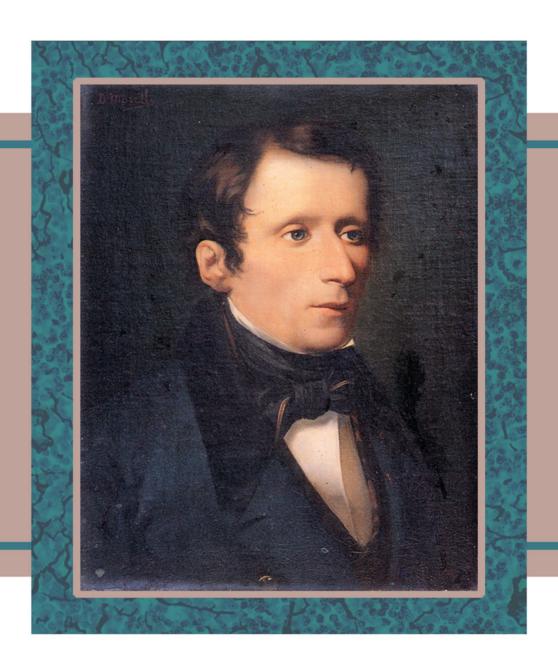# Mapping Leopardi

Poetic and Philosophical Intersections

Edited by Emanuela Cervato, Mark Epstein,
Giulia Santi and Simona Wright

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INTRODUCTION

First things first: what do the editors of this collection of essays mean by "mapping"? Mapping is indeed an ambiguous verb, one where the uses and aspirations involved in performing this operation can differ markedly. Maps and mapping have a long history, and in today's digital age of course aspirations to 'completeness' and 'totality' have increased enormously due to the power technology/-ies put at the disposal of the human species. GPS bridges the virtual and real worlds, it adjusts 'mapping(s)' to the person(s) travelling while they are in motion, and especially in its more sophisticated versions (used by 'government agencies') is capable of extremely high degrees of precision, down to a foot or less. As part of the technological 'automatisms' many of us now take for granted in our *Lebenswelt*, it fosters the illusion of complete control and complete knowledge, emphasized precisely by its almost 'invisible', 'magical', digital electronic modalities. But nothing could have been more alien to Leopardi than this kind of tacit, unconscious arrogance of the human species in its role in the world, more arrogant in its presumption of complete or total knowledge and control. An exploration of cultural, intellectual, literary, philosophical mappings is therefore also a way to counter these presumptions, this arrogance, and these self-delusions.

As many have pointed out, including Italo Calvino, a map that was complete in every detail would actually have to be a perfect replica of reality, in which case its function as map would disappear. In this sense, the paradox of the map is akin to that of referential activities enabled (and required) by the use of natural and formal languages. And one of the intentions the editors had in choosing this title was to underscore the 'networked', reticular nature of Leopardi's thoughts and his conception of an open philosophical structure, one that was not closed and did not think of itself as absolute or permanent. This is an aspect that is particularly important and clear in his *Zibaldone di pensieri*; and this collection has been thought of in part as a homage to the work of Michael Caesar, Franco d'Intino, and their team of translators (Kathleen Baldwin, Richard Dixon, David Gibbons, Ann Goldstein, Gerard Slowey, Martin Thom and Pamela Williams) in completing their masterful translation of that work into English.

Maps, in addition to their principal instrumental function of aiding orientation, are, however, also the sedimentation and stratification of prior knowledge about our movements in the 'world', so they have both conservative and 'prospective' teleological functions. Typically, maps are accumulations and integrations of various forms of acquired knowledge to aid and assist our future movements, trips, and travels in the physical world. Maps for orientation in the material world, where both the medium we travel through/on, the means of locomotion used, the purposes to be accomplished, and even the beings/objects 'using' the maps vary (drones/satellites), differ very significantly from the metaphorical/analogical use of the terms "maps/mapping" for intellectual activities and works, communicated via natural languages. While the matter of the sensory and physiological inputs into thought and its formalization in language is still an area mostly in an exploratory phase of knowledge, thought and language are much more homogeneous material media, and hence 'poorer', than those we need to navigate in the physical/'macro' world. Alexander Luria, in a famous book, *The Mind of a Mnemonist*,[1] explored the case history of a man who used the path(s) of his movements in the real world as a foundation onto which to map his memories and mental experiences.

Critical and scholarly mappings of Leopardi's reticular *oeuvre* are therefore 'maps' that are several levels more abstract. 'Discovering' America or not is an event that does not leave much room for ambiguity. An allegedly new 'mapping' of Leopardi's work(s) and thought(s) on the other hand, is something whose existence and/or acknowledgment by fellow researchers is a much more ambiguous and contentious matter. This also implies that the borders between the 'real', the 'imaginary', and the 'possible/potential' are much more fluid in these cases, as are the purposes guiding these explorations or forms of intellectual 'travel'. Scholarly and critical maps devoted to Leopardi's works written at the time of Francesco De Sanctis, Benedetto Croce, Adriano Tilgher, Cesare Luporini, Italo Calvino, and Umberto Eco, or in this volume by Luigi Blasucci and Antonio Prete, or whose main critical paradigms are psychoanalytic, structuralist, semiotic or deconstructionist capture different aspects of Leopardi's production. Other artists, such as Mario Martone in *Il giovane favoloso*, attempt to reproduce Leopardi, his life and works, in other media, thus presenting altogether different possibilities of imaginative mapping. The essays by Johnny Bertolio (based on critical paradigms provided by Northrop Frye, a critic whose greatest influence was several decades ago)

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[1] Alexander R. Luria, *The Mind of a Mnemonist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

and Silvia Stoyanova (which shows influences from both psychoanalytic and reader-reception theory) are good examples of this diversity.

Many scholars have explored the possibility of unpacking Leopardi's *Zibaldone* in ways that are compatible and easily accessible to today's readers. As such, the text has attracted contemporary scholars who aimed to explore the variety and complexity of Leopardi's thought, its multifaceted elements, layers, and thematic levels, through the notion of the hypertext, as Emanuela Cervato has successfully done in her recent work,[2] or Silvia Stoyanova by means of her digital platform project.[3] In this volume, we would like to borrow a hypothesis that Emilio Speciale, our late colleague and friend, had employed in an unfinished essay, that of an open and unfinished work, with distinct encyclopaedic properties, the beginnings of a map where readers/users can search, find, and elaborate information from the large deposit of knowledge that is both contained in *Zibaldone* and radiates from it.

Thus, the contributions collected in this volume span all of Leopardi's writerly production, from the *Puerilia* (essay by Bellomo) to his critical *Discourse on Romantic Poetry*, from the essays and compendia on natural history to the *Canti* (*Poems*), from his forgeries (essay by Piperno) to the political satire of *The War of the Mice and the Crabs* (essay by Penso), to formerly unpublished essays from his early scientific education (essay by Sordoni).

Though not as frequently conceived of from this perspective, maps are also the expression/formalization of the state of knowledge of a particular individual or community, about a specific domain of the knowable, at a specific point in time/history. Our hope is that this volume will to some degree represent a mapping of the questions posed, and the aspirations and temporary realizations of some of the scholarship at this point in time, as well as some more lasting achievements at the level of 'orientation'.

In our volume we have approached the *Zibaldone* as a map, or better, a complex interconnecting network of maps, that Leopardi used to reflect on the extensive list of readings he was recording, the works he was proposing to write, and the philosophical, philological, and aesthetic positions he provisionally made his own. His maps (the 1827 Index, the card-indexes known as *polizzine* [separate slips]) therefore assume both a conservative

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[2] Emanuela Cervato, *A System That Excludes All Systems* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017).

[3] Silvia Stoyanova and Ben Johnston, *Giacomo Leopardi's* Zibaldone di pensieri: *A Digital Research Platform*, http://digitalzibaldone.net (last accessed 19 September 2018). The digital research platform project was funded by Princeton University in association with the University of Macerata and the University of Göttingen.

and prospective function. They were aids to return to paths of reflection he had begun but sometimes never completed, or from which he wanted to explore different turns. Aids to memory and orientation in past work and reflection, but also, and far from rarely, records of an intent focused on future explorations, future directions, projects of future work and re-direction. This particular function appears to be fundamental for many of the authors who contributed to this volume, for whom the *Zibaldone* constitutes a repository of original ideas, the laboratory where established philosophies were debated, tested, rejected, or embraced (Sims, Wright), new aesthetic paths were explored (Carrera), reflections on genre relating to but prior to the 'fantastic' were noted (Bombara), and reflections on the role of teleological positing in living organisms, its role in the materialist distinctions in the stratification of the existent, and the dilemmas of *noia* and *piacere* were made apparent (Epstein, Stoyanova), or tentative hypotheses about a mapping of a linguistic typology of poetic forms (Versace). The many possible paths and maps that connect humans to nature, other living organisms, the world(s) we inhabit, and their connection(s) to ecocriticism and (post)humanism are also among the important, future-oriented mappings in this collection of essays (Di Rosa).

In Leopardi's case, 'maps' also evolve, and the *Zibaldone*, as is obvious given its nature and intended purpose, is often a repository of more general or sketched maps, and more formally curated and circumspect (given the pressures of censorship) versions will replace them once they are published in the *Operette morali* (*Moral Tales*) or the *Canti*. In some instances Leopardi traces paths through internal references scattered across the text ("see page 4450, paragraph 6;" "as I have said elsewhere"), in others he revisits his published works, as for instance in *Zibaldone* 4079 (*Dialogo della Natura e di un'Anima*) (*Dialogue of Nature and a Soul*); *Zibaldone* 4099 (*Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*) (*Dialogue Between Nature and an Icelander*); and *Zibaldone* 4248 (*Frammento apocrifo di Stratone da Lampsaco*) (*Apocryphal Fragment of Strato of Lampsacus*). In *Zibaldone* (4130-31) he compares animal and human lives and their forms of teleological positing, and in this context he revisits *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*, *Cantico del Gallo silvestre* (*The Canticle of the Wild Cock*), as well as *Dialogo di un Fisico e un Metafisico* (*Dialogue Between a Physicist and a Metaphysician*). In the latter case he is actually creating new links to other reflections, so in some ways creating hybrid maps, or redrawing and shifting mapping priorities and coordinates. In *Dialogo di Cristoforo Colombo e di Pietro Gutierrez* (*The Dialogue of Christopher Columbus and Pedro Gutierrez*) Leopardi indirectly addresses some of the issues raised by exploration and mapping. The dialogue is temporally

situated at a time when both men are wondering if they will actually reach their destination, since previous signs they had read as promising turned out not to be so. They have not yet reached their goal/destination and are in a state of 'teleological suspense'. Columbus admits that many of his forecasts and interpretations of signs have not turned out as hoped for, and that maybe even their ultimate goal of finding new land could be illusory. He then proceeds with a barrage of questions that demonstrate how presumptuous it is to assume that the 'unknown' will be like the 'known'. In other words, it is Leopardi himself, via Columbus, who suspends belief in the certainties of mapping en route to probably the most canonized and magnified geographic 'discovery' in human history, especially within the Italian canon. It is therefore both an affirmation of materialist premises, but also a sceptical admission of one's own relative ignorance, and the provisional and local nature of knowledge. In other words mapping is very far from being equivalent to certain, let alone complete, or total, knowledge. What this implies at the level of reference, of genesis of ideas, of temporality considered in the encompassing network of Leopardi's entire production, is something that would have to be examined in much greater detail, but it opens up to the relation between two conceptual models that have become much more influential in recent criticism, especially of Leopardi: that of the hypertext, which is actually a variant of the conceptual map, modelled on the idea of a network or, on the other hand, that of semantic fields, to which numerous scholars have contributed, from Harald Weinrich[4] to George Lakoff[5] (Vincenzo Allegrini's essay on memory is a fairly good example, if one only based implicitly on this model). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have proposed a third model, the rhizome, as a network that creates connections and links between points normally kept separate by 'traditional' thought. The fifth rhizomatic principle elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari ('cartography') stipulates that the rhizome "is a map and not a tracing" and is based on their conviction that maps are open systems: "the map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification." The rhizome thus lends itself to cartography, which is the method of creating maps in order to orient oneself

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[4] Harald Weinrich, *Tempus: Besprochene und Erzählte Welt* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971).

[5] George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), and *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

from one point within the whole.[6] The rhizome, a paradigm of the structure of knowledge and its organization, is also a suitable model for the *Zibaldone* and its links with Leopardi's published works.[7]

The editors of this collection of essays think of mapping not in the sense of aspirations to completeness or totality, but instead as representing the interconnected diversity of shared exploration(s), which, at the very least, both look at past traces and mappings, explore their sedimentation, stratification, and accumulations, but also suggest or point to paths for further mapping and exploration, as well as celebrate the richness, complexity, and diversity of knowledge(s) in the present. As readers will see, this diversity is fairly well represented in this collection, with essays that cover a wide spectrum of positions from the post-(post-post-)Romantic (the varied forms of post-modern post-rationalism) to the more materialistically oriented, a spectrum that therefore differs fairly markedly on a number of issues, not least of which the status of the 'humanities' themselves, the possible (or not) forms of dialogue and exchange with the natural sciences, and the evaluation of the function and position of those very natural sciences themselves, as well as philosophy's position and role in the wider debate.

The mappings contained in this volume intend to remain aware of the diversity and partiality of individual goals and aspirations, but celebrate our collective movements in an interconnected world, above all a world that does not belong to humans, but is shared by an enormously large, and unfortunately very rapidly diminishing, number of other forms of life, which have their own movements, 'maps', and goals. Our hope is that this volume will therefore contribute both to the depth and openness of an inclusive perspective, which does keep the complex goals of the unity of knowledge in its sights, but never at the cost of suppressing diversity in the process.

The volume is divided in six parts, each one highlighting different components of Leopardi's multidimensional intellectual and poetic development. In the first part, *On the Romantic-Classic Debate*, Simona Wright, Gabrielle Sims, and Martina Piperno offer critical perspectives that further illuminate the aesthetic debate raging at the turn of the nineteenth century among the European *intellighentsia*.

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[6] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 12; cf. also Umberto Eco, From the Tree to the Labyrinth: Historical Studies on the Sign and Interpretation (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 3-94.

[7] Cervato, *A System*, 84-90.

With her contribution, "Leopardi's *Discorso di un Italiano intorno alla poesia romantica*: Prolegomena to a Poetics of Hyperreality," Simona Wright proposes an analysis of Leopardi's earliest reflections on Romantic poetry, as he penned them in his unpublished *Discorso intorno alla poesia romantica* (*Discourse on Romantic Poetry*). Inspired by his reading of Ludovico Di Breme's controversial *Osservazioni del Cavalier Ludovico di Breme sulla poesia moderna* (*Observations by Cavalier Ludovico di Breme on Romantic Poetry*) and by the debate on the new literary movement raging among the Milanese literati, Leopardi engages in a systematic critique of the 'Romantics', simultaneously formulating his own poetic philosophy. Leopardi's piece tested his knowledge and philological competence by situating it in the larger context of Europe's aesthetic debate. In proposing a challenge to the Romantic movement, which involved the poet in an inspired re-thinking of the principles inherited from the classical tradition, Leopardi was also attempting to move beyond the *querelle* to articulate his own lyrical paradigm. Using a dialectic structure that alternates rhetorical moments with a stringent network of comparisons, contrasts, and oppositions, Leopardi elicits a dialogue enriched by impassioned confutations and compelling argumentations, signalling his eagerness to participate, somewhat subversively, in the ongoing debate. Wright's study highlights particular moments of the *Discorso*, and links Leopardi's poetic formulations to his famed *idillio*, *L'Infinito* (*The Infinite*), identifying specific thematic elements and rhetorical artifices that the poet revisited, drawing them from both the classical repertoire as well as that of his contemporaries. Eager to present his personal poetic vision to a larger, more authoritative, audience, when the *Discorso* failed to be published, Leopardi responded with the *idilli* (1819-1821), of which, Wright argues, *L'Infinito* appears to be the most effective lyrical elaboration. If in the *Discorso* he had demarcated the realm of the poetic, in his verses he integrates the suggestions coming from the new sensitivity of the period, shaping them into a lyrical subjectivity that is both 'classical' and modern. In particular, Wright's analysis points to the *Discorso* as inaugurating the development of a systematic poetic self-examination which, through the critical annotations in *Zibaldone*, his correspondence with friends and publishers, and his verses, arrives at the formulation of *oggetti doppi* (double objects) as well as enabling the poet to see a reality beyond the surface of materiality ("arido vero"). Wright defines this point of arrival as "hyperreality," a poetic space where nature is alive, evocative, and meaningful. In contrast to the *arido vero* (the arid truth), and the *solido nulla* (solid void), hyperreality is the dimension where Leopardi can reach a synthesis, in the manner of a truly modern poet, between nature and reason, between poetic inspiration and philosophical understanding.

Gabrielle Sims's essay, "Sublimity Without Recompense: The Natural Philosophy of Pessimism in Giacomo Leopardi's *L'Infinito*," explores the connection between Giacomo Leopardi's late 'cosmic' pessimism and the natural order of his early *Canti* through a reading of the sublime process elaborated in the 1819 idyll, *L'Infinito*. Through a systematic review of the aesthetic debate that surrounded the young Leopardi, Sims argues that the division of nature in the poem, which pre-dates scientific distinctions between inorganic and organic by almost a decade, signals a momentous impasse in his poetic development. Sims observes how in the poem, Leopardi doubts his own convictions from a year earlier, the notion that, through poetry, the mind could know a nature beyond its own. Reading *L'Infinito* as the first of Leopardi's lifelong poetic challenges to contemporary optimism, Sims call into question ongoing scholarly attempts to align Leopardi with either Romantic or Enlightenment materialists (and commonly both) to offer, instead, the possibility of reading the poems in the *Canti* as the laboratory in which the poet developed his radical pessimistic philosophy of nature and cognition as well as an example of *L'Infinito* read in this new way.

The production of false pieces of poetry or prose disguised as ancient texts was a long-term habit, from the Renaissance on, of humanists and scholars working on antiquity. However, this practice acquired a peculiar meaning between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. As Martina Piperno argues, in "Forgery as a Form of Leopardi's Authorship," with the rise of a historicist approach to ancient literature and the progressive perception of the gradual distancing of modern and ancient cultures, the creation of ancient forgeries became a way to deal with the gradual cultural disconnect from antiquity. The most famous examples of eighteenth-century forgery are probably the poems of Ossian, composed by the Scottish philologist James Macpherson. However, Ugo Foscolo, in his 1803 commentary to Callimachus's *Berenice's Lock* (*Chioma di Berenice*, 1803), also inserted four fragments of an anonymous Greek hymn to the Graces that he declared to have translated from the Greek for the first time. These were in fact a forgery and represent the first fragments of Foscolo's poem *Le Grazie* (*The Graces*) (completed in 1812). Leopardi also participated in this peculiar phenomenon, mingling erudite research and creativity by composing his *Inno a Nettuno* (*Hymn to Neptune*) in 1816, at age eighteen. This text was published as a translation of a (fictional) Greek poem by an anonymous ancient poet; instead, it is an original creation by Leopardi, who also wrote a long introduction to it. Piperno's article explores Leopardi's *Inno a Nettuno* within the broader frame of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century production of forgeries. By focusing on forgery of

ancient works as a compensation for the loss of a direct relationship with ancient literature, a topic which directly deals with the notion of nostalgia, Piperno reflects on the issue of authorship, on the importance of this practice for the discipline of philology while also questioning how much forgery infringes on the space of creativity. In addition, the analysis highlights the central role played by irony in the self-representation of the author as a translator

In the second part of the volume, *On Literary Forms*, Daniela Bombara and Johnny Bertolio respectively explore Leopardi's philosophical prose and poetic style, which Leopardi had elected as privileged ways of expression to articulate his thoughts and worldviews. If Calvino identified the "seed" of the modern in the Italian fantastic, originating in Leopardi's philosophical dialogues, which were characterized by incisive analysis and ironic detachment, the critics that followed tended especially to highlight its supernatural component, as in the *Dialogue of Federico Ruysch and his Mummies.*

On the side of poetic production, critics have pointed to Leopardi's insistence on the image of the moon and its mysterious and symbolic manifestations. Daniela Bombara's contribution, "The Invention of a Rational Fantastic in Leopardi's Writings, from *Zibaldone* to *Operette Morali*," concentrates her analysis on the world of the *Moral Essays*, in order to further investigate the fictive universe of sub- and super-human characters that populate the pages of the dialogues, with the purpose of revealing, with their emotional detachment and 'otherworldliness', the possibility of a world of hidden truths and mysterious elements. Wise sprites and cunning gnomes, powerful wizards and Faustian imps, characters for the most part derived from the classical tradition and folk-lore, are re-elaborated in the modern fantastic to expose the chaotic reality of the world, to lucidly examine its superficiality and denounce its lack of logic, but also its inescapable suffering. Bombara argues that it is in the supernatural landscape that the dramatic vocation of the *Operette* emerges. Dominated by the destructive manifestations of Death, represented again and again under different guises, be it the giant and contemptuous figure of Nature, Fashion, or Ruysch's mummies, the *Operette* privilege a rational approach and an abstract characterization of its protagonists, embodiments, according to Bombara, of Leopardi's extraordinary figurative and expressive genius, but also emblems of an unforgiving assessment of the century's culture, of its groundless optimism and hope in a civilizing progress. Through the analysis of the *Operette* and their extensive ventures into the space of the fantastic, Leopardi's prose is confirmed as being as wryly modern as it is far removed from the visionary vapours of Leopardi's Romantic contemporaries.

As Bombara concludes, Romantic production aimed at comforting the audience with reassuring, albeit gothic, fantasies, while Leopardi's urged an unapologetic scrutiny of human existence that tested the limits of our understanding of objective reality.

Last of the series of the idylls, *La vita solitaria* (*The Solitary Life*) occupies a 'liminal' place in Leopardi's poetry since the edition of his *Versi* (1826). In its strophes the poet delineates a new pattern of "historical adventures of *his* soul" in the context of a continuous day: from morning to night. The second strophe, in particular, portrays a state of nirvanic immersion in nature which only apparently replicates the one described in the last lines of *L 'Infinito*. Literary tradition, myth, and Leopardi's original thought intertwine with each other in the poem and, for this reason, *La vita solitaria* appears suited to varied critical approaches. The succession of daily moments and the very strong presence of a poetic self allow one to read the text with the tools forged by Northrop Frye in his critical works, in particular *Anatomy of Criticism* and *Fables of Identity*. In "*La vita solitaria*: A Fryean Idyll?" Johmy Bertolio primarily aims to demonstrate the ways in which *La vita solitaria* fits the idyllic phase in Frye's scheme through a close comparison with other literary texts of the same genre: Theocritus, Moschus, translated by Leopardi himself, and, quite surprisingly, Giovan Battista Marino. The analysis of the poetic text also aims to illuminate the marmer in which the poem can be viewed as a perfect synthesis of all four Fryean phases, as it revolves around the figure of the 'dying' poet-hero. By approaching the idyll from this original perspective, Bertolio presents every aspect of its poetical itinerary in a new light.

Both Leonardo Bellomo's and Stefano Versace's essays in this section dedicated to *Poetics and Linguistics* examine formal and technical aspects of Leopardi's works: Bellomo's is focused on technical aspects relating to metre, versification, and internal structural characteristics of some of the poet's *juvenilia*, while Versace proposes the existence of a coherent, albeit never fully explicitly formulated, perspective on poetic form(s) in the *Zibaldone*.

Leonardo Bellomo's principal objective, in "Metre and Style in Leopardi's *Puerilia*," is to link Leopardi's youthful production with the *Canti*, particularly in light of the similarity of some of their stylistic features, thus illuminating how the techniques adopted by the precocious author shaped and governed all of his future poetic production. Bellomo's analysis considers the *Puerilia* from a formal point of view, describing their stylistic features and metric choices, especially in regards to their connections to syntactic strategies. The aim is to identify the cultural coordinates within which Leopardi's first creative efforts developed, and, at the same time, to

recognise links and divergences between the poet's juvenile and mature language, i.e. that of the *Canti*. The majority of the texts under examination were penned between 1809 and 1810, when Leopardi was just eleven and twelve years old, with most of them published only in 1972 by Maria Corti. They, along with some letters, are the first documents related to Leopardi's intellectual development and as such contain important information about his education and cultural influences (first readings and literary models) beside providing evidence of his early forays into writing. Remarking that these texts are extremely significant, Bellomo also notes that they have not been thoroughly investigated and proposes to overcome this critical omission with his essay. In the *Canti,* Leopardi had used mostly open metrical forms by subverting the Petrarchan model in his *canzoni*, which gradually became "libere." He also employed free hendecasyllables in a very innovative way. Bellomo finds the same metre in the first compositions of the *Puerilia* (*Sansone* [Samson]*, L'Amicizia* [Friendship], among others), which he usefully compares to the famous *Idilli*. Significantly, it is in the *Puerilia* that the poet exploits traditional closed structures, like sonnets and songs. Bellomo examines how the young author interprets the metrical schema he will later refuse and how much his syntactic strategy changes in a different metrical context. A study of the translations, which Bellomo conducts in this essay, indicates that specific work in this direction could reveal more about the influence of Latin exercises on the young Leopardi's poetic diction.

In his essay on *Leopardi's Linguistic Typology of Poetic Forms*, Stefano Versace pursues a somewhat unusual line of questioning and research, namely one concerning Leopardi's reflections on poetic forms and natural languages. Ultimately, Versace dwells significantly more on poetic forms than languages, and explores what he argues is Leopardi's coherent theoretical line of inquiry regarding the patterns of variation and (universal) constancy in these poetic forms. While Versace emphasizes the fact that Leopardi never explicitly formulated or committed himself to an explicit overarching hypothesis, his examination of Leopardi's reflections in *Zibaldone* does seem to point to a fairly cohesive framework, one that originates in Leopardi's reading of Montesquieu's *Essay on Taste*. These are examined by Leopardi both in their geographical- and historical-cultural diversity. Ultimately, Versace's analysis of Leopardi's reflections on these topics in *Zibaldone* is also a plea/proposal for the drafting/establishment of some sort of framework, or frame of reference, for some provisional foundation of 'poetic typology' seen from a linguistic point of view and informed by model(s) drawn from linguistic typology.

In this section of *Readings of Leopardi*, Luigi Blasucci, Antonio Prete, and Andrea Penso offer their personal readings of a number of themes, symbols, and elements in Leopardi's oeuvre. Blasucci's reading continues reflections initiated in earlier works, Prete's cross over into his own poetic formulations and reveries, while Andrea Penso's focus on a fairly detailed exegesis of some of the more philosophical stanzas in the *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia* [*The War of the Mice and the Crabs*].

Luigi Blasucci is a very well-known Leopardi scholar, especially within his native Italy. This brief essay, "●nce Again on Leopardi and the Space of Poetry," draws on some of his previous work and his prior reflections, most especially *Leopardi e lo spazio della poesia*. Blasucci expressly states that in this essay his approach is more typological than chronological. He also argues that Leopardi is making essentially three claims: that "the Leopardian subject is (expressing) the nostalgic yearning for a happiness that is no longer achievable in the present, but which did actually exist, both in the history of humanity and that of individuals;" the second type of claim made by this subject concerns the "pleasures of the imagination," and therefore those afforded by the illusions created by the imagination, which at some level the subject knows are illusory, but which still afford him some pleasure/respite; and finally a third 'claim', namely the satisfaction the individual finds in formulating a direct denunciation of the negatives of existence. In concluding his essay, Blasucci seems to suggest that even when following the third claim, the very expression of these feelings to a degree provides comfort even when 'illusion' is suspended.

Antonio Prete is another one of Italy's best known and respected Leopardi scholars. In his essay, he explores the paths leading to the poet personal cosmology as an experiential and epistemological space that allows for both a scientific, rational reading of the world, as well as for its poetic representation. It is in this realm that Leopardi posits the most significant and pained questions about the human condition. In particular, Prete observes that the presence of the poet's favourite celestial body, the moon, highlights the verses' psychological dimension. In this dimension, the poet embraces both the limitlessness and the infinity of time and space. Already in *L'Infinito*, Leopardi's famed *idillio*, Prete observes the felicitous encounter between the physical, material corporeality of the human experience and the inexpressible boundlessness of the cosmos. As a consequence, we find the many instances of the use of "me" inside the text mark matter as it perceives and attempts to conceive/imagine the unlimited, that which is naturally and historically beyond human understanding. It is at the confluence of perception and conception that the poet "is shipwrecked" as, in Prete's reading, both language and intellect discover their limits. In

the second part of his reading, Prete follows the syncretistic relationship between the observation of the sky and poetic interrogation, which, he argues, constitutes a crucial undercurrent of Leopardi's entire poetic work. From the youthful forays into the discipline of astronomy to the *grandi idilli* of his mature years, the mysterious space of the heavens continues to intrigue the authorial voice, guiding its subjectivity across the spectrum from the external world to the realm of interiority. For Prete, the moon remains the custodian of the celestial vault, a presence that is both ethereal and all-knowing yet firmly located in the familiar geography of Leopardi's childhood. Prete concludes by eliciting a reading of Leopardi's work that continues to highlight his cosmology, a space/'place' where Leopardi places the possibility of a corpo-real comprehension of human existence.

Andrea Penso's essay, "'Quella forma di ragionar diritta e sana': An Exegesis of Some Philosophical Stanzas in Leopardi's *Paralipomeni*," focuses on a work by Leopardi that is, relatively speaking, given somewhat less critical attention, the *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia*. Penso's is a very careful exegesis that examines the sophisticated forms of irony, dissimulation, and delegitimization that Leopardi engages in to undermine the arguments of proponents of French religious conservative thought such as Louis De Bonald, Robert de Lamennais and, Leopardi's principal target, Joseph De Maistre. Penso shows how many of these believers in providentialism ultimately philosophically resort to forms of apriorism, and also shows how they opposed Rousseau's writings on the state of nature, therefore becoming targets of Leopardi's satire for a fairly wide variety of reasons. Leopardi's anti-spiritualism is partially founded on this belief in a stronger and less corrupted relation to nature being available to "savages," in a fairly Rousseauian vein, and these foundations also inform his satirical construct. One of the most effective and original strategies, in terms of its function and use, deployed by Leopardi, is the use of comparisons and analogies to the animal world (Penso talks about the mock-epic and the *zooepic*), which, given Leopardi's original disanthropomorphizing perspective, is particularly successful in laying bare the logical flaws and fallacies inherent in many human presumptions of superiority and entitlement, used as justifications to 'run' nature for humanity's 'benefit' (in fact they basically take the philosophical point deployed by using "savages" as examples a further step in a radically materialist direction). Leopardi's sophisticated 'double' irony targeting Catholic and religious doctrines of the soul (and its/their absence in animals) is particularly effective. Penso concludes by emphasizing how some of these themes carry over into *La ginestra* (*The Broom*).

In the section dedicated to *Faculties of the Mind and the Body*, one in which all three authors indirectly confirm the originality of Leopardi's perspectives on the relations between 'mind' and 'body', or what could quite plausibly be seen as anticipations of current reflections and debates on the 'embodied mind', Alessandro Carrera explores the border areas between desire, happiness and pleasure in Leopardi, Silvia Stoyanova examines the many facets of the interconnections between reading, purposive activity, boredom/ennui and our relationship to 'Being', while Vincenzo Allegrini explores the complex territories situated between memory, remembrance, and habituation.

Alessandro Carrera's essay, "'I Can't Get No Satisfaction': Giacomo Leopardi's Theory of Pleasure," is dedicated to what the author describes as Leopardi's 'theory of pleasure'. After a succinct introduction, which reviews some of the poet's adolescent essays, youthful and early influences from the French *idéologues*, and assorted and very varied philosophical comparisons, Carrera gets to the hub of his arguments, which centre mostly on French postmodern theory and psychoanalysis, so there is a marked shift from "happiness" to desire, satisfaction, and of course, given the title, and Leopardi's formulations, pleasure. France, in addition to having a pronounced influence on the world of fashion as *couture*, has for many decades had an almost equivalent influence, most especially in the humanities, on the world of intellectual *couture* (which of course in French rhymes with *culture*), and academia seems to have been very loath to introduce too many restrictions based on plausibility, logic or the natural sciences, hence there has been very little *coupure*, but plenty of *allure*/allure of all kinds. And in this hothouse/greenhouse atmosphere, it is not so surprising they have produced countless theories of desire, Deleuze and Guattari's being just some of the more widely known. And it is in this general framework that Carrera's essay shifts from the Leopardian keyword(s), "happiness/pleasure," to the more French preoccupations of desire, satisfaction, and pleasure. So we move in the later sections of the essay to Sade, Freud, Lacan, and of course to *désir*, *plaisir*, and *bonheur*, and, in Carrera's view, a Leopardian anticipation of *jouissance*. A very brief brush with Goethe, then leads to more Freud and the 'death-drive', and to Leopardian reflections on "noia" (boredom/ennui), which, according to Carrera, in some sense, constitute a prosecution of the theory of desire/pleasure by other means. We end on notes that are close to themes such as the *Liebestod*, but though Nietzsche has of course put in an appearance, Wagner never quite makes it. Death is ultimately also the conclusion of Carrera's essay, but not a death due to material(ist) finiteness/finitude, but death that seems to also need its own impulses,

pulsations, and drives (given Carrera's title taken from popular culture, one would be tempted to say a 'zombie' death). As is clear from his references and the arguments he emphasizes, Carrera's critical perspective is strongly indebted to contemporary French theory and its Italian derivatives (ca. in line with what someone like Roberto Esposito argues is 'Italian Thought'). In contemporary France, *coupure* would rarely evoke any connection to the textual/textile references of classical mythology and death, but would instead be precariously poised on the titillating top of the fence of an intellectual aspiration to seduction, leading to many verbose 'little deaths', in fact dressing up Depardieuan fears for a certain kind of 'male' with more rarefied, and less obviously bodily, theoretical vestments. A theoretical strip-tease if you will... In this sense Carrera's title is, indeed, on point.

