

The Theopoetics of Space:

*John Bradburne,
a Pilgrim in Paradise*

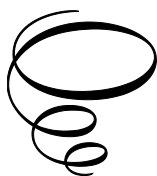
The Theopoetics of Space:

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a Pilgrim in Paradise*

By

Rosanna Masiola and Renato Tomei

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“Love God and do what you like”
(Saint Augustine through the mike).
“In Medio Ecclesiae,” 1978

Behold, Saint Francis to the birds
Preaches, to airs my unread words:
John Bernardoně, Bradburne I
Mad John aspire to Heaven’s Sky
Ora pro mihi
“Behold, Saint Francis,” 1957

(Ho, ho, ho, how glad I am!
Married to Lady Miriam,
Lady Marry who marries me
Into a sea of minstrelsee.
O a little green elf on a shelf in the Son
Has married the Moon’s beams, and fun’s begun!)
“A Corollary: Carthusian Cartwheels,” 1958

The most destructive thing on earth is man
Disparaging his destiny in God,
He roots up forests and his bootless plan
Is concrete roads to speed him under sod
“Dixit Insipiens,” 1970

All heaven is of angel’s eyes eternally there booked
To fasten on the Word with wide amaze
“Upalong,” 1970

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INTRODUCTION

SPACES FOR THE SOUL: LOCALISING JOHN BRADBURNE'S POETICS

RENATO TOMEI

Flying away from the sigh of forget-me-nots
Out of our sleep we arise to be polyglots

"The Grounds One Sings," February 29, 1979

These introductory notes to the volume only partially account for the rich and diverse themes within John Bradburne's theopoetics and his sacred spaces. The depth and variety of his literary expressions invite thoughtful exploration, raising intriguing questions about how he fits within various conceptual and theoretical literary frameworks, as a challenge to interpretation and translation.

His work draws inspiration from many influences, reflecting a vibrant tapestry woven from his life and spiritual experiences across India, the British Isles, Northern Europe, the Mediterranean, the Holy Land, and Africa. The selection of John Bradburne's geographical spaces features his postwar travels: pilgrimages across the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and his final destination in southern Africa. In particular, it focuses on geographical spaces and sites recognised as holy in different spiritual traditions spanning across time and religious literature. The common thread weaving through the chapters is his condition of wanderer and vagabond, a pilgrim "who knows not what to seek," signposted by his spiritual development, contextualized within historical dynamics and personal events, focusing on his first visit and image of a country, and his subsequent visits, as in the case of Italy and Holy Land.

Foregrounded in the literature of travel writing, Italy cannot be severed from its Roman mythological past and papal present, and medieval Franciscanism

(chapter one); his second time in Italy features his call to the mystic marriage to Our Lady, while he would have been on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Jerusalem. There is the first pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and after many years his second visit and encounter at the Western Wall with the Hassidic and Orthodox Jews (see chapters two and three). Regarding the poems on the Hassidim of his second time in Jerusalem, there certainly was the influence of Geza Vermes, his friend at the Louvain College. Vermes needed an introduction to the English language and John had given him the *Oxford Book of English Verse*,¹ accidentally triggering in Vermes the passion to study and translate the Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls (Vermes 1999, 79).

Chapter four outlines the conceptualization and imagery of the theological space of Zion, and the New Jerusalem is critically compared and contextualized in the Millenarian Ethiopian Orthodox ideal of the Ark and Zion announced in the songs of Bob Marley: the Rastafarian link is not so abstruse, as the derivation from the Psalm is the common source as well as the idealism of the Promised Land after Exodus. Ironically, the end of the Zimbabwe Liberation War or the “Chimurenga” (1964–79) saw the death of John in Mashonaland. The proclamation of the state of Zimbabwe saw the coming of Marley to Harare (ex-Salisbury) with his “Zimbabwe” song. The year before, “Redemption Song” – with its incendiary verses: “But my hand was made strong by the ’and of the Almighty” – coincided with John’s death and Marley’s diagnoses of cancer. In the wake of Bradburne’s theopoetics and key symbols is the parallel with the Messianic strain of a Zion in Africa, whether inspired by Ethiopia or Mashonaland, which is a powerful message. Subsequently the theme of the Ark and Ethiopian Orthodox theology based on the Trinity and Marian cult has a strong correspondence with Bradburne’s key themes, as well as the Ark and its significance. The translation of these key concepts from one language of faith to another consequently links the topic of chapter five.

These recurrent theological concepts and key terms expressed in his verses bridge with chapter five, which focuses on the question of translation and interpretation across languages, critically considering the surface smoothness of translatability in words like the Trinitarian faith and his theopoetics, starting from translation as hermeneutics (Steiner 1975) and the biblical interpretation and translations in the West (Kelly 1979), linking to the German-Jewish scholars like Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig and Gershom Scholem, and eventually the approach to the recent concept of “translationality” (Blumczynski 2016; 2023) applied to poetics and scriptural texts. The intricacy of the issues also enhances the question of

John's puns and multilingualism in poetic translation in decolonial studies of inclusion (Bandia 2020a). The symbol of the "Word" and Bradburne's approach are foregrounded as problematic. On the other hand, it is only through interpretation and translation that tensions between constellations of meaning and significance along with transcultural factors are foregrounded enabling knowledge of literary traditions impacting worldview (Pym 2021).

Thus, the sixth chapter attempts to ascribe a place for Bradburne's poetics in the scene of comparative postcolonial literature and world literature, determined by his diasporic identity and spirituality, from his colonial days in India, his European and British background and Anglo-Catholicism, and his life and poetic production in transitional southern Africa, bridging the thematic focus of sacred spaces with other chapters. Consequently, this provides the localisation of his work as a poet in the scene of global world literature and his mysticism and imagery of landscapes.

