"Dante e l'Italia sono la stessa cosa": Poet and Nation in the Centenary Years of 1865 and 2021

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This essay discusses how Dante centenaries over the last two centuries have often served to contain the medieval poet within a restrictive national framework, one which can impoverish our understanding of his cultural, linguistic, and political reality. It begins by focusing on the celebration of the 1865 centenary in Florence, its importance in consecrating Dante as a symbol and vessel of the Italian nation, and the commemorative rhetoric associated with this event. It then considers some echoes of this rhetoric in contemporary Italian politics, looking especially at the terms in which the nationalist-populist movement of Giorgia Meloni, Fratelli d'Italia, claimed Dante as "father of Italian identity" during the centenary year of 2021. Finally, it reflects upon some of the problems associated with viewing Dante through a rigid national frame, and upon the persistence of this image of the poet.

Keywords: Dante; commemoration; nationalism; unification; populism.

The sixth centenary of Dante's birth in May 1865 was marked in locations throughout the Italian peninsula, but the most significant festivities took place in Ravenna and especially in Florence.[1] The three-day Florentine *festa*, the most iconic of Dante centenary celebrations, arrived at an emotionally and politically charged moment, not only in the immediate wake of unification in 1861, but also just months after Florence replaced Turin as capital of the new Kingdom of Italy. The occasion was inspired by a series of analogous commemorations of literary and intellectual figures in other European settings in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

[1] This article stems from a larger book project on Dante and nationalism which has been funded by the Leverhulme Trust ("The Poet and the Nation: Dante and the Idea of Italy"). I wish to record my gratitude to Leverhulme for supporting this research. For their helpful comments on an earlier version of the essay, I wish to thank Federica Coluzzi and Ruth Glynn. I presented versions of this work at the Dante Centenaries workshop at the University of Warwick and later at the Oxford Dante Society, and I am grateful to my audiences at both these events, as well as to the readers at *Bibliotheca Dantesca*, for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.

Such events played an important role in cultivating new forms of national consciousness and civic religion, grounded in cultural as much as social and political histories and mythologies (Italy, Stefano Jossa has written, was above all a "literary construction").[2] As such, the 1865 Dante centenary has attracted scholarly attention not only as a specific exercise in literary commemoration, but as an event of multifaceted political, cultural, and sociological interest.[3] It can be seen, on the one hand, as a powerful example of how nationalisms are forged; as an attempt to instrumentalize cultural heritage in order to impose a singular identity onto what remained a socially and linguistically heterogenous reality. However, the centenary cannot be seen merely as a top-down exercise in inculcation. The event also saw an extraordinary level of public participation, transcending barriers of region, class, and gender, in a manner that in fact unsettled some members of the cultural elite.[4]

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[2] Stefano Jossa, "Politics vs Literature: The Myth of Dante and the Italian National Identity," in *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century: Nationality, Identity, and Appropriation*, eds. Aida Audeh and Nick Havely (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 30–50 (31). See also Alberto Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000). On Dante in the context of other European literary centenaries in the period, see, e.g., Carlo Dionisotti, "Varia fortuna di Dante," included in *Geografia e politica della letteratura italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1999), 205–42 (205-7; the essay originally appeared in 1966); *Commemorating Writers in Nineteenth Century Europe: Nation-Building and Centenary Fever*, eds. Joseph Leerssen and Ann Rigney (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[3] For instance, Mahnaz Yousefzadeh draws on archival records to reconstruct the event and shows how Dante was used to accommodate some of the social and political tensions associated with the new nation: *City and Nation in the Italian Unification: The National Festivals of Dante Alighieri* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). In his richly documented survey of Dante and Italian national identity, Fulvio Conti studies the *festa* alongside the centenary celebration of Galileo in Pisa in 1864, which he sees as a "trial run" for the Dante festivities. I cite the recent translation: *The Ultimate Italian: Dante and a Nation's Identity* (Routledge: Abingdon and New York, 2023), 39-64. Another key area of scholarly focus has been the role of Dante monuments and the debates surrounding them (1865 saw the unveiling of Enrico Pazzi's statue in Piazza Santa Croce). On the Pazzi statue, see, e.g., Conti, *The Ultimate Italian*, 41-48; Anne O'Connor, "Dante Alighieri: From Absence to Stony Presence: Building Memories in Nineteenth Century Florence," *Italian Studies* 67.3 (2012): 307–35; Bruno Tobia, "La statuaria dantesca nell'Italia liberale: tradizione, identità e culto nazionale," *Mélanges de l'école Française de Rome* 109 (1997): 75–87. On the Ravenna commemorations, which coincided with the rediscovery and exhibition of Dante's skeleton, see Conti, *The Ultimate Italian*, 56-59, and especially Guy Raffa, *Dante's Bones: How a Poet Invented Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 117-33.

[4] See Conti, *The Ultimate Italian*, 48-50; Yousefzadeh, *City and Nation in the Italian Unification*, 7-8 and 95-130. See Federica Coluzzi's essay in the present collection of essays on female participation in the 1865 *festa* in Florence.

My interest in the 1865 centenary, in the first part of this essay, lies in its importance in consecrating Dante as a symbol and vessel of the Italian nation, and the commemorative rhetoric associated with this occasion. From there, I consider the echoes of some of this rhetoric in contemporary Italian politics, looking especially at the terms in which the national populist movement of Giorgia Meloni, Fratelli d'Italia, claimed Dante as "father of Italian identity" during the centenary year of 2021. As we shall see, contemporary scholarly accounts of Dante's reception as a cultural and political icon tend to emphasize how the intensely "national" Dante of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been superseded by a "global" Dante, one unbound by territorial or linguistic constraints and less encumbered by political ideology. The present essay aims to problematize this common critical narrative. It contends that the dominant idea of Dante we find in 1865, associated with an essentialized idea of national culture and identity, is not a historical relic, but a conception of the poet and his legacy that – as witnessed in some of the discourse surrounding the 2021 centenary – retains public legitimacy, and has indeed seen a resurgence in the Italian political arena. In the final part of the essay, I reflect upon some of the problems and distortions associated with viewing the pre-national medieval poet and his culture through the kind of obdurate frame common to nationalist readers of the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries.

1865: Prophet and Vessel of the New Nation

The 1865 centenary has often been seen as the apex of Dante's rehabilitation as a cultural and political icon over the course of the nineteenth century.[5] The different strands of this recuperation, following three centuries in which Dante had been somewhat marginalized as a literary and cultural model, have been traced by a number of scholars.[6] The poet had been appropriated by some,

[5] In his foundational 1967 essay "Varia fortuna di Dante," Carlo Dionisotti describes the centenary as "l'ultima scena del favoloso dramma risorgimentale" (228).