Silvia Stoyanova's essay, *Giacomo Leopardi on the Act of Reading*, focuses on Leopardi's reflections on (the act of) reading. Based on a careful reading of Leopardi's thoughts on the subject collected in *Zibaldone*, Stoyanova distinguishes between three kinds of readers, and their associated motivations/purposes, when engaging in the act of reading: the pastime reader whose primary goal is attaining pleasure (and whose end-result is usually boredom); the scholarly reader who reads with ulterior purposes in mind (and who can either achieve vicarious pleasure, or be confronted by a cognitive block); and finally the "release" from "instrumental intentionality" that potentially any reader could achieve, but seems from Stoyanova's essay to be more closely associated with pastime/leisure readers. In other words, Stoyanova's essay, based on Leopardi's reflections, combines a typology of readers (pastime vs. scholarly) as well as a spectrum of goals they seek and do or do not achieve. When dealing with the first two typologies of readers in the initial sections of her essay, Stoyanova relies on studies by psychologists, phenomenological psychologists and phenomenologists. In her final section, which deals with this "release" from "instrumental intentionality," she instead relies philosophically on the reflections of Martin Heidegger on "boredom" as a way to achieve this release. Heidegger distinguishes between three 'levels' of boredom, and the third, last and highest, is the one that releases us from ca. the 'preconceived' goals of specific activities or lines of thought and is a/the path to 'openness' for "Being." In concluding, Stoyanova draws parallels between these Heideggerian reflections and Leopardi's reflections on "noia," and argues particularly that Leopardi's more 'carefree' periods in his youth were those when he was closest to this 'openness' to "Being," i.e. not enmeshed in the preoccupations of pre-conceived goals of both daily existence and more specifically focused activities and forms of agency.

Vincenzo Allegrini's essay, "'Memory', 'Remembrance', and '●blivion' in Leopardi's Theory of Knowledge and Poetry," deals with Leopardi's reflections on memory. Allegrini discusses them in connection with the drafting of the *Zibaldone*, the evolving print industry, and its effects on the quantity of written material in circulation which, consequently, also had an impact on the possible recognition and notoriety of individual authors. ●f even greater interest is Allegrini's review of Leopardi's materialist reflections on the role of spoken and written language for memory, but indirectly, one could argue, also for thought. Allegrini examines the ties memory has to habit (*abitudine*) and habituation (*assuefazione*), exploring some of the philosophical foundations and references of Leopardi's reflections (mainly John Locke, though known indirectly in translation) to point to the relationship between *memoria* (memory, which performs conservative and reproductive functions) and *rimembranza* (remembrance, which instead fosters creative and imaginative ones). Finally, he relates these reflections to a number of Leopardi's works, indicating in which ways, for instance, remembrance can be associated with very idiosyncratic forms of 'pleasure', which Leopardi explored in his later and more pessimistic period, where he relied less or hardly at all on the possible 'redeeming' function of illusions.

In the concluding section, dedicated to *Philosophy and the Sciences*, Mark Epstein examines the interconnections between teleology and materialism in Leopardi, and his development of a materialist theory of the imagination, which lays the foundation for Leopardi's extremely original dialogue between poetry, philosophy, and science; Rossella Di Rosa explores the many and complex ways Leopardi's reflections on nature and matter can be seen as anticipations of ecocriticism, post-humanism, and a proto-ecological sensibility; and finally, Valentina Sordoni introduces the English speaking world to some heretofore untranslated texts from Leopardi's early education and exposure to the science of his day.

Mark Epstein's essay, "The End(s): Teleology and Materialism in Leopardi," places teleology in a broad and encompassing framework. He shows how it can be used as one of the distinguishing characteristics for at least some initial steps in demarcating natural, human and formal sciences, as well as the problem-areas they attempt to research and investigate. Epstein argues that one of the advantages of this approach, which is based on a materialist foundation in philosophy that believes in the superposition of the inorganic, organic, and human/social levels, rather than in either/or or hierarchizing/exclusivist approaches, is that it is more flexible in dealing with the enormous complexity of the problems to be examined. He argues that this ontological superposition is related to the Marxian 'recession of

natural barriers' and that, in his own way, Leopardi recognized a similar development, though mostly seen from an, evaluatively speaking, contrarian perspective. This helps in explaining certain aspects of Leopardi's relational philosophy, which is situated between materialist/scientific interests, philosophical exploration, curiosity and dialogical interaction, and a materialist poetic imagination. Epstein analyses the interconnections between Leopardi's reflections on the finite vs. infinite opposition seen in a materialist context, and how it is closely tied to Leopardi's reflections on teleological issues themselves. Just as for Leopardi there is an "infinite leap" between matter and nothingness, there is also a very significant contrast between inorganic nature (very often associated with astronomical dimensions and bodies), frequently related to infinite/non-finite dimensional extension, and organic nature (where the interplay of vegetable, animal, and human is significantly more complex), whose finite limits are usually associated with teleological positing and projections. The complexity and flexibility of Leopardi's relational philosophy allows for the development of an original form of materialism, one which Epstein argues is equivalent to an *infraphilosophy* (i.e. ca. the materialist presuppositions of philosophy), which is not in the mechanist tradition of French materialism. It instead allows for limited, organism-specific forms of teleology. Epstein then finishes by showing how in some of Leopardi's late works, such as the *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* (*Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia*), or in *Il tramonto della luna* (*The Setting of the Moon*), he intentionally concludes by merging the two meanings of end, with or without meaning (the sense of an ending), in death.

Rossella Di Rosa's essay, "From Nature to Matter: Leopardi's Anti-Anthropocentrism and Inchoate Proto-Ecological Thinking," looks at Leopardi's reflections as precursors of topics that contemporary 'ecocritical' trends attempt to deal with in various branches of the humanities. Di Rosa's essay explores the tensions inherent in concepts such as "nature" and "matter," and reviews a plethora of thinkers and critics from Kate Soper to Sergio Solmi, Deleuze and Guattari to Gaspare Polizzi and Serenella Iovino. She shows how Leopardi questions mechanistic forms of materialism and understanding of nature; then discusses some of the implications of his anti-anthropomorphic reflections; and then proceeds to show how his reflections on nature as "system," while not yet interconnecting its elements as later theories of "ecosystems" would, is proceeding in this general direction. After a section dedicated to the implications of the "myth of the state of nature," and proceeding to mention prior materialist examinations of Leopardi's thought, such as Timpanaro's, which emphasize the shared materiality of human and non-human existence, she then proceeds to

thinkers in a "new materialist" vein, such as Jane Bennett and finally passes to Animal Studies and Literary Ecology. Ultimately, she concludes that Leopardi's reflections in several ways anticipate the concerns of post-humanism, and use a materialist foundation to explore the relations between humans and 'nature' in ways that are not predicated on human beings as the entitled sovereigns of the Great Chain of Being.

Valentina Sordoni's essay, "Chemistry and Natural History in the Young Leopardi: A Comparison Between the *Saggio di chimica naturale* and the *Compendio di storia naturale,*" (Essay in Chemistry and Natural History) focuses on a comparison between these two youthful productions by Leopardi, in the context of his early education and exposure to some of the scientific thought of his day. Sordoni just published the volume *Il giovane Leopardi, la chimica e la storia naturale,* which includes the previously unpublished Italian text of the *Saggio di chimica e di storia naturale.*[8] The *Saggio* is really a product of Giacomo's early education, meant as a form of public display of the young Leopardi siblings' accomplishments, and is presented here for the first time in English translation, along with the Italian original: it is a valuable source for scholars not only of Leopardi and the evolution of his thought, but more generally of education, the relationship between philosophy and the sciences, and the changing status of the claims to truth of scientific authorities over time. Sordoni discusses the work in the context of the science and education of the day, demonstrating how the *saggio* relied greatly on Noël-Antoine Pluche's *Spectacle of Nature,* and concludes by identifying these early forays as the foundation for much later, and greatly modified, works, like the *Elogio degli uccelli (In praise of Birds)* and the *Paralipomeni della batracomiomachia.* There, Leopardi confirmed his persistent fascination with the scientific examination of the unexpected forms the natural world takes, one informed by the original conception of a materialist imagination.

This volume should also have included an essay by Emilio Speciale, whose premature passing has prevented him from completing his contribution and, more importantly, his ambitious project of an on-line encyclopedia entirely devoted to Leopardi. Conceived as 'a single receptacle' modelled on the rhizomatic, unlimited, copylefted, non-hierarchical and censorship-free Wikipedia, it would enlist the contribution of Leopardi scholars/specialists and bring together 'students, scholars, readers, aficionados'. This would result in a layered reference work, a critical companion, an open and multi-directional collective compendium focused on all aspects of the author's

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[8] Valentina Sordoni, *Il giovane Leopardi, la chimica e la storia naturale* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2018).

work, philosophy, and aesthetics.

With *Mapping Leopardi: Poetic and Philosophical Investigations*, we hope to have made a significant contribution to Leopardi studies and to have been instrumental in initiating what Emilio Speciale had hoped his planned Leopardi encyclopedia would become: a "monument to an author recognized as a classic and a national emblem and, simultaneously, a universal figure."

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Part I

On the Romantic-Classic Debate

CHAPTER ONE

LEOPARDI'S *DISCORSO DI UN ITALIANO*
INTORNO ALLA POESIA ROMANTICA:
PROLEGOMENA TO A POETICS
OF HYPERREALITY

SIMONA WRIGHT

In August 1818 Leopardi completed an essay occasioned by an article
written by Ludovico di Breme that had appeared in Milan in January of the
same year. The *Osservazioni del Cavalier Ludovico di Breme sulla poesia
moderna* (*Observations by Cavalier Ludovico di Breme on Romantic
Poetry*)[1] followed an equally controversial piece Di Breme had published in
1816,[2] *Intorno all'ingiustizia di alcuni giudizi letterari* (*On the Unfairness
of Certain Literary Judgments*). In this much debated text the Cavaliere had
supported Mme De Staël's position on the situation of Italian letters,[3] which

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[1] The article, which appeared in issues 11 and 12 of the Milanese *Spettatore italiano*
(1-15 January 1818) prompted Leopardi to a critical response that was first
formulated in the early pages of the *Zibaldone* (15-21) and later systematized in his
Discorso di un italiano intorno alla poesia romantica, in *Poesie e Prose*, Vol. 2, I
Meridiani, eds. Rolando Damiani and Mario Andrea Rigoni (Milan: Mondadori,
1988), 347-426. Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. Giuseppe Pacella (Milan:
Garzanti, 1991), and *Zibaldone*, eds. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino, trans.
Kathleen Baldwin et al., rev. ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).
[2] The 62-page essay appeared in early June 1816 in Milan, care of Giovanni Pietro
Giegler, Bookseller in Corsia de' Servi, N. 603, Carlo Calcaterra, ed., *I manifesti
romantici del 1816 e gli scritti principali del "Conciliatore" sul Romanticismo*
(Turin: UTET, 1951), 81-124.
[3] In particular, Mme De Staël had pointed to the inability of Italian literature to renew
itself, as it remained excessively anchored to an erudite but stale classical tradition.
Bemoaning the excessive use of mythology, the lack of familiarity with foreign
authors, and the absence of Italian intellects from the larger literary debate occurring

went as far as advocating a refashioning of what was considered by many[4] at the time a stagnant and exhausted literary style. Following the highly regarded critique published by the French Baroness in the same year,[5] in his essay Di Breme had urged a departure from the imitation of the Greeks, especially in the entirely clichéd fashion espoused by the French, and had called for a return to the Italian national literary tradition exemplified by Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto, and Tasso. Finally, he had invited Italian authors to reclaim the "sapore di quelle moderne età" (the flair of those modern ages) of Italian literature that the French aristocrat had emphatically praised. Two years later, as the battle between Classics and Romantics was still raging, Di Breme had returned to the forum with a second article dedicated to Byron's *Giaour*. Leopardi responded to Di Breme's second piece with a systematic work which tested his knowledge and philological competence by situating it in the larger context of Europe's aesthetic debate.[6] In

in Europe, the Baroness wished for a renewal of Italy's literary canon and encouraged authors to attend to the translation of modern English and German works.

[4] I am referring especially to the group of young intellectuals, Pellico, Berchet, Borsieri, Romagnosi, Visconti, and Di Breme, among others, that will gather around the short-lived Milanese journal *Il Conciliatore*; cf. Edmondo Clerici, *Il "Conciliatore"* (Pisa: Nistri, 1903) and Mario Apollonio, *Il gruppo del "Conciliatore" e la cultura italiana dell'Ottocento* (Milan: C.E.L.U.C., 1969).

[5] Mme De Staël's *Sulla maniera e l'uso delle traduzioni* (*On the manner and use of translations*), translated and published by Pietro Giordani, appeared in the first number of the *Biblioteca Italiana*, in January 1816. Its content generated a vibrant debate that involved intellectuals and literary figures on opposing sides. Pietro Giordani and Giacomo Leopardi, whose *Lettera ai Sigg. compilatori della Biblioteca Italiana* (*Letter to the Compilers of the Biblioteca Italiana*) was not published until 1906, stood on the side of the Greek and Roman tradition while Di Breme, Pietro Borsieri, Giovanni Berchet, and Ermes Visconti, stood on the side of modernization. Di Breme's *Intorno all'ingiustizia di alcuni giudizi letterari italiani* was the first piece, followed by Pietro Borsieri's *Avventure letterarie di un giorno o consigli di un galantuomo a vari scrittori*, (*A Day's Literary Adventures or A Gentleman's Advice to Various Writers*) and Giovanni Berchet's *Sul "Cacciatore feroce" e sulla "Eleonora" di Goffredo Augusto Bürger. Lettera semiseria di Grisostomo al suo figliuolo* (*On the* Cacciatore feroce *and the* Eleonora *by G. A. Bürger. Semi-serious letter by Grisostomo to his Son*), constituted what many consider to be the first Italian 'Romantic' manifestos, cf. Carlo Calcaterra, *I manifesti romantici*; for an overview of the polemical debate generated by Mme De Staël's article, cf. Guido Muoni, *Ludovico Di Breme e le prime polemiche intorno a Madama Di Staël ed al Romanticismo in Italia: 1816* (Milan: Società Editrice Libraria, 1902).

[6] Ettore Mazzali proposes a similar reading of the *Discorso*, interpreting the manuscript in light of Leopardi's intention of advancing beyond the context of his

proposing a challenge to the Romantic movement, which involved the poet in an inspired re-thinking of the principles inherited from the classical tradition,[7] Leopardi was also attempting to move beyond the *querelle* to articulate his own lyrical paradigm. Using a dialectic structure that alternates rhetorical moments with a stringent network of comparisons, contrasts, and oppositions,[8] Leopardi elicits a dialogue enriched by impassioned confutations and compelling argumentations, signaling his eagerness to participate, somewhat subversively, as an advocate of the classics in the ongoing debate. This study highlights particular moments of the *Discorso*, and links Leopardi's poetic formulations with his famed *idillio*, *L'Infinito*, identifying specific thematic elements and rhetorical artifices that the poet revisited, drawing them from both the classical repertory as well as that of his contemporaries. Eager to formulate his personal poetic vision, when the *Discorso* failed to be published, Leopardi responded with the *idilli* (1819-21). I argue that, of all the *idilli*, *L'Infinito* strikes us as the most effective lyrical elaboration of the positions presented

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aristocratic but provincial upbringing. Cf. Ettore Mazzali, "Osservazioni sul *Discorso di un italiano*," in *Leopardi e il Settecento*, Centro nazionale studi leopardiani, Atti di Convegni (Florence: Olschki, 1964), 437. Cf. also Franco Betti, "Key Aspects of Romantic Poetics in Italian Literature," *Italica* 74, 2 (July 1997): 185-200.

[7] Describing his response, in a letter to his friend Pietro Giordani, dated 18 August 1818, Leopardi writes that the essay had been "un opuscolo molto sudato" (quite a labored essay), emphasizing that he had placed particular effort in its composition. Additional evidence of the significance he attributed to this piece is given by Leopardi since, in the same letter, he informs Giordani that he would not attempt publication before receiving his friend's opinion and approval. Giacomo Leopardi, *Epistolario*, vol. 1, eds. Franco Brioschi e Patrizia Landi (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998),208.

[8] Despite several expressions of support for the movement and generally sharing a feeling of the need for a literary renewal, the Romantic program in Italy did not contain, as in the case of its German counterpart, an "organic intuition of reality" that would give rise to an aesthetically original canon. Thus, although on the theoretical level many diverse and contrasting impetuses coexisted, the actual results were scarcely original. When in 1823, in an attempt to summarize the merits of the Romantic movement, Manzoni wrote his *Lettera a Cesare D'Azeglio sul Romanticismo* (Letter to C. D'Azeglio on Romanticism), he embraced the Romantics in their dismissal of mythology, of the imitation of the classics, and in the rejection of arbitrary laws such as the unity of time and place, Manzoni praised other Romantic traits but conflated them with his own principles of equilibriun, expressive simplicity, and commitment to the historical, and Christian, "vero" (true), hardly a declaration of a new and bold aesthetics. Cf. Mario Puppo, *Il Romanticismo*, 6th ed. (Rome: Studium, 1975), 170-71.

in his essay. If there he had demarcated the realm of the poetic, in his verses he addresses both the Classical and the Romantic traditions, integrating the suggestions coming from the new sensitivity of the period and shaping them into a lyrical subjectivity that is both 'classical' and modern. In sum, the *Discorso* inaugurates a crucial period of Leopardi's production, which projects itself from the essay's rejection to *L'Infinito* and beyond. Emerging from the scattered annotations of the *Zibaldone*, from his correspondence with friends and publishers, and in his verses, is Leopardi's continued renegotiation of styles, traditions, and expressive techniques. He will ultimately resolve all oppositions via poetic elaboration, revealing the distinctive traits of his work, which he relentlessly exposed to a dynamic intersection of aesthetic and formal articulations.[9]

Contrast and Comparison

When Leopardi sat down to write his response, and later on, when he completed his most celebrated *canzoni civili* and *idilli*, he must have recalled Di Breme's position on imitation, on nature and its representation, and on the preeminence of subjectivity in the creative process, featured in both the articles the Cavaliere had published. In his 1816 defense of De Staël's position in particular, Di Breme had identified the core issues involved in the *querelle*, the most important being the question of imitation, which in Italy had turned poetic practice into a mechanical repetition of rituals, and converted the sanctuary of literature into desolate "officine di ricopiatura" (copy workshops). The concept (and the process) of imitation had to be completely revisited, and to this end Di Breme offered some considerations, and an exhortation, that must have resonated with Leopardi in deep and powerful ways:

> [...] since in nature, *in any age and before anything else, human beings are central.* Because nature has not produced you so that you would imitate it in the only way you understand; since you also are nature, and furthermore its interpreter, its rival in the moral, sensitive, and imaginative order [...] And

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[9] The notion of an anti-Romantic and materialist Leopardi has been elaborated by several critics, in particular by Sebastiano Timpanaro, *Sul materialismo* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1970), and *Alcune osservazioni sul pensiero di Leopardi*, ed. Antonio Prete (Chieti: Solfanelli, 2015) and more recently, but not less expertly, by Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, *Leopardi antiromantico, e altri saggi sui "Canti"* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012), and by Mario Andrea Rigoni, *Il materialismo romantico di Leopardi* (Naples: La scuola di Pitagora, 2013); *Saggi sul pensiero leopardiano* (Naples: Liguori, 1985).

if you will never sing anything more than the herds of Sicily or the strait of
Abydos and the lynx eyes of Philomela and Procne [...] instead of depicting,
with naked and vibrant effects, those phenomena and objects with which
nature has surrounded you and what they elicit within you, with their
harmony. You should not say that you imitate it, and even less should you
say that you translate yourself in your work. If we want to imitate it, we
should then rise to compete with it in the very act of creation; and if our
mystical, moral, scientific doctrines, if our customs and recent affections
have enlarged the field of invention so amply, let's measure **the extent of
that horizon**, let's throw ourselves **into that immensity**, attempting **the
regions of the infinite** that are open to us fearlessly. This is how nature
wants to be imitated; doing it with success however is not given to the many
who try, who even demand, to be regarded as poets.[10]

After lamenting the impoverishment of Italian letters and confidently
pointing to its cause,[11] Di Breme invites literary circles to re-establish a

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[10] Ludovico di Breme, *Intorno all'ingiustizia di alcuni giudizi letterari italiani*, in
Polemiche (Turin: UTET, 1923), 43-44. The Italics are Di Breme's while the bolding
is mine: "[…] siccome nella natura, *in ogni età e per prima cosa, rispetto all'uomo,
v'ha l'uomo*. Perchè la natura non ti ha già composto nella mira che tu imitassi lei in
quel solo modo che intendi; *chè anche tu sei la natura*, e sei per di più il suo
interprete, il suo rivale nell'ordine morale, sensitivo e imaginoso [...] e se non vorrai
cantare mai sempre se non gli armenti della Sicilia e lo stretto d'Abido e gli occhi
cervieri e Progne e Filomela [...] *invece di dipingere con efficacia, nudi e vivaci quei
fenomeni che si producono in te dagli oggetti di che ella ti ha circondato*, e l'armonia
loro, non potrai già dire che tu la imiti, e molto meno potrai dire che tu imiti, che tu
traduca te stesso nelle opere tue. In vista dunque d'imitarla, inalziamoci a gareggiar
con lei nella stessa creazione; e se le nostre dottrine mistiche, morali, scientifiche,
se i nostri usi, i recenti affetti nostri hanno ampliato di tanto *il campo
dell'invenzione*, misuriamo noi tutta **l'ampiezza di quell'orizzonte**, lanciamoci **in
quella immensità**, e tentiamo animosi **le regioni dell'infinito** che ci sono
concedute. Così intende natura di essere imitata; ma il farlo con memorando
successo non è opera da tanti, che pur vi pongon mano, e s'arrogano pure di sedere
a scranna." This translation is mine.
[11] In his "Introduzione" (Introduction) to Di Breme's works, Carlo Calcaterra
observes a keen intellect and a deeply felt commitment to the rejuvenation of Italian
letters in the Piedmontese aristocrat. His views, cultivated by the reading of Parini,
Alfieri, and Mme De Staël, are a testament to an inexhaustible energy striving to
restore meaning and authority to the creative process: "Per ottenere un nuovo
risorgimento letterario occorreva quindi rompere innanzi tutto la consuetudine di
considerare le lettere come un trastullo o una fonte di godimento immediato [...]
Occorreva mettere in evidenza che per darsi alle lettere sono necessarie quella
'vocazione intima' e quell'elevazione ideale senza cui mai non sono feconde le
opere dello spirito" (To produce a new literary renaissance it was necessary to break

close and non-mediated rapport with nature, whose imitation is a result of an encounter with both the physical environment and its all-encompassing phenomenology. By recognizing the significance of the lyrical I in the natural environment as the primary element, Di Breme establishes his main point of differentiation from the classicist authors, justifying the intrusion of subjectivity into poetic verse. Thus, while he repudiates the conventional replication of the mythological tradition they championed, he implicates both the notion of nature as well as that of modern subjectivity in the process of 'translation', which projects the self into the poetic work in a sublime instant of transfiguration and, as in *L'Infinito*, lyrical effacement.[12] Completely aligned with Romantic principles, Di Breme then echoes De Staël's and many other Romantic voices in viewing poetry as a creative contest between nature and human beings fully immersed in their historicity. The poetic work would become a formidable imaginative pursuit conflating all human knowledge in its spiritual, scientific, moral, and even mystical dimensions into one point. The process of imitation, the idea of a transfigured subjectivity that is absorbed or better 'translated' into nature to the point of dissolution, as will later become the case in the works of many authors, and the willingness and even the determination to open the poetic horizon to include the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, the social reality, and the sciences are three elements that distinguish the aesthetic enterprise of the Romantics, and it is precisely those elements that meet with Leopardi's suspicion and criticism. Di Breme's final exhortation to embrace the extension of a creative process dramatically broadened by the progression of history, his appeal to measure the "immensity" of that new epistemological "horizon," and his call to reach the regions of the "infinite" beyond it must have given Leopardi the impression of a poetic and intellectual challenge, one that he could not ignore. "Orizzonte,"

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first of all with the habit of considering literature a past-time or a source of immediate enjoyment [...] It was necessary to stress that a dedication to letters required the "intimate vocation," the elevation of the spirit that distinguishes all the works of the intellect). Cf. Carlo Calcaterra, "Introduzione," in *Polemiche*, xx. The translation is mine.

[12] In this instance, Di Breme distances himself from Friedrich Schiller, who, in his *On the Pathetic*, had praised the greatness of the Greeks: "Never [...] ashamed of nature, he leaves sensuousness its full rights and is, nevertheless, certain that he will never be subjugated by it. His deep and correct understanding lets him distinguish the accidental, which bad taste makes into his principal work, from the necessary; everything, however, which is not humanity, is accidental, to man" (http://wlym.com/archive/oakland/docs/SchillerOnThePathetic.pdf). Last accessed on August 31, 2018.

"immensità," and "infinito," refer to the theoretical perspective predicated by the Romantics and championed by Di Breme, a perspective open both diachronically and synchronically, in terms of depth as well as extension, expanding far beyond the realms of the canon as traditionally interpreted.[13] We will see how these terms will be absorbed and elaborated by Leopardi to become synonymous with the intellectual process that underlies and governs the poetic imagination.

During the time that elapsed between the publication of Di Breme's first and second article, Giovanni Berchet had joined the debate with his *Lettera semiseria di Grisostomo*.[14]

> Poets [...] who call themselves modern, went in different directions. Some, hoping to reproduce the style they admired in the Greeks and Romans, repeated, and most often imitated, modifying them, the habits, opinions, passions, and myths of the ancients. Others questioned nature directly: and nature gave them neither ancient ideas nor affections, but modern ones. They explored folklore: and found the mysteries of the Christian religion, the tale of a regenerating God, the certitude of eternal life, and the fear of eternal damnation. They questioned the human soul and it told them nothing more than what could be found in themselves and their contemporaries, their customs, at times chivalric, at others religious, at still others ferocious, but all present and practiced, or at least generally known, deriving from the civilization of the century they lived in. [belonging to their world and their

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[13] A careful consideration of Di Breme's writings, which include both his 1816 *Discorso*, his 1818 *Osservazioni*, as well as his *Considérations sur les vicissitudes du langage et sur le système des puristes italiens* (Considerations on the vicissitudes of language and the system of the Italian purists), reveals that his position and Leopardi's were not as discordant as we are led to believe after reading the young Recanatese's response. With respect to language and poetic style, for instance, Di Breme had expressed sentiments that Leopardi would have wholeheartedly shared. In his *Considérations*, in fact, Di Breme had proclaimed that: "It is important to understand that the duty of those who address readers or an audience consists in the faithful translation of their intellect, as they should not lower themselves to draw their ideas from ancient pages, or their eloquence from a dictionary" (Il faut bien comprendre que le devoir de tout homme qui en appelle à des lecteurs ou à des auditeurs, consiste dans la fidelle traduction de toute sa pensée, et à ne pas se laisser réduire à tirer ses idées des anciennes rubriques, et son appareil oratoire d'un dictionnaire). Ludovico Di Breme, in *Polemiche*, 70; the translation is mine.

[14] Berchet's somewhat ironic piece received much acclaim for the clarity of the exposition and the energetic proclamation of the new romantic notions and was recognized as the official manifesto of the movement in Italy. Puppo, *Il Romanticismo*, 160.

reality] The poetry of the first is called 'classic', that of the second group is called 'romantic'.[15]

And later:

If poetry is the expression of a vibrant nature, it must be as vibrant as the object it expresses, free like the idea that gives it life, bold like the objective towards which it is directed.[16]

In outlining the two leading aesthetic ideologies of his time, Berchet reiterates Di Breme's distinction between a poetry fashioned around the imitation of the classics (*poesia classica*),[17] and one generated by the close

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[15] "I poeti [...] che portano il nome comune di moderni, tennero strade diverse. Alcuni, sperando di riprodurre le bellezze ammirate ne' Greci e ne' Romani, ripeterono, e più spesso *imitarono modificandoli, i costumi, le opinioni, le passioni, la mitologia de' popoli antichi*. Altri interrogarono direttamente la natura: e la natura non dettò loro né pensieri né affetti antichi, ma sentimenti e massime moderne. Interrogarono la credenza del popolo: e n'ebbero in risposta i misteri della Religione cristiana, la storia di un Dio rigeneratore, la certezza di una vita avvenire, il timore di una eternità di pene. Interrogarono l'animo umano vivente: e quello non disse loro che cose sentite da loro stessi e da' loro contemporanei; cose risultanti dalle usanze, ora cavalleresche, ora religiose, ora feroci, ma, e praticate e presenti e conosciute generalmente; cose risultanti dal complesso della civiltà del secolo in cui vivevano. La poesia de' primi è '*classica*', quella dei secondi è '*romantica*'." Giovanni Berchet, *Sul "Cacciatore feroce" e sulla "Eleonora" di Goffredo Augusto Bürger. Lettera semiseria di Grisostomo al suo figliuolo*, In *I manifesti romantici del 1816*, 282-83.

[16] "Se la poesia è l'espressione della natura viva, ella deve essere viva come l'oggetto ch'ella esprime, libera come il pensiero che le dà moto, ardita come lo scopo a cui è indirizzata." Ibid., 292; the translation is mine.

[17] Berchet, and with him other Italian exponents of the Romantic movement, was familiar with the literary debate that had engaged prominent German intellectuals and philosophers at the end of the 18th century, primarily Schiller, Goethe, Herder, Mendelssohn, Winckelmann, and, at a greater remove, Kant and Hegel. In Berchet, traces of the reading of *Über die naïve und sentimentalische Dichtung* (*On naïve and sentimental poetry*; 1795), emerge in particular where he recognizes the presence of classical elements in the modern, a line of thought developed by Schiller who, in examining the difference between naïve and sentimental poetry, had noted that not all poets of antiquity were totally naïve (he refers in particular to Euripides, Tibullus, and Virgil), and that not all poets in modern times (Shakespeare and Goethe, for instance) were totally sentimental. Stylistic, thematic, and emotional similarities between ancient and modern authors are also noted by Ermes Visconti in his *Idee elementari sulla poesia romantica* (§ 4), in *I manifesti romantici del 1816*, 349-409.

encounter with nature and the dialogue with surrounding historical reality (*poesia romantica*).[18] Except that Berchet, whose intent was primarily that of humoring, and dismissing, the new movement, takes the debate a step further, by adding a drastic opposition, that between life and death. What is at issue here is more than a simple generational conflict; it is the definition of a different creative model that conceives the poetic product as a living organism,[19] against what is viewed as an erudite yet sterile act of reproduction.

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[18] I refer once again to Visconti's *Idee elementari sulla poesia romantica* (*Fundamentals of Romantic Poetry*), where among the fundamentals of the Romantic movement the author highlights considerations regarding natural historical progress: "Ma se la scuola romantica non vieta di ricorrere alle rimembranze dell'antichitá, ingiunge però di rispettare il sapere politico de' nostri coetanei. Per quella gran ragione, che l'uomo è perfettibile, e che le scienze progrediscono, è naturale che noi, ammaestrati da Montesquieu e da Smith, da Necker e da Malthus, testimoni delle rivoluzioni d'America e di Francia, della recente potenza francese, della resistenza spagnuola e della lega tedesca, siamo in grado di giudicare gli Stati e le leggi con piú perspicacia e prudenza che non sapessero farle i concittadini d'Alessandro e di Pericle, di Traiano e d'Augusto" (But if the Romantic school does not forbid one to make use of the memories of antiquity, it urges us to respect the political wisdom of our contemporaries. For the important reason that man is perfectible, and that science progresses, it is natural that we, taught by Montesquieu and Smith, Necker and Malthus, witnesses to the American and French Revolution, of the recent French power, of the Spanish Resistance and of the German League, can judge both states and the laws with more acumen and prudence than the citizens in the times of Alexander the Great, Pericles, Trajan, and Augustus). Ibid., 358. This and subsequent translations of Visconti are mine.

[19] The dichotomy indicated by Berchet cannot be understood without a reference to the scientific debate that characterized the eighteenth century. Enlightenment scientists, most notably the *idéologues* and the *observateurs de l'homme*, conducted a thorough assessment of the scientific methods endorsed in the first part of the century, and brought to fruition two important transformations, indeed two revolutions. The first one involved the substitution of Condillac's man-statue with an organicistic and vitalistic model introduced by Cabanis and by the group of *médicins-philosophes*, while the second implied a new regard for ethnographic studies, which became recognized as a rigorous science. The attention given to the individual and to social man, to his primitive or more advanced social structures, constitutes a large part of the debate that concerned philosophers and thinkers of the 18th century, reverberating in other fields of knowledge and most importantly in the arts. The new vitalistic and organicistic view proposed by the sciences, as well as the renewed focus on the individual and his forms of social existence permeate Romantic ideology and have a distinct impact on Leopardi's poetic and essayistic work. Cf. Sergio Moravia, *La scienza dell'uomo nel Settecento* (Bari: Laterza, 1970), 5-12, and Marco Poli, "L'ilhuninismo nella formazione del pensiero di Giacomo Leopardi," *Belfagor. Rassegna di varia umanità* 5 (1974): 514-16.

The Romantics called for a poetry pulsating with life, rejecting the lifeless replica of past glories. Berchet reduced the classical canon to a poetics of sterility and loss, similarly to Ermes Visconti who, in summarizing the imperatives of the new poetics, had reminded his readers that poetry is first and foremost the expression of a human experience, not a purely rhetorical practice.[20] Visconti's *Idee elementari sulla poesia romantica*, published as six essays in the *Conciliatore*, continues to elaborate on Berchet's dichotomy by extending it to the readers' reception. What is felt personally, individually, the poet's existence that is, with its history and emotions, is what compels, giving expression to his verses and pathos to his style. In Visconti's opinion, in the classicists the artifice is quickly revealed, making their work insincere and visibly contrived. Imitation of the classics was however, not proscribed, as Visconti will note in the following passage. The narration of events involving the human being, no matter if of the recent or distant past, engenders reflection, produces enthusiasm, and sparks the imagination, all elements dear to the Romantics, whose argument is not with the power of history or past facts, but rather with the affectation of a poetic word that is unable, as it is borrowed and clichéd, to speak to the modern individual.[21]

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[20] "Riguardo poi ai consigli pratici che abbiamo enunciati, e che svilupperemo in seguito nell'atto stesso che si verranno spiegando le distinzioni teoriche, essi non sono altro che applicazioni rigorose di questa massima: i poeti devono esser uomini, cittadini e filantropi, non meri dotti, né retori; l'impulso pratico deve nascere dalle sensazioni della vita, e non dalle abitudini della scuola" (A propos the practical advice we just enunciated, which we will develop further as we explain the theoretical distinctions, they are nothing more than the rigorous applications of this maxim: poets must be men, citizens and philanthropists, not mere erudites or rhetoricians; the practical impulse must be borne of life's sensations and not of bookish habits). Cf. Visconti, *I manifesti romantici*, 352-53.