Chapter seven is on Bradburne's arrival and stay at the leper colony of Mutemwa, for him now the New Jerusalem in Mashonaland, with the lepers, the wretched of the earth, now the Chosen People, and highlights his shift in perceiving Africa as the true Zion, which is alive with the community of lepers inspiring some of the most touching verses, dedicated to each one of them, as in the first verses of "A Ballade of the Leaping Lepers" (1973)

This people is as ancient as the world
 Yet not so old as cannot hold its youth
 Despite extremities benighted, furred
 Into naught gives hint on thoughts of truth

The concluding chapter eight ends the circle of the poet's geographical and spiritual spatiality expressed in his recollections of a world of innocence and references to children's literature and nursery rhymes, expressed in verses and his private letters to his mother. In his later years, when the guerilla and government repression was becoming more violent, his memory goes back to a space of innocence and a return to Fairyland or Maryland, as he calls it. Our Lady morphs into Titania, the Queen of Fairyland, where intratextual citations from Disney cartoons, television, and a world of fantasy creatures highlight the interrelationship between verbal depictions and visual imagery, and references to the rich tradition of late Victorian book illustrations and paintings are beyond mere conjecture. Bradburne's originality and unique position in the world of literature and spatial poetics account for his theological references while actively engaging in the space of life with God and his lepers. His best verses denote the power of the space of love he had cut himself in the physical reality of the huts among the lepers. Also, it was

the time he was exiled and lived on Mount Chigona in a tent, where he wrote by candlelight or by the light of the moon.

The focus on geographical landscapes serves a profound purpose, transforming them into realms of theological significance – a notion captured in the title's reference to theopoetics. At the heart of it all is Bradburne's unwavering love for all living beings, which drove him to dedicate his life to a leper colony in Mashonaland, Zimbabwe. This commitment not only rejuvenates his vision of Jerusalem and Zion within the African context but also deepens our understanding of the divine calling he embraced. Throughout the final decade of his life, his enduring affection for his homeland and the land of Saint Francis shines through in the relationship with all the creatures, and the lepers, whom he takes to bathing and treating their plague, and eventually in the erection of a little chapel. Here, the lush landscapes of Africa beautifully evoke the rolling hills of Umbria, blending his memories with his profound sense of belonging. Africa was the Call he received, to which he responded, and is the fulfilment of his three spiritual wishes: to serve the lepers, to die a martyr, and eventually to be buried in a Franciscan habit. He now lies in the graveyard of the Mission of Chishawasha, near Harare, buried among Jesuit missionaries.

This volume is not on the life of Bradburne, as others have done this majestically, like Didier Rance, and years earlier John's companion in India and Africa John Dove, SJ. It is also not about the poetry and the thought of John Bradburne, which has been the herculean task of David Crystal, Bradburne's discoverer, who also edited his works and set up the online archive. Yet, reflections and citations deriving from these two books are inevitable. More humbly, it is an attempt to squeeze between these two towering pillars and raise the question of Bradburne's literary contextualization, debating whether to collocate him within the main literary trends and concepts, providing elements for further debate and delving into the still unexplored areas of the magnitude of his output, or else if he is entitled to be a solitary literary case, *sui generis*. One critical question emerges here: could Bradburne be ascribed to many disciplinary slots and shelves posterior to his poetic writings (the more significant part of his letters is also in verse), which derive from the places and turbulent times he lived in? His temporal collocation is among the interstices of the dying colonial empire, and the decolonial and postcolonial theories and practices came to the global scene, with their clusters of geographic, spiritual and diasporic topography. Topophilia concerns memory and identity against loss and displacement. We have tried to locate his spiritual

identity in the spaces of geography, and reached the conclusion that his spiritual poetics was that of God, a theopoetics of sacred spaces, and that this is a challenging perspective as it accounts for his definition and localization in terms of theoretical and applicative concepts of comparative literature and postcolonial literature in the international scenario, and the literature of nature and the sacred of the twentieth century (Burton-Christie 1994).

With the new trends and widening horizons in the realm of theories and practices of postcolonial and decolonising literatures, translanguaging, comparative literatures, and international or global comparative literatures, he would comfortably fit in as an author, if not for the astounding quantity of his writing (see Cao et al. 2023; 2024; Domínguez et al. 2014), then for the recognised multilingual mixing and translanguaging (see Gilmour and Steinitz 2020; Jones, Preece and Rees 2020). More comfortably, he also has his place in institutionalised critical and literary approaches that, if existing, were hardly codified and conceptualised, as the debating trend on world literature in the global and postcolonial age indicates (Apter 2013; Damrosch 2003; 2020; Damrosch et al. 2022; Damrosch and Tiwari 2023).

CHAPTER ONE

THE ITALIAN ITINERARY:
LA DOLCE VIA

RENATO TOMEI

Behold, Saint Francis to the birds
Preaches, to airs my unread words:
John Bernadonč, Bradburne I
Mad John aspire to Heaven's Sky
Ora pro mihi

“Behold, Saint Francis!”, 1957

John Bradburne: A Mystic on the Road

This chapter is about the poetics of John Bradburne and his visions of Italy, a country that played a significant role in his spiritual journey in the postwar decades. His verses show an unconditional love for its beauty and the sacred spaces he found where he developed his initial theopoetics, from Umbria for the Clitumnus (“how spell that spellbound ageless angel-place? Then tongue it out so ably to the throngs?”), Santa Maria degli Angeli, where he is among the stars (“Santa Maria del Angeli [*sic*] she is my Lady Moon” [1960]), Venice (“I might never have sailed from Venice that night, torn between a scintillating reality that looked like a dream and a dream of what I booked for a reality. I was literally passing through Venice like a ship in the night!” [1968]); Campania (“Second to none [save to thy Ringing Isle] / Is thy Bellissima Campania” [1960]), and Rome (“Rome is glorious, and she beggars all description this vagabond may try to give of her beauty and grandeur” [1952]), where he avows his inadequacy to describe it.