[6] In addition to Dionisotti's essay, see, e.g., *Dante: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Michael Caesar (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1989), 47-72; Andrea Ciccarelli, "Dante and Italian Culture from the Risorgimento to World War I," *Dante Studies* 119 (2001): 125–54; Conti, *The Ultimate Italian*, 7-38; Charles Till Davis, "Dante and Italian Nationalism," in *A Dante Symposium*, eds. William de Sua and Gino Rizzo (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 199–213; Jossa, "Politics vs Literature"; Raffa in *Dante's Bones* deftly uses the history of Dante's human remains to trace the different currents of the poet's cultural and political reception through the centuries.

notably Ugo Foscolo and Giuseppe Mazzini, who were eager to inaugurate a more secular nation-state. For these figures, Dante was the Ghibelline who had angrily denounced the corruption and political aspirations of the late-medieval popes in his *Commedia*. For others, so-called neo-Guelphs (Vincenzo Gioberti and Cesare Balbo, for instance), who longed for a distinctively Catholic united Italy with the papacy at its helm, Dante was the Guelph politician and consummately Christian poet. Common to these groups, however, was a zealous vision of Dante as a poet whose writing anticipated and even foretold the unified Italy, and whose political biography manifested distinctively Italian virtues.

Eyewitness accounts of the 1865 centenary celebrations in Florence, which took place from the fourteenth to the sixteenth of May, make for extraordinary reading. An engaging testimony comes from the British Dante scholar, Henry Clark Barlow, who was invited to attend the *festa* and was knighted by King Vittorio Emanuele II for his scholarship on the poet.[7] Barlow's evocative retelling describes the frenzied atmosphere in the city. Hotel rates reached unprecedented levels; people were frightened of the surging crowds; Dante souvenirs were sold on every corner. Indeed, writes Barlow, "Whatever was said, or sold, or done, had a reference to Dante."[8] As well as being attended by the king (celebrated as Dante's messianic "veltro") and assorted dignitaries from each of the regions of the new Italy and from abroad, Florence's three-day celebration saw tens of thousands of ordinary Italians, from different social classes and from the length and breadth of the newly unified peninsula, descend on Florence to honour the poet's memory. One contemporary scholar has described this celebration as an "extraordinary cultural laboratory."[9] As well as the unveiling of Enrico Pazzi's statue in Piazza Santa Croce, Barlow and others describe a series of patriotic orations in the packed square; a plethora of

[7] Henry Clark Barlow, *The Sixth Centenary Festivals of Dante Allighieri in Florence and at Ravenna, by a Representative* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1866). On Barlow in the context of the Victorian reception of Dante, see Nick Havely, *Dante's British Public: Readers and Texts, from the Fourteenth Century to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 239-41. On foreign views of the *festa*, see Graham Smith, *The Stone of Dante and Later Celebrations of the Poet* (Florence: Olschki, 2000), 49-56; Frances Clemente, "'And now the great day had come, the 14th of May, 1865!': Anna Vivanti-Lindau e il seicentenario dantesco," *Italian Studies* 78 (2023): 399-420.

[8] Barlow, *The Sixth Centenary Festivals,* 7.

[9] Rossella Bonfatti, "Performing Dante or Building the Nation? The *Divina Commedia* between Dramaturgy of Exile and Public Festivities," *Mediaevalia* 38 (2017): 37–67 (49).

publications – journalistic, academic, poetic, popularizing; displays and exhibitions; an array of musical and theatrical performances; and solemn processions through the city.

A valuable resource, which shows how the celebrations unfolded and how a particular understanding of Dante was mediated to the wider public, is the periodical literature dedicated to the centenary. Two regular centennial publications appeared in Florence. The first of these was *Il giornale del Centenario di Dante Alighieri*, which appeared every ten days from February 10, 1864, until the *festa* itself in May 1865.[10] This periodical collected public notices and reflections on the celebrations and their political significance alongside scholarly contributions on aspects of Dante's work. Reflecting attempts to mediate between the local and national in 1865 through the figure of Dante, the banner across the title page of each issue places the poet's portrait between the arms of Florence and of the House of Savoy (the Piedmontese dynasty that ruled the Kingdom until 1946), both illuminated by his star at the top of the image.[11] Above the title appears the epigraphic verse "Onorate l'altissimo poeta." In *Inf.* 4.80, these words are directed by the "bella scola" of classical poets towards Virgil, but they were repurposed in the 1865 celebrations as a patriotic refrain with which to honour Dante himself.

The second publication, which appeared weekly from May 1, 1864, again until the occasion of the centenary itself, was *La festa di Dante: letture domenicali del popolo fiorentino*.[12] This periodical was aimed at a more popular audience and had the objective of preparing the local population for the celebrations, inculcating in the public a particular idea of Dante. Written in "schoolmasterly language,"[13] it familiarizes its readers with the poet's biography and major works; the topography of his afterlife in the *Commedia* and its principal characters; and some of its key moral lessons in the section "Catechismo dantesco." Together, the two publications, aimed respectively at more learned and mass audiences, reflect the

[10] The *Giornale* can be consulted online at: https://archive.org/details/giornaledelcente00fireuoft/mode/2up. References to the periodical henceforth are taken from this online source, with the date and page provided.

[11] The banner across each title page can be seen by consulting the link in the previous footnote. Yousefzadeh's book explores how the Dantean *festa* negotiated some of the significant regional, social, and political tensions associated with the new state.

[12] All issues of *Festa di Dante* can be found online at: https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/La_Festa_di_Dante/kK8-AAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1. References henceforth are again taken from the online resource, with the date and page provided.

[13] Caesar, *Dante: The Critical Heritage*, 71.

combination of elite and popular contributions that characterized the 1865 *festa*.

By way of introduction to the idea of a "national" Dante and its associated rhetoric that dominate the 1865 celebrations, I shall take a quotation from each of these periodicals. In the third issue of the *Giornale del Centenario*, the academic Luigi Savorini writes:

> Il gentilissimo pensiero di festeggiare il centenario della nascita di Dante, doveva appunto aver vita nella gentile Firenze [...]
> Ma Dante appartiene alla nazione tutta; e tutta quindi [...] deve prender parte alla doverosa dimostrazione. Non però divisa in tanti piccioli centri, [...] il che richiamerebbe quasi la dolorosa reminiscenza dell'età dei Comuni; bensì unita e concorde in un grande e dignitoso insieme. È quindi per ciò che noi voremmo invitati i Municipi tutti d'Italia ed il Governo stesso a concorrervi efficacemente, e cementare così sempre più la fusione delle provincie in quel nome santissimo.
> Le glorie nazionali però non denno essere celebrate per ragione di inutile e snervante vanità; sebbene per trarne tanto più di vigore e potenza alla stabilità delle sorti avvenire.[14]

Dante's local identity is here quickly subordinated to the national; he is promoted instead as a consummately Italian figure in whose name the different regions of the new nation may now come together as one. The celebration of the poet and of other Italian cultural glories cannot be a commemorative end in itself – Savorini argues that such celebration would be frivolous. Rather, the festivities have the clear *function* of cultivating national unity, vigour, and strength. The instrumentalization of the poet is explicit and unapologetic and the national project is sacralized: Dante's is the "nome santissimo" in whose name fragmentation becomes unity.