[21] "Gli avvenimenti della Grecia e di Roma sono patrimonio anche nostro, occasioni anche per noi di riflettere, occupazioni dell'immaginazione e del cuore. Che importa se un fatto accadde ieri o trenta secoli fa? Appena è passato, esso fa parte dell'esperienza sociale, può essere germe e motivo d'entusiasmo a tutti i posteri, finché ne duri memoria. Beninteso sempre che i casi più recenti ci commuovono più al vivo, e che quindi i nostri teatri ed i nostri libri devono offrirci per lo più vicende moderne, che sono ben altrimenti connesse coi beni e coi mali delle istituzioni viventi, cogli attuali desideri e speranze delle nazioni" (The events of Greece and Rome are our legacy as well, opportunities to reflect, occupations of the imagination and the heart. What does it matter if an event happened today or thirty centuries back? As soon as it is past, it becomes part of social experience, it can be a germ or cause for enthusiasm for all posterity, as long as its memory lasts. Obviously, the events of the present move us more deeply and therefore our theaters and our books

Thus the practice of imitation that was traditionally pursued and revered is viewed by Visconti, and more generally by the Romantics, as a trite duplication of myths, motifs, and formulas that is hollow from the artistic point of view and fatal for the recipient's imagination. However, here again it is not imitation in general that is criticized and condemned. Visconti makes a clear distinction between a pedantic activity, that "imitation of an imitation,"[22] which saturated the classical canon of his time, and the dynamic (read vital) recuperation of the many past histories that emerged from the discovery of new peoples and civilizations. The latter, inasmuch as it was creatively beneficial to the reader's contemporary condition, was both accepted and welcome. A 'progressive' elaboration and not a mere imitation of the past was in order, one that would take elements of history and time into account, in short, of evolution, and speak to contemporaries with images, a language, and a form that were appropriate and relevant. Laid out in this way, the argument could not be marginal, as it implied on one side a revolution in the realm of creativity, imagination, and inspiration, and on the other it raised the question of historical context, modernity, and subjectivity. The young Leopardi could not remain silent in this major dispute and would return to it in countless entries in his *Zibaldone*. Indeed, continued direct and indirect references to it in his diary indicate that he recognized not only the various dimensions of the *querelle* but also that the controversy was to become instrumental in the making of his own poetics. Imitation was a fundamental element in Leopardi's creative process as it was for the authors of his time and for poetry in general. What was beneficially contentious in the dispute was the necessity, acknowledged by the Romantics and evidently by Leopardi as well, to re-formulate the basic principles of the imaginative process. It was an invitation that did not leave him indifferent, prompting his replies, as early as his 1816 letter,[23] and later

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should offer us mostly modern events which are more closely connected with the good and evils of our living institutions, with the desires and hopes of the nations). Ibid., 357-58.

[22] "È il solo classicismo de' moderni che merita biasmo, perché è un'imitazione inopportuna, non della natura, ma di preesistenti opere d'arte; è un poetare spurio, tanto lungi dal vero buon gusto, quanto le inezie claustrali degli scolastici erano lungi dalla vera filosofia" (It is only the Classicism of the moderns that deserves our remonstrances, because it is an inappropriate imitation, not of nature but of pre-existing works of art; it is a spurious act of poetry, as distant from good taste as the scholastics' trifling exercises were from true philosophy). Ibid., 380.

[23] The *Lettera ai Sigg. compilatori della Biblioteca Italiana in risposta a quella di Mad. la Baronessa De Staël Holstein ai medesimi* (*Letter to the Editors of the Biblioteca Italiana in response to that by Baroness de Staël Holstein to them*), dated July 18, 1816, was sent to the Biblioteca Italiana but never published, the same fate

in his 1818 *Discorso*, where, through a dynamic introspective process, he shaped a poetics of the natural, the artless, of simplicity and spontaneity that precisely mirrors what Schiller had envisioned in his 1795 treatise, and will find stylistic expression in the verses of *L'Infinito*.

Di Breme's 1818's *Osservazioni* on Byron's *Giaurro*

Di Breme's essay opens with a crucial reference to Descartes,[24] whose major contribution to the scientific world was to challenge those preconceived ideas and dogmatic generalizations that could not withstand a rigorous scientific investigation, and yet informed so much of the knowledge and wisdom of his and preceding times. The opening reference is relevant to the issue in question, as Di Breme acknowledges the need for a revolution in poetics similar to that brought about by the 17th-century French philosopher. The need for a paradigmatic change in the substance and essence of poetic practice is recognized by both Di Breme and his friends at the *Conciliatore*, but Di Breme goes beyond his colleagues' declarations to invoke the possibility that a new Descartes from the world of letters may appear on the horizon. What is interesting to note here, and relevant as we explore Leopardi's reaction to this essay, is that the Piedmontese aristocrat offers specific details, intellectual and human, that belong to this new imagined sensibility. Di Breme describes a poetic personality endowed with the courage to challenge and transcend ("oltrepassare," 83),[25] any school, tradition, or movement, and to elevate the process of invention and imitation by articulating an originally personal voice. A doubter of all canonic principles, as Descartes had been of all pseudo-scientific laws, the new talent would assume the responsibility of developing a new poetics, of joining all sensitive faculties together in harmony, allowing the soul and the mind to resonate to the chords of both beauty and truth.

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that awaited his later and better articulated *Discorso di un italiano sopra la poesia romantica*.

[24] In a *Zibaldone* entry, Leopardi acknowledges Descartes as one of the most noteworthy thinkers of all times, together with Newton and Bacon.

[25] The verb "oltrepassare," or "andare oltre" (to go beyond), is especially significant as it will become fundamental in Leopardi's intellectual and philosophical undertakings. The notion of "andare oltre" will be examined later in this investigation, with the help of Sergio Moravia's hermeneutics of the "essere morale" (moral being). Sergio Moravia, *L'enigma dell'esistenza. Soggetto, morale, passioni nell'età del disincanto* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1996).

The preparation and education of their *complete* being, gifted with a felicitous inclination for the harmony of their talents, should be entrusted to these individuals. Inclination that, I believe, proceeds from the refinement of the senses and from a heart that is deeply affected by the encounter with the true.[26]

It is important to note that Di Breme's invitation to elaborate a "complete" sensitivity, one that intersects both aesthetic and philosophical dimensions, points to and simultaneously solicits a re-thinking of the poetic enterprise, a call that will, and not only for Leopardi, revolutionize the paradigm of writing, turning it into a dynamic, transformative process, a movement towards an equilibrium of forces, an act of becoming. The notion of aesthetic production as a process intersecting, in the case of poetry, the spheres of the beautiful and the true, is no doubt a by-product of the philosophical and literary debates occupying the stage in the 18th and early 19th centuries. The involvement of the philosophical dimension in the poetic operation constitutes, in Leopardi's view, an inevitable loss of spontaneity and of authenticity for the poet, one which he himself records when relating his 1819 conversion to philosophy.[27] For Leopardi the contact with the true, historical, philosophical, or contingent, as one may describe it, produces a rupture, a separation from, and indeed a betrayal of the poet's calling, condemning his verses to affected sentimentality.

Paradoxically, for Leopardi the encounter with the true (*il vero*) seems to reduce verse to the artificial and insincere, condemning poetry to its death. Thus Leopardi seems convinced of the impossibility of the co-existence and interrelation of both elements, beautiful and true, aesthetic and philosophical, as circuitously conveyed in *Zibaldone* in 1819. Yet, a closer examination of Leopardi's poetic production in those years clearly reveals the poet's endeavor to fuse both dimensions, urging us to re-examine the position he articulated in his diary, as well as in his verses.

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[26] "Venisse affidato a costui la preparazione e la direzione di un animo *completo*, e dotato di felice attitudine all'armonia delle sue facoltà; la quale attitudine cred'io riposta nella finezza dei sensi e in un cuore altamente echeggiante ai soli tocchi del vero" (all translations are mine, I have substituted the generic phiral for the masculine singular in the Italian). Ludovico Di Breme, *Polemiche*, 83.

[27] The process of transformation and maturation had already begun for the young Leopardi in 1816, when a series of physical and mental ailments that almost caused his death resulted in extended periods of forced inactivity. During these years, which culminated in his failed attempt to escape excessive parental control in 1819, Leopardi had moved, as he records in *Zibaldone* and in his correspondence with Pietro Giordani, from a poetics of imagination (or of the *naive*, according to the Romantics) to one driven by reflection and philosophical considerations.

This is however not the only evidence that should convince us of the resonance and impact Di Breme's essay had on the young Leopardi. If we continue to read the text, we come across a piece of advice the Piedmontese had sketched for his idealized talent, one that addresses both Leopardi's sheltered existence and his reserved demeanor.

> This unblemished being should be jealously cared for, protected from the wretched influence of current urban artifice, and from the same corruption that offends the nobility and splendor of decorum: perversions that suffocate the most beautiful and delicate aspirations and subvert a fundamental part of the poetic genius; the poet I invoke, then, should be mindful that the first poets in the world were the most generous beings [...] the first who dared speak of strength, of a glorious death, of the common good, of self-sacrifice and elevation above our instincts.[28]

If one reflects on the poetic production of the years immediately following the publication of the *Observations* (1819-21) and, successively, of the years until Leopardi's death, one can easily discern that Di Breme's plea had not only been acknowledged by the Recanatese, but also expanded into a coherent personal aesthetic paradigm which materialized in his unpublished 1818 *Discorso*. There, the poetic principles of heroic isolation, primacy of the intellect, persistence of the individuality and subjectivity,[29] abnegation and sacrifice in light of the common good (intellectual and philosophical, but also political), go hand in hand with an idea of poetic process that shares its spontaneity and artlessness with the poetry of origins, forming a complex network of intertextual cross-references that intersected both his poetry, contemporary and future, as well as many *Zibaldone* entries. Leopardi's vehement defense of his poetics in his well-known letter to De Sinner in 1832 is evidence of the persistence of the principles outlined in

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[28] "Quest'animo ancora intemerato ei se lo appartasse geloso, e lo guardasse dai meschini influssi dei correnti artifizi urbani, e dalle medesime corruttele che fanno ingiuria alla nobiltà e allo splendore dei costumi: corruttele soffocatrici delle più belle e dilicate ispirazioni, e che sovvertono una gran parte fondamentale di facoltà poetica; si ricordasse perciò l'uomo ch'io invoco, i primi poeti del mondo essere stati le più generose anime [...] i primi che ardirono far parola all'uomo di fortezza, di gloriosa morte, di comun bene, di annegazione della volontà, d'inalzamento sopra l'istinto." *Polemiche,* 83.

[29] In line with Romantic tenets, Di Breme underlines the dominant role of Nature, mother of all inspiration, example of physical and moral rectitude, and as such manifestation of divine love. In her universe, man is the first creation, supreme object of contemplation and study. Ibid., 84.

the *Discorso*. Never abandoned or repudiated, they informed his philosophy and guided his inspiration until the end.

In addition to a brief introductory plea, Di Breme's remarks, which precede the examination of Byron's *Giaour*, articulate a series of issues that had inflamed the debate over the poem. His first statement is directed at those critics who privileged the obedience to ancient rules, dismissing the possibility of reaching a poetic *effect* in the present. Here, the aristocrat reignites the controversy between *anciens et modernes*, pointing out that the latter, by retaining Democritus's lesson on passion and the poet's search for the reader's innermost sentiments, celebrate these as foundational principles of the poetic. Passion as poetic furor, as pathos that among the ancients derived from an utter ignorance of nature and its phenomena, pathos as a perpetually imaginative force, is, for the the moderns, driven by the multiple "harmonies of nature" (*armonie della natura*, 92). Among these were religion and the sense of the sacred, sublime love, womanhood, the miracles of science, of industry, the manifold ideas, views, and notions inspired by an overly optimistic vision of progress. In celebrating imaginative energy, Di Breme touches on an important point. If imagination has no limits, it must nevertheless be close to our senses, not arbitrary or disconnected but rather deeply rooted in the world we inhabit. Most significantly, it cannot be disengaged from our inner self, the "vero infinito" of subjectivity, which Di Breme recognizes as an infinite source of pathos (92). The focus is here on multiplicity (reality in its manifold manifestations can affect the poetic), and on the interactive relationship between the subjective self and the objective world. Both issues would resonate with Leopardi, who resolved them in a minimalist poetics strongly embedded in the observing and interrogating of the self.

The celebration of a poetry inspired by Romantic modernity comes at a price, the demolition of the *pathos* of the ancients, that Di Breme decries as primitive, while the images, metaphors, and allegories of their verses are perceived as having lost all emotional and evocative power. The poetic works of the classics, in the forms imitated by the classicists, are declared anachronistic, extinct, while the reality they represented so powerfully has been silenced as far as modern affectivity is concerned. Here again, modernity does not resonate with antiquity, but is instead caught in a dialectical opposition of life and death, of emotion and stillness. And although the principle of inspiration is eternal and invariable, it nevertheless needs to derive from the natural, social, and individual sphere of the subject, from his conscience and consciousness (93). The element of *pathos,* discussed at length by Di Breme and described as depth and vastness of sentiment (94), is further illuminated by the initial verses of the *Giaour*,

where a few harmonious images can capture the sentiment of the moment. Here, Di Breme explains, the poetic voice is both indeterminate and universal, it is a poetic presence immersed in nature, dissolved in the affective setting. Nature, Di Breme is convinced, is life manifested in disparate forms, forms that contain a cognizant, self-conscious self that poetry believes it is able to evoke, all the more persuasively as the laws of reason and rationality cannot demonstrate its existence.[30] The difference is that while in ancient poetry nature's being was mediated by mythological figures, in the Romantics it is dissolved into a more diffuse presence that is one with the natural surroundings. In Di Breme's view, shortly after its auspicious beginnings, the ancients' mediated relationship between nature and human beings had calamitous consequences. First, it stifled the poetic by representing nature in one uniform, monotonous dimension; it destroyed the magic that allowed humans to find life in its multiple meanings behind all forms of nature. Last, it gradually deprived humans of their spontaneous connection with nature by distancing the object from its interpreters. As a consequence of this hermeneutic estrangement, Di Breme laments, any sense of mystery, discovery, and awe, when facing nature and its manifestations, was lost. This passage is of the utmost interest to us as it touches upon issues that concerned the young Leopardi both as an intellectual and a poet: nature as living organism, as an interlocutor capable of dialogue, and the poet as its supreme interpreter. More subtly, di Breme also approaches the question of reception, which will occupy the young

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[30] "Nature is life: life modified in countless guises. If wherever there is life there is also *consciousness* and *self-awareness*, poetry wants to believe this or feign it, against the advice of reason, all the more. Poetic inclination, which resides in the human being, was pleased all the more with this gift, yet in ancient mythology nature was individualized rather than animated without mediation [...] With the result that by interposing people between us and the natural phenomena, and between us and ourselves, it not only <u>deflated the poetic artifice</u> but <u>deprived it of</u> the most miraculous magic, that which attributes <u>meaning</u> to everything, <u>recognizing life in all possible forms</u>, not exclusively in human forms" (La natura è vita: vita modificata in migliaia di guise. Se dovunque è vita siavi parimenti coscienza e sentimento di un *se stesso*, ciò la poesia tanto più ama di crederlo e di fingerlo quanto meno è dimostrato dalla ragione. L'attitudine poetica, ch'è nell'animo umano, si compiacque mai sempre di questa fantasia, ma nelle mitologie la natura veniva piuttosto convertita in individui, che immediatamente avvivata [...] Perocché infrapponendo sempre persone fra noi e i fenomeni naturali, e fra noi e noi stessi, non solamente rendeva infine troppo uniforme l'artifizio poetico, ma lo spogliava della più miracolosa tra tutte le magie, quella cioè che attribuisce un senso ad ogni cosa, e riconosce vita, sotto tutte le possibili forme, non esclusivamente sotto le umane). Ibid., 103; italics in the text, the underline is mine.

Recanatese in depth. If the culture of the time rejected pedantic imitation, it also called for a radical re-fashioning, not only of poetry's content, but also of its style. Style was the recognized battleground where poetic representation was to meet modernity, soliciting and affecting the readership in new and suggestive ways.[31] These issues concerned first and foremost the poetic voice, which was to assume the role of intermediary between the natural and human spheres, once the mythological element had been removed. But Di Breme's proposed formula, elucidated through Byron's verses, seems to involve the dissolution of the authorial voice into manifestations of nature. Nature speaks directly through visions, images, and symbols while the poet's actuality dissolves into its manifold presences. This is a cardinal element of dissent for Leopardi, who will proclaim the centrality of the poetic subjectivity in the aesthetic experience, for example, of *L'Infinito*. The effacement of the self as point of view, developing as a result of the strategies implied by Di Breme, is an irremediable and unacceptable absence. Thus, if Di Breme espouses the imaginative process avowed by the Romantics as the most conducive to connect the human with the natural world, he fails to realize that the intrusion of the lyrical subjectivity is the real disruptive element of modernity. Leopardi must have been aware of this critical passage, as he remains rooted in the defense of a determined and determining voice, an authorial self that is in command of all experiences, linguistic, poetic, and intellectual, but also philosophical and hermeneutic.

Di Breme continues his retort against mythology and adds an important point, that of analogy: "L'universo poetico è un tutto governato da queste leggi di analogia: il capirle non è dato a chi non le sente; il sentirle profondamente è proprio soltanto di quegli animi generosi e dilicati, che diconsi, e sono poeti" (the poetic universe is a whole governed by the laws of analogy: to understand them is not possible for those who cannot feel them; to deeply feel them is possible only to those generous and delicate souls we call poets)[32] In the following pages, analogy is almost immediately connected with an important distinction. If the style in vogue among the

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[31] Leopardi's work can be described as a metaphorical journey of discovery that involves continuous interpretation and redefinition of notions, tenets, and principles, poetic as well as philosophical. From the very first *idilli*, and in particular in *L'Infinito*, of all these notions that of time assumes a fundamental cognitive role for the poet. The self, immersed in time, becomes the paradigm of knowledge, of that *sapere aude* that had informed the philosophical investigations of the Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* and, *What is Enlightenment*, trans. Lewis White Beck, 2nd ed. (New York-London: Macmillan, 1990).

[32] Di Breme, 104.

Classicists required nothing but good memory and familiarity with mythological figures, Romantic poetry needs not only sensitivity, but also understanding of a deeper philosophical dimension. In this brief comment, which the young Leopardi cannot have overlooked, the poetic and the philosophical are implicitly joined together, opening up the possibility of new directions for the imaginative enterprise. In *Zibaldone* Leopardi laments the passage from the poetic to the philosophical he experienced in 1819 as a loss, a fatality. Here, Di Breme offers a different reading of that same experience. Not only is the philosophical element not a limitation or an impediment for the poet, it could instead be the solution to an *impasse*, the gateway to a new aesthetic paradigm, an invitation that Leopardi accepted and developed in his *Discorso*.

Emulation rather than imitation is for Di Breme the path to modern poetry, as it allows the modern to rival the Greek and Latin poets in "sviscerare la natura ideale, *modificata secondo i vari tempi,* e nello spaziare generosamente e grandiosamente per la immensità del cuore umano" (to examine the ideal nature, which changes in time, and to roam generously and vigorously through the immensity of the human heart).[33] The italics are Di Breme's, who calls attention to the relativity of "natura ideale," a concept that is neither universal nor eternal, but local and specific. What Di Breme touches upon here, probably without much consideration as he does not develop them further, are the elements of space, time, and 'self', or better, the implications the *apriori* of space and time have for the 'self', the very dimension the Romantics had substantially contributed to expanding. Consistently with the Romantics' view, in his annotations Di Breme defines the "cuore umano" (human heart), as a spatial vastness, a notion that resonated with Leopardi, who will introduce the notion of "pensiero" (thinking) in *L'Infinito*, contributing in his own terms to the intellectual and philosophical shift urged by the Romantics.

Leopardi's *Discorso di un italiano intorno alla poesia romantica*

The brief review of the Italian Romantic manifestos that appeared between 1816 and 1818 has highlighted the major questions that urged Leopardi to compose his *Discorso*. As we have noted, the young poet had worked intensely at the development of the document,[34] integrating in it all

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[33] Ibid., 112.

[34] The manuscript is written *currenti calamo* with *Zibaldone*, where several pages with no date accompany the development of the primary text with reflections on the

those elements of the debate that he considered significant for the elaboration of his own aesthetics: nature and its imitation, imagination and deceit, sensism and *sensitività*,[35] pleasure, anthropomorphism, remembrance, reception, style, and the Romantics' excesses. The importance of this work for the young intellectual cannot be overstated, as Leopardi had destined it for publication, presumably hoping that it would serve as his official introduction to the world of Italian letters, as well as an indication of his interest in initiating a dialogue with those he considered distinguished interlocutors. Furthemore, the manuscript's systematic enunciations indicate the poet's intention to rise above the limits of the cultural provincialism he inhabited, and to confront the challenges offered by the larger European context, where literary trends were debated, critical notions tested, and contemporary forms of expression scrutinized.

The over seventy page long essay is manifestly a response to Cavalier Di Breme's *Osservazioni*,[36] penned to demonstrate that the ideas they contain are vague, frail, and misleading, but also dangerous as they appear

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sublime, comparisons with classical and contemporary authors, and personal declarations of poetics. Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 15-23.

[35] This term appears in *Zibaldone*'s first annotations, as Leopardi contrasts di Breme's position with his own idea of the pathetic, the emotional sensitivity the poet needs to stir up in his readers, a core principle in authors such as Chateaubriand, Delille, and Saint Pierre, whom Leopardi intended to challenge (*Zib*. 15).

[36] Leopardi records his first impressions very early in *Zibaldone*, immediately after reading Di Breme's essay: "I have just finished reading Lodovico di Breme's observations in issue no. 91 of the *Spettatore* on modern Romantic poetry, or whatever we want to call it, and because I have seen a series of arguments that might cause confusion and concern, and by nature am never far from doubt even about things that are regarded as beyond doubt, and because I have in my mind the answers that can and should be given to those arguments, I am writing them down for my own peace of mind" (Finisco in questo punto di leggere nello Spettatore n. 91, le Osservazioni del Cavalier Lodovico di Breme sopra la poesia moderna e romantica che la vogliamo chiamare, e perché ci ho veduto una serie di ragionamenti che può imbrogliare e inquietare, e io per mia natura non sono lontano dal dubbio anche sopra le cose credute indubitabili, però avendo nella mente le risposte che a quei ragionamenti si possono e debbono fare, per mia quiete le scrivo). In the *Zibaldone* entries, Leopardi laid the foundations of the more articulated and organic structure of the *Discorso*. Here, the crucial issues, including those of imagination and illusion, sentimentality and affectation, nature and the natural, are already present, but clearly Leopardi felt the need to elaborate them into a more comprehensive and careful critique. All quotations in English are taken from the recent publication of *Zibaldone*, eds. Caesar and D'Intino, 15.

to be acute, ingenious, and profound.[37] Leopardi's intention is to confront and dismantle the seemingly strong rhetorical paradigm of the essay, and in so doing to prove that the Romantics' foundational principles were vulnerable and unconvincing. The *Discorso* abounds with interrogations, confutations, and demonstrations, presenting an author who, while always respectful, remains an anonymous but outspoken advocate of the teachings derived from the past and an opponent of the fashionable ideas of the new movement. Rhetorically, the essay appears to be driven by impulse and passion, an impression the initial series of interrogative locutions and exclamations seems to confirm, yet as one proceeds with the reading, it is clear that both the thematic and theoretical underpinnings have been coherently planned, following an eloquent discursive structure that, while it does not obey a distinct rhetorical pattern, is much more than a reply written with youthful impetuousness, and represents the condensation of a universe imbued with values, ideas, and notions, some of them still developing, others firm and enduring.

The *corpus* of the essay interweaves two sections, a *pars destruens*, which includes the attacks against Di Breme's *Osservazioni* as well as against the Romantics' positions, and a *pars construens*, which articulates Leopardi's own poetic principles. The deliberate conflation/opposition, in the sections devoted to the criticism of the Romantics, of Leopardi's own poetic principles, provides a movement and a rhythm unknown to his predecessors' essays in defense of Romanticism. The uniqueness and originality of Leopardi's *Discorso* lies in this 'scientific' approach,[38] which simultaneously produces the emergence of a dynamic poetic voice, questioning and contesting the *status quo*, which can be understood to include both the Classicist and the Romantic models, and the formulation of an original and distinctive aesthetic.

The first passages of the dispute center on the place of poetry. From the outset, the young Leopardi separates the sphere of the intellect from that of the imagination, indicting both Di Breme and the Romantics for a

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[37] "To me, the Cavaliere's *Observations* seem rather dangerous; and I say dangerous precisely because they are, for the most part, acute and ingenious and profound." Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from the *Discorso* are taken from *Leopardi's Discourse on Romantic Poetry*, trans. Fabio Camilletti and Gabrielle Sims, in Fabio Camilletti, *Classicism and Romanticism in Italian Literature* (New York-London: Routledge, 2015), 114.

[38] Leopardi's calls to reason, clarity, and truth are reiterated in the first pages of the *Discorso* (347, 348, 349, and 350). Giacomo Leopardi, *Discorso di un italiano intorno alla poesia romantica*, in *Poesie e prose*, eds. Rolando Damiani and Mario Andrea Rigoni, vol. 2, I Meridiani (Milan: Mondadori, 1988), 345-426.

fundamental mistake: to have moved poetry away from the "commerce with the senses"[39] and to have directed it toward the spiritual, the metaphysical, and the rational. The constitutive elements of poetry, as Leopardi envisions them, are its materiality, visibility, physicality, in brief, its connection, or "commerce" as he puts it, with the material world.[40] Nature's reality is rendered visible and perceivable by means of the senses, not the intellect. Poetry deceives, Di Breme admits, but the act of deception, instrumental to this process, is not directed towards the intellect, rather, retorts Leopardi, towards the imagination,[41] and as such it would work at any level of reception (educated readers or not), and in any time period (past or present).[42] In opening a volume of verses, Leopardi observes, one can recognize their content and intent, in short, the reader can welcome the deception and accept it exactly for what it is, a product of the imagination.[43] Leopardi swiftly concludes the argument about Di Breme's support for the modernization of poetry, irrevocably dismissing what seemed to be the crux of the Romantics' challenge to the Classicists and instead redirecting the argument to the real issues at hand: what is poetry concerned with, what are its "ufficio" (role), and its purpose.[44] Certainly, the imitation of nature is poetry's first and only pursuit, and delectation (or pleasure), its only purpose, which is to be attained (via imaginative deception) in the most substantial, natural, and authentic way possible. Leopardi explains:

[39] Camilletti and Sims, *Classicism and Romanticism*, 115.

[40] This position hints at Leopardi's closeness to the eighteenth century sensism of authors such as Gravina and Cesarotti, and at the influence of Locke's widely acclaimed *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In the *Discorso*, Gravina's position, excerpted from *Della efficacia della poesia* (*On the effectiveness of poetry*) and previously quoted in *Zibaldone* (16), is expanded to illustrate Leopardi's own thoughts on the mental operations that produce the representation of what the senses perceive. On the one hand, he stresses the connections between our emotional state and its representations, on the other, he argues for the need for an equilibrium (*convenienza*) between poetic style and the intensity of one's perceptions.

[41] Leopardi, *Discorso*, 352.

[42] This position mirrors that of Longinus in his *Treatise on the Sublime* when, in the opening remarks, he defines poetry, and within it the sublime, as an event that transcends reason or the intellect: "A lofty passage does not convince the reason of the reader, but takes him out of himself. That which is admirable ever confounds our judgment, and eclipses that which is merely reasonable or agreeable. To believe or not is usually in our own power; but the Sublime, acting with an imperious and irresistible force, sways every reader whether he will or no." Longinus, *Longinus on the Sublime*, trans. H. L. Havell (London-New York: MacMillan, 1890), § 1.

[43] Leopardi, *Discorso*, 353.

[44] Ibid., 354.

Nature's beauties, then, having initially conformed to the characteristics of natural observers and ordered for their delight, do not vary in accordance with the variations in their observers; change in the social world has never induced a corresponding change in the natural order, which remains ever the same, a conqueror of experience and learning and art, indeed of every human thing. In order to garner from nature that pure and substantial delight which is the proper office of poetry [...] and which conforms to the original, primitive condition of humankind, it is necessary not that nature adapt to us, but that we adapt to nature, and therefore that *poetry must not continuously change*, as the moderns would have it, but rather that, like nature, *it be immutable* in its principle characteristics.[45]

The immutability of nature appears as an axiom, *le point fixe* of all experience (poetic in this case). Like the sun in the heliocentric system, nature is not altered by time, history, or artistic innovation, and similarly poetry, whose "caratteri principali" (main elements) have remained unaltered since humans perceived it for the first time. The process of adaptation and change instead befalls those who have indeed been transformed in the course of history and must now return to a condition of primitiveness, a condition that is not of the intellect, as some, including Di Breme, have argued, but rather of the senses, which are premised on spontaneity, naturalness, and simplicity. This is, for now, the crux of Leopardi's poetic ideal, the second axiomatic term of his lyrical system.[46]

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[45] Camilletti and Sims, *Classicism and Romanticism*, 121. "Le bellezze dunque della natura conformate da principio alle qualità ed ordinate al diletto di spettatori naturali, non variano pel variare de' riguardanti, ma nessuna mutazione degli uomini indusse mai cambiamento nella natura, la quale vincitrice dell'esperienza e dello studio e dell'arte e d'ogni cosa umana mantenendosi eternamente quella, a volerne conseguire quel diletto puro e sostanziale ch'è il fine proprio della poesia [...] ma che insieme è conformato alla condizione primitiva degli uomini, è necessario che, non la natura a noi, ma noi ci adattiamo alla natura, e però *la poesia non si venga mutando*, come vogliono i moderni, ma ne' suoi caratteri principali, sia, *come la natura, immutabile*." Leopardi, *Discorso*, 357; italics are mine.

[46] The concept of Nature in Leopardi has been studied extensively. Here, I propose but a limited and incomplete list of the most interesting critical works on the subject: Emanuela Andreoni Fontecedro, *Natura di voler matrigna: Saggio su Leopardi e su 'Natura noverca'* (Rome: Kepos, 1993); Bortolo Martinelli, *Leopardi tra Leibnitz e Locke* (Rome: Carocci, 2003); Giorgio Ficara, *Il punto di vista della Natura. Saggio su Leopardi* (Genoa: Il Melangolo, 1996); Bruno Biral, *La posizione storica di Giacomo Leopardi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974); Mario Andrea Rigoni's "Leopardi, Schelling, Madame de Staël e la scienza romantica della natura," *Lettere italiane* 53, no. 2 (2001 April-June): 247-56; and the volume edited by Vincenzo Placella, *Leopardi e lo spettacolo della natura*, Atti del Convegno internazionale, Naples, 17-

And this adaptation of mankind to nature consists in *utilizing the imagination in order to resituate ourselves in the primitive state of our forefathers*, which is precisely what the poet, master of fancies, leads us to do without any effort on our part.[47]

The reader's disposition towards the poetic product is immutable, and so is the principle of nature as origin and repository of any literary invention. Tied to them is the persuasion that it is the poet, in his role as "master of fancies," who enables us, as best we can ("come meglio possiamo"), given the limits to the sophistication of our consciousness, to return, by means of the *imagination*, to that state of artlessness that is comparable to the primitive condition of the senses. Neither nature nor the foundations of the poetic edifice have changed, and although the passing of time has not altered the strength of our imagination it has severely diminished its use. As reason and the intellect shed light on nature, explaining, dissecting, and forcing it into their analytical framework, they tear it apart, destroying any impetus or inspiration.[48] Can the enthusiasm of childhood, which reason seems to endanger, remain intact? How can it relate to nature, establish a relation with it? Leopardi explains:

[...] when the thunder and the wind and the sun and stars and animals and plants and the very walls of our houses, all things, were either friends or enemies but never indifferent or meaningless for us; when every object that we saw seemed to be trying to tell a story; when we were never alone and we interrogated the painted walls and the trees and flowers and the clouds, and when we embraced stones and trees, and as though offended we punished, or as though blessed we cherished, things incapable of inflicting injury or conferring bliss; when we were continually possessed by the marvel, which is so pleasing to us, that we so often wish to believe just in order to be capable of marveling [...] What a remarkable thing was our

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19 December 1998 (Naples: L'Orientale, 2000). Finally, recent studies have approached the work of Leopardi from the bio- and eco-critical perspective, such as Federico Luisetti's article, "Notes on the Biopolitical State of Nature," *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 39, 1 (Mar. 2016): 108-21.

[47] Camilletti and Sims, *Classicism and Romanticism*, 121. "E questo adattarsi degli uomini alla natura, consiste *in rimetterci con l'immaginazione come meglio possiamo nello stato primitivo* dei nostri maggiori, la qual cosa ci fa fare senza fatica il poeta padrone delle fantasie." Leopardi, *Discorso*, 357; italics are mine.