Many verses written by John Bradburne (1921–79) are dedicated to Italy, his Italian pilgrimage, and his extended stay in Naples. “The Servant of God” visited Italy thrice (1950, 1952–3 and 1968). A war hero during the Second World War, he converted to Catholicism, tried several monastic

orders, and eventually chose to remain a lay Franciscan at the service of the lepers in Africa (Zimbabwe), where he was assassinated. On his way to Jerusalem in a spiritual quest, accidental circumstances brought him to Campania, where he remained for over a year and mystically wed Our Lady in 1952. The 1950s and 1960s were the decades of the Roman “Dolce Vita” and of “Hollywood on Tiber,” of the Jubilee, the proclamation of the Marian year, and devotional processions of the Madonna Pellegrina, all expressions of faith at the time of the Iron Curtain. His imagery and vision of Italy, in particular of Tuscany, Umbria, Campania, and Rome, and also Sicily and Puglia, where he is a wayfarer by the wayside, are those of mythic and mystical space where English lore and legends are conjured and coexist with classical pagan myths and authors, and the saints of the regions, namely Saint Francis.

He hardly fits into the conventional typology of traveller, although there are echoes of the Romantic and Victorian writers and their literary visions of Italy. As a military man, he was used to long marches during the war and was a walking pilgrim in the Franciscan tradition. This section aims to highlight and contextualize his narrative, echoing both Shakespearean visions of Italy blending with his profound hagiographic, classicist, mystical and ecstatic experience of the Italian landscape and theopoetics of space, always on the road to Jerusalem, and as a spiritual counter-narrative rebutting the anti-Catholic Anglophone writings of the nineteenth century. His extensive knowledge of music, literature and science challenges conventions in notation and translation. Furthermore, in his theological, geographical and literary references and intertextual citations there is an inexorable drive towards wordplay that includes homophony, homography and paronymy. The comments and notations to his verses in this chapter leave some language themes and topics aside, as the focus is on the Italian landscape and his poetics of the sacred spaces and places he sees as a wayfarer and pilgrim.

Theopoetics and Hodoeporics of the Vagabond of God²

Travel writing is a rich tapestry of intricate mythologies and intratextuality, where imagery and cross-cultural identities flourish, reinforcing ideas, tropes and modes of representation (Cooper Alarcón 2024). The case of John Bradburne’s spiritual poetics of space is a particularly fascinating one, especially when the space in question is spiritual and religious. This complex interplay of epistolary writing, poetics, journals and travelogues transcends conventional categorizations, sparking a transdisciplinary exploration of

geography, religion, literature and their various genres and sub-genres.

Apart from his ascertained Guinness World Record productivity as a poet,³ John Bradburne is a literary phenomenon as everything he wrote was in verse, and he could not express himself otherwise, from the most sublime to the utterly prosaic and trivial matters, and this also occurs in his epistolary documentation. “Italy” occurs over seventy times. There are instances of verses beginning with family memories and recollections and ending with his current religious experience in Africa. There is a celestial bridge between the two spaces in its mystical and aesthetic recollections of Italian sketches and memories of the landscape as he writes from Africa in the 1970s, the last and most productive decade of his life. The use of different languages and the mixing of them in puns and cryptic signals render interpretation a bewildering challenge for the reader, as in this reference to Italian art in the rhymed titled “A l’Ora dell’Aurora” (“At the Hour of Aurora”).⁴

Notably, the poem was composed some twenty years after his first Italian pilgrimage in 1950 and his second in 1952, when he mystically wedded Our Lady. The spatial dynamics and his spiritual poetics signpost significant passages as the two stages of his visits to Italy. “Aunt Laura” occurs seven times in his writings and “Aurora” seventy-four times, often undergoing a wondrous transformation into Our Lady, whom he addresses with the names of astronomical bodies.

Aunt Laura used to go to Italy
And bathe herself in pure Italian art,
Somehow she thought they did things prettily
Which warmed the more her wits and nordic heart;
The senses five (she thought) are not so bad
And here I find mourne more alive and glad

(“A l’Ora del’Aurora” [*sic*], April 11, 1970)

Here, the theme is reminiscently domestic, as he refers to a real Aunt Laura, develops a paronomasia in Italian (Laura/L’ora), and rethinks and recreates in verse elements of his Italian, always in a nostalgic vein when confronted with the present, confined in southern Africa amid the tumult of civil war in Rhodesia, and his family in England he will not see again. He is nostalgic for comparisons of femininity.

More than on Britain's beaches in the Thirties;
 Lips were less painted yet they more appealed
 Than garish grins of Daisies and of Girties:
 The men were smooth par excellence – away
 She looked since she was fifty if a day.

("A l'Ora del'Aurora," April 11, 1970)

However, the grand finale, as is often the case, is a tribute to his Spouse when, in a typical Bradburnian turn, the prosaic and domestic flow into the visionary and sublime and his inevitable verbal artifice in a profusion of contrast of lights declaring his pledge to the Lady, as he refers to himself typing. A significant turn in his poetic production was also thanks to the gift of a typewriter and the possibility of being alone at night in his hut in Mutemwa.

Aunt Laura's nephew John (who typing sits
 At brightest dawn in darkest Africa)
 Finds it not difficult at dawn to don
 A Lady, put a Dame on, fairer far
 And rarer than all blondes and all brunettes
 The sun may shine upon until it sets.