In the first issue of *La festa di Dante*, we find in the editorial board's opening statement those aspects of Dante's life that most captivated the nationalists of the time, as the exiled poet is cast as the quintessence of Italian patriotism:

> Dante Alighieri gridò fieramente contro le discordie, mostrò dove erano i più gravi danni della patria e ne disse i rimedi, rampognò i vizi, esaltò le virtù, sparse infine la luce più viva della civiltà e del progresso. Ma da pochi fu sentito, inteso e ammirato. Oggi che il popolo a prezzo di sacrifici e di sangue ha ripreso in gran parte la sua dignità, ed è in grado di farsi rispettare e temere, è nostro sacro debito di rivendicare il più grande degli uomini, il più italiano degli italiani. […] L'Alighieri

[14] *Il giornale del centenario*, issue 3 (February 29, 1864), 19.

> fu il profeta della rigenerazione italiana, e questo profeta è vostro concittadino, o Fiorentini! Onoratelo adunque con tutto l'amore.[15]

The passage encapsulates some of the dimensions of Dante's political biography that made him such a resonant figure to the architects of unification. As in many instances, Dante is presented as prophet of Italian unity and the paragon of *italianità*: "il più italiano degli italiani" (the phrase echoes Cesare Balbo's highly influential *Vita di Dante*, which I quote below). However, he is also presented as a prophet unheeded – a political outcast, whose patriotism led him to suffer the pains of exile, and the persistence of political discord. In both these extracts, Dante is invoked more as a political than as a literary hero.[16] There is also an association of the fragmented communal Italy of the later Middle Ages with pre-unification Italy in the nineteenth century. Accordingly, national unification is cast as the actualization of Dante's own political ideal – a vision shamefully ignored in the poet's own time.

In the period of this centenary, Dante is depicted not only as a poet and politician who embodied Italian virtues, and whose writing foretold Italian unity, but as the very embodiment of a singular and immutable national essence. I shall provide here a few passages that express emblematically this idea of Dante as a man who not only inspired national pride, but who was in a sense Italy incarnate. Firstly, Cesare Balbo in the opening pages of his 1840 *Vita* writes:

> Quindi è che non avendo potuto o saputo ritrarre la vita di tutta la nazione italiana, tento ritrarre quella almeno dell'Italiano che più di niun altro raccolse in sè l'ingegno, le virtù, i vizi, le fortune della patria. Egli ad un tempo uomo d'azioni e di lettere, come furono i migliori nostri; egli uomo di parte; egli esule, ramingo, povero, traente dall'avversità nuove forze e nuova gloria; egli, in somma, l'Italiano più italiano che sia stato mai.[17]

Next, we have the extraordinary words of Bernardino Zendrini, who, in his 1865 centenary publication on the poet, not only presents Dante as the paradigm of the Italian people, but also the *Commedia* as the sacred text underpinning a secular religion of the new nation:

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[15] *La festa di Dante*, issue 1 (May 1, 1864), 1.

[16] See Jossa, "Politics vs Literature," on this strong politicization and "deliterization" of Dante in the Risorgimento.

[17] Cesare Balbo, *Vita di Dante* (Naples: Gaetano Nobile, 1840), 7.

> Dante è veramente il prototipo del popolo italiano; di quel popolo al quale egli ha dato, come Mosè l'ha data agli Ebrei, una particolare fisionomia modellata sulla immagine sua interiore d'uomo e di cittadino. E io credo di non aver detto troppo affermando che la *Commedia* fu a noi, come la Bibbia ai profughi Israeliti, simbolo di patria e di nazionalità negli anni del predominio straniero e dell'universale avvilimento.[18]

And then, returning to Barlow and to his English-language account:

> Dante's great poem is to the Italians not only a manual of morality and theology, and a text-book of political principles, but a mirror in which they are themselves reflected. His life was the life of the Italian middle ages, the history of a nation summed up in one man. Dante is the type of a whole people, the personification of Italy itself, when Italy was the centre of European civilization, literature, science and art.[19]

There is in each of these passages no less than an equation established between the poet, the nation, and the Italian people. As Bruno Tobia puts it, we witness "un culto dantesco come sinonimo di culto patriottico."[20] This "synonym" appears vividly in another passage from *La festa di Dante*. On the opening page of the sixth issue, the editors set out the national significance of the forthcoming celebration:

> Dante e l'Italia sono la stessa cosa, perché egli fu tutto di lei, ed essa tutto ebbe da lui, ed oggi fa di tutto per sempre più ispirarsi alle sue dottrine. Quindi la festa nazionale che oggi si celebra è festa anche di Dante. Anzi sarebbe bene che d'ora in poi, e cominciando l'anno prossimo, la festa dello Statuto fosse portata al giorno della nascita di Dante e in quello mantenuta per l'avvenire.[21]

Poet and nation here become assimilated, and Italy rendered wholly reducible to the figure of Dante. To honour the "altissimo poeta" is to honour the new nation in its unity and integrity, to celebrate its innate and unchanging qualities that extend through time. The 1865 celebration sees Italy consecrated in the poet's name and in his image, and the poet consecrated in the name and image of the nation. Dante is not merely an instrument of nationalist discourse at this moment; rather he becomes its very vessel.

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[18] Bernardo Zendrini, *Per il centenario di Dante* (Milan: Editori della biblioteca utile, 1865), 18

[19] Barlow, *The Sixth Centenary Festivals*, 19.

[20] Tobia, "La statuaria dantesca nell'Italia liberale," 77.

[21] *La festa di Dante*, issue 6 (June 5, 1864), 21.