[48] It is interesting that Leopardi uses, among other terms, the verb "affogare" (to drown), when he asks Di Breme about the effects of reason on the imagination. Ibid., 362.

imagination at that time; how often and easily it was inflamed; how freely and without restraint; how it roamed impetuously and tirelessly.[49]

The explanation of the imaginative process affected by nature is stylistically reinforced both by the extensive use of "when" and "and" in a polysyndetic structure, and by the accumulation of descriptive enumerations aimed at stimulating the reader's attention and emotive participation. Leopardi's particular investment in this part of the *Discorso* is revealed in the successive passages, where the narrative takes an autobiographical turn and the poet confides that, as a child, he personally experienced the situation he is describing.[50] The unexpected autobiographical interlude is quite significant and consequential as it projects the reader into the poet's intimate sphere, into a personal and existential space where seemingly ordinary encounters with nature turn into sublime experiences. The passage is complex and needs to be deconstructed. For the purpose of the present exploration, it is important to note the presence of the adjective "insensata" (meaningless, muted, dead), which seems to point to a dialogical pattern that involves both the senses and the intellect. For Leopardi, in childhood "ogni cosa" (everything) was significant: nothing could be perceived without the senses or, better, only the senses could invest the world with meaning and inspire the individuality to its discovery. Nature communicates itself to the child and later, when he enters the corrupted stage of adulthood, to the poet. Nature engages his 'primitive' subjectivity, calling for a process of interpretation and expression that may lead, in psychologically controlled, serene moments,[51] to poetic invention. Transported by his description,

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[49] Ibid., 122-23. "Quando il tuono e il vento e il sole e gli astri e gli animali e le piante e le mura de' nostri alberghi, ogni cosa ci appariva o amica o nemica nostra, indifferente nessuna, insensata nessuna; quando ciascun oggetto che vedevamo ci pareva che in certo modo accennando, quasi mostrasse di *volerci favellare*; quando in nessun luogo soli, interrogavamo le immagini e le pareti e gli alberi e i fiori e le nuvole, e abbracciavamo sassi e legni, e quasi ingiuriati malmenavamo e quasi beneficiati carezzavamo cose incapaci d'ingiuria e di benefizio; quando la maraviglia tanto grata a noi che spessissimo desideriamo di poter credere per poterci maravigliare, continuamente ci possedeva [...] Ma qual era in quel tempo la fantasia nostra, come spesso e facilmente s'infiammava, come libera e senza freno, impetuosa e instancabile spaziava." Leopardi, *Discorso*, 358.

[50] The entries dedicated to this topic are numerous in *Zibaldone*, 152, 172, and 212, 16 August, 1820. Here too, all experiences are autobiographical. Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. Pacella.

[51] Tranquillity and strength are needed in the moment of invention, as Leopardi explains in *Zibaldone*, 258 (October 1, 1820): "In essence, for the invention of precise, formal subjects, at their most original and primitive [I mean in the first

Leopardi conflates tangible objects of the physical world, flowers, trees, with those inaccessible to touch, the clouds, the wind, thunder, the singing of birds. If Nature is the object of interrogation,[52] of wonderment, and of the

moments of conception], the moment of enthusiasm, warmth and feverish imagination is not what is required, and in fact it is harmful. You need a *time of strength*, but *strength that is tranquil*, a time of actual genius rather than of actual enthusiasm (that is, an act of genius rather than of enthusiasm), the influence of past, future, or habitual enthusiasm rather than its presence, and we might even say its twilight rather than its midday. Often, the best time is the moment that follows the experience of enthusiasm or feeling, when the soul, though calm, goes back and rides the waves once more after the storm, and recalls with pleasure the past sensation. This is perhaps the most suitable and most frequent time for the conception of an original subject, or the original part of a subject" (In sostanza per l'invenzione dei soggetti formali e circoscritti, ed anche primitivi [voglio dire per la prima loro concezione] ed originali, non ci vuole, anzi nuoce, il tempo dell'entusiasmo, del calore e dell'immaginazione agitata. Ci vuole un *tempo di forza*, ma *tranquilla*; un tempo di genio attuale piuttosto che di entusiasmo attuale [o sia, piuttosto un atto di genio che di entusiasmo]; un influsso dell'entusiasmo passato o futuro o abituale, piuttosto che la sua presenza, e possiamo dire il suo crepuscolo, piuttosto che il mezzogiorno. Spesso è adattatissimo un momento in cui dopo un entusiasmo, o un sentimento provato, l'anima sebbene in calma, pure ritorna come a mareggiare dopo la tempesta, e richiama con piacere la sensazione passata. Quello forse è il tempo più atto, e il più frequente della concezione di un soggetto originale, o delle parti originali di esso). Italics are mine.

[52] In *Zib.* 223-25, (24 August 1820), Leopardi explains the notion of the poetic by once again contrasting his position with that of the Romantics and in particular with Lord Byron's, whose poetic process is questioned in several passages. Following the reading of the *Corsair*, Leopardi criticizes the author's annotations since they elucidate, by providing historical examples, the effects produced by the passions described in the verses. The reader, underlines Leopardi, must *feel* and not *learn* (my italics in the original) how close the poet's description is to the truth or to nature. Explanations turn poetry into a psychological treatise that speaks to the intellect rather than the imagination. Furthermore, continues Leopardi, the Italian version is interspersed with punctuations whose aim is to call attention to the poet's versatility and lyrical ability, to the obvious detriment of the reader's experience of the verses. "Lord Byron in the notes to the *Corsair* (and also perhaps in his other works) gives historical examples of the effects of the passions and of the characters he describes. Wrongly. The reader *should feel* and *not be told* that your description, etc., conforms to reality and nature, and that such a character or such a passion in those circumstances will produce such an effect. Otherwise, the delight of the poetry will be lost, and imitation when it falls upon unknown objects does not produce wonder even if it is very accurate […] in the end your psychology, if it is true, must lead you to the same place and to rediscover what you already knew" (Lord Byron nelle annotazioni al *Corsaro* [forse anche ad altre sue opere] cita esempi storici, di quegli

imagination, it is its physical, sensual dimension that can evoke the limitless and the eternal. The entire passage is predicated on two verbs, "to appear" and "to imagine," for which Leopardi utilizes the intentionally loaded term "fingere," reiterating the notion of a poetic process that transcends chronological and spatial limits, projecting the senses to what is yet to be heard, seen, and imagined, as in *L'Infinito*.

If we in turn examine the lyrical production of those years, we see Leopardi at work on developing the *Concetto dell'idillio secondo*, later entitled *Alla natura*, a poetic test of sorts that will lead him a few months later to write *L'Infinito*, shelving for a while the project dedicated to Saffo that had prompted him to request a copy of Alessandro Verri's *Avventure di Saffo* from his publisher.[53]

Mindful of the ancients' teachings, Leopardi explores the ways in which nature operates on the imagination, arguing that the primitive, which for him is synonymous with the natural, is a dimension inhabiting all humans as well as a precondition for the poetic experience. Hence, imitation is the art of representing nature with artless, authentic, and spontaneous ingenuity. The primitiveness, the naturalness the poet 'contrives' (in the sense of fabricates, in a combined act of inspiration and understanding) in his verses, is meant to be received not in a chronological dimension, but as a purely sensual, timeless fantasy. The poet's work is not to illuminate reality or, as the Romantics would claim, to embrace it in all its intellectual and cultural contemporaneity. Reality would destroy the poetic, and modernity would

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effetti delle passioni, e di quei caratteri ch'egli descrive. Male. Il lettore deve *sentire* e non *imparare* la conformità che ha la tua descrizione ec. colla verità e colla natura, e che quei tali caratteri e passioni in quelle tali circostanze producono quel tale effetto; altrimenti il diletto poetico è svanito, e la imitazione cadendo sopra cose ignote, non produce maraviglia, ancorchè esattissima [...] E noi non c'interessiamo vivamente se non per li nostri simili, e come gli enti allegorici, o le piante o le bestie ec. così gli uomini di carattere affatto straordinario non sono personaggi adattati alla poesia [...] alla fine la vostra psicologia, s'è vera, vi deve ricondurre allo stesso luogo, e a ritrovare il già trovato). Italics are mine.

[53] Ernesto Travi documents the explicit and implicit references to the pre-Romantic poet in Leopardi's writings and publications. Starting from 1818, when his name is first mentioned in a correspondence addressed to Leopardi's publisher, Antonio Fortunato Stella, where the request is made for Verri's *Notti* and *Avventure di Saffo*, through 1827, when the *Crestomazia italiana*, containing ample passages taken from Verri's *Notti romane* and *Avventure di Saffo* is published by Stella editions, to 1828, when Leopardi notes in *Zibaldone* his last, implicit, reference to Verri about the notion of remembrance as a source of the poetic (22 October 1828). Ernesto Travi, "Leopardi lettore delle opere di Alessandro Verri," in *Leopardi e il Settecento*, Centro nazionale studi leopardiani, Atti di Convegni (Florence: Olschki, 1964), 502.

only detract from the sense of surprise and marvel. Poetry is atemporal (and definitely ahistorical), it is neither about cultural progress nor about intellectual complexity. It concerns the possibility of unshackling the imagination from the burden of historicity. It is at this intersection that Leopardi locates the activity of the poetic voice, which can conceive a world that far surpasses reality.

But assigning the poetic voice the task of creativity and invention calls into question the ways in which poetry reaches its mission, the imitation of nature, while upholding its principal aspiration, pleasure. This part of the *Discorso* is most valuable, as it systematizes Leopardi's views, intertwining both his principles of poetics and his observations on the reception of the literary product. Both for the Romantics and for Leopardi poetry should be "popolarissima" (super-popular), its intent being to delight the largest possible audience. But how can Romantic poetry be popular, asks the poet, when it is lofty, metaphysical, reasonable, in a word, abstract? If poetry's objective is "dilettare" (to entertain) and not "ingannare" (to deceive), it should strive to elicit "pure and substantial delight,"[54] not to confuse the intellect with errors and deceptions. Terms like "sodo" (solid), "sostanziale" (substantial), as well as "naturale" (natural), indicate the poet's strong opposition to all that is theoretical, conceptual, immaterial, in other words, far removed from the empirical reality of the senses. How then, can the contemporary poet succeed in choosing the fictive ideas that are best suited for the enjoyment of his listeners? It is certainly not a question of selecting simple and common objects, as many would think, or unusual and unfamiliar objects, places, or landscapes, as the Romantics would do, but to make sure that what is chosen 'appears' simple and artless,[55] maintaining the semblance of reality ("sembianza del vero").[56] Nor is it a question of following in the path of the speculative sciences, where nature has been dismembered and subjected to a system of analogies that have rendered it artificial, manufactured, and thus inadequate for the poetic experience.[57] Objective normality, expressed in language and images, and familiarity with the reality that is described, coupled with artlessness and lack of affectation, must guide the poet in his attempt to 're-create' the memories, the "rimembranze" of the primordial age, when nature 'was alive' and 'spoke' to the self. Leopardi bemoans humanity's transition into adulthood, with its

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[54] Leopardi, *Discourse*, 121.
[55] Leopardi, *Discorso*, 354.
[56] Ibid., 357.
[57] Ibid., 356.

attendant loss of simplicity and spontaneity, a loss that the Romantics deride and that he instead mourns.[58]

Ostensibly, Leopardi does not wish to return to a primordial world in historical terms, but rather seeks to recover what has been lost in terms of authenticity. Urbanity[59] and refinement have altered sensitivity towards nature, and yet, even in our culturally elevated circumstances, seeing or imagining a scene of simple life ("vita rustica") engenders in us bliss ("cagiona"), so that we "We happily delight with boundless desire" (giocondissimamente ci compiacciamo con indistinto desiderio).[60] A disposition to the natural and an abhorrence toward affectation are for Leopardi conditions of the soul that predate civilization and are innate but strongest in those subjectivities that are most sensitive to the arts. Thus, their encounter with objects untouched by civilization enables them to reveal nature in its purest and most original status, generating a "desire," or better a pleasure, that are indefinite as they are boundless. Leopardi here seems to be proposing something very similar to a mathematical formula: simplicity, artlessness, and spontaneity are those predispositions that are necessary to reveal nature's essence. Poetry, on the other hand, has the ability to tear the veil of artificiality that presently engulfs nature, producing infinite pleasure. Only poetry can defeat death if and when it follows its calling. Where there is naturalness there is vigor, where there is communication, as during childhood, there is meaning.

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[58] Ibid., 361.

[59] Leopardi expounds on a similar notion in his operetta *Detti memorabili di Filippo Ottonieri* (*Memorable Sayings of Filippo Ottonieri*), a witty and entertaining self-styled literary biography conflating in one text much of the author's philosophy. An interesting part of this operetta, one that is longer than usual, is dedicated to the issue of the beautiful and the true. In order to illustrate his position, Leopardi utilizes the example of the large city, which, replete with falsehood, contains neither the beautiful nor the true, making existence unbearable for delicate sensitivities: "Ora nelle città grandi, tu sei lontano dal bello: perché il bello non ha più luogo nessuno nella vita degli uomini. Sei lontano anche dal vero perché nelle città grandi ogni cosa è finta e vana. Di modo che ivi, per dir così, tu non vedi, non odi, non tocchi, non respiri altro che falsità, e questa brutta e spiacevole. Il che agli spiriti delicati si può dire che sia la maggior miseria del mondo" (Now in the big cities, one is far from beauty: because beauty is nowhere in the life of humankind. One is far from truth, and in the great cities everything is false or vain. So that here, one might say, one does not see, hear, touch or breathe anything but deception, which is both ugly and unpleasant. And we may say that for delicate beings this is the utmost misery). Giacomo Leopardi, *Detti memorabili di Filippo Ottonieri*, *Operette morali*, In *Poesie e Prose*, 141; the translation is mine.

[60] Leopardi, *Discorso*, 358.

It is this process of re-awakening, of giving life where there was nothing, "il solido nulla" (the solid nothingness) which engages Leopardi: "Mi crederei divino poeta se quelle immagini che vidi e quei moti che sentii nella fanciullezza, sapessi e ritrargli al vivo nelle scritture e suscitarli tali e quali in altrui" (I would believe myself a divine poet, if I were able to represent those images and emotions vividly as I saw and felt them in my childhood, if I were able to awaken them, as they really were, in others).[61] Depression befalls the poetic voice confronted with the inability to recapture that primitive imaginative fervor, to re-produce the infinite solitude of the *Gallo silvestre* (*Canticle of the Wild Cock*), the tranquil indifference of Nature after the death of the Icelander, or the sacredness Adam felt in the beginnings, as in the *Inno ai Patriarchi* (*Hymn to the Patriarchs*, vv. 22-34).[62] Although Leopardi acknowledges that both time and history have transformed the poetic process, the objectives have remained the same: to deceive (*illudere*), to imitate (*imitare*), to delight (*delectare*), as enumerated in the widely circulated treatise on the *Sublime* by Longinus.[63]

Leopardi assigns it a central role in his *Discorso*, as he considered the treatise germane to his own considerations on poetry: the final invocation to Italian youth finds its logical explanation if one keeps this objective, inspiring the notion of a modern sublime, a "*sublime moderno*," as noted in *Zibaldone* on December 24, 1826, in mind.[64] In the text, Leopardi frames

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[61] Ibid., 360; the translation is mine.

[62] The *Hymn to the Patriarchs* contains a brief history of human 'progress', starting with the uncontaminated horizons in which Adam was immersed and ending with the corrupted and deadly reality of the urban centers. The image of the town (modernity), contrasted with that of the countryside (antiquity), epitomizes civilization, a state of defeat and degradation that foreshadows not merely a political and social decadence, but, most critically for Leopardi, a poetic one. The intent of the hymn therefore is not to sketch a succession of social declines and degenerations, but to describe the phases of the descent from a primordial condition of authenticity, naturalness, and sacredness into the artificial, sophisticated, and lifeless condition of modern poetry. A fundamental point of the *Discorso* is in fact foreshadowed in the episodes of Abraham and Jacob, where the vision of the sacred, which in Leopardi's view can never be direct, as the Romantics proclaimed, is veiled by the infinite wisdom of nature, vv. 99-102.

[63] Raffaele Gaetano, *Giacomo Leopardi e il sublime: archeologia e percorsi di una idea estetica* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2002).

[64] The contrast between ancient and modern poetry occupies Leopardi from the early entries of *Zibaldone*, where innumerable times we find the two adjectives juxtaposed. Some entries in particular relate to the issue at hand, the need to produce a style that is naturally modern, without affectation and most importantly without

the classical author's principles within an interrogative structure. It is a reply to the Romantics, whose position was a product of their ideological relativity. "We are no longer children!" is their mantra, "lamentably, we are not" is Leopardi's elliptical retort, "but the poet must beguile, and beguiling, imitate nature, delight: and where, indeed, is there a poetic delight more true, great, pure and profound? And what is nature, and what was she ever, other than this?"[65] To deceive, to imitate, to please (*delectare*) are the lessons Leopardi learned from the widely read and extremely popular *Sublime* by Longinus. Particularly significant is the question of imitation, and most specifically, the imitation of nature. It is necessary to re-consider Leopardi's axiom at this juncture, and distinguish the two parts of which it is composed. The first is a series of statements that are both interconnected and interdependent. In order to please, the poet has to imitate nature, and to imitate nature one has to deceive. The deception, which takes shape by means of the imitation, must come as close as possible to the object imitated, without becoming its replica. This is the great lesson Leopardi derived from Longinus. Imitation as closeness, not as juxtaposition, analogy, not replication, impression, not parody. Longinus, and Leopardi with him, is also most attentive to the readers and to their emotional reactions.[66] Thus the process of imitation is founded on a series of correspondences, conceptual and stylistic, aimed at bringing back the energy, the dynamism, and the vitality of the ancient poetic voices, not at resuscitating those voices of yore. In conclusion, contemporary poets need to enter a dialogical process[67] with their predecessors, a dialectic that will allow them to imitate not what Homer or Pindar or Horace would say but how they would say it, today.[68] Leopardi does not aspire to faithfully replicate the *ekstasis*

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the deadly imitation so dear to the literati of Leopardi's time. Leopardi, *Zib.* 2395 (March 19, 1822).

[65] Camilletti and Sims, *Classicism and Romanticism*, 123. "Ma il poeta deve illudere, e illudendo imitar la natura, e imitando la natura dilettare: e dov'è un diletto poetico altrettanto vero e grande e puro e profondo? e qual è la natura se questa non è? anzi, qual è o fu mai fuorché questa?" Leopardi, *Discorso*, 361.

[66] "Yet more inspiring would be the thought, With what feelings will future ages through all time read these my works? If this should awaken a fear in any writer that he will not be intelligible to his contemporaries, it will necessarily follow that the conceptions of his mind will be crude, maimed, and abortive, and lacking that ripe perfection which alone can win the applause of ages to come." Longinus, *Longinus on the Sublime*, § 14.

[67] The notion is valid for the critic as well, who must "comprehend the text as a dialogical structure and no longer as a *causa sui*." Hans Robert Jauss, "Interview," *Diacritics* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1975): 61; Longinus, *Longinus on the Sublime*, § 13-14.

[68] Ibid., § 13-14.

Longinus placed at the heart of the aesthetic experience, he instead seeks to
re-awaken, to re-ignite it in the contemporary reader.[69] He intends to do so
not with short-lived linguistic novelties or empty forms, which Longinus
had criticized in ch. v of his treatise, but by means of the re-elaboration of
the universal principles the ancients have bequeathed us. In his *Bruto
minore* (1821), a *canzone* with a deceptive historical motif, Leopardi
describes the perilous silence that threatens Italian poetry as it endures the
attacks of the Romantics. The figure of the protagonist, Brutus, appears
from the very first lines as a bard rather than a soldier, his "feroci *note*"
(fierce *notes*),[70] drum in vain against the indolent and impassive skies (vv.
14-15), as barbaric hordes and gothic blades tear down the glory of the
Roman walls.[71] All lamentations are in vain, as the Northeners' inane virtue,
empty vapors, and fields of larvae impend with their new paradigms.[72]
Brutus's tragic solitude and his violent end mirror the situation dramatized
in *All'Italia*, whose protagonist exclaims: "Combatterò, procomberò sol'io"
(I'll fight alone, I'll fall alone),[73] in a confrontation against the present
decadent state of Italy that has poetically belligerent overtones.[74]

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[69] Gadamer's reflections on hermeneutics seem to move in a similar direction as that
indicated by Leopardi a century earlier. The proximity of the poet's considerations
regarding what is defined as the 'myth of origins' and the German philosopher's
position is palpable when we consider the latter's reflections on the purpose of
hermeneutics, which is "not the reconstruction of the original or 'first' meaning of
the text; rather it is the establishment of the difference and the temporal interval
between the code of the author and the code of the recipient, i.e., between the code
of the first reader and that of the current one." Jauss, "Interview," 60.

[70] The italics are mine.

[71] "Now that Italian valor lies uprooted, / one huge ruin in the dust of Thrace, / where
fate is readying barbarian horses / to trample the green valleys of Hesperia / and
Tiber's shore / exhorting Gothic swordmen / from the wild forests / lorded over by
the freezing Bear / to breach the venerable walls of Rome" (Il calpestìo de' barbari
cavalli / prepara il fato, e dalle selve ignude / cui l'orsa algida preme, / a spezzar le
romane inclite mura / chiama i gotici brandi). Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans.
Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), vv. 1-9, p. 57.

[72] "Foolish valor, empty mists / and the fields of restless ghosts / are where you live"
(Stolta virtù, le cave nebbie, i campi / dell'inquiete larve / son le tue scole). Ibid.,
vv. 15-17, p. 57.

[73] Ibid., v. 38, p. 4.

[74] To confirm my interpretation of Brutus as Leopardi's autobiographical double,
battling against the new poetic models that threatened to corrupt the poetic
universals and destroy the sublimity of the classics, Greek, Roman, and Italian, there
is a letter from the author to his friend, the linguist, Louis de Sinner, written on 24
May 1832. In it, Leopardi vehemently condemns any attempt to connect his
despairing (*disperante*) philosophy of life to his personal situation and reiterates that

But returning to Leopardi and his *Discorso*, if the first part of the quote points to a logical reasoning aimed at exercising the intellect, the second revolves around a series of questions and interrogations. Here too, Longinus' lesson is at work. Vigorous as they are compelling, these questions are directed at the readers, whose attention is called upon to confirm the genuine and authentic feeling of the author who "deceives them into a belief that what is really the result of labor in every detail has been struck out of the speaker by the inspiration of the moment."[75] This part is critical to Leopardi's argument, and as such, it is rendered as a series of interrogatives structured as a musical *crescendo*. Where else, asks the poet, is a purer, deeper, greater and more real poetic pleasure? And what is 'natura' if not this? In fact, was 'natura' ever anything but this? Leopardi correlates two seemingly separate elements here, deception/imitation and nature. This is a fundamental passage that needs to be carefully examined, as these elements are conflated by the poet to compose a single, yet composite entity. On the one hand, attention is focused on the poetic act: imitation is a most pleasurable aesthetic experience, but it is also the most real, authentic, and intense from an ethical point of view. Both the author and the reader exult at the sight of a poetic product that is full of energy, meaning, and life, both 'noble and sublime' and, as such, everlasting. However, Leopardi goes even further when he interrogates himself and the reader on the essence of nature. What is nature if not this, and was it ever anything but this? The question is, for us, what nature is Leopardi talking about? Upon closer reading, it appears that Leopardi assigns nature a twofold meaning, as poetic process, which implicates nature as an adjective (natural) and as poetic content, which considers it as an objective, physical reality (nature). The first relates to the artlessness of the product, which does not at any time reveal the 'labor' that sustained its creation and whose strategies Leopardi has methodically summarized in his *Discorso*. The second has to do with the 'reality' of the object imitated. If we consider Leopardi's later incursions into this issue, especially in *Zibaldone*, we note that nature, his nature, is 'real' only in its poetic manifestations, that it acquires meaning only in the realm of the senses, and hence of the imagination, which Leopardi locates in the past, or in the future, a space that is not present, not real, but that can be evoked by an operation of the mind,

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the position he expressed on the matter in his *Brutus*, eleven years earlier, has endured unchanged. For Leopardi, Brutus remained the personification of stubborn valor, of a despairing yet disobedient vision of life (mainly poetic but also intellectual and philosophical), founded on universal values and undying principles for which it was worth fighting and even dying.

[75] Longinus, Longinus on the Sublime, § 18.

as in the case of the "pensier" (imagination) of *L'Infinito*. To judge the accuracy of this premise one needs to examine several annotations from *Zibaldone* that are implicitly linked with this critical part of the *Discorso*. A decade after his essay, on 22 October 1828, Leopardi returns to the ancient-modern opposition, locating it firmly within the space of remembrance.[76]

> Why is modernity, newness, never or unlikely to be romantic; and antiquity, oldness, the opposite? Because almost all pleasures of the imagination and feeling consist of remembering which is the same as saying that they exist in the past rather than in the present.[77]

What gives pleasure is not the present, the modern, the unknown, which surprises and even astounds the reader, appeasing her fickle curiosity, but rather the known, which reappears through the operation of remembrance. Vague and indefinite by nature, remembrance adds the element of *durée*, extending and deepening the pleasure, in contrast with the short-lived sensations produced by novelty, vagary, and excess. Leopardi further unpacks his thought, stressing that the location of pleasure, imaginative and sentimental, is primarily the past. Here again, the term 'past' is implicitly opposed to the present, the time of reason, clarity, a time devoid of illusions. Poetically, the present is a *termine*, a term, while "past" becomes a *parola*, a word replete with accessory connotations. In *Zibaldone*, observations concerning "termini" and "parole" date back to April 1820, when Leopardi

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[76] Leopardi is very sensitive to the idea of *durée* both in the affective as well as in the receptive sphere. In his *Pensieri*, he points out the incommunicability of the sensations of intense enthusiasm. When the sensation is intense, according to Leopardi, simply communicating it can endanger its emotive force, its persistence. Only in the permanence of the poetic word can those sensations cause a lasting impression. Hence the superiority of the ancient poets in giving form to these sensations resides, according to Leopardi, in the natural and spontaneous ways in which they captured the beautiful, rendering extraordinary what was common, not seeking the extraordinary and the excessive, like the Romantics. It was the strength of the contrast between simple and sublime that moved the listeners, arousing their imagination and generating a lasting impression: "E così ancora si verifica che gli antichi lasciavano a pensare più di quello ch'esprimessero, e l'impressione delle loro opere era più durevole" (And so once again it can be seen that the ancients left more for thought than they expressed, and the impression of their work was more long-lasting). Giacomo Leopardi, *Pensieri di varia filosofia e di bella letteratura*, ed. Giosuè Carducci (Florence: Le Monnier, 1898), 197 (87).

[77] "Perché il moderno, il nuovo, non è mai, o ben difficilmente romantico; e l'antico, il vecchio, al contrario? Perché quasi tutti i piaceri dell'immaginazione e del sentimento consistono in rimembranza. Che è come dire che stanno al passato anzi che al presente." Leopardi, *Zib.*, 4415

meditates over Beccaria's *Trattato dello stile*, assigning the notion of term a scientific actuality that circumscribes the object in its immediate form. Terms define and determine the object "from all sides" (da tutte le parti), they crystallize it in its luminous, present reality, leaving no space for additional meanings. Their barrenness is detrimental to the imaginative operation, "Because the appropriate choice of a word and plainness or dryness are very different things, and if the former gives discourse efficacy and clarity the latter adds nothing but aridity."[78] Complementary considerations are added throughout the fall of 1821, as Leopardi was presumably attending to the completion of the *Idilli*. Among the many collateral notes concerning the past-present opposition, on September 28, the poet evokes the notion of vagueness, indistinction, and incompleteness produced by words such as darkness, night, and depth, which he links to his theory of pleasure.[79] In a footnote written on December 20 of the same year, he returns to the concept to extend it chronologically to both past and future and to charge it emotively through the notions of the vast and the general, which produce the vague, the uncertain, and the indefinite:[80]

> *Antichi* [ancients], *antico* [ancient], *antichità* [antiquity], *posteri* [descendants], *posterità* [posterity] are very poetic, etc. words because they contain an idea

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[78] "Giacché sono cose ben diverse la proprietà delle parole e la nudità e secchezza, e se quella dà efficacia ed evidenza al discorso, questa non gli dà altro che aridità." Ibid., 110, (30 April 1820.

[79] Leopardi, *Zib.*, 1798, (28 September 1821), "The words *notte, notturno* [night, nocturnal], etc., descriptions of night, etc. are highly poetic, because the night confounds objects so that the mind is only able to conceive a vague, indistinct, incomplete image, both of the night and whatever it contains. Likewise oscurità, profondo [darkness, deep], etc. etc." (Le parole notte notturno ec. le descrizioni della notte ec. sono poeticissime, perchè la notte confondendo gli oggetti, l'animo non ne concepisce che un'immagine vaga, indistinta, incompleta, sì di essa, che quanto ella contiene. Così oscurità, profondo. ec. ec.). On the theory of pleasure cf. the essay by Alessandro Carrera in this volume.

[80] The poetic of the vague and indefinite, as noted by Ernesto Travi in "Leopardi lettore delle opere di Alessandro Verri," and Carlo Muscetta, "*L'ultimo canto di Saffo,*" *La Rassegna della letteratura italiana* 2 (May-August): 194-218, is elaborated by Leopardi between 1818 and 1828, following the suggestions produced by his reading of Alessandro Verri's *Notti romane.* Muscetta identifies in particular superlatives such as "tranquillissima" (perfectly quiet), "apertissimi" (wide open), "placidissima" (most peaceful), and "finissima tela" (finest canvas), or expressions like "interminabile spazio di astri infiniti" (boundless space of infinite stars), "miserie infinite" (endless miseries), "leggiadro ingegno" (graceful genius), and "placida luna" (graceful moon), which resurface at various moments in Leopardi's poetic memory.

that is (1) vast, (2) indefinite and indeterminate, especially *posterity*, which we know nothing about, and *antiquity*, which is similarly obscure to us. Anyway, all words that express generality, or a thing in general, pertain to these considerations.[81]

What the poet elicits in the dimensions of past and future is their distance. There, darkness, opacity, and indistinctness, unlike the immediate and discernible present, allow inspiration to generate illusions. The ancient is neither eternal nor infinite, but imagining its distance produces a sensation of indefiniteness, where time loses its contours, gratifying the fascination for the infinite, borderless, and indeterminate that Leopardi deems instinctive in every human being. Where distance conceals closeness reveals, marking a contrasting location within the poetic. What the intellect wholly comprehends, as the object is too brightly illuminated, is that "arid truth," which should be scorned by the modern poet as deadly to the imagination.[82]

The ancient is a crucial ingredient in sublime sensations, be they physical, like a prospect, a Romantic view, etc. etc. or merely spiritual and interior. Why is that? It is on account of man's propensity for the infinite. The ancient is not eternal, and hence it is not infinite, but the soul's conceiving of a span of many centuries produces an indefinite sensation, the idea of an indeterminate time, in which the soul loses itself, and even though it knows

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[81] "*Antichi, antico, antichità; posteri, posterità* sono parole poeticissime ec., perché contengono un'idea, (1) vasta, (2) indefinita ed incerta, massime *posterità* della quale non sappiamo nulla, ed *antichità* similmente è cosa oscurissima per noi. Del resto, tutte le parole che esprimono generalità, o una cosa in generale, appartengono a queste considerazioni." Leopardi, *Zib.*, 2263, (20 December 1821).

[82] Here too, Leopardi elaborates suggestions that he found in Verri's *Notti romane*, Notte V, *Inclinazioni dell'uomo al discoprire* (416-17) a text later selected for inclusion in his 1827 edition of *Crestomazia italiana*: "Quell'impeto che spinge l'uomo verso l'avvenire, e lo fa ansioso degli eventi, e presago investigatore, lo respinge parimenti verso il passato, bramoso di trarre dall'abisso del tempo quelle cose che vi stanno sommerse. Quindi l'umano intelletto, non mai pagato ne' confini del presente, per lui angusti, si lancia ne' due estremi, ed aspira al vasto imperio, e tenta sempre diffondere le sue facoltà, a spaziare in libere meditazioni" (The impetus that drives man towards the future, and produces in him anxiety about events, makes of him a prophetic explorer, also urges him back to the past, eager to extract from the abyss of time the things that lie submerged in it. Human intellect is never satisfied within the narrow contours of the present, which are too confining for it, and throws itself into the two extremes, aspiring to vast empires, always attempting to expand the domain of its faculties over it, to diffuse itself in unlimited meditations). The translation is mine.

that there are bounds to it, it does not discern them, and does not know what kind they may be. Not so with modern things, because the soul cannot lose itself in them, and clearly sees the full extent of time, and gets at once to the era, the term, etc. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the soul is one of these ecstasies, seeing, e.g. a modern tower, but not knowing when it was built, and another ancient one whose precise era it knows, is nonetheless more deeply moved by the latter than by the former. Because the indefinite aspect of the former is too small, and the span of time, although the bounds are not discernible, is so narrow that the soul manages to comprehend all of it. But in the other case, although the bounds may be seen, and there is nothing indefinite about them, there is, however, indefiniteness in the fact that the span of time is so broad that the soul cannot embrace it, and is lost in it, and even though it distinguishes the extremes, it can only distinguish confusedly the space stretching out between them. As when we see a vast expanse of countryside, whose horizon is yet apparent on every side.[83]

The past and the future are dimensions of pleasure because they are empty, in that nothing is known of them to us. Their space is primarily that of the imagination, as perfectly illustrated in *L'Infinito*, but also of nostalgia, loss, and anguish, affective modes that permeate the *Grandi idilli* (*Canti pisano-recanatesi* 1826-28 [Pisan Canti]). Many years later, Leopardi finalizes his earlier considerations with the well-known passage on *oggetti doppi* (double objects).