("A l'Ora del'Aurora," April 11, 1970)

Regarding John Bradburne's Italian journeys and the book titled *Sulle vie del cielo* (Tomei 2021), there are some significant phases in his spatial mysticism and literary iconography here titled "Dolce Via" juxtaposed with the "Dolce Vita" in the Roman movie capital of "Hollywood on Tiber" in the 1950s and 1960s. His visits to Italy follow a distinctive time and place reference in narrative poetics. He wrote poems under an imaginative and spiritual impulse without seeing Italy. They are all written after the war, following his conversion in 1948; some of these poems are written under the spell of his Catholic conversion and Franciscan aspiration without ever having visited Italy as the "Strange Vagabond of God" (Dove 2001; Rance 2012; 2018; 2023). There are poems written on his first journey to Italy, and some are also in the form of travelogues handwritten in his notebooks under the fresh impression of the "eyes of the beholder" in describing the landscape, confronting first impressions and travel writing alongside imagery of Italy as a "path to the self" (Korte 2000, 40–65), and the list of traveller types invented by Lawrence Stearne in his *Sentimental Journey* first published in 1768 (1967, 15).⁵

These impressions are influenced directly or obliquely by the travellers of the Grand Tour and the Romantic poets to Italy and Umbria, a fact that enlightens us about the depth of more or less direct literary influences (Brand 1957; Brilli 1997; 2012; 2018; 2022a; 2022b; Brilli and Neri 2023; Buzard 1993; in particular De Vecchi Ranieri 1992),⁶ converging with his profound religious culture and mystic sense of place. In no travel writing study on Italy is there any mention of Bradburne as he is left at the margins of the hodoeporic literature, notwithstanding his poetic production and religious, inspirational motifs (Olivieri 1997; 1998).⁷

In the Western canon, “landscape” is inscribed into the tradition of “landscape writing” and the poetics of space, developing the aesthetics wavering from the picturesque to the sublime; and then in the case of Italy,⁸ and in the more practical guidebooks, throughout the past three centuries. The term “landscape” is better suited here in the sense of his aesthetic experience and poetics, as conceived by Italian philosopher Rosario Assunto in his works, especially *L’Estetica e il paesaggio* (1973) and his descriptions of Roman landscapes in literary travels (1991). Beyond their synchronicity in writing, an affinity between Assunto’s aesthetic analysis and Bradburne’s spiritual poetics of space is no mere far-fetched hypothesis, as both authors were concerned with the descriptions and representations of landscape, and their work was unrecognised in their lifetimes. The factors are mainly ideological and political; moreover, his poetic writing remained unpublished and unknown, except for some poems published in a Catholic magazine *The Shield* in Salisbury (now Harare).

The trans-textuality in John’s citations from the classics, hagiographies, Mediterranean and pagan myths, and legends fuses into an image of Italy as the country of his soul, which will further emerge and develop in his African poems. Much as he loved the landscape of Mashonaland in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), the green hills of southern Africa would remind him of the rolling green hills of Umbria to his last days as sacred landscapes he would express in his poetics (Burton-Christie 1994; Masiola 2022; 2023; Tomei 2021). His love for Italy and the love for the woman he marries in Campania blend into a personal Marian topophilia; in fact, it was the Virgin Mary whom he mystically married in the Campania landscape he lovingly recalls (February 2, 1953). The sacred spaces and places of Italy resonate in his verbal and musical poetics: music, together with the arts and the cultural heritage, are inseparable from his topophilic theology (Masiola and Baraldo 2025). Conclusively, there are three significant phases in his hodoeporics of Italy: the first as an imagined country of the spirit; the second in verses also including travel notes and letters recording his cognitive experience of

mysticism enriched by realistic details; the third conclusive phase on the recollections of Italy in the last ten years of his life in Africa when writing under the impulse of memory and love for the country he identifies with his bride, Maria.

In his Italian itineraries, he journeyed across the country from the north and the Alps via France, and from the south when coming from Africa and the Middle East via Sicily. Despite the challenges of lack of money, passport visa and tickets, he always found a way, often through fortuitous encounters with enigmatic figures offering their help, from Franciscan friars to Italian truck drivers. His most prolonged stay in Italy (1952–3) was a result of a providential accident on his way to Jerusalem. In Ostia, the seaport of ancient Rome, he missed the boat that was to sail for the Holy Land. Undeterred, he adapted his plans, tried to board in Puglia, crossed the Apennines, and after an unsuccessful attempt walked back to Campania, where he stopped. His adaptability, as he traveled via trains, boats and lifts from truck drivers, and walking and climbing the mountains, marked a significant phase in his mystical experience and poetics, always with a vein of humour, verbal artifice reminiscent of Lawrence Sterne and his travel writing.⁹

Bradburne's writing was non-stop, as his praying constantly overlaps with it. However, the times were not ripe for his poetic recognition, not even for a poet who wrote twice as much as Shakespeare and three times as much as William Wordsworth (Crystal 2017, 191); the 1960s and 1970s were the decades of the juvenile rebellion, of the avant-gardes and revolution, and the concept of theopoetics had been theorized by its initiators in protestant authors in North America.¹⁰ The comparative inter-religious approach to theopoetics recently adopted by Gloria Maité Hernández (2021) is particularly apt for analysing Bradburne's mysticism from his verses considering also the recent interfaith poetics featured in the anthology *Versi a Dio*, enriched by a letter from Pope Francis to the poets (Brullo et al. 2024; Russell 2020).