2021: Father of Italian Identity and Echoes of 1865

There is a temptation to consign the intensely "nationalized" Dante of 1865 firmly to the past, and to see the history of Dante centenaries and his reception more broadly in terms of a movement from the national to the global: from the fervent celebrations of Dante in the wake of Italian unification and the heavily ideological and propagandistic appropriation of the poet under fascism to a Dante that is universal and unbound. This narrative arc is often emphasized in scholarly accounts of the poet's cultural and political reception.[22] Such an emphasis is entirely legitimate. Fulvio Conti's essay in the present collection sheds light on the "universalization" of Dante as a cultural symbol in post-war and post-fascist Italy, focusing especially on the 1965 centenary. Moreover, as we see in Heather Webb and Daragh O'Connell's contributions, it is certainly true that the reception of Dante today has never been more international, and that he inspires forms of cultural production that transcend different languages, media, political standpoints, and cultural traditions.[23] Dante has, in general terms, become ever more flexible and ever less ideologically circumscribed, both within Italy and beyond. Nonetheless, I would argue that – alongside this "liberation" of the poet as a cultural and political icon – the "national" appropriation of Dante has not only survived but has, in recent years, re-asserted itself. It is my contention here that the influence

[22] To take the two most important recent examples (and I should stress that both scholars treat the history of Dante's reception with great care and insight), the final chapter of Fulvio Conti's book, having traced the Romantic, liberal, and fascist cults of Dante, is entitled "From Italian symbol to global icon," while the last part of Raffa's account of the compelling story of Dante's human remains concerns "Dante's global face." See Conti, *The Ultimate Italian*, 150-86; Raffa, *Dante's Bones*, 288-301. Conti's article in the present issue, too, emphasizes the movement from a "national" to a "universalist" Dante in the aftermath of the Second World War and a new era of post-Fascist multilateralism, while Heather Webb's posits the emergence of a "non-Italian Dante" in 2021. Catherine Keen, in a recent essay on Dante's cultural and political reception, emphasizes the poet's global reach and persistence as an "Italian cultural icon," while stating that "the idea of a 'national poet' has fallen somewhat out of favour over the past century": "Dante's Fortuna: An Overview of Canon Formation and National Contexts," in *Ethics, Politics and Justice in Dante*, eds. Giulia Gaimari and Catherine Keen (London: UCL Press, 2019), 129–43 (134). My suggestion here, however, is that the 2021 centenary witnessed a notable reassertion of this "national" Dante, alongside other forms of commemoration and appropriation.

[23] At the University of Bristol, my colleague Rhiannon Daniels and I commissioned and exhibited eight artists' books responding to Dante's work. A catalogue of images of the books can be seen at https://dante.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/artists/dante-libri-nuovi-catalogue/.

this tradition continues to exert upon the popular imagining of the poet in Italy remains considerable, and that the common narrative of a movement from a "national" to a "global" Dante should be nuanced.

That the "national" Dante has seen something of a revival should perhaps come as little surprise. Following the apparent triumph of liberal multilateralism and globalized capitalism, especially in the aftermath of the Cold War, the last fifteen years have seen the emergence of new geopolitical tensions accompanied by a marked reassertion of nationhood and nationalism. Italy has been a significant venue for this kind of retrenchment, as nationalist populism has enjoyed notable electoral successes.[24] The separatist Lega Nord was relaunched in 2018 by Matteo Salvini as the national Lega party, on a platform strongly opposed to immigration and multiculturalism. It became the largest party on the right of Italian politics in the 2018 national elections and the largest Italian party overall in the 2019 European elections.[25] Subsequently, the Lega has been usurped by Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia. Meloni's party, with roots in the post-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano, rose to power in the 2022 Italian elections. As well as channelling wider political and economic frustrations, these parties' successes have been grounded in a reaction against the transnational project of the European Union and characterized by inflammatory rhetoric around migration. Both have invoked a traditional and homogenous idea of national identity, of which they have cast themselves as the trusted defenders.

To show how Dante has been absorbed back into contemporary nationalist discourse (having been largely absent from the 150-year anniversary of the Italian nation only a decade earlier in 2011),[26] I shall now turn to the centenary of 2021, the year that of course marked the seven-hundredth anniversary of Dante's death. The centenary celebrations, which unfolded from late 2020 until

[24] On the term "nationalist populism," see for instance Prerna Singh, "Populism, Nationalism, and Nationalist Populism," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 56, no. 2 (2021): 250–69. In addition to the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia parties discussed here, the anti-establishment Movimento 5 Stelle has also enjoyed considerable success in Italy, but – per Singh's definition – it represents an example of populism but not nationalist populism.

[25] Salvini himself has invoked Dante in support of his anti-immigrant agenda. See here his 2016 speech in Florence, in which he uses Dante's representation of Mohammed in *Inferno* 28 to attack "immigrati estremisti": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1JXr-4xxAY.

[26] This absence is noted in Ronald de Rooy, "Dante all'insegna dell'unità," *Incontri: rivista europea di studi italiana* 26, no. 2 (2011): 64–72 (71).

the anniversary itself on September 14, 2021, were of course extremely multifarious. In part, they attested to Dante's extraordinary global reach. The Italian scholar Matteo Maselli has recently summarized some of the key initiatives, both in Italy and internationally, here in *Bibliotheca Dantesca*.[27] These included exhibitions, publications, conferences, and performances in locations around the world. Moreover, the opportunities for online dissemination and collaboration, some of them imposed by the restrictions on movement associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, allowed for instantaneous dialogue across national borders, and for new and more diverse audiences to engage with Dante and his legacy.

At the same time, some of the most high-profile political interventions in Italy continued to commemorate and promote Dante through a markedly national frame, and it is this side of the centenary year that I wish to focus on here. Such interventions were not the preserve of the nationalist right. When members of the Conte and Draghi governments (the commemorations, from late 2020 until late 2021, spanned both of these administrations) paid tribute to Dante's legacy, their language often echoed that surrounding the 1865 centenary. They were also able to reach large audiences: speeches made through the apparatus of the state were widely broadcast and reported across the Italian media. In the most high-profile address, President Sergio Mattarella inaugurated the year of centennial events on October 2, 2020, with a speech from the Palazzo del Quirinale. Following a stirring rendition of the national anthem, the President proceeded to celebrate Dante's universality, but at the same time presented him as a figure of the nation, the very father and foundation of Italian unity. In language strongly redolent of the Risorgimento, he described the poet as "il grande profeta dell'Italia, un patriota visionario, destinato, quasi biblicamente, a scorgere ma non a calcare la Terra vagheggiata e promessa […] il poeta italiano e civile per eccellenza."[28] The same weekend, once again echoing the language of the 1865 passages I cited above, the then Minister for Cultural Heritage, Dario Franceschini (from the centre-left Democratic Party), affirmed that "Ricordare Dante non è solo ricordare la sua grandezza, ma è un

[27] Matteo Maselli, "Seven Hundred Years After Dante's Death. The Imperishable Image of an Eternal Poet," *Bibliotheca Dantesca: Journal of Dante Studies* 4 (2021): 199-211. See also the essays by Webb and O'Connell in the present issue.