To a sensitive and imaginative man, who lives, as I have done for so long, continually feeling and imagining, the world and its objects are in a certain

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[83] "L'antico è un principalissimo ingrediente delle sublimi sensazioni, siano materiali, come una prospettiva, una veduta romantica ec. ec. o solamente spirituali ed interiori. Perchè ciò? per la tendenza dell'uomo all'infinito. L'antico non è eterno, e quindi non è infinito, ma il concepire che fa l'anima uno spazio di molti secoli, produce una sensazione indefinita, l'idea di un tempo indeterminato, dove l'anima si perde, e sebben sa che vi sono confini, non li discerne, e non sa quali sieno. Non così nelle cose moderne, perch'ella non vi si può perdere, e vede chiaramente tutta la stesa del tempo, e giunge subito all'epoca, al termine ec. Anzi è notabile che l'anima in una delle dette estasi, vedendo p. e. una torre moderna, ma che non sappia quando fabbricata, e un'altra antica della quale sappia l'epoca precisa, tuttavia è molto più commossa da questa che da quella. Perchè l'indefinito di quella è troppo piccolo, e lo spazio, benchè i confini non si discernano, è tanto angusto, che l'anima arriva a comprenderlo tutto. Ma nell'altro caso, sebbene i confini si vedano, e quanto ad essi non vi sia indefinito, v'è però in questo, che lo spazio è così ampio che l'anima non l'abbraccia, e vi si perde; e sebbene distingue gli estremi, non distingue però se non se confusamente lo spazio che corre tra loro. Come allorchè vediamo una vasta campagna, di cui pur da tutte le parti si scuopra l'orizzonte." Leopardi, *Zib*., 1429-30, (1 August 1821).

respect double. With his eyes he will see a tower, a landscape, with his ears
he will hear the sound of a bell; and at the same time with his imagination
he will see another tower, another landscape, he will hear another sound.
The whole beauty and pleasure of things lies in this second kind of objects.
Sad is that life (and yet life is generally so) which sees, hears, feels only
simple objects, only those objects perceived by the eyes, the ears, and the
other senses.[84]

The 1828 *Zibaldone* annotation seems to exhibit the features of an
appendix that is linked to and further illuminates the poetic process outlined
in the *Discorso*. Once again the passage is autobiographical, mirroring the
earlier pages but condensing them in a final reflection. The poet's existence
is observed in its *durée*, as a totality, and considered by analogy as one and
the same with the imaginative order of the poetic. Prior to introducing the
concept of *oggetti doppi* in fact, Leopardi frames his entire life as a
continuum of sensitivity, feeling, and imagination. Within this framework,
reality is split: on one side is the banality of the every day, nothing but a
horrific and "solido nulla," on the other, the imaginative mind transcends
the limit, the hedge of *L'Infinito*, and contrives a "hyperreality" where the
poet can delight in the limitless *jouissant* abandonment of the mind. The
only source of authentic albeit insatiable pleasure, is the poet's desire to see
beyond the existing. Hans Robert Jauss describes the concept in his theory
of aesthetic pleasure as "the possibility for the productive consciousness [to
create] the world as its own work."[85] Both in the *Discorso* as in this
celebrated entry, the conceived is more meaningful and more pleasing than
the perceived. The creative process gives life to reality's obtuse materiality,
transforming its silence into a dialogic exchange, an exchange that can
satiate, albeit fleetingly, the poet's solitary longing. Charged with meaning,
this hyperreality produces the only pleasure, the only illusion for which it is

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[84] "All'uomo sensibile e immaginoso, che viva, come io sono vissuto gran tempo,
sentendo di continuo e immaginando, il mondo e gli oggetti sono in certo modo
doppi. Egli vedrà cogli occhi una torre, una campagna; udrà con gli orecchi un suono
d'una campana; e nel tempo stesso coll'immaginazione vedrà un'altra torre, un'altra
campagna, udrà un altro suono. In questo secondo genere di obietti sta tutto il bello
e il piacevole delle cose. Trista quella vita (ed è pur tale la vita comunemente) che
non vede, non ode, non sente se non che *oggetti semplici, quelli solidi* di cui gli
occhi, gli orecchi e gli altri sentimenti ricevono la sensazione." Leopardi, *Zib.*, 4418,
(30 November 1828). Italics are mine. The English translation omits the adjective
"solid," an omission that in my opinion constitutes a problem, in that it fails to
perceive the connection with Leopardi's lifelong considerations on what is poetic in
general and on his poetics in particular.
[85] Jauss, "Interview," 60.

worth living. The imaginary has isolated the object, the tower, the countryside, the sound of the bell, extracting them from their physical denotation and connoting them with new meaning through the aesthetic process.[86]

In his *Discorso*, Leopardi calls this "natura," and it becomes clear that he intends it as an innate emotional dimension that inspires the operation of the imaginary, which in turn acts within its own 'nature'. In spontaneous ways, that is. It is an energy that characterizes and even dominates childhood but is lost, as Leopardi laments, as both the individual and humanity reach adulthood. It remains intact but latent only in the sensitive self, which waits to be reawakened. There, it constitutes the primitive and natural sensitivity which Leopardi sought.[87]

But how can the poet free the imagination from the shackles of reason, which continuously endangers it with its well-lit horizons, with its rationality and analytical understanding? And what is reason and how does it impact *natura*?

> Here, I could point out that reason in almost every way is the formal enemy of nature; that reason is the enemy in all human matters of any grandeur; that often, where nature is vast, reason is small and inadequate; that for the most part, what men esteem as grand is none other than the extraordinary, whereas the extraordinary stands against or lies outside the order of which reason is the constant friend.[88]

Leopardi postulates here for the first time the chasm that in his view exists between 'nature' and 'reason', the latter perceived as a superstructure

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[86] Ibid., 55.

[87] Leopardi describes this primordial being, "primo uomo" in his famed *Dialogo di Torquato Tasso e del suo genio familiare* (*Dialogue between Torquato Tasso and his Familiar Spirit*), where the protagonist, imprisoned and solitary, distracts himself by conversing with his imaginary spirit, his *genio familiare*. A dialogue that contains many of the notions dear to Leopardi, ennui, pleasure, imprisonment, reality, distance, Torquato Tasso could be examined as a later poetic corollary to the *Discorso*, as it explores the idea of reality and dream, of imagination and pleasure, of a poetic, dream-like life, a world separated from reality, exhibiting a solitude and separateness that can recover the beneficial inexperience of primeval times and thus re-ignite the imagination. Leopardi, *Poesie e prose*, 2:68-75.

[88] Camilletti and Sims, *Classicism and Romanticism*, 125-26. "Qui potrei dire che la ragione in pressoch'infinite cose è nemica formale della natura; che la ragione è nemica delle *cose umane* di quasi ogni grandezza; che spessissimo dove la natura è grande, la ragione è piccola; che per lo più il grande nella stima degli uomini non è altra cosa che lo straordinario, ma lo straordinario è contro e fuori dell'ordine di cui la ragione è amica perpetua." Leopardi, *Discorso*, 364; italics are mine.

of mathematical formulas and geometrical patterns, an edifice which is inimical to the unstructured and spontaneous "all things human." Reason, whose direct products are science and industry, impacts the physical world by solidifying its already inexpressive, deadly surface.[89] Leopardi separates what is mathematical and scientific from the natural, which I claim he equates with "all things human" (cose umane) which the Romantics dubbed *uralte Innerlichkeit*. Can poetry be enhanced by scientific reason, as di Breme opined? Leopardi retorts with a resounding no. What poetry conceals, reason reveals; the direct light of science can only unravel the poetic space of hyperreality, forcing the poet to confess his contraptions and scoff at his own deceptions. Only in hyperreality, a notion akin to the other notion espoused by Leopardi, ultraphilosophy,[90] are illusions real and imagination can impede the corruption of 'nature'. Hence the poet's task is that of 'manifesting' nature, "to bring back before our eyes that nature that has disappeared from sight."[91] Hyperreality is fleeting, unpredictable, intermittent, and easily dissolved. Like *jouissance*, it is tirelessly pursued but only occasionally attained. Its unquenched desire morphs into a condition of perpetual bereavement that Leopardi expresses in the topoi of loss, remembrance, or nostalgia. Poetically, it is embodied in the "woman that cannot be found" of *Alla sua donna*, in the deceased female figures of *A Silvia* and *Le rimembranze*, in Tasso reminiscing about his Leonore. *Senhals* of a deep-seated longing for a condition unspoiled by the "knowledge of the world and of one's unhappiness" (uso del mondo, e l'esercizio de' patimenti), markers of the fleeting moments when imagination strikes, before

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[89] Leopardi's thoughts on nature are analogous to those of the late Enlightenment thinkers that Peter Hanns Reill defines as Enlightenment vitalists, who rejected the mechanist notion of nature as inert matter and worked towards an understanding of it as the principle that unified all natural and historical development. As Reill states, Enlightenment vitalists envisioned nature as a "teeming interaction of active forces vitalizing matter, revolving around each other in a developmental dance" (7). Convinced that nature was to be studied in its interconnections, relations, and rapports, these thinkers recognized the need to go beyond the examination of the immediately observable, fostering a progressive descent into the "depths of observed reality" (8) to reintroduce, against the deterministic trend, "entities such as active energy and individuality into the inner core of scientific thinking" (9). Peter Hanns Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[90] Cf. Daniela Bini, "Giacomo Leopardi's Ultrafilosofia," *Italica* 74, no. 1 (Spring, 1997): 52-66.

[91] Camilletti and Sims, *Classicism and Romanticism*, 126. "e quella che ci è sparita dagli occhi, riconducerla avanti." Leopardi, *Discorso*, 365.

sinking back into lethargy.[92] Female presences that cannot be found as they are not real, neither have they ever existed in a definite physical form. Their existence can be recorded only, for us, as "oggetti doppi." Tasso's answer to his spirit's question, what is more pleasing, to see the loved one or to imagine her, offers us further evidence of Leopardi's point. Leonore *appeared* as a woman in the real world, but in the imagination she *appeared* as a goddess.[93] Tasso's Leonore is the poetic transfiguration of hyperreality/ultraphilosophy, where the human turns into the poetic divine.[94] In a passage of the *Discorso*,[95] Leopardi had suggested that imitation renders what is tangible and quotidian more memorable, more extraordinary, thereby liberating the objective world from its ordinariness. By charging it semantically and symbolically, it elevates it to the sphere of poetry. Thus the poetic process implies a recovery of what nature is from the corruption of fashionable trends and deadly intellectualizations. Leopardi's words, quoted earlier in this essay, "I would, without fail, believe myself a divine poet if I knew how to portray in writing and to bring alive in others those images that I saw and those sentiments that moved me as a child,"[96] express a programmatic intention to bring back to life the childhood images and emotions (so dear to and so immediate for the Classics), in direct opposition to the seductive lures of reason that so beguile the Romantics,[97] whose verses exude sophistication and strangeness in the name of novelty. Leopardi records the corruption of sensitivity as a desensitization of imaginative *élan*, which allows the readership to become a victim of pleasures lifeless and crude

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[92] Leopardi, *Dialogo*, 68.

[93] Ibid., 69.

[94] The rare apparition of the "woman," and in later years the mourning of its loss, dramatically sung in the *Grandi idilli* by means of the figures of Silvia and Nerina, and in the *Sepolcrali* (*Funereal Poems*), expresses the poet's grievous condition. It is the heartfelt bereavement for what, in 1818, he lamented as the weakening of the imagination. A failing not determined by diminishing poetic vigor but rather by reduced use, by a waning that he had observed personally as early as 1819, when he recorded his shift from poetry to philosophy. Leopardi, *Canti*, 142, 172, 178, 244, 254.

[95] Leopardi, *Discourse*, 147.

[96] Camilletti and Sims, *Classicism and Romanticism*, 123. "mi crederei *divino* poeta se quelle immagini che vidi e quei moti che sentii nella fanciullezza sapessi e ritrargli al vivo nelle scritture e suscitarli tali e quali in altrui."

[97] In several places in the *Discorso* Leopardi associates modernity and civilization with urban life (127 and 130), which he describes as corrupt, contrived, and deceptive, and contrasts it to the simplicity and authenticity of life in the countryside, which he deemed ideal for a poetic representation that was natural, untainted, and original.

(secco, grosso),[98] stirred only by singularity, monstruosity, and excess.[99] After illustrating the tenets of his poetry in the pages that follow, Leopardi traces the line of the non-poetic. The rarity and singularity of images are not poetic in themselves, while novelty can attract only for a while, until the reader gets accustomed to it.[100] Novelty, rarity, and singularity cannot be omitted from the poetic process, but it is the manner of their use that distinguishes the poet from the simple imitator, the 'versificatore', or the counterfeiter of the classics,[101] both willing to transform poetry into an ephemeral and transitory fashion good for picture albums that change with the season.[102] Poetic efficacy is wherever the object imitated is common and ordinary, rare not because of its strangeness, exceptionality, or monstrosity, but for the uncommon nature of its imitation.[103] In confusing what is universal and absolute, the process, with what is accidental, the object, the Romantics fail to understand that rarity is a stylistic device. It is the ability

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[98] Ibid., 130.

[99] Ibid., 130-31.

[100] Many entries in *Zibaldone* are devoted to the issue of habit and habituation, as Leopardi was considering its impact, effects, and consequences on the individual and on humanity and their intellectual and historical development.

[101] In a letter to Pietro Giordani (5 December 1817), Leopardi expresses his opinion of Cesare Arici, a classical scholar and known poet at the time, in the following terms: "Nondimeno vi dirò sinceramente che nè quella sua epistola malinconica tutta versi e imitazione del Pindemonte, nè il suo discorso sull'epopea [...] nè quel suo disegno di poema epico [...] che nè per sè stesso; umanamente parlando, importa molto; nè suscita, secondo me, gran calore in chi legge la storia" (Nonetheless I will tell you that neither in his melancholic letter, full of verses and imitations of Pindemonte's style, nor his discourse on epos [...] nor his theory of the epic poem [...] nor he himself; humanly speaking, is of much import; neither does his work produce, in my opinion, much passion in the reader). On many similar occasions, while examining the poetic production of his contemporaries, Leopardi stresses both the coldness of their verses, considered in this case a mere imitation of Pindemonte's style, and the triviality of the project of an epic poem, slated as being *humanly* insignificant. Prospero Viani, *Epistolario di Giacomo Leopardi,* ed. Prospero Viani, 2 vols. (Naples: Giuseppe Marghieri, 1860), 68.

[102] Leopardi's critical position is elaborated in a famous operetta, *Dialogo della Moda e della Morte (Dialogue of Fashion and Death)*, where he once again explores the issue of cultural trends, moving a brilliantly comprehensive critique of his time, defined as "secolo della morte" (century of death). Implicitly, the dialogue is an attack on those literary circles that had submitted to destructive poetic trends, ignoring, as their poetry deviated from the useful, beautiful, and convenient, the great lessons of the classics. Leopardi, *Poesie e prose*, 2:27. Cf. also Leopardi, *Filippo Ottonieri*, 140.

[103] Camilletti and Sims, *Classicism and Romanticism*, 135.

to exemplify with simplicity, to surprise with spontaneity, and to make visible what is in front of everyone's eyes. Rarity concerns the object only tangentially, residing rather in the unaffected, artless, painter-like stroke the poet applies to the poetic canvas.[104] The poet's words do not describe, they depict, adhering to the metonymic rather than the scientific approach of demonstration and elucidation, leaving the completion of the image on the margins of the verse. The object needs to be known, familiar, to elicit the surprise, not to perplex the reader with confused fabrications and hallucinations. Authenticity cannot be relinquished in favor of the extraordinary, the exceptional, and the singular, which are redolent of forgery and distortion.

If poetic renewal is imperative, in these pages Leopardi delivers his impassioned call to arms through an invitation to return to the classics' not as a poetic production per se, but rather to the principles that it embodied.

> […] how, if not through the use of and familiarity with the ancient poets, will we be able to recuperate for the sake of poetry the natural manner of speaking, to rediscover that part[s] of nature that are hidden from us […] and finally, how else will we be able to see and inhabit and understand intimately the primitive world from within our civilized one, and nature from within the urmatural world?[105]

As Leopardi invokes a revival of the classics,[106] he rejects the corrupted fabrications of both the Romantics and the French, whose poetry deliberately

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[104] Ibid., 134-36.

[105] Camilletti and Sims, *Classicism and Romanticism*, 143. "Come, se non mediante l'uso e la familiarità con gli antichi, ripiglieremo *per rispetto alla poesia* la maniera *naturale* di *favellare*, rivedremo quelle parti della natura che a noi sono nascoste […] e insomma nel mondo incivilito vedremo e abiteremo e conosceremo intimamente il mondo primitivo, e nel mondo snaturato la natura?" Leopardi, *Discorso*, 387.

[106] Leopardi's *Zibaldone* entries dedicated to examining the poetic production of his contemporaries are copious. Leopardi dedicates a few exemplary notes to Vincenzo Monti, a well-known and celebrated poet at the time. Referring to him, Leopardi writes: "In truth, he is a poet of the ear and the imagination, but certainly not of the heart […] the coldness of his heart is so evident that his elaborate style and composition are insufficient to hide it" (Egli è un poeta veramente dell'orecchio e dell'immaginazione, del cuore in nessun modo […] è così manifesta la freddezza del suo cuore che non vale punto a celarla l'elaboratezza del suo stile e della sua composizione). Monti's familiarity with classical Greek and Latin poets, his deep knowledge of every stylistic device, his elegant and refined style, are the perfect demonstration of what Leopardi criticized in his learned contemporaries. The affectation, the calculated sophistication, the intentional elegance, leave the audience cold, unresponsive, and for this reason they are met with Leopardi's

seeks the sentimental and the pathetic, whereas in the ancients this effect was unplanned and unintentional. "I do not confess this sensitivity but preach and cry out that it is a copious source not only convenient for but *proper* to poetry."[107] This poetic sensitivity is both proper and appropriate because it provides abundant material for the poet, who transports it naturally into the verse, as Homer and Dante did, with that modicum of *sprezzatura* that distinguishes their innocent and natural brushstrokes. If poetry is the art of doing much with little,[108] avoiding the nausea that comes from patent artifice, what needs to be manifest is neither the *legerdemain* nor the inner mechanisms, which corrupt simplicity and extinguish all emotion. Necessity and appropriateness are abandoned when all is exaggerated and pretentious, where obscurity and incongruity reign. While sensitivity is spontaneous and impulsive, it is also modest, unassuming, and solitary, and shares nothing with the narcissistic conceit of the overexcited frenzy triumphing at present. Shying away from the light, true sensitivity needs to be rendered manifest without any additional attribution, appendages, or individual ornaments. Science, knowledge, a penchant for the classics, philosophy, psychology, and any other *accoutrement* are not only unnecessary but destructive, for sensitivity must remain unadorned and uncontaminated.[109] To depict one's self *live* ("dal vivo") does not mean to demonstrate our *knowledge* of the self, neither is it to embrace the horrific and the monstrous, or to reduce all the poetic to the sentimental and pathetic. It is the variety (*varietà*) of the poet's emotional *palette* that garners praise, as does appropriateness (*convenienza*), which shields the poet against the bizarre and the ridiculous.[110]

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disapproval. Both imagination and familiarity with the classical tradition must be keys to the audience's heart, its emotional and affective dimension, not a display of the author's literary prowess. Leopardi, *Zib.* 37.

[107] Camilletti and Sims, *Classicism and Romanticism*, 149. "Questa sensibilità non confesso ma predico e grido ch'è fonte copiosissima di materia non solo conveniente ma *propria* della poesia." Leopardi, *Discorso*, 395.

[108] Ibid., 152.

[109] Ibid., 164.

[110] On obscurity, confusion, and grandiloquence, Longinus, *Sublime*, § 3: "Such expressions, and such images, produce an effect of confusion and obscurity, not of *energy*; and if each separately be examined under the light of criticism, *what seemed terrible gradually sinks into absurdity.* Since then, even in tragedy, where the *natural* dignity of the subject makes a swelling diction allowable, we cannot pardon a *tasteless grandiloquence*, how much more *incongruous* must it seem in sober prose!" Longinus's critique is even more appropriate in the case of poetry.

The Final Invocation

Leopardi's *Discorso* has gradually progressed into an elaborate and complex poetic *vademecum*, which reveals the desire to re-define imagination as a poetic absolute. Leopardi questions a poetry subjected to dubious and ephemeral trends and bemoans the paucity of inspiration of his contemporaries. In calling for an opening and expansion of the literary horizons of Italian letters beyond the provinces of Italy, Mme De Staël had invoked a general cultural renewal. The solution, to consider other models, to follow the paradigms of modern foreign traditions, appeared both simplistic and fallacious to Leopardi, for it ignored the critical point that he had already discussed in his 1816 *Lettera ai compilatori della biblioteca italiana*: "Divine spark, superhuman impetus is necessary to the great poet."[111] The poet is not s/he who diligently studies and examines foreign authors, but the one who, invested by divine inspiration, can act upon it with a supreme effort of creativity. Yet, Leopardi notes, no regeneration would be possible, without a critical consideration of the poetic origins of Italian sensitivity. Thus the *Discorso* aims at something more radical and more progressive than Mme De Staël's invitation to modernization suggested. Departing from a critique against any form, ancient as well as modern, of imitation for imitation's sake,[112] Leopardi complicates poetics in a process of fusion of classical inspiration and modern sensitivity. Poetry remained

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[111] "Scintilla celeste, e impulso soprumano vuolsi a fare un sommo poeta." Giacomo Leopardi, *Lettera ai compilatori della biblioteca italiana*, in *Poesie e prose*, 437; the translation is mine.

[112] Ibid., 422. "Ma già per rapirle questo medesimo avanzo adoprano armi ed arti assai più terribili e potenti che per l'addietro, studiandosi di *viziare* e *corrompere* gli *ingegni* italiani, e *imbarbarire* le *arti e lettere nostre*, e fare che la misera Italia di maestra delle nazioni moderne diventi *emula* e *imitatrice*, e di signora, uguale e serva e, quello che nessun altro ha potuto, si spogli finalmente del regno e s'uccida essa stessa" (But to rob it of this very remnant, they use much more dreadful and persuasive ways than before, studying *to spoil and corrupt* Italian genius, *to barbarize our arts and letters*, and to make of Italy, once mistress of modern nations, *an imitator*, once a ruler, now a servant and, once impossible to conquer, now agent of her own spoliation and death). Leopardi's plea is poetic rather than political, and his invocation directed to defend and protect Italy's legacy, the tradition of supremacy in the arts and letters that risked being corrupted by the fever of emulation and imitation. In a manner that is consistent with the subject of his essay, Leopardi indicates the consequences of the kind of imitation recommended by Mme De Staël: poetic corruption, a descent into barbarism, and ultimately the death of Italian culture, the exact opposite of what Leopardi proposes in his *Discorso*. Italics are mine.

for Leopardi the space of subjectivity[113] and Italian the language whose combination of naturalness, modesty, harmony, elegance, vagueness, and beauty was the essence of the Italian "indole" (here again, indole signifies "nature"), as Leopardi himself notes:

> [...] that character that belongs to us is unchanged; it remains an inspirer of the highest things, ardent and judicious, most willing and most vivid, still calm and wise and *solid*, vigorous and delicate, exceptional and modest, sweet and tender and sensitive to the highest degree, and still solemn and non-chalant, the *most mortal enemy of affectation* whatsoever, aware and *enamoured of naturalness* above every other thing, that naturalness without which there never was nor ever will be any beauty nor grace, the yearning lover and most refined connoisseur of the beautiful the sublime and the true, and finally the *most wise moderator of nature and reason.*[114]

Leopardi concludes his *Discorso* with a youthfully impassioned plea[115] to his contemporaries, the Italian youth, imploring them to give the country succor by rescuing its literary reputation. Humiliated politically by foreign domination, the peninsula risks being further disgraced as its cultural wealth and authority are under attack by foreign assailants. What worries Leopardi to the point of invoking a collective resistance is the fear that literature would become a peripheral whim, decreeing the death of what for centuries

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[113] Leopardi is mindful of Longinus's teachings, contained in *On the Sublime*, § 15.8, where the classical author had warned against the traps and failings of stylistic forms, such as exaggeration: "To return, then, in poetry, as I observed, a certain mythical exaggeration is allowable, transcending altogether mere logical credence. But the chief beauties of an oratorical image are its energy and reality. Such digressions become offensive and monstrous when the language is cast in a poetical and fabulous mould, and runs into all sorts of impossibilities."

[114] Camilletti and Sims, *Classicism and Romanticism*, 171-72. "Ancora non è cambiata quell'indole propria nostra, madre di cose altissime, ardente e giudiziosa, prontissima e vivacissima, e tuttavia riposata e assennata e *soda*, robusta e delicata, eccelsa e modesta, dolce e tenera e sensitiva oltre modo, e tuttavia grave e disinvolta, *nemica mortalissima* di qualsivoglia *affettazione*, conoscitrice e *vaga* sopra ogni cosa *della naturalezza*, senza cui non c'è nè fu nè sarà mai beltà nè grazia, amante spasimata e finissima discernitrice del bello e del sublime e del vero, e finalmente *savissima temperatrice della natura e della ragione*." Leopardi, *Discorso*, 425; italics are mine.

[115] As Ettore Mazzali notes, Leopardi is at this point still imbued with the myth of Italy's glorious literary past, giving the nation supremacy in matters political and cultural. He will later on free himself of these arcadic and preromantic patriotic sentiments in favor of a more mature and rational patriotism, formulated as a functional response to both the internal and external political contexts. Mazzali, 437.

had shone for its illustrious origins and tradition. Under the guise of a pamphlet inflaming the hearts against Italy's literary (and political) servitude, Leopardi's *Discorso* aims at the recovery of Italian literary *elan*, formulating the paradigm of a poetic *renaissance* opposed both to the deadly rhetoric of erudition and the lack of an authentically modern style.

Leopardi's was above all interested in participating in the debate aimed at renovating Italian letters from the inside, with a voice that was passionate and forceful, calling for a collective commitment, involving Italian youth in particular, against the contrived literary style which threatened to prevail in Italy. It is not against the Romantics but against the danger of an unnatural literary model that Leopardi, as a modern Brutus, was preparing to brandish his sharp poetic word.

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CHAPTER TWO

SUBLIMITY WITHOUT RECOMPENSE: THE NATURAL PHILOSOPHY OF PESSIMISM IN GIACOMO LEOPARDI'S *L'INFINITO*

GABRIELLE SIMS

In 1823, Giacomo Leopardi read Sophocles and the other Greek tragedians for the first time. He was twenty-five years old and, although his father's position and library had granted him access even to the banned books of the French materialists, he had never before had to doubt the existence of a real, historical golden age as it had been imagined by Rousseau. Until this point, Leopardi's pessimism was historical. He had already established himself as a blunt voice of opposition to urban liberal progressives, but his only real fight with his contemporaries concerned what he felt was their unfounded optimism about the promises of modern sciences and poetics.[1] As the biography goes, it was because of his encounter with pessimism among the ancients that Leopardi became a much more trenchant, 'cosmic' pessimist and let go of the notion that nihilistic despair was a uniquely modern illness brought on by our literal alienation from nature and the consequent death of the imagination. As though it were incompatible with this darker, less tractable phase of his philosophy, the poetry ceased. The principal literary fruits of this crisis were the "difficult" twenty-four satirical dialogues and short prose works called the *Operette*

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[1] In fact, it seems reasonable to connect Leopardi's inability to publish the *Discorso intorno alla poesia romantica* (*Discourse on Romantic Poetry*, from now on *Discorso*), a superb but characteristically acerbic attack on the Romantic poets composed in 1818, with a retort that he had written two years earlier to A.L. Germaine de Staël's *De l'Esprit des Traductions*, which had been published in the Milanese literary journal, *Il Conciliatore*. In this essay on translations, de Staël exhorted Italians to get past their effectively childlike fascination with classical myth and fable and, in short, join the modern era. Like the anti-Romantic *Discorso*, this letter to Mme. de Staël remained unpublished during Leopardi's lifetime.

Morali (*Moral Tales*) first published in June of 1827, which his editor A.F. Stella told him were "spoken well of by everybody, even though Italy is not yet accustomed to that kind of reading matter."[2] Scholars hold that it is only in 1826, when Leopardi returned to poetry, that we can detect in the *Canti* the anti-anthropocentrism and the darker views of the natural order already developed in the *Operette Morali* and in hundreds of entries in the *Zibaldone*.

The problem with this too-neat, chronological division between the earlier poetry and the pessimism is that it fails to take into account the natural-philosophical roots of Leopardi's objections to the optimism of his own century. We find in the earlier poetry not only the roots or suggestions of Leopardi's pessimism, in fact, but even fully-developed articulations of a system of nature divided against itself, or, more accurately, divided into two, incommensurable orders. A full and explicit poetic exposition of this philosophy of nature divided (in some sense against itself) comes relatively late, in the *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia* (*The War of the Mice and the Crabs*) and the 1836 poem, *La Ginestra, o il fiore del deserto* (*The Broom Flower*) (the logical product of Leopardi's final years in Naples living in a villa that overlooked the perfect symbol of nature's indifference: Mount Vesuvius). However, in this essay, my focus remains on the presence in *L'Infinito* (*The Infinite*) of the first stages of the radical materialist pessimism for which Leopardi is now best known (at least in the Anglophone world).[3] This (supposedly) nostalgic, sweet idyll of 1819 plays with temporality and pretends (the pertinent verb in the text is the form of *fingere* that we find in line 7) to dispense with the emphatic 'here'-ness of the poem's opening ("*quest*'ermo colle"), seemingly in order to make its way (back?) past the poet's personal memory to the universal memory of the infinite / indefinite that Leopardi says structured our relationships with the world when we were children.[4] It is just these questions about return and the limits of poetry – and the relationship of these to pessimism and natural philosophy – that I ask here (and attempt to answer at least partially) about a poem that so many scholars continue to read according to the optimistic code of the Romantic sublime.

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[2] Quoted in Michael Caesar's "Introduction" to Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, eds. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino, trans. Kathleen Baldwin et al. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2013), xxvii.

[3] The ready popularity of the above-cited first full English translation of the *Zibaldone* (2013, eds. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino) is perhaps the best example of enthusiastic Anglophone reception of the image of Leopardi the radical pessimist.

[4] Cf. among many examples in the *Zibaldone*: 167-77, and especially 514-16.

Unlikely as Romantic poetry may be from the author of the *Discorso*, in fact, scholars have generally decided that Leopardi's *L'Infinito* is a fundamentally Romantic poem. These readings go back decades, and in my analysis, I look at two of the most thorough of them, Claudio Colaiacomo's study, *Camera Obscura* (1992), and Margaret Brose's *Leopardi Sublime* (1998) as well as her article, "Leopardi's *L'Infinito* and the Language of the Romantic Sublime" (1983). The reason for my choice is that, until Mario Rigoni's 2013 *Il Materialismo Romantico di Giacomo Leopardi*, these were the most detailed recent studies of *L'Infinito* as (what Brose calls) a "self-conscious demonstration of lyric transcendence."[5] In the present essay, I do not consider Rigoni's study in any detail because, like many scholars of Leopardi's *Canti*, he follows the conservative rule that, if there is philosophical content in a poem, it is just that: content, a representation of an idea, but not an idea in itself. About *L'Infinito* specifically, Rigoni writes that this poem is "immensely sweet" precisely because it remains untainted by pessimism (or any philosophy at all, it seems):

> *L'Infinito* is Leopardi's only perfectly serene lyric poem, free from traces of pessimism, indeed from any polemical notions whatsoever it owes its immense sweetness precisely to an imagined moment of forgetting that it is the limit that makes all things real and constitutes the very condition of their existence.[6]

As already mentioned above, I agree with most scholars that in the 1819 *L'Infinito*, we have not quite arrived at the fullness of Leopardi's cosmic pessimistic philosophy, which is only articulated more or less systematically in an 1825 entry in the *Zibaldone* (4133-34). In this entry, Leopardi relegates *everything* belonging to organic matter (including thought and anything that we might think—wrongly—can extend beyond our bodily selves) to the smaller order of nature, which, in relation to the "gran sistema del tutto" (the great system of everything), is lesser: "menoma" (minimal), "un'imperfezione" (an imperfection), even "un nulla" (nothingness). Certain key elements of the poem prepare us for that later development, however, and it is these that I focus on here. I keep my analysis to *L'Infinito*,

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[5] Margaret Brose, "Leopardi's *L'Infinito* and the Language of the Romantic Sublime," *Poetics Today* 4, no. 1 (1983), 48.

[6] My translation. "*L'Infinito* [è] l'unica lirica di Leopardi perfettamente serena, priva di accenti pessimistici come di spunti polemici deve la sua immensa dolcezza all'oblio momentaneo e immaginario di quel limite che obiettivamente è la sola condizione e la sola realtà delle cose." Mario Andrea Rigoni, *Il Materialismo Romantico di Giacomo Leopardi* (Naples: La Scuola di Pitagora Editrice, 2013), 18.

however, due to considerations of space. If space permitted, analysis of all of the pre-1826 *Canti* would demonstrate the aesthetic feature of *L'Infinito* that most interests me for present purposes: a discontinuity—absolute and insurmountable—between the two orders of nature: the lesser, organic nature to which we belong, and the greater, inorganic order that is out of our reach and yet contains and determines all of life.[7]

In other words, according to my interpretation, there is much more continuity between Leopardi's earliest 'nature' poem and (perhaps) the last one he wrote before he died, *La Ginestra*, which explicitly divides nature according to the into two incommensurable, unharmonious orders dominated by non-living, inorganic matter. My reading shows that, ahead of its time, *L'Infinito* seems to take place in exactly this minimal space and to affirm both grammatically and narratively that, despite ideal (Romantic) conditions, poetry *cannot* reach the "great system of everything" (nature as macrocosm, *Zib.,* 4133-44). All of the ingredients for the Romantic sublime experience are present, as we will see, but the natural objects of the poet's longing lie *beyond* the hedge and the hill (the moon, sea, sky, stars, in[de]finite worlds). In this as in all similar poems of the *Canti,* nature beyond proves unresponsive and overwhelming, even fatally so. In fact, it is this final lack of reciprocity between speaking subject and natural objects in all of the relevant *Canti* that creates a jarringly static structure, resists the Romantic dynamic that M. H. Abrams calls the poetry of "correspondence," and persuades me of Leopardi's overall project against the Romantic poetics of optimism.[8] Thus, what seems a small shift in reading *L'Infinito* in fact opens

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[7] The only true precedent for this discontinuous, dominantly inorganic philosophy of nature that I have found in my research is in the work of a Scottish doctor and self-styled geologist, James Hutton (1726-97), with whose work Leopardi was familiar through his reading of Georges Cuvier. This awareness of Hutton through Cuvier, however, seems to have come only in the 1825 edition of Cuvier's *Discours sur les revolutions*, which Gaspare Polizzi discovered fairly recently in the family library in Recanati. It is in this 1825 work on progressive development in fossils that Cuvier argues against and cites directly Hutton's 1795 *Theory of the Earth* in his own work, as well as the earlier *Rapport Historique sur le Progrès des Sciences Naturelles depuis 1789, et sur Leur État Actuel* (1810). Cf. Gaspare Polizzi, *«Per le forze eterne della materia». Natura e scienza in Giacomo Leopardi* (Milan: FrancoAngeli Editore, 2008). The overall implication for my argument of Leopardi's relatively late awareness of Hutton's inorganicist theory is that Leopardi's philosophy of nature divided appears thus all the more interesting because it does not have a straightforward direct source.