Following decades of debate over the forms and functions of religious language, Crystal advocated the recognition of theolinguistics as a discipline centred on studies on the language of God (2018a, 3–18), which aligns with Bradburne's poetical language and Crystal's contribution to the subject. In a comparative analysis on Bradburne's mysticism, Didier Rance posited the problem of being a mystic and a poet, as it has already been debated for St. Ephrem and Saint John of the Cross, citing the mystic French poet and playwright: "To take Paul Claudel's terms, both belong to

anima versus *animus*, the reasoning thought, which is abstract but clear. But poetry aims at forms, namely realities of this world assumed by beauty, while in mysticism, through grace, man embraces a relationship initiated by him who is beyond all the forms and realities of a world of which He is the Creator and Saviour” (2018, 14). John’s entrance into the Roman Catholic church opened for him a poetic tap, and that tap became an ocean after he visited Italy.

The Triadic Temporality of Bradburne’s Visions of Italy

In 1949, in Italy and France, the *Pegrinatio Mariae* pageants and processions inspired a widespread Marian devotion to the *Regina Pacis*, the Queen of Peace. It was also the year of Bradburne’s pilgrimage to Our Lady of Lourdes in France, where he visited the Grotto on the feast of the Assumption (August 15). This year, he would write some 116 poems (Crystal 2018, 214). The French pilgrimage would be recalled in many of his verses. It impacted his Franciscan devotion to Our Lady, marking a further phase from his initial Franciscan vision influenced by the marriage to Our Lady, who for Francis was Our Lady Poverty and Francis was the jester of God. Thus, the Marian theme is not present in the poem “To Saint Francis,” written in July (the Feast of Christ the King), preceding his journey to Lourdes (August 1949), following his conversion to Catholicism: “Bright Master minstrel, Bernardone blest,/ You have outsong’d the troubadours of France; Sweet jester of the King, you did advance/ The jongleur’s art. O Fool. God’s fool the Best.” He often refers to himself being “God’s vagabond,” “God’s jongleur” and a “buffoon.” His inexhaustible acrobatic wordplay to the extreme and his constant oscillating between the sacred and the profane reflect throughout his poetics: “Words resonate against each other in unexpected ways. They are probed, twisted, stretched, and pummeled, to yield every ounce of structure and connotation. Bradburne’s poetry is a punster’s paradise” (Crystal 1996, ix). The “creatural” element of Christian and medieval poetics and the sublime and the quest for the total fulfillment of Franciscan love find expression in the long poem of 10,184 lines, “Ut Unum Sint” (“That They May Be One”), where references to Italian contexts are present (1956–7).¹¹

If there can be a parallel with John’s militant mysticism in those years when the avant-garde and protest poems prevailed, it would be the Italian poet Padre David Maria Turollo (1916–92). Padre David was born in Friuli into a humble family. He started to publish his poems after the end of the war. Like Bradburne, this religious man did not belong to any academe or avant-

garde, and was a militant visionary committed to the indigent.¹² Turollo, known also as the Viking of God, published in the years of John's Italian itineraries in 1950 and 1952. Bradburne's pilgrimages across Italy in 1950, 1952–3 and 1968 are still the quest of the Vagabond of God "who knows not what to seek" as he walks across Tuscany and Umbria towards Rome, Naples and Bari. These experiences are recorded in notebooks, letters and verses, yet most of his verses and poems are recollections written in the 1970s. If the encounter with the lepers in southern Africa gave impulse to a transcendental turn and the output of verses was extraordinary, there was also a practical reason, as he had been given a typewriter which he used during the night. He will recall this experience in the 1970s which came after his ultimate choice to stay in Africa and two journeys to Jerusalem, as well as various experiences with different monastic orders. The first of his journeys to Italy and Jerusalem as a pilgrim was in 1950, after his service in India, Burma and Malay during the war as a military man. The year 1968 would mark the last of his pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem.

Tuscany and Umbria: Spiritual Pilgrimage or Sentimental Journey?

In the wake of a tradition of English travel writing about Italy, from Joseph Addison and Lawrence Sterne to John Milton and the Grand Tour and satire (Carey 2009; 2019) and the wave of Anglophone Romantic poets, the visionary Pre-Raphaelites, and his contemporaries (Brand 1957; Brilli 2022a; 2022b; Churchill 1980), Bradburne found his original collocation as a militant mystic and vagabond of God on his way to the holy city of Rome, preceding his journey to the Holy Land. But his images are those of the traveller who does not avail himself of trains and comfortable means of travel, walks all the way and does not stop at hotels. He is alone, at one with God, his saints and beloved classics, and meditation is suffused with ecstatic contemplation in silence, with the sound of only animal creatures at the wayside and barnyards, like cockerels at the break of dawn. The poems inspired by Tuscany and Umbria weave into the Latin classics and the Graeco-Roman mythopoeia (see also De Vecchi Ranieri 1992). A landscape of "stillness" and "silence" forms an intricate theological pattern, transcending the common matrix of the travellers to Italy, noted by Buzard in the visits to archaeological and religious sites under the moon, whether in Venice or Rome: "*Stillness* refers to the ennobling effect, recorded in countless luminous moments in travel texts, when the traveller is alone to savor a place's poignant or powerful reverberations of beauty, sublimity, or significance" (1993, 177). The word "stillness" occurs in twenty-four and

“silence” in some three hundred works, in addition to the titles of poems (e.g. “In Magno Silentio”), and his “nocturnal delight” featured in the title of a poem (August 28, 1975). Stillness fosters his need for contemplation and ecstatic prayer, and his poetic life thrives upon this urgency, as in the Carthusian practice of monastic life in solitude and silence (Crystal 2017, 406; Maksjan 2007, 99). The most sacred places and sites invite ecstatic contemplation, in Italy and elsewhere, as at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, whereof Venice is its door.