[28] A transcript of Mattarella's full speech, along with photos and video, can be found at: https://www.quirinale.it/elementi/50535.

modo di rendere viva l'identità nazionale."[29] In March 2021, Luigi di Maio, then Minister of Foreign Affairs and former head of the Five Star Movement, introduced a programme of events organized by his ministry ("Dante 700 nel mondo"). In doing so, he appealed strikingly to a sense of Italian cultural exceptionalism: "Dante è un'icona del genio italiano. Rappresenta la sconfinata ricchezza del nostro patrimonio culturale, che fa del nostro modo di vivere un *unicum* nel mondo."[30]

Another major focal point for commemorative activities in 2021 was March 25, or "Dantedì." The idea of an annual date dedicated to Italy's "sommo poeta" was first promoted by the *Corriere della Sera* and received backing from influential politicians before being instituted in 2020. As noted in our introduction to this collection of essays, while recent centennial events have combined national and global dimensions, "Dantedì" has seemed a commemorative occasion especially concerned with reinforcing ideas of Italian identity within the peninsula. Those first championing this event used the kind of essentialist discourse that I have traced through the examples above. For instance, Enzo Moavero Milanesi, Minister of Foreign Affairs in Conte's administration, published a paean to Dante in the *Corriere* in June 2019. Milanesi, a distinguished lawyer and diplomat, described Dante as "iscritto, a pieno titolo e pervasivamente, nel codice genetico dell'italianità."[31] The association of Dante with a "genetic code" of Italian identity expresses, in the language of modern science, an idea of Italian identity that is fixed, innate, and ancestral rather than open to change, acquisition, or renegotiation. Instituting the annual event in 2020, Franceschini – fully melding poet and nation in the manner of Dante's nineteenth-century advocates – declared that the poet *is* Italy's language and its unity ("Dante," he concluded, "è l'idea stessa d'Italia").[32]

It is clear from these examples that a strongly "national" rhetoric surrounding Dante remained pervasive in the political sphere in 2021. However, given the subsequent rise to power of Fratelli

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[29] For a video of the speech in question, see: https://video.repubblica.it/edizione/firenze/700-anni-dalla-morte-di-dante-franceschini-e-il-simbolo-dell-unita-nazionale/368290/368871.

[30] See https://iicshanghai.esteri.it/it/gli_eventi/calendario/dante-700-nel-mondo/.

[31] Enzo Moavero Milanesi, Dantedì, "Ecco perché la voce del poeta è parte del nostro Dna," *Corriere della sera*, July 6, 2019. See https://www.corriere.it/19_luglio_06/dantedi-giornata-dante-intervento-enzo-moavero-milanesi-d8466eea-a00b-11e9-832f-72b4d689725f.shtml.

[32] See https://www.nove.firenze.it/dante-e-lidea-stessa-ditalia-il-25-marzo-giornata-nazionale.htm.

d'Italia, the contributions of Meloni and her party to the commemorative discourse are of particular interest. In them, we witness an intensification of the rhetoric noted above, and an instrumentalization of Dante to more exclusivist ends. On the centennial year's "Dantedì," Meloni released a video on social media and on her party's website to mark the occasion. Having recited a terzina from St Bernard's prayer to the Virgin in *Paradiso* 33, and introduced the day as "la giornata per ricordare Dante Alighieri," Meloni connects the poet to her wider political agenda:

> Dante è autenticamente "nostro": è autenticamente italiano, è autenticamente cristiano. Dante è il padre della nostra identità.
> Un'identità che vogliamo difendere, a partire dalla nostra lingua: il quarto idioma più studiato al mondo ma che l'Italia non ha ancora neanche riconosciuto come lingua ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana.
> Fratelli d'Italia ha presentato una proposta di legge costituzionale perché venga riconosciuta e ha presentato una mozione per chiedere l'utilizzo esclusivo della nostra lingua negli atti del Parlamento, della pubblica amministrazione e degli enti locali. Chiediamo anche a voi di aiutarci in questa piccola ma grande battaglia partecipando sui social all'iniziativa lanciata da FdI e dal titolo #parlaitaliano.
> Onoriamo Dante e difendiamo insieme la nostra identità.[33]

As in the nineteenth-century examples quoted above, there is a near equation established here between the poet and the nation (or, here, an essentialist idea of national identity). The act of commemorating Dante is again in service of a fixed idea of nationhood: to honour the poet is at once to defend "la nostra identità." There is a populist appeal to "common sense" through short, lapidary, declarative statements that echo the extreme clarification characteristic of Meloni's well-known mode of self-presentation elsewhere ("Io sono Giorgia, sono una donna, sono una madre, sono italiana, sono cristiana," she has famously declared).[34] Dante, she says, is "authentically" ours, he is "authentically" Italian, he is "authentically"

[33] The video and transcript can be found at https://www.fratelli-italia.it/2021/03/25/dantedi-giorgia-meloni-fratelli-ditalia-ha-presentato-una-proposta-di-legge-costituzionale-per-riconoscere-litaliano-come-lingua-ufficiale-della-repubblica-video/. Akash Kumar has recently written an astute commentary on Meloni's speech, in relation to questions of linguistic purity, on the *Dante Notes* website: https://dantesociety.org/publicationsdante-notes/authentically-speaking-dante-and-politics-language-melonis-italy. My own focus here, as well as noting the distortions present in Meloni's reading, is to situate it within a longer history of nationalist commemoration of the poet.

[34] See, for instance, this speech in Rome on January 24, 2020, where Meloni declares herself "pronta a governare questa nazione e difendere la sua identità": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFYoFOaJvMs.

Christian. He is, in the end, the father of our identity, a singular and exclusivist identity, one infers, that elides the categories of "Italian" and "Christian." Dante is also invoked as the father of the Italian language (a language Meloni sees as undervalued by a cosmopolitan elite). It is in the poet's name that she proposes a new law whereby Italian would be the only language permitted in parliament and in public administration.

As I shall discuss in the final part of this essay, attempts to define rigidly the parameters of national cultures and communities, as bounded entities each defined by unique characteristics, fail to acknowledge their inherent interconnectedness and permeability. For Meloni, however, Dante is seen to embody a pure (though scarcely defined) Italian identity, to be protected from subversive forces within the nation and hostile forces without. Thus, Italian identity is something to be "defended" ("difendiamo"). Her party's endeavours to protect the exclusive use of Italian, in Dante's name, is a "battaglia." Again on "Dantedì," Meloni relished the opportunity to criticize a German journalist and translator, Arno Widmann, who had questioned the extent of Dante's originality in the newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau*. While the German daily had, she declared, baselessly attacked Dante in "parole inaccetabili," "Noi, al contrario, siamo e resteremo sempre orgoglioso del Sommo Poeta che, con i suoi versi, ha plasmato la lingua, la cultura e l'identità del nostro popolo."[35] Meloni has thus invoked Dante as a symbol of national integrity, to be preserved and protected from external attacks, and has used him to uphold the stark dichotomies that underpin her political project (us/them, inside/outside).