[8] M. H. Abrams, *A Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1984).

up the whole field of inquiry concerned with Leopardi's relationship to Romanticism and the Enlightenment.

My essay is part of a larger project that aims to show, therefore, that Leopardi viewed Romantic sentimentality as an outgrowth of Enlightenment positivism, and that he used his poetry to point to and challenge the anthropocentric assumptions of both.[9] In fact, Leopardi seems to have not made the distinction, except in terms of genre, between the fundamental interests of, on the one hand, positivistic materialists or so-called (and self-titled) 'Enlightenment' philosophers, such as the Baron d'Holbach, and, on the other hand, the sentimental optimists called 'Romantics', such as Schelling (to name two thinkers that often come up in scholarly work on Leopardi). Were present space to permit, an examination of the whole spectrum of prose writings in conjunction with his poetry would reveal that Leopardi seems to have objected first and foremost to the idea that nature as "great system" would somehow be more readily knowable by *human* animals than by any other kind of animal or plant. For Leopardi, both Enlightenment and Romantic thinkers are unfounded optimists in that they hold to an idea of continuity and harmony *within* nature (meaning, among its various forms) as well as *between* nature and society. This could be continuity between the thinking, creative self and nature that many Romantics felt was once in place but was lost. It could be the continuity of all matter, which is intelligible even if, strictly speaking, not detectable through the senses. Continuity in Romantic and Enlightenment texts also frequently adopts the meaning of continuity of the social with the natural world (whatever is designated by 'nature'), which makes nature into the pattern and model of the hierarchies, morality and ethics of a given society.

We can see the specific terms of Leopardi's resistance to Enlightenment and Romantic ideals as early as his *Discorso*. Leopardi's criticism of contemporary poetry in this early essay focuses especially upon the Romantic emphasis on the individual over the universal. Leopardi sees this as a technical as much as an aesthetic problem: as he states in many texts and at different times, poetry is only poetry insofar as it derives from the universal.[10] He complains about the Romantic preference for a poetry that navigates the mind, the emotions, that which, broadly speaking, pertains to the self of the poet. Romantic poetry, he says, fails the test of universality that the so-called real poetry of the ancients (and of their Italian imitators, of whom he intends to be one) will always pass. When one reads *L'Infinito*,

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[9] The larger project is a book manuscript, currently in progress, tentatively titled *Unhomely Nature: Poetry and Pessimism in Giacomo Leopardi*.

[10] The *Discorso* is only one of these. Among others, we can see multiple entries in the *Zibaldone*, particularly the very early entries from 1818.

it is difficult to not be struck by the irony of his argument in the *Discorso*. Indeed, a consideration of the rest of the *Canti* would show the same pattern of apparent hope for recovery of past (youthful) happiness, for a return to universal nature, swiftly undercut by a hovering, indifferent, pointedly unresponsive figure of "Natura." In fact, not one of the *Canti* grants to its poet-subjects (be they human, non-human animal, or plant) any kind of recovery or consolation. This remains true whether one thinks of recovery and return in terms of either growth of understanding or restoration of language and order. In fact, with the (highly) debatable exception of the patriotic canzone *All'Italia* (*To Italy*), not one of the *Canti*, pre- or post-1823, expresses itself capable of reviving the lost illusions of classical glory; of nature hidden, mysterious, and enchanted; or the mutually benevolent, mutually respectful relationship to the natural world supposedly enjoyed by the ancients.

Rather, once Leopardi becomes a poet in his own right (and not, say, an imitator or translator of Virgil or Hesiod), it appears that he discards one of the central tenets of the *Discorso*: that poetry, as the product of illusion (understood as *menzogna*, 'a lie'), is uniquely capable of re-enchanting nature and functioning as a channel through which we can restore our sense of the natural world as *homely*, not something *un-homely* to be investigated—poked, prodded, and dissected like Leopardi's image of nature subjected to the scientific gaze (*Zib.*, 3241-2)—but rather a place to live and rest, a *locus amoenus*.[11] If poetry can be called 'poetry' even if it is neither product nor producer of enchantment, then we might ask how Leopardi reconfigures its function. Logic dictates that the poet of the *Canti* would accept one of the following as an answer to this uncertainty: either poetry remains the language of nature (external natural *things*) as Leopardi claims it should be in the *Discorso*, and we should see this played out in his poetry, or the *Canti* (d)evolve into what Leopardi accuses the Romantics of doing: exploring the coordinates of their own genius and thereby taking away what he considers the popular role of poetry.

Before looking at the grammatical details of *L'Infinito*, it is useful to consider the overall structure and movement, or lack thereof, of the text. As one might expect of a poem in the sublime mode, there is an encounter, a clash, and what appears to be a final unity (all transacted through the poet

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[11] The term *menzogna* best captures the problem of Leopardi's ambiguous use of *fingere* in *L'Infinito*. On the one hand, it can mean "to feign" as in a complete fiction, a creation *ex nihilo*; on the other, *fingere* can indicate a creative act consistent with reductive physicalism (strict materialism, in which all mental and emotional experience can be explained through material causes). For Leopardi, nothing true about nature could be un-adaptable to poetry.

as a kind of "Aeolian harp," to adopt M. H. Abram's useful imagery from *A Correspondent Breeze*) between the two principal spaces of the poem: the hedge on the lonely hill of verse two and the sea of verse fifteen.[12] However, the dialectic in the poem is false, because it fails to achieve final synthesis. The poem never returns to either the opening scene or its associated feeling of enclosed safety; there is neither literal return to nor affective recovery of the self of the first verse. If, as many scholars claim, *L'Infinito* were a journey with a return, we could reasonably agree with Margaret Brose, Claudio Colaiacomo, and others who have read this text more or less directly within a Romantic framework. Although Brose does not refer to any specific Romantic poet as model or define and delimit her use of the Romantic sublime framework, my understanding is that she applies to Leopardi's *L'Infinito* Schlegel's idea that poetry acts as an effective compensatory tool, successfully re-enchanting the world to restore us— albeit fleetingly, for the duration of the (repeatable) text—to the state of the ancients. It is possible, although not yet adequately argued, that Leopardi knew of Schlegel's optimism about Romantic art, especially poetry, through Wordsworth, with whose poetry Leopardi was evidently familiar. The problem with this reading (with which Colaiacomo partly agrees) is that not a single one of Leopardi's *Canti* performs this consolatory feat. Rather, many spend numerous lines lamenting their inability to do just that.

The clearest indication that we would be wrong to read *L'Infinito* as a journey with a return or any kind of recovery is its final verse: "e 'l naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare" (and shipwreck is sweet to me in this sea).[13] For two reasons, it seems problematic to reduce the specificity of meaning or the definitive force of this (and every other) poem's closing line. The first is the centrality of the question of return and survival to both epic and the Romantic sublime, two genres clearly at work in this poem (although both are subverted). The second is that word, "naufragar" (shipwreck). As John Freccero has demonstrated, *naufragio* is effectively a technical term in the Italian tradition, and wherever it appears, we cannot brush aside the implied allegory of the poem as (attempted) seafaring journey in imitation of that of Ulysses.[14] Even more interesting is that Leopardi modifies his "naufragar"

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[12] Abrams, *A Correspondent Breeze*, 28, among other instances.

[13] Geoffrey Bickersteth (1923) is alone in having translated this line using the term "shipwreck," which strikes me as not only the most accurate but also the most meaningful choice. Giacomo Leopardi, *The Poems of Leopardi*, trans. G. Bickersteth (Cambridge University Press, 1923).

[14] The importance of 'shipwreck' of course goes far beyond Italian tradition. Cf. esp. Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); and Freccero, *Poetics of Conversion*

with another technical term in Italian poetics, the Dantean "dolce." In his 2010 translation of the *Canti*, Jonathan Galassi's version of *L'Infinito* figures "naufragar" as "foundering" and not as "shipwreck." Although this choice matches the syllable count of the Italian, "foundering"—which is so much less violent than shipwreck—misses the line's clear allusion to canto XXVI of the *Inferno*, where Dante shipwrecks his Ulysses, thus denying the most famous ancient homecoming and undercutting the overall circular structure of classical epic. In fact, Dante uses precisely the word "dolce" to distinguish his voyage in the *Divina Commedia*, guided by grace, from that of Ulysses, guided instead by pride.[15] Because I perceive this reference as central to both *L'Infinito*'s self-positioning in the history of poetics and its response to Romanticism, the concluding part of this essay spends a fair amount of time examining these allusions to Dante in the context of the history of the metaphor of shipwreck.

The loss of coordinates crucial to the idea of shipwreck begins, in fact, right from the poem's opening line. Its jarring grammar, the juxtaposition of "sempre" (always) with "fu" (the preterit form of "was") disorients the reader, or it should, anyway. Instead, Jonathan Galassi's translation of this line ("Always dear to me was this solitary hill") erases or at least overlooks the temporal disorientation of the original Italian. This is more than an infelicitous choice, however; it contravenes much of what Leopardi writes on the subject of what makes a thing—*any* thing—poetic, and thus completely misleads the English-language reader of Leopardi's poem. In many passages of the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi insists that poet and reader must enter a state of the indefinite in order for there to be poetry at all, let alone the dilation of time and space and the removal from the immediate and present that poetry necessarily effects. While Galassi's "was" is the only reasonable solution in a language that requires context to distinguish an imperfect from a past perfect verb, to remove the juxtaposition of the incommensurate temporalities misses, I think, the point of the poem. The text never heals the rift created in this first line between the time of the infinite ("sempre") and the time of the poet's feeling of connectedness to nature in a broader sense ("fu"), and we arrive—of necessity—at the anti-Romantic conclusion that no art, not even poetry, can heal the historical rupture brought about by the consciousness and knowledge economy of

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(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); and a book-length exploration of the argument in Freccero's recent, *In Dante's Wake: Reading from Medieval to Modern in the Augustinian Tradition*, ed. by Danielle Callegari and Melissa Swain (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

[15] Cf. John Freccero, "Dante's Ulysses: From Epic to Novel," in *Poetics of Conversion*, 136-51.

modernity. As mentioned above, the discontinuity that Leopardi finds inherent in the system of nature—the rift between the enchanted nature of youth (antiquity) and the stark, indifferent nature of adulthood (modernity)—is therefore historical only insofar as it took humanity until the modern age to perceive what was always already there.

Even before the reader of *L'Infinito* begins to think about the poem's verbal oddities, however, Leopardi prepares us for disorientation and subversion by his very categorization of the poem as an idyll. In a preface to the 1826 edition of the *Canti* printed in Bologna, Leopardi situates *L'Infinito* as the first of six idylls.[16] This categorization is problematic for several reasons, not the least of which is the poem's purported subject matter: infinity. On none of its surfaces does *L'Infinito* fit with the traditional requirements for an idyll, whereas it is only on the surface that the text does fit with the traditional requirements for the Romantic sublime. Surface readings of Leopardi are clearly misleading.[17] Indeed, the vastness implied by the poem's very title, *L'Infinito*, contradicts the etymological definition of the word idyll, the Greek "eidùllion" ("little form" or "little thing"). If Leopardi was known and respected for anything other than poetry during his lifetime, it was for his work as a philologist, which Nietzsche in *We Philologists* later recognized as the "modern ideal."[18] Either the poem is an *eidùllion* or it is an *eîdos*, a fully-fledged idea or form in the Platonic—and perhaps Romantic—sense, but it clearly cannot be both.[19]

An idyll is also, by definition, a poem of *distance*, that is, a poem in which the poet observes the object or objects from a position removed from the action of the poem, either by actual distance or by virtue of the fact that the speaker is not the poet in the first person. Moreover, idylls generally have multiple speakers, or characters, and are thus not private poetry or interior voyages. An idyll may be in the style of epic or romance, as in Tennyson's courtly *Idylls of the King*. The Classical idylls of Theocritus, however, first defined the genre as decidedly pastoral: replete with mythological figures such as sorceresses, shepherds, goatherds and nymphs.

[16] Cf. Introductory notes to *L'Infinito* by Lucio Felici in Giacomo Leopardi, *Tutte le Poesie e Tutte le Prose*, eds. Lucio Felici and Emanuele Trevi, (Roma: Newton-Compton Editori, 2007), 1:120.

[17] Meaning poems such as Alla primavera, o delle favole antiche (To Spring, or on the Ancient Myths), Il sabato del villaggio (Saturday in the Village), and similar.

[18] Friedrich Nietzsche, *We Philologists,* ed. Oscar Levy, trans. by J. M. Kennedy, 3rd ed, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: T. N. Foulis, 1911), 8:10.

[19] I am indebted to my colleague at Boston University, Assoc. Prof. of Classics James Uden, for this observation.

There are none of these figures in *L'Infinito*, so one must look into the significance of Leopardi's categorization. Indeed, it is only possible to understand *L'Infinito* as an idyll if we begin by examining that unusual grammar in the opening verse, its paradoxical association of the time of the "sempre" with the remote past of the self and that self's affectionate, emphatically *private* (because solitary) relationship to the hill inherent in "fu." The idyllic requirement for distance (multiple speakers or perspectives), non-interiority, and for a universalization of experience is fulfilled in several ways in this poem, the first necessary step of which is this distancing of the two selves of the narration. It is true that the Romantic sublime process generally begins with the same kind of fission or breakdown of the self (and ordered language). In the various draft versions of *L'Infinito*, Leopardi had considered both the imperfect "era" and the present tense "è." His final choice of "fu" can only mean that he decides to break cleanly with the suggestion of an *ongoing* affective relationship with the enclosed space and is attempting—unsuccessfully, I think—to push his poetry into the space of the *beyond* the limit (or the boundary-hedge).[20] Although as a rule one should avoid any discussion of authorial intention, it might be the case here that Leopardi is *pretending* to push his poem into the infinite space of the title and that its conclusion in shipwreck is a pointed rejection of Romantic poetic presumption. My hope is that the remainder of my analysis of *L'Infinito* allows us to see that (admittedly disdainful) playfulness at work without having to resort to any outside texts or biographical considerations.

Recent translations of the poem make it clear that scholars continue to disagree about the significance of the "sempre" juxtaposed with the past perfect verbal construction "mi fu" in the opening line.[21] The drama of this preterit is highlighted by its contrast with the insistent present of all of the other verbs in the poem: "mi fingo" (I figure, I draw in my mind), "mi

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[20] It is not always the case, but in Italian the *passato remoto* (preterit) is frequently used to refer to one no longer living. Even when it does refer to the experience of a living person, the preterit often indicates that the experience narrated is being relegated definitively to the past.

[21] Cf. Nicolae Babuts, *Memory, Metaphors and Meaning: Reading Literary Texts* (London: Routledge, 2017), esp. ch. 6, "Metaphoric Fields," where Babuts contests the frequent critical argument that *L'Infinito*'s opening "Sempre" makes the poem open-ended. This open-endedness, Babuts points out, implies that the 'I' at the poem's end that experiences the "naufragar" does not, in fact, perish. For more on the argument that this is a shipwreck with survival, see Timothy Bahti, *Ends of the Lyric: Direction and Consequence in Western Poetry* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

sovvien" (comes to mind), and "m'è" (is…[to me]), all of which are logically connected through the repetition of a form of the possessive "mi." Then there is the progressive tense of the gerunds, "sedendo e mirando" (sitting and gazing) and a few lines down, "vo comparando" (I go comparing). The "naufragar" of the closing line also takes place in an emphatic present: "il naufragar <u>m'è</u> dolce in questo mare." The indefiniteness of the gerunds opens the poem in such a way as to demonstrate the expansion of time and space within the dense unity of the text. Brose's and Colaiacomo's observations about the limits of the poem are useful here. In their interpretations, the poet starts out bound by time and space but in some manner (re)joins the state of indefinite represented by the sea that closes the poem. Where Brose finds *L'Infinito* unbound by real considerations of time and space, however, Colaiacomo recognizes that restriction but resolves the incommensurable states into a final unity by way of an infinite "salto" (leap) between the two. This implies two things: first, because it *can* make that leap, that the poem *is* the infinity of its title and second, that the poet, identifiable with his poem, successfully moves back and forth (and back again, presumably) between the two spatio-temporal dimensions. Colaiacomo explains this "leap" as follows:

> [T]he narrative opposition [in the text] (an 'I' recounts a personal, interior experience) […] engenders another opposition, that of tenses. The latter appears to be an irremediable opposition, an existential leap, between two different psychological and temporal dimensions: the narrative and the ecstatic, the latter the domain of the present tense.[22]

Brose resolves the disorientations of 'where are we?' and 'what is this?' a little differently. She finds that the poet in *L'Infinito* sets up but then moves beyond the common Romantic binaries of subject-object, poet-landscape, mind-nature, and "the reader is led, of necessity, to the moment of Romantic transcendence as though it were a question of literal passage from one condition to the other."[23] This Romantic reading of the opening lines turns the hill into a touchstone, the natural spot to which one returns in order,

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[22] Translation mine. "L'opposizione narrativa (un *io* racconta una propria esperienza interiore) […] serve a rendere operante l'altra, costruita dall'opposizione dei tempi […] che vuole essere […] opposizione non mediabile, *salto*, fra due diverse dimensioni temporali e psicologiche, quella narrativa […], e quella estatica, il cui tempo […] è il presente." Colaiacomo, *Camera Obscura*, 29.

[23] Translation mine. "Il lettore viene necessariamente condotto al momento di trascendenza romantica come se si trattasse di un vero e proprio passaggio da una condizione all'altra." Brose, *Leopardi Sublime*, 9.

through memory, to "measure one's life and time in general."[24] Brose's claim is that the Leopardian natural object has no intrinsic meaning and that the hill (*colle*) is significant only insofar as it is reappropriated by memory, the hedge (*siepe*), only insofar as it is a boundary to be transcended by the imagination.[25]

Colaiacomo makes a similar point but does not go so far as to divest the organic object of all intrinsic meaning, arguing instead that it is a real boundary that must, in fact, be confronted and overcome in a leap whose rhetoricity does not entirely eliminate the abyss that lies beyond the hedge. According to Colaiacomo, therefore, the leap does not actually succeed, and there is no literal movement outwards through the material cosmos that the poem, at least according to its title, purports to explore. Asking about the "Ma" or "But" that opens up a tension in the fourth line of the poem, Colaiacomo explains the effect of this opposition in the following way:

> What is it that the 'ma' [but] sets up as an opposition? Evidently, there are no doubts: the exterior and interior gazes and, in turn, finitude and infinitude. But this way of reading it, as much as it seems inevitable, creates an asymmetry that the comma can attenuate but not erase. The 'ma', in fact, juxtaposes the relative 'che esclude' [that blocks] and the principal 'mi fingo' [I imagine, or rather fashion, in my mind]. Consequently, 'this hedge' seems to unfix itself from the context and to remain pure image. Every disequilibrium, however, only acts as a spur towards its own elimination.[26]

Colaiacomo's solution does not satisfy, however. His claim that the hedge becomes pure image implies that 'hedge' retains none of its vegetal, rooted qualities and plays no role in keeping the poet right where he is, pointedly unable to transport himself (alive). To me, the hedge is rather reminiscent of the window-frames in so many of the other *Canti*. As such, it obeys the general rule of spatial relationships throughout the *Canti* of insurmountable distance and disconnectedness between, on the one hand,

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[24] This quote, as used by Marjorie Nicolson, refers to Wordsworth. Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997).
[25] Brose, Leopardi Sublime, 9.
[26] Translation mine. "Cos'è che il "ma" giustappone avversativamente? apparentemente non ci sono dubbi: lo sguardo esteriore e lo sguardo interiore e, con essi, una finità e un'infinità. Ma questa lettura, per quanto inevitabile, determina un'asimmetria che l'interpunzione forte e fortemente censurante attenua ma non cancella. Il 'ma', infatti […], coordina una relativa ("che esclude") e una principale ("mi fingo"). Di conseguenza "questa siepe" sembra svincolarsi dell'ordine contestuale, restare pura immagine. Ogni squilibrio, però, è tale perché stimola a eliminarlo." Colaiacomo, *Camera Obscura*, 28.

the poet's self and the natural object of the poem's desire (again, usually not a living, finite object, but a cosmic, indefinite one such as the moon or the sky or the darkness of night). For all of the impetuous drama of the child-poet's lament in the 1820 canzone *La sera del dì di festa* (*The Evening of the Holiday*), for example, the most prominent protagonist in this, as in the other *Canti*, is the silent, indifferent *Natura* against which the child's lament is directed: the moon (*la notturna lampa*) and "ancient, onmipotent Nature, which made me to suffer" (*l'antica natura onnipossente / che mi fece all'affanno*). A cursory examination of other *Canti* reveals a similar spatial relationship between poet and landscape, in which the poet is contained (in *La sera del dì*, as elsewhere, literally shut inside a room in a house looking out the window), fixed, almost pushed to one side, while the feeling of vastness conveyed by the poem as a whole is the product of the scene outside the window (or beyond the hedge in the present case): the cosmos, the silence, the depths, and other immeasurable entities that constitute the inorganic dimension of nature. It is worth noting that, where this enclosure of the poet does not occur, the poet is not present as a first-person protagonist, and we have, instead, the exoticized, radically other voices taking the narrative place. This is the case in, for example, *Canto notturno di un pastore errante nell'Asia* (*Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia*), where the shepherd's illusions are completely destroyed within the space of the poem and the so-called wanderer finds himself, instead, quite bounded, dwarfed, even silenced, by a magnitude with which he tries unsuccessfully to communicate. Another poem possibly from the same year finds the poet attempting to identify with his protagonist, a solitary sparrow. The full identification of poet with bird remains impossible, however, and appears, instead, a relic both of the ecstatic, desire-driven theological poetry of Dante and of Romantic poetic wish-fulfillment.

If we are to follow Leopardi's definition of poetry from the *Discorso* (perhaps the only dictum in the essay that survives—intact—his career as poet), the natural objects must in every way determine the poetry, from story to form to the very possibility of its existence. The question then becomes what we mean by 'nature', or rather *which* natural objects, for, as we have seen in the *Zibaldone*'s division between the "great system of everything" and the "minimal spot" that is biotic nature, not all natural objects are equal. In *L'Infinito*, it is the hedge that puts the poem in motion, which makes for a nice play on the Romantic notion of sublime blockage. In other words, the organic natural object determines the poet's capacity to see the universe poetically, with a combination of sensory input (its organic element) and imagination (that constructs, by intuitive extrapolation, its more powerful and enduring inorganic element). It is the sea, water, that liminal space

between life and death where the inorganic *seems* organic because it is required for the latter's very existence, that brings the poem to a close and draws all of the other objects into itself.

A Romantic interpretation of this poem requires, instead of a final absorption and death, a 'return' to the past with which *L'Infinito* begins. According to this reading, of which Brose's is representative, the opening memory is revivified and the hill, transfigured by the process of amplification intrinsic to the Romantic sublime, becomes the sea (*mare*). Thus the faculty of memory not only begins but guides the entire poetic process, and the poem becomes a mapping of the poet's consciousness and imaginative faculty. For Brose, then, and others who follow a Romantic reading of *L'Infinito*, the opening "mi fu" (absence) will be rectified with the closing "m'è" (presence):

> This reappropriation is only possible by means of the memory (*rimembranza*) of a childhood illusion which, despatialized and detemporalized, metaleptically returns inviolate.[27]

"Returns inviolate," claims Brose, but we cannot equate a contained, framed, pointedly finite space – the temporal coordinates of which are before and after (appropriate to memory) – with the fluid, unbounded space of what Dante calls the "pelago" (*Inferno* I.23).[28] In fact, the unavoidable implication of the combination of sea and shipwreck in verse fifteen is that we are in this space of the "pelago," that is, the open sea beyond the Pillars of Hercules. It is the space in which the epic adventurer and the Italian poet traditionally drown, and if it has a 'before' and an 'after', those distinctions are only purgatorial, not of this life. The Romantic interpretive framework instead constrains Brose to read the poem's constant shifts between 'this' (*questo*) and 'that' (*quello*)—in particular the final "questo" of "questo mare"—as though they restored the lost fullness, the signified, of the (initially emptied sign) "colle."[29]

The "siepe" (hedge) of *L'Infinito* certainly figures the organic element as a boundary to be transcended in order to activate the imagination, and thus remains more or less consistent with Leopardi's idea of the in(de)finite as inherently poetic. However, it is one thing to define the infinite as one's own mental capacities (as Kant and many Romantics do), and it is quite another to define the infinite as that which lies beyond the human subject in

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[27] Brose, "Leopardi's *L'Infinito*," 50.

[28] For an analysis of this and other instances of "pelago" in the *Divina Commedia*, see Freccero, *In Dante's Wake*.

[29] Brose, "Leopardi's *L'Infinito*," 66.

every possible sense. Indeed, the choice of the word 'transcended' creates a problem for Leopardi's poetics, which we have seen unable to escape its finitude or limits. 'To transcend' also denotes a specifically upward movement whose connotation of immateriality we cannot escape.[30] I would argue that this is precisely the meaning that Leopardi is playing with in *L'Infinito*: that in attempting to understand the binary of finite versus infinite, the mind moves from material to immaterial, not least because of cultural habit. Instead, what makes Leopardi's infinity distinct from that of his poetic and philosophical contemporaries is not only its material quality, for he shares this conception with numerous predecessors. Rather, the difference here is that the binary of finite versus infinite remains and, unlike both Kant and the Romantics, privileges the latter rather than the former.

I have argued up to this point that the poem, far from mapping consciousness, is instead a mapping of the not-self, and stands as such in distinct contrast to the blurring of self and nature that characterizes many Romantic texts. In "io nel pensier mi fingo" and the lines that immediately follow it, I would like to suggest that a series of allusions not only support Leopardi's argument in the *Discorso* that poetry is a transposition of nature into the poem through the medium of imagination, but that the physicality of poetic inspiration, language, and laws of its composition established by these allusions lead to the conclusion that Leopardi is going so far as to limit all mental activity in the physical world to *this* side of the hedge, in other words in the minimal order of organic nature. This means that the limit is an absolute even for the intellect and the imagination. This is irreconcilable with the dynamic structure of the Romantic sublime, and for poets whose poetry-making is most commonly figured using the image of the Aeolian harp.

In *A Correspondent Breeze* M. H. Abrams establishes the centrality of what he calls "air-in-motion," or breathing and wind motifs, to Romantic poetry, and links them to the image of the poet as Aeolian harp, or vehicle of the 'breath' of Aeolus, the god of the winds. In keeping with the idea of passivity, the harp, or more properly, wind chimes, are played *by the wind*, and not by a musician. As Abrams points out, "earlier poets had launched their epics by invoking for inspiration a muse, Apollo, or the Holy Spirit;"[31] thus the Aeolian harp is an important departure from traditional images of the poet and poetic inspiration. In *L'Infinito* the poet is figured as this so-called Aeolian harp; he is, in other words, a passive figure, the vehicle for a

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[30] Both Brose and Colaiacomo use the terminology of transcendence in their discussion of the hedge (*siepe*).

[31] Abrams, A Correspondent Breeze, 39-40.

breath not his own, but belonging instead to nature. However, as Abrams demonstrates in the context of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, what resembles (and is disguised as) passivity in Romantic poetry is, in fact, a determined reclaiming of control over nature through the higher, supernaturally-informed, agency of intellect.

Herein lies the crucial distinction between, on the one hand, the Romantic resolution of a sublime loss of control and, on the other, that of Leopardi. Below, in *The Prelude*, we see the poet's abandonment to the voice of nature, "this gentle breeze," but in the lines that immediately follow this image of relinquishing himself to the powers of nature, there is a return of the poet's physical presence ("For I, methought, while the sweet breath of heaven | Was blowing on my body") and the breeze is not only correspondent but *enters* the body of the poet, awakening his creative spirit, engendering the in-out-in movement so crucial to Romantic lyric. The wind thus serves precisely as inspiration in both the literal sense of breathing in and in the metaphorical sense of awakening "poetic numbers" and thus the poet's "spirit," which seems "singled out" by nature "for holy services." Unrarified, Leopardi's *vento* instead gathers power not through the *poet* but by drawing into itself the various enumerated elements of the poem: "l'eterno, e morte stagioni e la presente | e viva, e 'l suon di lei" (it seems reasonable to read the "suon di lei" as the spring sound of wind storming through the plants from a few verses before). From multiplicity, we move to final unity, the wind and its contents eventually forming the tidal wave that drowns the poet and his thought ("s'annega il pensier mio"). Unlike the Romantic breeze, Leopardi's "vento" remains an external power to the poet, or to that of the poet's imagination, serving as a marker of absolute *non*-correspondence between *this* nature (the poet, the "colle" and the "siepe") and *that* nature (the silences, spaces, seasons, depths, and the "mare").[32]

In the last few lines of *L'Infinito*, the transformation of the wind into a tidal wave that drowns the poet's thought appears to be the sublime moment of breakdown or loss of language. According to the Romantic model, we would expect a pause or even a sentence fragment here, followed by a return to poetic confidence and closure in an image of harmony between inner and outer, poet and nature. The Kantian model would give us a slight variation on this harmony by avoiding the sense of balance between inner and outer and giving us, instead, an image of intellectual unity that would lift the poet out of the vicissitudes of material, natural forces. For Kant, unity is the work

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[32] I do not intend, however, to conflate the "colle" and the "siepe," or thus to reduce the significance of the distinction between the hill as that which enables vision and the hedge as, instead, that which blocks the view.

of the mind, or the result of its work, which needs and constructs an absolute totality in order to survive sublime disharmony and fragmentation. By survival is meant also the act of understanding: the mind's reflecting upon itself, on its purpose, and not upon the objects of its representation. In an age that claimed to have discovered subjectivity and took it to extremes, objects refer not only to themselves in a unified higher form, but also to the mind that perceives them. For Kant it is the *idea,* the acquisition of understanding, that amplifies the self despite recognition of its own finitude; and for the Romantics, the connection with the metaphysical.

Scholars continue to frame the use of the literary fragment as part of the search for totality of expression, both self-expression and the expression of whatever is (or seems) external to the self.[33] For example, Thomas Weiskel's classic work on the Romantic sublime reads the grammatical fragment, the ellipsis, and the list form as an initial breakdown of discourse in the face of something perceived as much greater than the writing self.[34] This breakdown is, of course, only temporary, a way to represent both the lost connection and a final, restored harmony, an unbroken reunion, between self and nature, observer and observed. The completion of the process, the composition of the poem and the rejoining of the object and subject, can thus be read as a successful repair of the broken links in the chain of being: a recovery of language, internal equilibrium, and harmony with the external world. The fragment is thus generally used in Romantic poetry as a temporary measure on the way to a successful reach toward the supernatural, or to a successful reinstatement of full intellectual capacities *over and above* the might of nature.[35] In this way, in a poem about nature, or that engages with nature as its impetus, we often find the landscape used, as Geoffrey Hartman famously wrote of Wordsworth, to "represent, and then to liberate [the] imagination."[36]

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[33] On Romanticism and the fragmentary impulse, cf. D. F. Rauber, "The Fragment as Romantic Form" *Modern Language Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (June 1969): 212-21.

[34] Thomas Weiskel, The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

[35] This traditional line of interpretation of Romantic poetry needs to be recalibrated, however, to take into account an apparent interest on the part of, in particular, Wordsworth and Shelley, in that other nature, the one that cannot be contained either in a landscape or in an image generated by the imagination. Cf. esp. Noah Heringman, *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); and Onno Oerlemans, *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature,* 2nd ed. (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

[36] Oerlemans, *Romanticism,* 10.

Even at the height of necessity, in a poem that somehow claims to reach, if not to manifest, infinity, Leopardi does not recur to the fragment. Instead, he writes a short poem composed of four complete sentences. It is possible that because of its *internal* structure—the list-like form, the repetitions—scholars have not drawn attention to this grammatical continuity and to its potential impact upon our interpretation of the Leopardian system of nature. But for Leopardi, unity, meaning absolute totality, is neither a survival technique of the intellect to remain in life and to give life meaning, as it is for Kant; nor is it an indication of an immaterial (spiritual) element in human being as it is for the Romantics. Unity belongs to the "great system of nature," not to the minor order of which the mind is part (recall *Zib.*, 4134). The mind is fragmented: in its post-infancy, it is ruptured, self-aware, constantly looking back at the self that "fu" (*L'Infinito* line 1) and forward to the one that will come to an end in death, the only enduring present ("m'è," line 15). Until the moment of abandonment of 'my thought' ("s'annega il pensier mio," [my mind drowns]), there is neither unity nor stillness in the poem's initial exploration of the universe. The function, then, of the repetitions, the listing of impressions ("interminati spazi / [...] e sovrumani silenzi / e profondissima quiete"), the repetitions of 'e' (and [...] and [...] and) and even the use of the plural rather than the singular for both "spaces" and "silences" (spazi...silenzi) can be explained precisely by the incapacity of the mind to express a unity that exists outside of it, and that is impossible to comprehend or even to imagine.

At the heart of the Romantic ideal of the unified whole is the process through which the poet-philosopher reaches full employment and final refinement of the faculties. Much of Wilhelm von Goethe's iconic *Italian Journey*, for example, is organized around the activity of progressive sharpening of the senses as a way to achieve a single, unified vision of nature of which he is himself a part. Likewise, the poetry of Wordsworth relies heavily upon the theme of the search for pure sensation and the reliability of the senses as instruments in the search for truth, while keeping the individual identity intact in the face of objective wholeness. In this sense, *L'Infinito* works in accordance with Romantic philosophy to a point by denying the Lucretian or Epicurean possibility for existential fullness in *abstinence* from the exercise of the faculties. Leopardi's sharp divergence from Romanticism, however, lies in the result of that exercise, of the fullness of experience and refinement of the faculties. Leopardi's is the very same shipwreck that Ulysses experienced at the hand of Dante---death, in other words, as the inevitable result of attempting to surpass the limits of human comprehension. In the Romantic sublime, and even in the Kantian version, the terror associated with fear of death is aesthetic more than real.