There are the nights of Venice when in his verses he always pays tribute to Shakespeare’s Venice “In such a night as this ...” (*The Merchant of Venice* 5, 1, vv.1–36) and “in the stillness of the night,” the iterated words uttered by the Venetian Jewess Jessica and Lorenzo that also recall his family history, as a member of the Bradburne family had eloped with a Jewess in Venice (Rance 2012, 42).¹³ The Shakespearean citation occurs twenty-five times; and Venetian stillness reverberates while on the Grand Canal on his way to Haifa/Jerusalem via boat (“A Path to Rome,” January 27, 1969).

Venice appears as the Golden Gate to the East. E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, published in 1924, dovetails his verses, as it also does for John’s recollections of India for his images of Italy in *A Room with a View*: “Though Venice was not Europe, it was part of the Mediterranean harmony. The Mediterranean is the human norm” (1979, 248). It is the passage and gateway to the Orient, a ritual passage, a metaphorical and geographical station “in via” of a corporeal subject entering a literary and historical landscape and the spatiality of travel (Wheeler 1999, 5), which in Bradburne is sublimized into spirituality, even after many years since his first image.

Juxtaposed with the “stillness” of the night is the glorious rising of the sun and the ringing chanticleer and cockerels of Tuscany hailing him after the night spent under a starry sky. The longing for the Tuscan and Umbrian landscape is ever recurrent in his last days in Mashonaland (ex-Rhodesia), as in the verses from “Andante” (March 27, 1969), where nostalgia and memory are so vivid that he would even “dung the cowhouse of some noble lord” as long as he would be near Arezzo. True to his style, he never shuns a verbal artifice in titles and verses in other languages (“Dante/Andante”). The vision of Dante’s Beatrice is recreated through the prismatic devotion and guidance of his bride, and the procession of saints featured in the *Paradiso*. The theme could be expanded as with the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow can be traced in some verses.¹⁴ Longfellow was known across the Atlantic for his translation of *The Divine Comedy* and had written descriptions of the Italian cities cited in Dante and visited by

Bradburne, like Pisa, Florence, Arezzo, Perugia and Venice.

And Dante went from Florence oft to Rome
 As oft I feel his longing to return
 To Tuscany, his native land and home
 (Loam me, my Master, of his art I'd learn);
 I'd lean like Pisa's Tower to the sward,
 I'd glean Toscana's stubble with her cocks,
 I'd dung the cowhouse of some noble lord
 Nigh to Arezzo, stalled in bovine box

("Andante," March 27, 1969)

Silence, as noted, is his chosen comfort zone, and Our Lady is the Queen of Silence, at the same time Eloquent with him: "this is my Israel,/ My home wherein I roam and respite win: Eloquent Lady, Queen of silence, gay/ Mistress rejoicing, tune my voice today" is ever present as in this "Aubade" (August 1972). The poet offers prismatic and kaleidoscopic images of the eternal feminine of wisdom, beauty, art and the fruitfulness of love and grace. In Campania, where he mystically weds Our Lady, he is empowered by her personal inspiration, as his "Lass" (Our Lady), in his own words, will guide his pen. John's Marian devotion is the source of his illumination precisely in spaces sacred since pagan antiquity, between islands and hills, lakes and streams, sources, springs, caves, trees and woods, and their creatures, whether natural, mythical or imagined. If she accompanied him across the continents and appeared in different forms, marked by diverse epithets and names, it is yet in Italy that he married her after a forced halt during his pilgrimage and subsequently denoted her as his bride. There is a cycle of poems dedicated to his Italian pilgrimages on foot, which aligns with the Franciscan tradition, albeit he does not disdain hitchhiking. His first pilgrimage to Rome was with a group of pilgrims, and he then proceeded to Jerusalem in 1950. On his second stay in Italy in 1952, he set forth from Louvain in Belgium, where he was a postulant with the Order of Our Lady of Mount Sion, following his previous experience with the Benedictines and the Carthusians in England. The poems "Envoy in Via" (1969), "An Ascent" (1971) and "Idylls of the Spring" (1969) are only some of his poems dedicated to Umbria and Tuscany.¹⁵ Many of these poems have the same title and a new date, and some have a follow-up reference.

In Umbria, the Isola Maggiore of Lake Trasimeno hosted Saint Francis in the Lent of 1211; the small chapel by the shores of the island commemorates the event. By the time of Bradburne's arrival, regular ferry services from Passignano and San Feliciano to the Lake had restarted. Not following the

chronological order and focusing on his geographic itinerary, the poem “Envoy in Via” was written on January 27, 1969, at the mission of Silveira House in Mashonaland. The celebration for the feast of Santa Chiara of Assisi was on August 10, 1952. He takes up again the topography of Umbria and is inspired by the birds, a tribute to Saint Francis, enriching it with references to music and the element of water with images echoing the Giotto frescoes of the Basilica, the Saint’s early portrait by Cimabue, or the Botticelli painting he must have seen at the National Gallery in London.

It is fascinating to note that the bordering areas of Umbria and Tuscany are rich in mineral waters like the Fonte della Verna and the nearby Sanctuary dedicated to Saint Francis, erected on Mount Penna, not far from Arezzo (Brilli and Neri 2023). It is also another coincidence that Guido d’Arezzo was the reputed inventor of the pentagram and musical notation, adding a layer of historical significance to the region.¹⁶

The last ten years of Bradburne’s life mark a decisive phase of his poetical vein inspired by Italy, and also a rewriting of earlier poems written before his Italian journey, such as “To Saint Francis” dated July 1949 and “Il Poverello” dated October 3, 1978, the vigil of the feast of the Saint (the term “poverello” has eleven occurrences), taking up again the theme of Brother Fire of his early poem, adding bees and cocks to the landscape: “While all the cocks in Tuscany to Umbria’s replied/ He preached Christ’s words to trysting birds and reached The Crucified,” iterating the verse: “While all the cocks in Tuscany and Umbria but dreamed/ Saint Francis praised Our Lord and blazed abroad the Blood that streamed” (1978).