Another Fratelli d'Italia parliamentarian, meanwhile, the Florentine Giovanni Donzelli, used the 2021 "Dantedì" to decry the use of foreign terms within the Italian language when equivalent Italian terms exist. His comments appear in a blog post, tellingly under a photo of Pazzi's imposing 1865 statue in Florence:

> In questa giornata tutti ricorderanno il Sommo Poeta per poi tornare a dimenticare l'importanza della lingua italiana di cui Dante è stato il

[35] For the original article, see https://www.fr.de/kultur/literatur/dante-die-guten-ins-toepfchen-die-schlechten-ins-kroepfchen-90259881.html. On the subsequent polemic in Italy, see: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/mar/29/italians-defend-dante-from-claims-he-was-light-years-behind-shakespeare. For Meloni's comments quoted here, see: https://www.fratelli-italia.it/2021/03/25/dante-meloni-da-quotidiano-tedesco-parole-inaccettabili-e-senza-fondamento/.

> padre. In troppe occasioni si utilizzano termini stranieri sostituendoli a parole e concetti italiani esistenti.[36]

Once again, to promote this uncontaminated vision of Italian language and culture is to remember and honour Dante:

> La volontà di Fratelli d'Italia è quella di difendere la lingua italiana in ogni sede, anche quelle istituzionali. La nostra iniziativa vuole ricordare Dante e onorare la sua figura tutti i giorni. Per combattere l'ipocrisia di onorare il Vate solo un giorno e calpestare la nostra cultura il resto dell'anno.[37]

Below the comments appears a promotional image of Meloni, draped in the Italian flag, surrounded by the words: "Difendiamo l'Italia: la sua lingua, la sua identità, la sua cultura." In the background looms, once again, Pazzi's statue. It is under the aegis of this monumental "national" poet, shaped by the Risorgimento cult of Dante and celebrated (and given enduring material form) in the 1865 celebrations, that this "defence" is carried out.[38]

Such an invocation of Dante in the name of linguistic purity has a notable history. To take a striking example from the fascist period, Adelmo Cicogna's 1940 book *Autarchia della Lingua* promotes Italian linguistic self-sufficiency and the expurgation of all foreign terms ("Senza il minimo disprezzo per le altre lingue, *vogliamo togliere dalla lingua italiana tutte le parole straniere*").[39] The title page includes a quotation from Mussolini stressing the role of defending linguistic autarchy as part of cultivating "l'unità spirituale e quindi politica della nazione." Such spiritual and political unity is sought in the image of Dante: in the cover image, we see the overlaying of a statuesque image of the poet in profile, the

[36] See the blog post on Donzelli's website: https://www.giovannidonzelli.it/fratelli-italia/dante-lingua-italiana-atti-stranieri-fratelli-ditalia.html?fbclid=IwAR3P-jeKWv_usUXGfjyRlXVA-uBXEY3_ENzx_NB9l7NlML5aVvAJYbuabzU.

[37] *Ibid.*

[38] On the statue's "clearly delineated and imposingly solid monumentality," and its impact on how Dante can be perceived in the modern world, see Zygmunt Barański, "On Dante's Trail," *Italian Studies* 72 (2017): 1-15 (1); and also Keen, "Dante's Fortuna," 134.

[39] Adelmo Cicogna, *Autarchia della lingua* (Rome: 1940), 7. The italics here are the author's own. On the uses of Dante under Fascism, see especially Stefano Albertini, "Dante in camicia nera: uso e abuso del divino poeta nell'Italia fascista," *The Italianist* 16, no. 1 (1996): 117–42; Conti, *The Ultimate Italian*, 108-49; Raffa, *Dante's Bones*, 209-37; Luigi Scorrano, *Il Dante "fascista": saggi, letture, note dantesche* (Ravenna: Longo, 2001), 89–125.

Italian peninsula, and the fasces.[40] The use of the quotation from *Inf.* 33.80 "del bel paese là dove 'l SI sona" uses Dante to reinforce an idea of nationhood built on linguistic, cultural, and territorial uniformity.

The National Dante: Persistence and Distortion

The nationalists of 1865 and 2021 alike present Italian culture, language, and identity as singular, immutable, and circumscribed, and use Dante to uphold this vision. There are, naturally, significant differences between the 1865 and 2021 centenaries, in terms of both their specific political and cultural contexts and the different forms of nationalism and commemoration at stake. The nationalism of the Risorgimento was understood as an emancipatory movement, as the shackles of external dominion were cast off, while the Italian nationalism of today is led by the forces of reaction, with a strong emphasis on sovereignty, hard borders, and the supposed perils of multiculturalism and inward migration. The national cult of Dante in the 1865 *festa* was accompanied by a passionate engagement with the poet's writing, for all that this engagement tended to exaggerate his nationalist credentials. By contrast, the national appropriation of Dante in 2021, at least in the political arena, tends to be more superficial and, in some cases, opportunistic. References to Dante and his significance in the examples cited above are usually restricted to commonplaces – notably the idea of Dante as the "father" of Italy, its culture, its language, and its identity. Nonetheless, we have seen how the language of commemoration associated with the 1865 centenary finds some striking rhetorical and conceptual echoes in the political discourse surrounding its 2021 counterpart. Common to both instances is a primordial understanding of national culture: Dante is understood and depicted as the progenitor of an unchanging form of *italianità*, a totem of monoculturalism and a bulwark against political, cultural, and linguistic pluralism.

