

“Ad Infinitum,” a review of *Infinity: The Story of a Moment*, by Gabriel Josipovici, in *American Book Review*, vol. 34, no. 2 (Jan./Feb. 2013), pp. 10-11.

Infinity: the story of a moment

Gabriel Josipovici

Carcenet Press

www.carcenet.co.uk

122 pages; paper; \$19.95 price

ISBN: 9781847771667

by Jeff Bursey

On beginning to read any of Gabriel Josipovici’s fiction there is a multiple awareness, based on past experience, of aspects that lie ahead: tension felt as one is led through the material; a vertiginous aspect to the experience; renewed enjoyment in the language; and the re-enforced knowledge that whatever surety we possess on the edge of the first page will be turned inside out, undermined, transformed, and left more in the air by the last page. Small wonder, then, that in the “self-impooverished narrowness of mainstream British so-called ‘literary’ literature, its obsession with Amises and McEwans, its deliberate ignorance of so much else,” as Jenny Turner put it in her [review](#) of Tom McCarthy’s *C* for the *London Review of Books*, there is little discussion of Josipovici. In 2010 alone he put out *Heart’s Wing and Other Stories, Only Joking* (a comic novel), and the critical work *What Ever Happened to Modernism?*, which earned him some notoriety, yet he isn’t noticed by, for example, Booker Prize judges.

Infinity: the story of a moment from the start raises questions unresolved at the end. A former man-servant, Massimo, of a dead Sicilian composer named Tancredo Pavone, is interviewed by an unnamed person about the life of the seemingly misunderstood, principled aristocrat whose compositions slowly garnered interest over time. (A note at the back of the book states that the life and writings of a real composer, Giacinto Scelsi, have been used, loosely, in creating the character.) We aren’t told the purpose of the interview, though we know that, as the composer died of natural causes, there’s nothing criminal in this regard. (Massimo’s contact with another employee of Pavone, Miss Mauss, the nature of which goes unstated, does seem to edge near the criminal: “Nothing was ever proved, I said,” [116] in his words.) The interviewer alternates between encouragement, exasperation, and unseemly prying.

He was silent.

After a while I said: Go on.

– Yes, sir, he said. How would you like me to go on?

– In any way you wish, I said.

– Yes, sir, he said, but he did not go on.

– Did he often speak about his wife? I finally asked. (12)

That type of exchange is a feature of the book until, at some point, Pavone’s servant no longer needs prompting.

Massimo’s retelling of his master’s thought and life takes in Pavone’s early successes in Monte Carlo and London, his musical study in Vienna, life and friendships in Paris, and time in Swiss sanatoria. What marks him most are the trips to West Africa

(1926) and, above all, India and Nepal (1949), where his encounter with Buddhist chanting and trumpets change his conceptions of sound and music. Arabella, Pavone's wife, left him when the Second World War ended, for the third and last time, and once recovered and living in Rome, he concentrated on forgetting everything learned from his time as a student of Scheler, himself a student of Schoenberg. Incorporating what he's learned from his travels, Pavone starts writing pieces for the piano, quartets, and voices (without words) that cause commotions in the audience. *Six Sixty-Six* is the

same note struck in the same way on the piano six hundred and sixty-six times. It was beautiful, Massimo, he said, Its beauty was an otherworldly beauty. It would either drive you mad or draw you into another dimension, When it was performed . . . , the audience rioted, and walked out. Cage said to me: This is a piece I would like to have written if only I had thought of it. (88)

As is usual in Josipovici's work, there is a wit present that, due to Pavone's nature, comes out in putdowns ("And then listen to the music of a dedicated mountain-goer like Mahler and you see what a disaster for music mountains have been. That music neither sings nor dances, it crawls on its belly and imagines it is rising to the stars." [72]), maxims ("Sound is immutable and sound itself is a creative force," [102]), and dicta ("The language of music is not the sonata and it not the tone row, he said, it is the same kind of language as weeping, sobbing, shrieking and laughing." [52]). Present-day opera (which seems to cover the years 1901 to the novel's hazy present) comes in for a drubbing: "Serious composers will always come to grief with opera today, he said as we were driving to Palestrina, no matter how they set about their task. . . ." (54) Pavone's sense of the rightness of sounds extends to his choice of clothing, shoes, shirts and the large home he inhabits. We are never far removed from what would appear to be a monstrous, controlling individual, an only child, emblematic of his socio-economic background: a corrupt portion of a corrupted nation that had fascism as a form of government and fostered the criminality of the Mafia.

Yet, everything told to the interviewer is funneled through a man who occasionally avoids answering questions. Of what we hear, what portion is undeniably Pavone? That's unclear, but we must treat the narrative with caution. An intermittent remark of Massimo's is: "You know how it is, sir." (14 et passim) This is usually said when what seems apparent to him is not apparent to his interviewer. We can take something more profound from this simple remark.

The world outside the novel containing bridges, taxes, and art works is something most of us, most of the time, agree exists, a compact we've made to get along, when we really each live in a personal reality that's distinct and distant from everyone else. The tension in *Infinity* (as in many of Josipovici's works) is two-fold: between "how it is" and the beliefs held by a character; and the order presented as eternal (theoretically, if this novel exists forever) and the fact that it is temporary since we, at some point, finish the book and close off its endlessness. Common knowledge is a matter of assumption, and of faith (or a flip-side; the desire not to be alone in our perception of the world). Pavone rarely finds understanding, musically and personally. (When he tries to list three best friends he can only remember two.) To experience some of his mediated journey is to be thrust into contemplation of what we can be sure are certainties of our own, and few of

Josipovici's contemporaries would risk showing "the loss of society" (54) with such restrained humour and discipline.

The novel's play of ideas will excite a thinking reader; as Pavone recalls his declining marriage or describes a piece of music, a feeling reader will sympathize with him in believing that we are now, and have been for some time, in decline. "Soon nobody will know what the word civilization means," (6) Pavone declares early in the book. Gabriel Josipovici explores that idea repeatedly in *Infinity*, and by doing so makes our world feel unstable.

[1,147 words]

* * *

Reviewer Bio (2-3 lines): Jeff Bursey is the author of *Verbatim: A Novel*, and his short fiction has appeared, most recently, in *Riptides: New Island Fiction* and *The Winnipeg Review*. His reviews and essays have been published in a variety of print and online journals.