By then, he had fully “lived” and experienced the landscape, walking across the Apennines and sleeping under the stars, being awakened by the cockerels. The poem is set in the Tuscan and Umbrian landscape featuring the cockerels together with the evangelical symbolism. The rooster symbolism has many meanings, and in the Holy Books, even if not explicitly cited, the sound of crowing serves as a harbinger of a new dawn and awakening. As usual in his multifaceted poetical symbolism, the process of secularisation blends with the sacralization of the symbol, also visible in religious spaces and sites. Given his love for Italian wine, it extends to the brand of Chianti Ruffino with “galletto nero” (black rooster). The rhyme of “vino/divino” (“wine/divine”) is well exploited. The verses where he deploys all the physical experience of the place, in kinetic movements and bodily actions, are revived from his recollections and occur in other poems. “Water changed into wine” occurs twenty-three times, and he is profoundly appreciative of the miracle at Cana in Galilee when

Our Lord changed water into wine, and not wine into water or any other drink: here as elsewhere, it is also the sweet remembrance of Italian coffee:

To those withholders from the sober truth
 Who say that wine is not divinely made
 I answer with the wedding-bells of youth
 That Christ changed water not to lemonade;
 Drinking my coffee, I shall make a raid
 On all teetotallers and cry ashine
 That when a call on Cana Jesus paid
 He changed six pots of water into wine

("Ballade of a Non- Saracen," August 12, 1975)

The wedding at Cana thus receives the conclusive tribute in the Envoi, with the stammering of "graphic" jocular tipsiness, on our Lord (HEE) and his Lady (Mareeam):

Prince, if the name of Miriam be made
 Mareeam still Our Lady's eyes will shine
 On unabstaining asses that have brayed:
 "HEE changed six pots of water into wine!"

("The Ballade of a Non-Saracen," August 12, 1975)

On his journeys in general, and on his Italian experience, the poet's recollections are rich with physical experiences and bodily actions, offering a vivid immersion into his world. Wine and bread were offered to him along the way, as he records in "Envoy in Via" (January 27, 1969). Saint Clare (Chiara) is also punned on her Latin name, meaning bright and "aflare" with love, and accompanied by the flares of trumpets and bells:

I stood in good Ruffino's field, ate lightly, slightly wined,
 The stars were in the welkin and the lights were on the fat
 Festal for Clare, brightly aflare for nomen to remain!
 At midnight I ascended by that ancient winding track
 To fastness of Saint Francis and on Umbria looked back:
 The little hamlets, dimly lit no longer, lay obscured
 In lap of panorama lost in wonderment, allured

("Envoy in Via," January 27, 1969)

"Ruffino" has been the family name brand since 1877, from the toponymic derivation "Rufina," and the iconic brand with the black cockerel and the Tuscan vineyards including Chianti Classico and Montepulciano, and as he

walks through Tuscany from Arezzo to Umbria he is well aware of the spiritual wine-scape of Italy, as wine is also used at Mass and he is slightly “wined.” More importantly, Saint Ruffino was the first Archbishop of Assisi who died as a martyr (ca. 239), and the Duomo of Assisi is also known as the Cathedral of Saint Ruffino.

Likewise, when exploring the poems written in the mission house and leper settlement of Mashonaland in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), it is important to understand the poet’s deep emotional attachment to the memory of the spiritual landscape. His nostalgic vein for the loved landscape develops a topophilic memory (Tuan 1990, 113), and the sentiment of place is rooted in a profound emotional connection as he rebuilds his vision while in a distant landscape.¹⁷

One must not be misled by the month (January); it is the beginning of summer in the southern hemisphere, and he synchronizes the Italian season to it, as we know it is the day of Saint Clare of Assisi, August 11, 1960. Arriving from the hills of Tuscany, from Arezzo, he will coast Lake Trasimeno along the Franciscan route with the *Cantico* in his heart and soul. (see also Cardini 1991). He will sleep under the stars, be awakened by the birds, and climb to Assisi, where a baker will donate to him a loaf of bread:

Then every cock in Tuscany stretched up its ready neck
And roundly crowed that take the road might I: at call and beck
Of all the cocks in Tuscany I rose from out the ditch
As pauper raised, from being dazed by dreams of growing rich,
By Brother Sun, the only One who makes the roosters rise
To chant it clear, “The day is near, Aurora rules the skies!”

(“Envoy in Via,” January 27, 1969)

The Ascent to the Seraphic City: Between Saint Francis and Saint Bonaventure

Likewise, “An Ascent” – a title occurring in the other three poems – written while in the leper settlement of Mutemwa, is a part of the cycle of poems written in the last decade of his life.¹⁸ In these verses, he lovingly recalls the region of Umbria, and his mystical and ecstatic experiences there, now that he is in Africa and war is raging. “Ascent” recalls the etymology of Assisi/Ascesi in Italian. In the vulgar language, the toponym is “Ascesi” or “Scesi,” also used by Dante Alighieri in his Tuscan tongue. The poems are a tribute to the Prince of Peace, whom he often addresses at the end of the