Although the terror of the sublime is too complex to explore in any detail here, what is important presently is to note that this terror is associated with the representation of death in the abstract sense—that is, of the death of the world, of humanity; of death, therefore, in the apocalyptic sense. It is not the personal, real death of an individual, although it is always experienced that way within the poem. The representation occurs in images of the abyss or of death as such, but the observer remains on *this* side of the limit of life, on *this* side of the sharp precipice or the shore (as in Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, which is exemplary of this sublime genre).

The choice to abandon oneself to the abyss, apparent or real, beyond the limit is made only once there is reassurance of survival. But the question is about more than survival; it is about reassurance of a reward, of improvement. The Romantic sublime (as well as the Kantian though in a different way) contains within it the same structure of reassurance: that the imaginative voyage beyond the limit will not only circle back upon itself as in the epic, but, since survival is a small prize for such an undertaking, it will also effect a moral and intellectual improvement that, in just about every epic since *Gilgamesh*, only comes with the experience of mortal fear and uncertainty.[37] It is this reassurance that permits pleasure where there should be pure fear, even reluctance. It is difficult to know what to make of Leopardi's "dolce," given that circular return, or indeed *any* kind of compensatory recovery, is absolutely denied by the poem's inexorable outward movement towards shipwreck.

This brings me to my closing observation about *L'Infinito* and the final crux of the poem: the juxtaposition of "dolce" with shipwreck ("e 'l naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare"). As Emanuele Severino correctly noted, the word "dolce" implicates Leopardi's theory of pleasure in a reading of *L'Infinito*.[38] However, it seems to me that this pleasure is not Epicurean, as Severino has it, but rather *negative* pleasure. It is, after all, certainly not the pleasure of one who has abstained from a journey, or an effort, imaginative or otherwise. Negative pleasure suggests a Kantian underpinning, as we have seen is true of the most immediate layer of meaning in *L'Infinito* as a whole. In the final image of shipwreck, however, is the characteristically Leopardian shift away from tradition: it is the point

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[37] I would argue against the interpretation of the Romantic voyage put forward in Harold Bloom's essay, "The Internalization of Quest-Romance," in which Bloom reads the Romantic quest in Kantian, or at least secular, terms. Harold Bloom, in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1970), 3-24.

[38] Cf. Emanuele Severino, *Il Nulla e la Poesia: alla Fine dell'Età della Tecnica, Leopardi* (Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 2005).

at which Leopardi, having been united briefly with Kant by a shared strategy of opposition (or resistance) to Romanticism, leaves him behind at the most crucial point: that of the definition of pleasure in the endpoint of the sublime process. For Leopardi pleasure is not, as it is for Kant, pleasure in the power of his own faculties as they reconstitute and affirm the integrity of the self, albeit finite, against (or despite) the overwhelming power and infinity of inorganic nature. Nor can Leopardian pleasure be defined according to a traditional Romantic framework, as pleasure in the harmony between the immaterial, or supernatural, in the human and nature (which would be an organicist—or bio-centric—resolution).

Leopardi's is rather pleasure in a *loss* of self, a kind of Freudian claim that the only real pleasure is the calm that comes with death or at least with letting go of the idea that life is necessarily better than death. Leopardi's poem (the *poem*, the *thought*, not the poet) begins on a hill and ends in the sea. Where we expect flight and a general feeling of lightness, we have, at the end of *L'Infinito*, instead a gradual lowering of the perspective, a heaviness that we should have found in the beginning of the poem: the weight of memory and the sense of one's own finitude, from which the Romantic sublime process is meant to be a complete liberation. In a way, Leopardi's looks like John Keats' poetics of "negative capability"—what Keats described in a letter of 1817 to his brothers George and Tom as a state when one is "capable of being in uncertainties. Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason [...]."[39]

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[39] Cf. *Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1:191-94.

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Chapter Three

Forgery as a Form of Leopardi's Authorship

Martina Piperno

Today's Anglophone readership has no shortage of supplies to embark on the reading and interpretation of Leopardi's poetry and prose. Non-Italophone readers can overcome linguistic boundaries through the recent English translations of Giacomo Leopardi's lifetime notebook, the *Zibaldone*, and of his 1818 *Discourse of an Italian on Romantic Poetry*, which have complemented Jonathan Galassi's translation of Leopardi's *Canti*. Leopardi is therefore gaining popularity as a philosopher, a poet, and a *maître à penser*. Few readers, however, are as aware that he was also a forger. In fact, forgery is the first form taken by Leopardi's creative activity.

In 1816, at age 18, Leopardi mingled erudite research and creativity by composing some *Odae adespotae* (Anonymous odes) and an *Inno a Nettuno* (*Hymn to Neptune*).[1] The latter text, to which this essay is dedicated, was published as a translation from the Greek of a poem by an unidentified ancient author, but it is instead an original creation by Leopardi. This composition, which is now gaining new critical attention thanks to Margherita Centenari's commented edition,[2] bears some similarities with—as well as interesting differences from—the then-current European fashion of literary forgeries. This essay seeks to situate Leopardi's early attempts at

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[1] Leopardi would later also counterfeit some fourteenth-century texts, which I will not analyze in this essay. For an excellent account of this topic, cf. Sandra Covino, *Giacomo e Monaldo Leopardi falsari trecenteschi. Contraffazione dell'antico, cultura e storia linguistica nell'Ottocento italiano* (Florence: Olschki, 2009).

[2] Giacomo Leopardi, *Inno a Nettuno e Odae Adespotae*, ed. Margherita Centenari (Venice: Marsilio, 2016). Cf. also Margherita Centenari, "Prendere persona di greco. Per una rilettura dell'Inno a Nettuno di Giacomo Leopardi tra erudizione, traduzione e moda letteraria," in *L'Ellisse. Studi storici di letteratura italiana* 8, no. 1 (2013): 109-43.

creative compositions in the context of the production of forgeries in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and to highlight Leopardi's originality within this framework.

Forging Literature in Europe: Philology, Discovery, and National Pride

The presentation of modern pieces of poetry or prose as ancient texts is a longstanding practice, characterising scholarly work on antiquity from at least the Renaissance onwards. Between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, however, a new and different form of forgery developed, which Anthony Grafton subtly described as "forgery of nostalgia."[3] These kinds of spurious texts are particular in that that they aim to fill a gap, a fracture with the past, both on a historical and a creative level. As Grafton summarizes, "national histories not fully covered in canonical texts were now filled out" purposefully by the creation of coherent documents; "full-blown romantic emotions not mirrored by the classics were provided with ancient inspiration of a novel sort."[4] This is the case with a series of hoaxes from the English-speaking world that rediscover their native origins or forgotten ancient languages: Elizabeth Halket's *Hardyknute* (1719), an allegedly ancient Scottish poem, James Macpherson's Scottish *Poems of Ossian* (1760), Thomas Chatterton's *Rowley's Poems* (1769), and Thomas Percy's creative interventions in his collection of *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), all "attempt to forge a national literary culture," and this is not even to mention the proliferation of forgeries concerning the figure and the age of Shakespeare.[5]

Phenomena of this kind spread rapidly across Europe. In 1839 Théodore Hersart de la Villemarqué put together *Barzaz Breitz*, a collection of traditional Breton songs, largely by adding his own compositions to ancient documents and traditional oral verses. This was also the case with the Finnish *Kalevala* (1835) and the Estonian *Kalevipoeg* (1861), respectively created by Elias Lömrot and Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald, based on orally transmitted songs, but marketed as the sole creation of the ancient

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[3] Anthony Grafton, *Forgers and Critics. Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 32.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Margaret Russell, *Fictions and Fakes: Forging Romantic Authenticity, 1870-1845* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 8. Cf. Bernard Grebanier, *The Great Shakespeare Forgery* (London: Heinemann, 1966); Paul Baines, *The House of Forgery in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

Finnish and Estonian peoples.[6] Similar examples can be found in Bohemia, counterfeited by Vàclav Hanka.[7]

The turn of the nineteenth century witnessed a wave of sensational literary and cultural discoveries, which stirred up excitement and contributed to the creation of a market for the newly-rescued ancient works. In fact, we could say that the 'discovery' in itself—true or counterfeited—generated a potential market of its own.[8] Additionally, current literary theory had turned modern writers' attention towards aboriginal composition in itself: William Sharpe's *Dissertation upon Genius* (1755), Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), and William Duff's *Critical Observations on the Writings of the Most Celebrated Original Geniuses in Poetry* (1770) all contributed in different ways to producing a myth of inspired, original, spontaneous poetry as something that the modern imagination struggled to parallel. To take an example from Young's influential essay:

> [T]he pen of an Original Writer, like Armida's wand, out of a barren waste calls a blooming spring: out of that blooming spring an Imitator is a transplanter of Laurels, which sometimes die on removal, always languish in a foreign soil. [...] Let it not be suspected, that I would weakly insinuate anything in favour of the Moderns, as compared with ancient Authors; no, I am lamenting their great Inferiority.[9]

Later, Friedrich Schiller would raise the issue of naïve poetry as opposed to sentimental poetry (*Über die naïve und sentimentalische Dichtung* (*On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*; 1800), the first characterized by naturalness, childishness, and total adherence to the subject ("The naïve poet is the work and the work is the naïve poet"),[10] the other by the acknowledgment of a fracture between the narrator and the subject (the sentimental poet "seeks nature").[11] Schiller exemplified sentimental poetry with a passage from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*: when commenting on the virtues of Ferraù and Rinaldo, Ariosto exclaims: "O gran bontà de' cavallieri antiqui!" (O the great goodness of the ancient knights!; my translation) revealing his identity

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[6] Arne Merilai, "*Kalevipoeg*: Aspects of Genre and Authorship," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 46, no. 4 (2015): 497-534.

[7] Sandra Covino, *Giacomo e Monaldo Leopardi falsari trecenteschi*, 31-35.

[8] Russell, *Fictions and Fakes*, 1.

[9] Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition* (London: A. Millar-J. Dodsley, 1759), 10, 18.

[10] Friedrich Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, in *Essays*, ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom, trans. Daniel O, Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1998), 197.

[11] Ibid., 200.

as an author and an external observer, a 'modern' as opposed to the 'ancient' knights. Although, according to Schiller's perspective, the naïve and the sentimental are not necessarily historical categories, but rather categories of the human spirit, he would definitely establish the category of the sentimental as a feature of modern literature: "in an artificial age, poets of this naïve sort are rather out of place."[12]

Furthermore, the progress of scholarship affected the production of forgeries. The development of modern historiography dramatically impacted the formation of the ideas of counterfeiting and imposture: "the forgeries grew from a climate in which history and literature, fact and fiction, were persistently under the scrutiny of the historical thinker."[13] However, the subsequent rise of modern philology–itself directly dependent on historiography as well–contributed to problematising the relationship with classical and ancient literatures. Thanks to the findings by seventeenth-century antiquarians, the manuscript became an object of study and of reverence in the following century.[14] The outstanding popularity of Friedrich August Wolf's *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (*Introduction to Homer*; 1795), probably the most relevant philological novelty of that age, underlines how the issue of the historicity of ancient texts characterized early nineteenth century culture; the increasing development of subjects like archaeology, papyrology, and epigraphy, with their focus on the material conditions and transmission of texts, their *authenticity* or need for *authentication*, completed this framework. It is arguable that with the development of a historicist approach to ancient literature, producing ancient forgeries became a way to maintain a link with the lost sphere of antiquity, as well as with the myth of original and authentic material.[15]

It is probably not a coincidence, then, that the most famous examples of forgeries of the period were conceived by philologists, as a sideline to documentary research. James Macpherson not only presented himself as a discoverer of a lost text found in a picturesque location, but he also worked from original documents to compose his fake texts (so much so that it is

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[12] Ibid., 199.

[13] Ian Haywood, *The Making of History: A Study of the Literary Forgeries of James Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton in Relation to Eighteenth-Century Ideas of History and Fiction* (Madison; Lanham, MD: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986), 33; cf. also the whole chapter on forgeries and historiography, 15-45.

[14] Ibid., 19-24.

[15] Anthony Grafton, "Polystor into Philolog: Notes on the Transformation of German Classical Scholarship," in *History of Universities* 3 (1983): 159-62; James Turner, *Philology. The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 167-230.

now controversial to consider the *Poems of Ossian* a pure hoax, following Derick Thomson's demonstration that they directly echo authentic Gaelic verse).[16] Not only was Villemarqué a professional philologist, but his forgery also responded to a significant philological discovery, that of the main manuscript of the *Chanson de Roland* (*Song of Roland*), considered the epic poem of the French ruling class. Percy was a collector and editor of ancient English ballads, but he was also their 'restorer': his intervention in the texts varies from the interpolation of a few stanzas to alteration and complete re-invention.[17] It is certain that most forgers, including the early Elizabeth Hacknet, exploited the aura of newly-discovered ancient manuscripts in order to market their works and to ensure their popularity. Italian forgers, too, were familiar with philology: Leopardi was trained as a translator and editor of texts, while Ugo Foscolo hid some forged verses in a critical edition and translation of a Greek text (see below); Vàclav Hanka, who counterfeited ancient Bohemian texts, was a librarian.[18] Finally, even if Lönnrot and Kreutzwald fall rather in the category of folklorists, they claimed to have collected their materials from oral transmission as well as from library and archival research.[19]

In most cases, it is possible to relate literary forgeries to cultural tensions associated with the construction of national identities.[20] Villemarqué intended to give space to the identity of the ancient Bretons, a local tradition conceived in opposition to the Paris-centred French national narrative:

> The kings the nobles and the clergymen of France have their history: the *tiers état* [the third estate], thanks to the works directed by M. Augustin Thierry, will have his soon: justice will be done for everyone, except for the

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[16] Kristine Louise Haugen, "Ossian and the Invention of Textual History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59, no. 2 (1998): 309; and Russell, *Fiction and Fakes*, 13.

[17] K. K. Ruthven, *Faking Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 17. Cf. also Nick Groom, *The Making of Percy's "Reliques"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[18] Covino, *Giacomo e Monaldo Leopardi falsari trecenteschi*, 31-33.

[19] Merilai, *Kalevipoeg*, 506; Madis Arukask, "The Estonian National Epic, *Kalevipoeg*: Its Sources and Inception," in The Voice of the People: Writing the European Folk Revival, 1760 1914, eds. Matthew Campbell and Michael Perraudin (London: Anthem Press, 2012), 123 39. Keith Bosley, "Introduction," in Elias Lönnrot, *The Kalevala*, trans. Keith Bosley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), xxxi-ii.

[20] Cf. also Sandra Covino, *Giacomo e Monaldo Leopardi falsari trecenteschi*, 30-31.

people […] I aim to fill, as far as one province of France is concerned, the gap that I have identified.[21]

Similarly, Macpherson's nationalist aim "is to remove from Scottish culture the stigma of derivativeness from Ireland."[22] He claimed that "the inhabitants of Ireland were originally Britons,"[23] and that the legendary chief of the Fenians known as Fionn was actually a Gael, *Fingal*. Charlotte Brooke's translation of ancient Irish poetry (*Reliques of Irish Poetry*, 1789) is probably an indirect polemic reaction to Macpherson's appropriation.[24] The examples are numerous: the Estonian *Kalevipoeg* was also put together in order to foster the nation-building process in Estonia;[25] the same applies to the Finnish *Kalevala*, conceived in relation to the concurrent valorization of Finnish language. Assembling, embellishing and inventing fragments of original epic national compositions was expected to "engender a renascence […] just as the rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman texts in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had enabled an earlier renascence called the Renaissance."[26]

Most modern forgeries, therefore, originated from the desire to invent, uncover or reassess an ancient collective or epic language, to draw a literary 'us' out of fragmented literary discoveries. We could therefore conclude that the forger is a quintessentially modern author, whose imagination is set in motion by the *lacunae* of literary memory and transmission; he or she

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[21] *Barzaz-Breiz: Chants populaires de la Bretagne, recueills et publiés par Th. Hersand De La Villemarqué*, 4th edition (Paris-Leipzig: Franck, 1846) ; my translation. "Les rois, les nobles et le clergé de France ont leur histoire: le *tiers état*, grace au travaux qui se poursuivent sous la direction de M. Augustin Thierry, ne tardera pas a avoir aussi la sienne; justice aura eté faite à tout le monde, excepté au peuple. […] J'ai taché de combler, à l'egard d'une des provinces de France, la lacune que je viens de signaller." The reference to Thierry is related to his works on French history, published in *Essai sur l'histoire de la formation et du progrès du Tiers-état* (1953). Cf. Nelly Blanchard, *Barzaz-Breiz. Une fiction pour s'inventer* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2006).

[22] Ruthven, *Faking Literature*, 9; cf. also Haywood, *The Making of History*, 46-72; and Haugen, *Ossian and the Invention of Textual History*, 312.

[23] James Macpherson, *Fingal. An Epic Poem in Six Books. Together with Several Other Poems, Composed by Ossian the Son of Fingal, Translated from the Gaelic Language by James Macpherson*, 2nd edition (London: Becket-De Hondy, 1762), ii.

[24] Clare O'Halloran, "Irish Re-Creations of the Gaelic Past: The Challenge of Macpherson's Ossian," in *Past and Present* 124, no. 1 (1989): 87.

[25] Merilai, *Kalevipoeg*, 497-99.

[26] Ruthven, *Faking Literature*, 8.

hides his or her individual voice behind the mask of the facilitator, rescuer, or editor of the text in order to give space to a wider, all-encompassing idea of authorship. As Macpherson noted in his subtly ironic introduction to *Fingal*: "Inquiries into the antiquities of nations afford more pleasure than any real advantage to mankind. The *ingenious* may form systems of history on probabilities and a few facts."[27] Italian forgeries, although not as internationally renowned as the *Poems of Ossian*, participated in a similar cultural climate, as we will see in the following section.

Locating Italian Forgeries: Genealogy and Loss

The proliferation of fake literature in European aboriginal languages can be seen as a reaction against dominating cultures: either against ethnic or social élites. Several forgeries seem to aim at 'inventing' a tradition, in order to voice conquered or forgotten cultures silenced by external domination. In Italy, a more 'localistic' tendency to highlight the specificities of narrow communities through apocryphal texts can be found: this is the case, for example, with the false Sardinian *Carte d'Arborea*.[28] Additionally, a tradition of false thirteen and fourteenth century documents and texts flourished, frequently in connection with the interest in linguistic purism, as reconstructed by Sandra Covino.[29]

Forgeries also invaded literary space: analogously to Manzoni's *Promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*), Vincenzo Cuoco presented his novel *Platone in Italia* (*Plato in Italy*) in the form of a *Traduzione dal greco* (1804-1805).[30] The novel described Plato's travels in southern Italy, a narrative device that led Cuoco to explore the remote origins of the Italian

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[27] *Fingal*, ii, my emphasis. For an account of how fakes defined Romantic 'fictional identity' cf. Russell, *Fictions and Fakes*, 5-6.

[28] Covino, *Giacomo e Monaldo Leopardi falsari trecenteschi*, 117-38.

[29] Ibid., 54-137.

[30] Like Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*, Cuoco's *Platone in Italia* incorporates the device of the retrieved manuscript in a novelistic narration rather than being a forgery itself. However, it is worth considering it in this examination of Italian forgeries as it reveals the perceived continuity between modern Italian culture and the Classical tradition and the urgency of giving voice to the Italian community, perceived as voiceless, a concern it shares with Leopardi and Foscolo's forgeries (see below). A good part of existing critical literature on fake texts regards novels published in the form of the retrieved manuscript as a form of forgery   for example, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*: cf. Russell, *Fictions and Fakes*, 13-14; Haywood, *The Making of History*, 150-51; Ruthven, *Faking literature*, 5. Cf. Monica Farnetti, *Il manoscritto ritrovato. Storia letteraria di una finzione* (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2006).

nation, antecedent to the rise of Rome. Cuoco suggested that native Italians built an extraordinarily advanced civilization, in an attempt to foster the emerging narrative of the unity of the Italian nation and its pride.[31] This includes the hypothesis that Homer had composed his poems in Italy.[32] This novel was published in the form of an adventurously retrieved manuscript, translated from the Greek by Cuoco's grandfather who also found it (in 1774 near Paestum, according to the fictional narrative, a land of oblivion, "dove oggi non vi si trova né anche un albergo per ricovrar coloro che una lodevole curiosità move dalle parti più lontane d'Europa a visitar le ruine venerabili della più antica città dell'Italia").[33] Therefore, Cuoco claimed it was a historical document rather than a narrative invention:

> I will not bore you, o reader, with a long speech to demonstrate its authenticity [of the manuscript]. All that I can say can be reduced to showing you the autograph. The autograph of my grandfather is preserved at my place, and I can show it to whoever might want to see it.[34]

In terms of a discussion on authorship, it is interesting how Cuoco describes how he decided to publish the 'found' manuscript:

> My grandfather [...] had promised not to publish it. [...] 'Is it not worthless' he said 'to remind Italians that they were once virtuous, powerful, happy? Is it not worthless to remind them they were once the inventor of almost all the knowledge which honors the human spirit? Today it is rather preferable to call oneself the foreigners' disciple'. I thought differently from my grandfather, and I decided to publish the manuscript.[35]

[31] Paolo Casini, *L'antica sapienza italica. Cronistoria di un mito* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998), 251-52.

[32] Vincenzo Cuoco, *Platone in Italia*, eds. Antonino De Francesco and Annalisa Andreoni, *Opere*, vol. 1 (Bari: Laterza, 2006), 160-72. Cf. Annalisa Andreoni, *Omero italico. Favole antiche e identità nazionale da Vico a Cuoco* (Rome: Jouvence, 2003), 137-48, 211-44.

[33] Cuoco, *Platone in Italia*, 6. "Where now there is not even a hotel to host those who, with commendable curiosity, come from the farthest parts of Europe to visit the venerable ruins of the most ancient city in Italy;" this and the following translations of Cuoco are mine.

[34] "Non ti annoierò, o lettore con lungo discorso per dimostrartene l'autenticità [del manoscritto]. Tutto ciò che io potrei dirti si ridurrebbe in fine a mostrarti l'esistenza dell'autografo. Or l'autografo di mio avo si conserva da me, e son pronto a mostrarlo a chiunque abbia desiderio di vederlo." Ibid., 7.

[35] "Mio avo [...] avea giurato di non pubblicarlo [...]. "Che vale egli mi diceva rammentar oggi agl'Italiani ch'essi furono una volta virtuosi, potenti, felici? Oggi non lo sono più. Che vale rammentar loro che furono un giorno gl'inventori di quasi

Cuoco's contemporaries might in fact have noticed that reminding Italians that they were once great was precisely the aim that Cuoco had established for himself when starting the publication of his *Giornale Italiano*, a few years earlier.[36] Here he negatively rewrites his programmatic assumption and attributes this to his grandfather, creating an interesting antiphrastic split between his own identity and that of the retriever and translator of the manuscript. There is, therefore, a direct continuity between Cuoco's publishing activity and his novelistic invention.

However, Cuoco's novel, in its retracing an Italian primacy in poetry, philosophy, and construction of societies, does not draw from an 'antiquity' alternative to the classical Greek and Roman tradition. *Platone in Italia* rather attempted to rethink the philosophical and literary tradition that describes Latin culture as dependent on that of ancient Greece. Cuoco plays with the temporal primacy of Italians in inventing "quasi tutte le cognizioni che adornano lo spirito umano" (almost all the inventions that honour the human spirit). However, the novel, in hypothesizing that native Italians had anticipated the Greeks in inventing poetry, epic, and social institutions, does not negate that these would later be conveyed into the Greek culture through Plato's influence. Cuoco's hypotheses reassessed the traditional link between the modern Italian and the Graeco-Roman Classical tradition. On the contrary, modern European forgeries returned to the native origins of nations and explored an antiquity that was constructed as 'alternative' to Classicism, as is the case with Ossian.

The Italian version of the early nineteenth-century myth of origins demonstrates an interest for Greek remote antiquities. We could say that engaging in the pursuit of imagining ancient original antecedents is fascinated by the ideal of ancient Greece and that, in Italy, a genealogy of the ancient frequently dates back to ancient Greece. This was reflected in

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tutte le cognizioni che adornano lo spirito umano? Oggi è gloria chiamarsi discepoli degli stranieri." Io ho pensato diversamente da mio avo, ed ho risoluto pubblicare il manoscritto." Ibid.

[36] "Il dir loro [agli Italiani]:   Voi siete grandi   sarebbe inutile; senza dirlo, convien mostrare quelle cose dalle quali essi stessi possono incominciare a pensarlo" (Telling them [Italians]: "You are great" would be useless; without saying so, it is necessary to show those things that can make them start to think thus). Vincenzo Cuoco, "Programma [del *Giornale Italiano*]," in *Opere*, vol. 5, *Pagine giornalistiche*, ed. Fulvio Tessitore (Bari: Laterza 2011), 6.; Cf. also Domenico Conte, "La 'dimensione giornalistica' di Vincenzo Cuoco," in *Pagine giornalistiche*, 965-984, and Martina Piperno, "Creating the Myth of Vico between Press and Literature," in *The Formation of a National Audience. Readers and Spectators of Italian Culture*, eds. Gabriella Romani and Jennifer Burns (Madison; Lanham, MD: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2017) 83-102.

the choices of forgers. Ugo Foscolo provides an example of this: in 1803, he published his translation of Callimachus's ode known as *La chioma di Berenice* (*Berenice's Lock*). This text is interesting because it mingles the identities of Foscolo as a translator, a commentator, a philologist, a poet and a forger. As I have explained in detail elsewhere,[37] Foscolo's commentary on Callimachus is a text that, alongside the editing and translating of a classical Greek text, identifies a series of deficiencies in modern, as opposed to ancient, poetry. Specifically, Foscolo recalls the original religious nature of archaic poetry: the nature of ancient theology, which "a tutte le umane necessità, a tutti gli eventi naturali assegnava un Iddio," (attributed a God to all human necessities, all natural events) guaranteed the effectiveness of poetry, because it employed allegories and "pitture sensibili" (sensible images) of concepts and ideas. What touches the senses, Foscolo argues, touches the mind.[38]

Modern poetry, argues Foscolo, cannot do the same. Foscolo provides no solution: the 'open' nature of his texts seems to leave the problems unsolved. However, in his notes on translation Foscolo inserted four fragments of an allegedly anonymous Greek hymn to the Graces, and presented them as translated by himself from ancient Greek. These were original verses written by Foscolo that he hid among the erudite and bibliographical references in the paratext of *La chioma di Berenice*. They are the first fragments of Foscolo's poem *Le Grazie*, which he would complete in 1812.[39] By faking ancient verses, Foscolo was testing his own ability to write precisely that kind of poetry that in the introduction he declared inimitable, and to gauge the readership's consensus for his work ("esplorare il voto del pubblico," [explore the will of the public]), as Francesco Saverio Orlandini, the editor, commented.[40] It is possible to infer, then, that Foscolo's identity as a modern writer comes into play: a modern writer who challenges the impossibility of 'being ancient' by faking it, even if in a partial and fragmentary experimental form.

Cuoco and Foscolo's hoaxes feature some of the typical elements of European forgery. First of all, they share a nationalistic inspiration; the

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[37] Cf. Martina Piperno, *Rebuilding Post-Revolutionary Italy: Leopardi and Vico's "New Science"* (Oxford: Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment, 2018), 62-65.

[38] Ugo Foscolo, *La Chioma di Berenice di Callimaco*, in *Scritti letterari e politici dal 1796 al 1808*, ed. Giovanni Gambarin (Florence: Le Monnier, 1972), 303.

[39] Cf. Mario Scotti, "Introduzione," in Ugo Foscolo, *Poesie e Carmi*, eds. Francesco Pagliai, Gianfranco Folena, and Mario Scotti (Florence: Le Monnier, 1985), 159-68.

[40] *Opere edite e postume di Ugo Foscolo raccolte e ordinate da Francesco Saverio Orlandini* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1856), 197n.

search for a genealogy of Italian culture is at the centre of Cuoco's experiment, while Foscolo hints at the need for Italian poetry to strive for a social function. Secondly, they both seek to fill the void of what they perceived as a missing collective language, a historical and/or literary 'us'. In Foscolo's attempt, the problem of the lack of a modern imagination as opposed to an ancient one is quite evident. However, both Cuoco and Foscolo also made clear that Italy's search for its identity as well as literary models looked to Greek antiquity as its mythical aboriginal source. All these elements are present in Leopardi's *Inno a Nettuno,* probably one of the Italian forgeries that is closest to other European examples.

Leopardi as a Forger: Irony and Trickery

Leopardi's *Inno a Nettuno* was written in 1816, a year that the young poet would retrospectively regard as the time he discovered his talent. As he recalls in his *Zibaldone,* his practice of translation (to which Leopardi dedicated himself intensely between 1813 and 1817) led him to discover his own abilities as a poet: "non credetti d'esser poeta, se non dopo letti parecchi poeti greci" (*Zib.,* 1741, 19 September 1821).[41] For Leopardi, reading and translating were a form of interpretation. As D'Intino highlights, Leopardi's translation can be viewed as an active intervention in the original text, a deep listening to the ancient voice, a journey through time, and an exercise of Leopardi's own lyrical language in contact with and in contrast to the ancient model.[42] D'Intino relates Leopardi's experiences as a translator, his first contact with the ancient Greek world, to the Freudian term *unheimlich*: something familiar—the naturalness and happiness that Leopardi recognizes in the ancient world are the same he experienced during his childhood—and at the same time new and uncanny.[43] Leopardi was aware of the effect that the practice of translation had on him, as he made explicit in a letter to Giordani (21 March 1817):

> You say in your role as Teacher that translating is most useful at my age; this is certainly so, and something experience makes very clear to me.

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[41] I quote from Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone,* ed. Giuseppe Pacella (Milan: Garzanti, 1991); as usual, the page of the *Zibaldone* is indicated with the page of the manuscript. "I did not believe myself to be a poet until I had read a number of Greek poets." Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone,* eds. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (London: Penguin, 2013), 792.

[42] Franco D'Intino, "Introduzione," in Giacomo Leopardi, *Poeti greci e latini* (Rome: Salerno, 1999), vi-lxiii (x).

[43] Ibid., xiii.

Because when I have read some Classic, my mind is in a frenzy and becomes confused. Then I set about translating the best, and those beauties, of necessity examined and passed in review one by one, take their place in my mind, and enrich it and leave me in peace.[44]

Leopardi's profile as a translator is dominated by the crucial issue of fidelity—*imitatio*: translating faithfully an ancient text is a way to return its lost voice to life, freshness and originality. As Camarotto notes, when Leopardi describes Fronto's poetic career in his *Discorso sopra la vita e le opera di M. Cornelio Frontone* (*Discourse on the Life and Works of M. Cornelio Frontone*; still 1816) he is clearly speaking about himself: in order to replicate the ancient poetic capacities, Fronto decided to "go backwards" (*retrocedere*) and imitate them, carefully studying the propriety of each term with the same attention, Camarotto goes on to argue, that Leopardi claims to have put in his translations.[45]

Besides translation, Leopardi had dedicated himself to philology, namely editing and commenting ancient texts. During this training, Leopardi became familiar with concepts related to philology of ancient texts, such as variant, error, misinterpretation and *lacuna*. In short, he crucially discovered the fragile nature of textual transmission. Recently, Nicola Gardini has highlighted the idea of textual *lacuna* as the space of the unsaid. As he acknowledges, this concept is derived directly from philology, a discipline relating to the experience of void, loss, dearth.[46] There is evidence of Leopardi's complaining about the loss of masterpieces from classical Greek literature, while the coincidences of textual transmission have allowed minor works to be preserved. In his *Discorso della fama d'Orazio presso gli antichi* (*Discourse on the reputation of Horace among*

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[44] "Ella dice da Maestro che il tradurre è utilissimo nella età mia, cosa certa e che la pratica a me rende manifestissima. Perché quando ho letto qualche classico, la mia mente tumultua e si confonde. Allora prendo a tradurre il meglio, e quelle bellezze per necessità esaminate e rimenate a una a una, pigliano posto nella mia mente, e l'arricchiscono e mi lasciano in pace." Giacomo Leopardi, *Epistolario*, eds. Franco Brioschi and Patrizia Landi, 2 vols. (Milan: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998), 71; Giacomo Leopardi, *The Letters of Giacomo Leopardi 1817-1837*, ed. and trans. Prue Shaw (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 1998), 33-34.

[45] Giacomo Leopardi, *Discorso sopra la vita e le opera di M. Cornelio Frontone*, in *Tutte le poesie e tutte le prose*, eds. Lucio Felici and Emanuele Trevi (Rome: Newton Compton, 2003), 959. Cf. also Valerio Camarotto, *Leopardi traduttore. La poesia* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2016), 29. On the same point, cf. Centenari, "Introduzione," in Leopardi, *Inno a Nettuno e Odae adespotae*, 48.