The reach and potency of this idea of Dante in Italy, not least given the profile of its exponents and the poet's longstanding absorption into national iconography, should not be underestimated. As well as political speeches and interventions, successful books

[40] The image in question can be seen online on the Cornell University Library website: see https://rmc.library.cornell.edu/visionsofdante/fame_fascism.php.

aimed at the wider public can reinforce this image of the poet.[41] However, this "national" framing of the author can result in a caricaturing of his immense complexity. Like all caricatures, it is an idea of the poet grounded in a certain reality. It is little wonder, for instance, that Dante's invective on "serva Italia" in *Purg.* 6.76, a land blighted by disunity and ruled by tyrants, has long resonated with audiences (and not only nationalist ones) concerned with the political health of "Italia."[42] Dante defended the "italica loquela" (*Conv.* I, x, 14) against rival languages and there is no questioning his immense contribution to its development. In his unfinished *De vulgari eloquentia*, he suggestively traced the geographical contours of Italy, dissected its constituent regions and dialects, and proposed a supraregional "illustrious vernacular." For the nationalists most drawn to Dante, such utterances were proof that the nation had long existed; it needed to be reawakened and not created. In the most extreme nationalist readings of the poet, the pro-imperial prophecies of the *Commedia* were seen as "fulfilled" through the modern nation-state, whether in the Savoy kings of the newly unified Kingdom of Italy or in the rise of Mussolini.[43]

And yet any idea of Dante as a proto-nationalist and prophet of the unified Italian nation-state also demands significant qualification. A few brief comments to this end will have to suffice here.[44] Firstly, Dante does not foresee any kind of "national" sovereignty for Italy but calls for universal empire as the means of transcending the factionalism of his time. He saw the destiny of "Italia" not as an autonomous "nation," in competition with its neighbours, but as the "giardin de lo imperio" (*Purg.* 6.105): the political heart of a vast imperial superstructure, anchored in Rome, which saw humankind united under universal monarchical rule. As Fabio Finotti

[41] See, for example, Marcello Veneziani, *Dante, nostro padre: Il pensatore visionario che fondò l'Italia* (Florence: Vallecchi, 2020), published to coincide with the 2021 centenary, and, from a polemical right-wing perspective, Tommaso Indelli, *Dante: Il padre della patria* (Rome: Il Primato Nazionale Grande Italiani, 2021).

[42] On two "progressive" uses of the canto in Berlusconi era, see Nicolino Applauso, "Dante, Berlusconi, and the Bordello State: Paolo Sylos Labini's and James Walston's Democratic Dante at the Ebb of the Seconda Repubblica," *Mediaevalia* 38 (2017): 249–78.

[43] For a reading of this kind from around the time of 1865 centenary, see anon., *Quando il veltro di Dante comparirà in Italia?* (Florence: Cassone, 1866). For the most sustained such reading under Fascism, see Domenico Venturini, *Dante Alighieri e Benito Mussolini*, revised edition (Rome: Nuova Italia, 1932).

[44] I have written more fully elsewhere on the problems associated with the "monocultural" image of Dante: see Tristan Kay, "Dante and the Transnational Turn," in *Transnational Italian Studies*, eds. Charles Burdett, Loredana Polezzi, and Marco Santello (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 291-307.

discusses in his history of the (highly mutable) idea of the Italian *patria*, we find in Dante three different forms of *patria*, all of them of great importance, at play simultaneously: (1) the *patria* of the commune (one need think only of the sharply differentiated identities of medieval Florence and Fiesole, located just a few miles apart); (2) the *patria* of the Italian peninsula (a cultural "Italia" inspired in large part by the classics); and (3) the *patria* of the universal Empire that Dante believed was willed by God.[45] This is not to mention the celestial *patria* to which Dante's protagonist travels in the *Commedia*. *Patria* in Dante is thus a particularly dynamic and fluid concept that does not conform neatly to modern ideas of nationhood.

The question of language, too, requires careful interrogation. While the *De vulgari* envisions a supraregional Italian "vulgare illustre," it also presents Italian as but one branch of a Romance tongue that had itself fragmented into three (I, viii, 6): the vernaculars of *oc*, *oil*, and *sì* (Occitan, French, and Italian). Dante's examples of poetic eloquence in the vernacular thereafter in the treatise move fluidly between Romance vernaculars, and linguistic and cultural borders appear strikingly permeable. In the same work, in words that undercut his modern associations with Italian cultural exceptionalism, he attributes to his experience of exile his conviction that there must exist "many regions and cities more noble and more delightful than Tuscany and Florence […] and many nations and peoples who speak a more elegant and practical language than do the Italians" (*Dve* I, vi, 3). It is highly probable that Dante translated and adapted the Old French *Roman de la Rose* (in his *Fiore*) and authored the trilingual canzone "Aï faux ris."[46] He frequently took inspiration from the Occitan troubadours.[47] The language of his *Commedia*, moreover, is most notable for its openness and

[45] See Fabio Finotti, *Italia, l'invenzione della patria* (Milano: Bompiani, 2016), 117-45.

[46] On Dante and the *Roman de la rose*, see Antonio Montefusco, "Roman de la Rose," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, eds. Manuele Gragnolati, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 127-41. On the trilingual poem, see Massimiliano Chiamenti, "Attorno alla canzone trilingue "Aï Faux Ris," finalmente recuperata a Dante," *Dante Studies* 116 (1998): 189–207.

[47] On Dante and the troubadours, see Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the "Comedy"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), *passim*; William Burgwinkle, "Troubadours," in Gragnolati et al. (eds), *Oxford Handbook*, 141-57, and "Modern Lovers: Evanescence and the Act in Dante, Arnaut, and Sordello," in *Desire in Dante and the Middle Ages*, eds. Manuele Gragnolati, Tristan Kay, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden (Oxford: Legenda, 2012), 14-28; Tristan Kay, *Dante's Lyric Redemption: Eros, Salvation, Vernacular Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 155-246.

experimentation. Dante does not, in his masterpiece, seek a pristine and transhistorical standard, but revels in his vernacular's mutability and vitality, absorbing and not excluding extraneous influences.[48] His Limbo, a strikingly multicultural space for those virtuous non-Christians to be spared the physical torments of Hell, shows his esteem not only for pre-Christian Roman, Greek, and Hebrew cultures, but also for the intellectual achievements of medieval Islam.[49] The *Commedia* is characterized, in other words, not by the kind of Italian monoculturalism attributed to Dante by his nationalist advocates, but by a tension between the poet's variegated set of cultural influences and his attempts to accommodate them into his monotheistic eschatological vision.[50] Forcing Dante to conform to a monocultural and monolingual idea of the nation-state is not only an anachronism;[51] it also impoverishes our sense of the richness of his own cultural reality and intellectual formation.