poem in his Envoy. In the French medieval tradition, the ballade (a pun on Italian “in Via” and French “en voie,” meaning “on the way”) consists of a conclusive stanza that highlights the moral function dedicated to the person who is the subject of the poem. In some poems, the conventional “Envoie” addresses the Prince of Peace or the Queen of Peace. To reach the summit of the Seraphic City, as Assisi is also known, he climbs from the plain and valley flanked by Mount Subasio featured in Dante’s *Paradiso*, Canto 11, on Saint Francis, to the hilltop. Dante is precise in his geographic and sacred topography and cites Assisi and Perugia as sacred spaces spirituality related to Saint Bonaventure (1217–21) and Saint Francis, amid the flames of Cherubs and Seraphim, thence the epithet of the Seraphic Saint, and the Seraphic City. The mountainscape and hillsides encircling the valleys resound with the lives of saints and epiphanic visions. Saint Bonaventure in his *Legenda Major* recounts the episode (see the chapter “Trinity”) featuring the wings and the significance of fire, physical and metaphysical, vivid to such a point as to inspire Giotto’s frescoes in the Basilica, which Bradburne had seen, and thematizes his vision of angels and fire; once again, the metaphysical and theological space is a geo-physical reality: “One morning, as the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross was approaching, while he was praying by the side of the mountain, he saw the figure as of a seraphim, with six wings as bright as they were fiery, descending from the sublimity of the heavens: he, with very rapid flight, hovering in the air, came close to the man of God, and then the figure of a crucified man appeared among his wings” as narrated by Saint Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (*Legenda Major*, I.13.3).¹⁹

The impression of this vision will be a constant influence on John Bradburne’s life and theopoetics, and his yearning for a Franciscan life. The Italian landscape was his theological and mystical space, and its hills and holy mountains would find a replica in his final place of residence at the foot of Mount Chigona. In fact, it was in the mountain forest of La Verna in that Saint Francis received his stigmata in 1224, two years before his death, where a sanctuary was erected. Dante Alighieri refers it as a “crudo sasso” (raw stone) and revives his figure in the celebratory words of Saint Thomas Aquinas, another favourite saint in Bradburne’s pantheon (“l’un fu tutto serafico in ardore,” *Paradiso*, Canto 11.37), and also a friend of Saint Bonaventure. There is yet another coincidence between Dante’s vision and Bradburne’s theopoetics and his travels in the metaphor of the rising sun, as the medieval poet mentions the Orient, the rising sun on the River Ganges in India, at the time of the Spring Equinox.²⁰ There are intertextual references to Dante’s vision in the very long poem “Oculi semper ad Dominum Prologue,” where the Holy Land is in Italy, at least for that

precise moment, and he also cites the Franciscan mission of Custody of the Holy Land he had visited. Parts of the poem were composed in different years, starting from 1949.²¹

Once Christ the Lord of Christendom
Was seen above the Apennine
Three hundred miles and more from Rome
In Umbria: and He did shine!

And He did shine all radiant,
Seraphic in the firmament:
A flaming Sun, the Son of God
Above the place Saint Francis trod.

And He was pierced in foot and hand
And side, and He was suffering
Yet glorified, with widespread wing
Above th' Italian Holy Land.

Then did the Christ, the Hebrew King.
(All-glorified, all-suffering)
Seal Francis Guardian of the Land
Of Judah – foot and side and hand:

And therefore the Franciscans guard
The Holy Places of our Lord:
They keep them safe with flaming sword
Of Love and Peace – not in shard

(“Oculi Semper ad Dominum or Prologue,” 1958)

Also, he refers to the Franciscans in Jerusalem and their being Guardians of the Holy Sepulchre; likewise, his walking across the Holy Land of Italy claims a physical effort as the lyrical thrill expressed in his “Ascent”:

At the high behest of Arcady, (at the low request of none)
I took myself through Tuscany: from the rising of the sun
I walked, and Jove with Mercury was going at my side
Until Apollo went to bed with sunset as his bride:
Then sleep beneath the open sky all studded with its stars,
Or gazing up and counting out – Mercury, Venus, Mars

(“An Ascent,” 1971)

The above is testament to his deep connection with nature, framing his work in a theopoetics of space. He then gives us information about his Franciscan diet obtained from the charitable disposition of the people when he sang and played the recorder: “And tapped upon the window-pane and knocked upon the door/ In such a way that when the tramp with days and days of beard/ Appeared in time to catch the rhyming mood none thought it weird;/ They gave him bread, they gave him grapes, even they gave him wine/ And by the moment he was tight their thought had lost his line.” It is daylight and then night again and then daylight as he walks through Tuscany, and there is even reference to timing, as the Angelus is at midday, as “A whispering about me as I woke before we strode/ With all the cocks in Tuscany to set us on the road.”

Assisi was our happy goal and golden were the hours,
 Lord, and the broad Toscana is a terrain reined with powers!
 With Apennine for bridle that she cannot get beyond
 Upon her left and up in front and, on her right, is coned
 The power of the rippling sea, the tower of its waves
 But that was very far from where we strode all free of staves
 And free of care and free of thought of what the morrow held

(“An Ascent,” 1971)

Before reaching Assisi, he passed by Lake Trasimeno and then Perugia, as he came from the Arezzo route. August 1952 seemed to him exceptionally hot. His walking itinerary from Arezzo coasting Lake Trasimeno, also known as the Lake of Perugia, led him to the outskirts of the city, and as it was August and midday, it was very hot and the roads were dusty. As noted, by the lake he recalls the forty days of Lent fasting of Saint Francis (Bernardone’s son): “Hailing my Muse at Angelus, when crow the cocks.” He walks towards Assisi from Lake Trasimeno and then proceeds to climb up towards the historic citadel of Assisi, coming from Arezzo in Tuscany: “The turrets of Arezzo were arresting and we belled!”

It carried a great impetus, that journey tween the fields, –
 For standard had we Angelus, whilst waving harvest-yields
 Were reaped or stored or stood in stooks across the willing land;
 Apennine larger, larger loomed – Perugia is at hand
 And breezes are but zephyrs in the hazy August heat
 And none’s more near the chanticleer save One: the Paraclete

(“An Ascent,” 1971)