Scholars in recent decades have worked to show that national narratives need to be read with scepticism; that national identities are not immutable but endlessly renegotiated and contested; that cultures are not discrete entities but are engaged in continual processes of dialogue and cross-pollination.[52] Nonetheless, national frames of understanding also prove hard to resist. Benedict Anderson argues that "nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time," while Umut Özkırımlı describes nations as "the taken-for-granted context of everyday life and [the most] readily available cognitive and discursive frame to make sense of the world that surrounds us."[53] Modern language studies, the context in which many students outside Italy first encounter the

[48] See Kumar for comments on the linguistic "openness" of the *Commedia*.
[49] On aspects of Dante and the Islamic world, see the essays collected in *Dante and Islam*, ed. Jan M. Ziolkowski (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).
[50] See, e.g., Teodolinda Barolini, "Dante's Limbo and the cultural other, or injustice on the banks of the Indus," in *Dante Worlds: Echoes, Places, Questions*, ed. Peter Carravetta (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2019), 21-34; *Dante e la molteplicità delle culture nell'Europa medievale*, ed. Giuseppe Ledda (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2022).
[51] On nations and monolingualism, see Yasmin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011)
[52] See, e.g., the classic studies: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London New York: Verso, 2016); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, revised edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
[53] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 13; Umut Özkırımlı, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*, third edition (London: Macmillan Education, Palgrave, 2017), 5.

work of Dante, have become increasingly attentive to questions of transnationalism and to the importance of a more critical understanding of nationhood.[54] However, the academic structures and strata that shape students' experience of languages and their associated literatures can perpetuate the idea of container-cultures and neatly delineated national traditions. This is especially challenging in the case of Dante, who has been freighted with national meaning perhaps more than any other European writer. As we have seen in this essay, Dante has for nearly two centuries been presented by authoritative voices as a byword for Italian culture, or even for the Italian nation itself.

The overdetermined place of nations in approaching and understanding historical processes and cultural phenomena (what Astrid Erll terms "methodological nationalism") is especially distorting in the case of pre-national medieval cultures, when the modern hegemony of "nation-ness" was yet to take hold.[55] Erll herself, a scholar of memory studies, advocates for a "transcultural lens": "such an approach means moving away from site-bound, nation-bound, and in a naïve sense, cultures-bound research and displaying an interest in the mnemonic dynamics unfolding across and beyond boundaries."[56] A rich example of such an approach in studying medieval cultures comes in *Europe: A Literary History, 1348-1418*, edited by David Wallace.[57] Wallace's collection of essays works against historiographies that are shaped by modern nation-states. Accordingly, the volume's contributors do not write chapters on Italian, Spanish, or French literature from the period in

[54] See, e.g., *Transnational Modern Languages: A Handbook*, eds. Derek Duncan and Jennifer Burns (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022); Burdett et al (eds), *Transnational Italian Studies*. See Kay "Dante and the Transnational Turn" on Dante and ideas of transnationalism specifically.

[55] Astrid Erll, "Travelling Memory," *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (2011): 4–18 (8). "The nation-state may have proved a useful grid when addressing nineteenth and twentieth-century constellations of memory. In view of both earlier historical periods and the current age of global media cultures and diasporic public spheres, the nation, however, appears less and less as the key arbiter of cultural memory" (8).

[56] Erll, "Travelling Memory," 15.

[57] *Europe: A Literary History*, ed. David Wallace, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). For another interesting recent collection with a similar methodological emphasis, see *Openness in Medieval Europe*, eds. Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022). It is also important to note the burgeoning field of "global medieval studies," which similarly emphasizes cultural and locational interconnectedness (often across vast distances) and works against Eurocentric historiographies. For a helpful and concise introduction to the methodological principles at stake, see Geraldine Heng, *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), part of the short book series *Cambridge Elements in the Global Middle Ages*, eds. Heng and Susan Noakes.

question, but focus instead upon cities. These cities are then grouped together into "sequences" (reflecting routes of trade, pilgrimage, language, cultural exchange, and more), which cross the borders that exist between modern states. Sequence V, for instance, runs from Avignon to Naples, showing the French roots of much Italian cultural production in the period, while Sequence VI begins with Palermo and connects the Sicilian city to Muslim and Jewish communities in Iberia and in North Africa. Consequently, we are not presented with a discrete entity we can call "Italian culture," but instead with a series of essays that foreground the essential permeability and interconnectedness of cultural centres. Palermo, as the location of the very first "school" of Italian vernacular poetry, seems an especially compelling example: a strikingly multicultural and multilingual site of cultural exchange and production that contrasts profoundly with the myth of a monolingual and monocultural Italian tradition bequeathed by the national genius Dante.[58]

Centenaries and anniversaries are usually described as commemorative occasions. Yet, while they can serve to revivify and preserve cultural heritage, they can also constrain its reception. The passages I explored above from the Dante centenaries of 1865 and 2021 are, in spirit, antithetical to the approach advocated by scholars such as Erll and Wallace. They place the poet in a national straitjacket and leave little space for a more plural Dante, whose cultural interests and influences moved across different languages and cultures, and whose complex and shifting ruminations on politics and language have all too often been ossified in the name of national politics. Such interventions are in truth less commemorative than constitutive. They are concerned, that is, less with remembering the medieval Dante than in producing a new Dante, who conforms to a particular, time-bound idea of the modern nation-state. As such, the national Dante who emerges from these centenary events is a partial Dante, formed by significant omissions as well as recollections, his complexities and internal inconsistencies elided. Scholars of collective memory have highlighted that public commemoration, in seeking a solid, unifying, and coherent narrative, necessarily involves forgetting: Christina Simko writes that "in acknowledging particular events or episodes, we also place these moments

[58] The reception of Dante's poem is examined through a cross-cultural, Mediterranean lens in Andrea Celli's recent monograph: *Dante and the Mediterranean Comedy: From Muslim Spain to Post-Colonial Italy* (Palgrave: Abingdon and New York, 2022). See also the essays collected in *Dante Beyond Borders: Contexts and Reception*, eds. Nick Havely, Jonathan Katz, and Richard Cooper (Oxford: Legenda, 2021).

within larger narratives that foreground some elements of the past while downplaying, glossing over, and obscuring others."[59] The national commemoration of Dante seems a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon. The editors of the recent *Oxford Handbook of Dante* expressed their interest "in letting another figure emerge alongside that more solid and consistent (one might say overly consistent) Dante: a Dante who is (made) open to interpretation, unbound from the shackles of completion and wholeness."[60] I would argue that the shackles of nationhood have proven particularly restrictive and limiting; that the national Dante, a monumental figure consecrated in the 1865 centenary and surviving still today, has been an especially persistent impediment to the emergence of this "other" Dante. A Dante containing multitudes, however, is a richer, more faithful, and more rewarding proposition than the monolith of nationalist imagination.

[59] Christina Simko, "Collective Memory," in *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756384/obo-9780199756384-0215.xml. See also Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 130-42, on the "amnesias" associated with national narratives.

[60] Manuele Gragnolati, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden, "Introduction: Dante Unbound: A Vulnerable Life and the Openness of Interpretation," in Gragnolati et al (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, xxiii-xxxv (xxxii). For other recent correctives to the "overly consistent" and monolithic Dante identified by the editors of the *Handbook*, see Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Multitudes: History, Philosophy, Method* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2022); Nicolò Crisafi, *Dante's Masterplot and the Alternative Narrative Models in the 'Commedia'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).