[46] Nicola Gardini, *Lacuna. Saggio sul non detto* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014), 4 and *passim*.

the ancients), also published in the key year of 1816, Leopardi compiles a
list of lost works he would eagerly read but "son morti per sempre e non
altramente che se non fossero stati mai al mondo, inutili e in gran parte
ignoti per tutti i secoli della posterità" (They are dead forever, just as they
were never born, useless and largely ignored for all the subsequent
centuries).[47] Leopardi complains about ancient scribes due to their preserving
bad literature ("tante operacce"),[48] rather than masterpieces. If his juvenile
practice of translation is an experience of fracture with his previous self, as
D'Intino has explained, philology is for Leopardi an experience of loss, or
a confrontation with the partiality of our access to ancient literatures. This
is also a first assessment of the 'damaged' condition of the modern
individual, forced to consider his or her problematic and non-linear
relationship with the ancient.[49] However, lacunae and misinterpretations in
textual transmission can sometimes be filled through erudition, a task that
Leopardi took up enthusiastically, with the production of vast and hyper-
detailed commentaries to ancient texts, which can be considered a practice
of recollection and amendment of this perceived loss.[50]

1816 was a decisive year for Italian culture. In the first issue of the
journal *Biblioteca Italiana*, in January 1816, Madame de Staël had
encouraged Italians to explore European literary novelties, by becoming
acquainted with the new Romantic poetry, and updating their national
literature. Crucial to this renewal, according to Staël, would be the
abandonment of the practice of writing verses inspired by Graeco-Roman
models, loosening the bond with the classical tradition. By advocating this,
Staël indirectly forced Italians to address the problem of modernity. Her
stance provoked a variety of reactions from conservative as well as
progressive environments; Leopardi also took part in this polemic, by
writing a letter to the editors of the *Biblioteca Italiana*. In it, he expressed
no doubt in diagnosing the disease of Italian literature: there was an excess
of excellent models. As Leopardi puts it, "non sappiamo farne mai senza,
onde quasi tutti gli scritti nostri sono copie di altre copie, ed ecco perché
c'inonda una piena d'idee e di frasi comuni, ed ecco perché il nostro terreno
è fatto sterile e non produce più nulla di nuovo" (We cannot do without

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[47] Giacomo Leopardi, *Della fama di Orazio presso gli antichi*, in *Tutte le poesie e tutte le prose*, 950. This and the following translations are mine.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid. "I danni che il tempo ci ha fatto" (The harm that time did to us).
[50] On Leopardi as a philologist, cf. the 1955 classic *La filologia di Giacomo Leopardi*, by Sebastiano Timpanaro (Rome: Laterza, 2008), and Valerio Camarotto, "Le traduzioni e gli scritti filologici," in *Leopardi*, eds. Franco D'Intino and Massimo Natale (Rome: Carocci, 2018), 145-65.

models, so much so that almost all our writings are copies of other copies, and this is why we are flooded by commonplace ideas and sentences, and why our soil is sterile and does not produce anything new).[51] The only solution for this is to return to the roots:

> It is necessary to return to the roots [...]. O Italians, who think that you have already drunk so much from these springs that they are already dry, say who your Homer is, who your Anacreon is, who is your Cicero, who your Livy is. [...] Read the Greeks, the Latins, the Italians, [...] Homer, Virgil, and Tasso.[52]

For Leopardi, the best poet is the one who has no models, and who finds inspiration directly from Nature:

> The greatest poet is the most ancient, who had no models [...] we never could parallel the ancients [...] because when they wanted to describe the sky, the sea, the countryside, they would observe them, while we read a poet, when they wanted to portray a passion they would imagine feeling it, while we read a tragedy, and when they wanted to speak about the universe they would think about it, while we think of how they described it.[53]

It is likely that, when writing the hymn, Leopardi attempted to embody an ideal figure of 'the first' poet and to think beyond literary models. For Leopardi, the experiment of composing poetry *as if* he were a Greek poet meant precisely returning to *that* remote root of unending lyrical inspiration. Leopardi's stance, therefore, further reinforces Italian literature's link with Greek and Latin tradition. As he would state in the later *Discorso di un*

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[51] Giacomo Leopardi, *Lettera ai Sigg. compilatori della Biblioteca Italiana in risposta a quella della Baronessa De Staël-Holstein ai medesimi*, in *Tutte le poesie e tutte le prose*, 943. This and following translations are mine. Cf. Fabio Camilletti, *Classicism and Romanticism in Italian Literature. Giacomo Leopardi's Discourse on Romantic Poetry* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013).

[52] Ibid., 944. "Vuolsi andare alla radice [...]. O Italiani, che vi pensate di aver tanto bevuto a queste fonti che le siano già secche, dite qual è il vostro Omero, quale il vostro Anacreonte, quale il vostro Cicerone, quale il vostro Livio [...]. Leggete i Greci, i Latini, gl'Italiani [...] Omero Virgilio e Tasso."

[53] Ibid., 943. "Il più grande di tutti i poeti è il più antico, il quale non ha avuto modelli [...] e che noi non abbiamo mai potuto pareggiare gli antichi [...] perché essi quando voleano descrivere il cielo, il mare, le campagne, si metteano ad osservarle, e noi pigliamo in mano un poeta, e quando voleano ritrarre una passione s'immaginavano di sentirla, e noi ci facciamo a leggere una tragedia, e quando voleano parlare dell'universo vi pensavano sopra, e noi pensiamo sopra il modo in che essi ne hanno parlato." Cf. Centenari, *Prendere persona di greco*, 130-31.

italiano sopra la poesia romantica (*Discourse of an Italian on Romantic Poetry*; 1818), the secret of Italy's greatness lies in its preserved line of continuity with the Graeco-Roman world:

> We are still great; we still speak that tongue before which all living ones retreat, and which perhaps could not retreat before the dead ones; we still have in our veins the blood of those who, first in one way and then in another, ruled the world; we still breathe this same air and tread this same earth and enjoy the same light that an army of immortals enjoyed; the fire that inflamed our ancestors still burns.[54]

Therefore, the *Inno a Nettuno* was not only a display of literary skills: patriotic inspiration is at play as well. The argument is further reinforced by Leopardi's insistence on an ideal Italian 'us' and 'our' literary dimension, represented not only by Italian tradition, but by Latin literature as well ("Those sparks of poetic fire showered upon the popular imagination, have been granted by God principally to the Greeks and the Italians, and by Italians I mean also the Romans who are our ancestors and forefathers;" "Homer and Anacreon and other poets of ours").[55] In his 1816 letter to *Biblioteca italiana*, Leopardi insists on the direct genealogy between ancient Greek, Latin and modern Italian literature, a line of continuity which guarantees the poetic nature of Italy's language:

> As Taletes used to thank the Heavens because they made him Greek, I thank them wholeheartedly because they made me Italian […] for the style of Italian literature that is closest to Greek and Latin literature than all the literatures of the world, that is to say […] the only true one, because it is the only one that is natural, and has no affectation.[56]

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[54] Giacomo Leopardi, *Discorso sopra la poesia romantica*, in *Tutte le poesie e tutte le prose*, 996. "Ancora siamo grandi; ancora parliamo quella favella a cui cedono tutte le vive, e che forse non cederebbe alle morte; ancora abbiamo nelle vene il sangue di coloro che prima in un modo e quindi in altro signoreggiarono il mondo; ancora beviamo quest'aria e calchiamo questa terra e godiamo questa luce che gode un esercito d'immortali, ancora arde quella fiamma che accese i nostri antenati." Giacomo Leopardi, *Discourse on Romantic Poetry*, trans. Gabrielle Sims and Fabio Camilletti, in Camilletti, *Classicism and Romanticism*, 171 (cf. also 55-57).

[55] Ibid., 977. "quelle faville di fuoco poetico […] sono stati conceduti da Dio principalmente ai greci e agl'italiani; e per gl'italiani intendo anche i latini, padri nostri") and, although implicitly, by the Greeks ("Omero e Anacreonte e gli altri nostri" Cf. Giacomo Leopardi, *Discourse on Romantic Poetry*, 132, 130.

[56] "Come Talete ringraziava il Cielo per averlo fatto Greco, ringraziolo di cuore per avermi fatto Italiano… per la maniera della italiana letteratura che è di tutte le

The hynm was meant as a journey through time to rescue a forgotten, aboriginal poetic language; it was also necessary to regain familiarity with the purity and authenticity of ancient Greek mythical heritage, resetting the superfetation of repetitive classicistic poetry accumulated over time, as Staël had recommended. Resorting to a timeless and universal poetic principle meant refreshing Italian literature in order to *resist the language of the invader*, that is to say the foreign and exotic new literary model, Romanticism: "quelle più strane cose che si possano immaginare" (the strangest of imaginable things), "eccessi" (excesses), "invenzioni da spaccamonti" (inventions of boastful Mountain-splitters), "oggetti forestieri lontanissimi dagli occhi e dalla consuetudine dell'Europa o di quella tal nazione alla quale ciascuno di loro scrive" (faraway foreign objects that we cannot see and that are uncommon in Europe or in nations such as those for which they are writing).[57] In this sense, Leopardi's choice to counterfeit a text is close to that nationalistic/epic research which characterizes most European forgeries, as explained above.

The poem is accompanied by an introduction that muses on the identity of the poet, his origins and his time.[58] Leopardi also suggested possible identities for this imaginary Greek poet, such as Simonides or Miron, or Pamphos, or even Homer.[59] All those names are masks that Leopardi is wearing, playing with the *creative potential* that his disguise as a translator gives him and hiding his own identity. Subtle irony can also be traced in Macpherson's self-representation, when he addressed the issue of the poem's authenticity:

> Poetry, like virtue, receives its rewards after death. [...] This consideration might induce a man, diffident of his abilities, to ascribe his own compositions to a person, whose remote antiquity and whose situation, when alive, might well answer for faults which would be inexcusable in a writer of this age. [...] It would be a very uncommon instance of self-denial in me to disown them, were they really of my composition.[60]

Macpherson was laconic about his role in the composition / recuperation of the ancient text; he did not completely reject the accusation of falsification,

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letterature del mondo la più affine alla greca e alla latina, cioè a dire [...] alla sola vera, perché la sola naturale, e in tutto vota d'affettazione." Leopardi, *Lettera ai compilatori della Biblioteca Italiana*, 944.

[57] Leopardi, *Discorso sopra la poesia romantica*, 980. Trans. Sims and Camilletti, in Leopardi, *Discourse on Romantic Poetry*, 136.

[58] Giacomo Leopardi, *Inno a Nettuno*, 106.

[59] Ibid.

[60] *Fingal*, ii.

but rather alluded to it. The author effaced himself, hiding behind the mask of the translator. A similar attitude also characterizes Foscolo's presentation of his fake Greek verses in the 1803 footnotes to *La chioma di Berenice*—he presented his fragments as mediocre poetry: "quantunque questa poesia non abbia i caratteri della nobile semplicità Omerica […] vengonsi nondimeno *disjecti membra poetae*, ed un ardire felice" (despite the fact that this poetry does not have that noble simplicity that is characteristic of Homeric poetry, one can nonetheless see scattered fragments of poetry, and an effective effort).[61] On a second occasion, when in London, Foscolo published further fake fragments on the Graces in a volume dedicated to the Duke of Bedford (*Outline Engravings and Descriptions of the Woburn Abbey Marbles*, 1822). His *Dissertation on an Ancient Hymn to The Graces* accompanies these fragments, indicating the ancient poet Fanocles as a possible author; however, "some apparent anachronisms […] the extreme care, and artificial structure seem to border on the utmost verge of refinement, and to *betray a poet subsequent* to the period when the Lyric song in Greece was the spontaneous effusion of genius and the passion."[62]

Irony can, therefore, be considered a recurrent feature of forgers' self-representation; this is key, because irony can be considered one of the stylistic forms of modernity. Schiller also raised this point in relation to Ariosto, who is recognized as a modern precisely because of his ironical distance from the ideal world of chivalry.[63] It is probably not a coincidence, then, that for both Foscolo and Leopardi, later on, writing in an ironical style—the *Notizia intorno a Didimo Chierico* (*News about Didimo Chierico*) and the *Operette morali* (*Moral Tales*) respectively—was intended as a renunciation of research into poetry and an embrace of their identity as disenchanted modern writers.[64]

The form of the hymn, and its topic, are also extremely revealing of Leopardi's perspective on origins. Leopardi chooses a prayer as his first lyrical poem for publication, a truly primordial language, connected to the sphere of religion. A widespread interest in ancient hymnology informed

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[61] Foscolo, *La chioma di Berenice*, 211. See my *Rebuilding post-revolutionary Italy*, p. 115.
[62] Foscolo, *Dissertation on an Ancient Hymn to the Graces*, in *Poesie e Carmi*, 1095-6; my emphasis.
[63] Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, 199. Cf. Christian Rivoletti, *Ariosto e l'ironia della finzione. La ricezione letteraria e figurativa dell'Orlando Furioso in Francia, Germania e Italia* (Venice: Marsilio, 2014), 260-62.
[64] Cf Martina Piperno, "Nothing to Declare? Authorship and Contradiction in and around Leopardi's 'Canti'," *The Italianist* 37, no. 1 (2017): 36-49, particularly 40-41.

Leopardi's cultural background. Leopardi's choice, however, is probably also influenced by Foscolo's stance on the original religious value of ancient poetry.[65] While European forgers preferred to go back to ancient stories, heroes, and battles, foundational moments for specific communities, symbolic places and moments, Foscolo and Leopardi used the opportunity to search for an even more remote root of poetic language: the religion and the mythical heritage of the ancients, re-imagined without the accumulation of repetitive imitation of Classical and Neo-Classical texts, which had generated the sense of monotonousness often seen in modern poetry, and an object of debate in the Classic-Romantic quarrel. As Giordani observed, myth is regarded as a form of theology, of representation of the ancients' respect for the divine.[66] It is therefore an aboriginal, pre-literary, pre-civilized form of language that both Foscolo and Leopardi sought. Leopardi wanted to pretend to be the primordial poet, that first poet who had no direct models.

In her recent critical edition of the *Inno*, Margherita Centenari analyzes the strategies Leopardi used to counterfeit an archaic text: the choice of the metre (the hendecasyllable was traditionally used to translate ancient hexameters in Italian literature), the invention of compound nouns on the basis of ancient models, like "occhi-cilestra," (blue-eyed; l. 75), or "chiomi-bella," (beautifully-haired; l. 106) systematic use of morphosyntactic and lexical forms typical of archaic language. Leopardi, Centenari suggests, tries to form a plausible "natural language" through the use of topics and schemes taken from the mythical heritage (Homer, Hesiod, particularly his *Theogonia*), to which Leopardi imaginatively adds further details.[67] This is where the issue of authorship becomes important: by adopting the device of the forgery, Leopardi puts himself in the position not only of writing like an ancient poet, but also of drawing directly from the mythological heritage, composing an original narrative on the story of Neptune and freely combining different sources.

Through expert use of vast erudite sources, and imitative skills exercised through the practice of translation, Leopardi creates a space where he can sympathize—in the etymological sense of 'feeling'—with a primordial poet and his vision of the world. In an undated passage of the

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[65] On Leopardi's reading of Foscolo's writings on translation, on the relationship between Leopardi's hymn and Foscolo's *Chioma di Berenice*, and on early nineteenth-century hymnology cf. Centenari, "Prendere persona di Greco," 134-36.

[66] On this point, cf. Lucio Felici, *L'Olimpo abbandonato. Leopardi fra "favole antiche" e "disperati affetti"* (Venice: Marsilio 2005), 19.

[67] Centenari, "Introduzione," in Leopardi, *Inno a Nettuno*, 53-54.

Zibaldone (written between 1818 and 1820), Leopardi takes a powerful stance about the lost "horizon" of an ancient man observing nature:

> What a marvelous time it was when everything was alive, according to human imagination, and humanly alive, in other words inhabited or formed by beings like ourselves, when it was taken as certain that in the deserted woods lived the beautiful Hamadryads and fauns and woodland deities and Pan etc. and, on entering and seeing everything as solitude, you still believed that everything was inhabited, and that Naiads lived in the springs, etc., and embracing a tree you felt it almost palpitating between your hands and believed it was a man or a woman like Cyparissus etc., and same with flowers, etc., just as children do.[68]

The hynm is consistent with this vision of the world: the landscape depicted by the lyrical 'I' is inhabited by personified natural forces like Sky, Earth, Night; those, analogous to the Hamadryads and Fauns mentioned in the passage above, are godlike creatures that inhabit the natural world. Those are capable of hearing: "udilla" (he heard her; l. 39)—walking: "venne" (she came; l. 40)—hugging: "t'accogliea ben tosto la Diva Terra fra le sue grandi braccia" (soon divine Earth welcomed you in her wide arms; ll. 45-46). In short, these divine entities are capable of actions and feelings that are the same as those of humans: feeling, movement, care. In the hymn, nature is inhabited precisely by beings that are similar to men. The hynm's composition creates an occasion for Leopardi to place himself in that lost, infantile horizon where a man could imagine that every element of natural life (like a tree in the woods) was capable of communicating like a human being. This gave a sense of protection to the ancient self, even in solitary places, a sense of fullness that the moderns had lost. This reflection also echoes Foscolo's musings on the original connection between religious belief and poetic images directly (see above).[69]

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[68] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. Pacella, 69. "Che bel tempo era quello nel quale ogni cosa era viva secondo l'immaginazione umana e viva umanamente cioè abitata o formata di esseri uguali a noi, quando nei boschi desertissimi si giudicava per certo che abitassero le belle Amadriadi e i fauni e i silvani e Pane ec. ed entrandoci e vedendoci tutto solitudine pur credevi tutto abitato e così de' fonti abitati dalle Naiadi ec. e stringendoti un albere al seno te lo sentivi quasi palpitare fra le mani credendolo un uomo o donna come Ciparisso ec. e così de' fiori ec. come appunto i fanciulli." Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, eds. Caesar and D'Intino 63-64.

[69] For a discussion of Leopardi's recreation of aboriginal "natural language" and its connections with the then-current discussions on Vico's *New Science*, cf. Piperno, *Rebuilding Post-Revolutionary Italy*, 110-27.

Pietro Giordani not only praised the accuracy of this composition, but emphasized Leopardi's deep anthropological study of the ancient Greek imagination. When writing the hymn, he argued, Leopardi aimed to genuinely *embody* an ancient Greek: personify him (*prendere persona di greco*), incarnate him ("*incarnarsi* in Grecia sotto i tempi di Pericle e di Anassagora"), and make himself Greek (*ingrecarsi*).[70] It is noticeable how Giordani's lexical choices insist on Leopardi's alleged *penetration* into the Ancient Greek world. Following Giordani's suggestion, we could say that, through erudition, Leopardi attempted to create a link with the fictional original author of this text, which, to borrow a term from Ruthven, we could call empathy (*Einfühlung*), etymologically 'to feel in'; namely, "the self's capacity for identifying sympathetically with what is other to it."[71] Both *empathy* and *embodiment* of the ideal of the poet "senza modelli" (without models) are certainly key in this first expression of Leopardi's authorship.

Why did Leopardi choose to make his debut on the literary scene with a forgery? In part, this might be attributed to uncertainty and shyness related to the unpredictability of the audience's response. There was at least one significant antecedent: in writing the *Poems of Ossian*, Macpherson wanted to overcome the unsuccessful publication of his poem *The Highlander* (1758) by hiding behind the mask of the "mere facilitator of the text;" the mask protected him from blame, "as any 'faults' could be attributed to those Ossianic ballads he had faithfully translated."[72] Like other forgers, Macpherson was attracted to the idea of gaining a reputation, and possibly money, from his forgeries. It is possible that Leopardi, who yearned to make his first appearance in the public sphere, was trying to test the audience's reactions to his work as well, and to attract the readers' attention.

However, he would not describe his work in these terms; Leopardi would rather explain it as a virtuoso experiment, a performance. As he explained to Giordani, he wanted to "do as Michelangelo did when he dug up his Cupid, and then produced the missing arm for those who thought it was an ancient statue unearthed" (fare come Michel Angelo che sotterrò il suo Cupido, e a chi dissotterrato lo credea d'antico, portò il braccio mancante).[73] This is Leopardi's first description of his own authorship, and it is a rather unusual one: Leopardi sought to surprise and shock his readers by first producing a sensational discovery—exploiting its marketing

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[70] Giacomo Leopardi, *Scritti filologici raccolti e ordinati da Pietro Pellegrini e Pietro Giordani* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1845), 15-16; my translations.

[71] Ruthven, *Faking literature*, 27.

[72] Ibid., 14.

[73] Letter to Pietro Giordani, 30 May 1817, *Epistolario*, I, 104, in Leopardi, *Letters*, 43. Cf. Centenari, "Prendere persona di Greco," 129-30.

potential, as other forgers did—and then unveiling it as a formidable hoax. This disclosure would excite the readership, which would recognize Leopardi's ability to produce the illusion of the ancient. The reference to Michelangelo's anecdotal experience and the fantasy of gathering people around just to demonstrate his ability as an illusionist, show that Leopardi was thinking of himself almost as a magician. He longed to prove his capacity to write as a Greek, as well as to produce a sense of *illusion* in his readers—namely, persuade them of the originality of the text—but also destroy the illusion in order to gain approval for his ability. While he would later argue in favour of a poetry that maintains and safeguards illusions ("il poeta deve illudere")[74] at this early stage it was important for him to be recognized as an effective creator of illusions. Paradoxically, in order for him to do so, it was necessary that he himself destroy the illusion.

One can infer that for Leopardi, as well as for Foscolo, forgery represented a possible answer to a major issue in modern poetry: the lack of identification with the poetic language. This was the very issue that Foscolo had raised in the commentary on Callimachus and that, after De Staël's letter, resounded within the Italian intelligentsia in the so-called Classic-Romantic quarrel. Classical poetry, with its mythological apparatus, no longer provided material the moderns could use, argued the Italian Romantics; modern poets should find poetic inspiration, for example, in Christian imagery.[75] The mythological repertoire had become a technical, formulaic language which was no longer regarded as poetry;[76] it had survived as long as the culture was pagan, while modernity had grown to cherish abstract metaphysical concepts.[77] The perceptive Macpherson was aware that the success of a forgery was related to the suspension of disbelief, which in turn was a matter of readiness and willingness, for "posterity is always ready to *believe* anything, however fabulous, that reflects honour on their ancestors."[78]

With their forgeries, both Foscolo and Leopardi attempted to deceive their readers with *credible* poetic material. They were aware that they were

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[74] Leopardi, *Discorso*, 973.

[75] So argues Giovanni Berchet in his famous *Lettera semiseria di Grisostomo al suo figliolo*, in *I manifesti romantici del 1816 e gli scritti principali del Conciliatore sul Romanticismo*, ed. Carlo Calcaterra (Turin: UTET, 1951), 298.

[76] This is the position of Lodovico di Breme, as formulated in "Il giauro di Lord Byron," in *Discussioni e polemiche sul Romanticismo*, ed. Egidio Bellorini, (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1943), 1:262.

[77] Niccolò Tommaseo, entry "G. V. Gravina," in *Dizionario estetico*, (Florence: Le Monnier, 1867), 535.

[78] Machpherson, *Fingal*, ii.

unable to reproduce primitive religious illusions through the power of words, but they could attempt to engender an illusion that was similar to magic. Unlike for Foscolo, Leopardi recognized that this exercise contained a strong performative dimension, as the quotation about Michelangelo shows. Forging ancient poetry was, for both Foscolo and Leopardi, a way to suspend their audience's incredulity, implicitly demonstrating that authenticity was also a matter of belief.

Leopardi's poetic research would evolve to include new and different perspectives, which were more promising for him and more memorable for his readers; however, his *Inno a Nettuno*, due to its intentions and theoretical implications, definitely deserves consideration in the history of European eighteenth- and nineteenth-century forgeries, as a form of celebration and a cherishing of the myth of poetry's origins.

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PART II

ON LITERARY FORM

Chapter Four

The Invention of a Rational Fantastic in Leopardi's Writings, from *Zibaldone* to *Operette morali*

Daniela Bombara

Presenting a paper at a conference on "Il fantastico nella letteratura italiana" (The Fantastic in Italian Literature),[1] Italo Calvino wondered why Italian authors of the Romantic age devote very little space to irrational, supernatural, and unsettling motifs; this is due, argued Calvino, to their inability to analyse reality while distinguishing the otherness in it. Giacomo Leopardi can be considered the precursor in Italy of modern, twentieth-century otherworldly literature, for his invention of a rational fantastic:

> In this great poet and prose writer there is a fantastic nucleus, which can be seen in a few of his dialogues, or in that poetic fragment [Fragment XXXVII: "Listen, Melisso ..."] which describes a dream: the moon detaches from the sky and lies on a meadow [...] That is the authentic seed which could give birth to the Italian fantastic. Because the fantastic, contrary to popular belief, requires a lucid mind, rational control of both instinctive and unconscious inspiration, and a disciplined style; it also requires the ability to distinguish and blend fiction and reality, play and fear, fascination and coolness, that is, the ability to read the world through multiple levels and multiple languages at the same time.[2]

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[1] Unless otherwise specified all quotations and titles have been translated by Jolie Cuminale. All quotes from Leopardi's *Zibaldone* are taken from the edition Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, eds. Michael Caesar and Franco d'Intino (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux; London: Penguin, 2013).

[2] "In questo grande lirico e prosatore [Leopardi] esiste un nucleo fantastico che intravediamo in alcuni dei suoi dialoghi, o in quel frammento poetico [Frammento XXXVII: "Odi, Melisso ..."] che descrive un sogno in cui la luna si stacca dal cielo e si posa su un prato [...]. È quello il vero seme da cui poteva nascere il fantastico italiano. Perché il fantastico, contrariamente a quanto si può pensare, richiede mente

Calvino's words provided fundamental guidelines for the subsequent literary criticism pertaining to the Leopardian fantastic: scholars such as Prete, Castori, and Sandrini have focused mainly on the moon themes and of all the *Operette morali* (*Moral Tales*), Felici and Severino have devoted their attention particularly to *Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie*.[3] Some attention has been given by a few critics to other *Operette*, such as *Dialogo di un Folletto e di un Gnomo* (*Dialogue between a Sprite and a Gnome*), and *Dialogo di Malambruno e di Farfarello* (*Dialogue between Malambruno and Farfarello*).[4] The presence of seemingly gothic characters and situations in these works provides the opportunity to define the Leopardian fantastic, in comparison to or in conflict with Romantic culture and writing which, as is well-known, Leopardi scorned and considered incapable of apprehending the authentic meaning of existence.[5]

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lucida, controllo della ragione sull'ispirazione istintiva e inconscia, disciplina stilistica; richiede di saper nello stesso tempo distinguere e mescolare finzione e verità, gioco e spavento, fascinazione e distacco, cioè leggere il mondo su molteplici livelli e in molteplici linguaggi simultaneamente." Italo Calvino, "Il fantastico nella letteratura italiana," in *Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto*, ed. Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 2010), 203-4. Calvino opened his speech quoting from a Leopardian *Operetta*, the *Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie* (*Dialogue of Federico Ruysch and his Mummies*), which he considered very close to Northern Romanticism as it focuses on the crucial themes of the macabre and the supernatural.
[3] Cf. Antonio Prete, "La luna leopardiana," in *Il demone dell'analogia. Da Leopardi a Valery: studi di poetica* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1986), 11-29; Loredana Castori, "'Antica e stanca in ciel salia la luna.' Il limite dell''ultimo orizzonte' leopardiano nel passaggio dai *Canti* ai *Paralipomeni*," in *La Letteratura degli Italiani. Rotte confini passaggi*, XIV Congresso ADI, ed. Alberto Beniscelli, Quinto Marini, and Luigi Surdich (Genoa: University of Genoa, 2012); Giuseppe Sandrini, *Le avventure della luna. Leopardi, Calvino e il fantastico italiano* (Venice: Marsilio, 2014); Lucio Felici, "Il teatro della mente. Il *Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie*," in *La dimensione teatrale in Giacomo Leopardi*, Atti dell'XI Convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani (Florence: Olschki, 2008), 141-51; Emanuele Severino, *Cosa arcana e stupenda. L'Occidente e Leopardi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1997).
[4] Barbara Foresti, "*Il dialogo di un folletto e di uno gnomo*: uno studio intertestuale dei personaggi," *Studi e problemi di critica testuale*, 72 (April 2006), 97-117; "Leopardi e la magia: tra erudizione e creazione leopardiana," *La Rassegna della Letteratura Italiana*, 116, no. 9.1 (2012): 23-36; Emilio Giordano, "Uno sguardo oltre la fine: Leopardi, il folletto e uno gnomo," in *La dimensione teatrale in Giacomo Leopardi*, Atti dell'XI Convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani (Florence: Olschki, 2008), 423-30.
[5] In Leopardi's opinion, the gothic and fantastic elements used by the Italian Romantics are simply superimposed on reality, of which they become a grotesque double, in a literary operation that fails to provide the means to understand that

Even within the broad spectrum of existing criticism, there is no
comprehensive examination of the supernatural motifs in the *Operette*; in
fact, not only do most essays focus on a single work, but they also fail to
relate the Leopardian 'otherworld' with the theory of perception he
illustrated in *Zibaldone,* a connection that may explain some aspects of the
author's fantastic, often portrayed in vague and blurred forms.

In some of his *Operette* Leopardi stages supernatural beings whose
attributes are barely hinted at, and who are acting in a poorly defined
environment; moreover, these figures behave as characters belonging to a
most ordinary reality, their dialogues unfold in a sedate manner, and they
consider catastrophic events, such as mankind's annihilation, as though they
were facts of daily life.

While the Romantic Italian writers create an other, entirely fantastic
world, by presenting it in purely descriptive terms as a kind of "marvelous,"

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particular reality. Leopardi severely criticized the Romantics' inclinations towards
"the extraordinary" such as ghosts, skulls, witches, and disagreed with their "love of
singularity that makes them collect things vile, obscene, fetid and repugnant […].
What marvel derives, still, from this kind of imitations? And, what delight, then? If
what the Romantics maintain were true, nannies should be much better esteemed
than poets, and a puppet dressed with true clothes and a wig, with a face made of
wax and eyes made of glass, would be much worthier than a statue by Canova."
Giacomo Leopardi, "Discourse of an Italian on Romantic Poetry," trans. Gabrielle
Sims and Fabio A. Camilletti, in *Classicism and Romanticism in Italian Literature:
Leopardi's Discourse on Romantic Poetry,* ed. Fabio A. Camilletti, (New York:
Routledge, 2016), 137, 167-68. Leopardi operates in a very distinctive and even
opposite way to his Romantic counterparts. He represents the world analytically,
linking real and surreal aspects to the literary and mythical imagination. The purpose
is to provide a different interpretive framework for the observed reality. In this
respect, Calvino spoke of "nebulosità romantica" (Romantic haze), as opposed to a
Leopardian fantastic, which is a "lucida costruzione della mente" (lucid construction
of the mind). Only in the twentieth century, Calvino argued, "può nascere un
fantastico italiano, e questo avviene proprio quando la letteratura italiana si
riconosce soprattutto nell'eredità di Leopardi, cioè in una limpidezza di sguardo
disincantata, amara, ironica" (Can an Italian 'fantastic' be produced, and this will
happen when Italian literature recognizes Leopardi's legacy that is, the clarity of a
disenchanted, bitter, and ironic gaze). Cf. Calvino, "Il fantastico nella letteratura
italiana," 207. Regarding Calvino's definition of 'fantastic', on the basis of his
reading of Leopardi, cf. Andrea Cortellessa, "Al Leopardi ulteriore. G. Manganelli
e le *Operette Morali,*" in *Quel libro senza uguali. Le Operette morali e il Novecento
italiano,* eds. Novella Bellucci and Andrea Cortellessa (Rome: Bulzoni, 2000), 335-
406. Cf. also, on the relation between Calvino and Leopardi, Roberto Bertoni, "Note
sul dialogo di Calvino con Leopardi," in *L'ultimo orizzonte. Giacomo Leopardi, a
cosmic poet and his testament* (Turin: Trauben, 1999), 69-100.

to quote the interpretive paradigm from a well-known Todorov essay, Leopardi instead establishes a system where reality and supernatural intermingle; he presents fantastic events or characters as if they were real and authentic.[6] This allows the author to adopt an estranged point of view towards the 'known world', in order to see it from a non-human perspective. Furthermore, this permits otherworldly beings to examine nineteenth-century society without prejudices, to highlight its negative aspects and false myths. Therefore, the Sprite/Gnome couple undermines anthropocentrism and the faith in the "magnifiche sorti e progressive" (magnificent and progressive fate),[7] the duet Devil/Magician shows the illusory nature of pleasure; sisters Fashion and Death demonstrate the macabre features of existence, the statue/Nature illustrates the destructive function of the elements.

In comparing Leopardi's *Operette* with the nineteenth-century Italian gothic, we see that the descriptive modalities are reversed: as already mentioned, personages and situations are described by Leopardi by means of minimal characterization, which is connected to the theory of perception

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[6] The concept of the "marvelous" is quoted from Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975); however, one should consider that the scholar's ternary definition of supernatural literature, according to which the fantastic is determined by a cognitive "hesitation" of the reader between "marvelous" and "uncanny," cannot be applied to *Operette,* in which there is no doubt or "hesitation" about the otherworldly nature of the characters. More pertinent, in my opinion, is Christine Brooke-Rose's theoretical reflection on the representation of the "unreal as real" in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structures, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univeristy Press, 1981), 289, which emphasizes the dismantling, from the inside out, of the logic of the 'real' world. In this respect, Leopardi's fantastic is a "literature of subversion," which overturns the laws of daily life: "Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently 'new', absolutely 'other' and different." Cf. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London-New York: Methuen, 1981), 8. Leopardi's imagination gives rise to an upside-down world, in which progress is turned into involution, life into death, and movement into stagnation. This inversion, as Eric Rabkin notes, is typical of a "truly fantastic [which] occurs when the ground rules of a narrative are forced to make 180 degree reversal, when prevailing perspectives are directly contradicted […]; the fantastic exists only against a background to which it offers a direct reversal," cf. Eric Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 197, 216.
[7] Giacomo Leopardi, *La ginestra o il fiore del deserto (The Broom)*, in *Canti* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1869), 179.

expounded on in *Zibaldone*.[8] The 'vague representation' opens the text to a wide spectrum of interpretations, enriching the fantastic figures with all the meaning they gained throughout human history, at both a literary and folkloric level, which therefore conjoins them with the ancestral anguishes of the human being; the Romantic narratives of the irrational are instead too precise, and they evidently tend to elicit strong sensations, terror for example, leaving no space for the reader's interpretation.

This "bare bones" depiction also highlights the negative and conflictual nature of the Leopardian fantastic, which does not aim to create another system of values or another reality, but rather to destroy the one which we experience: it therefore exposes the "void" as an absence of characterization,

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[8] In a note in *Zibaldone*, dated 8 January 1820 (*Zib.*, 100), Leopardi states his preference for ancient poetry, which is unfinished, as opposed to finished modern poetry, "because, by just using a few descriptive strokes to describe and showing only a few parts of an object, they allowed the imagination to wander among those vague and indeterminate ideas of childhood, which are born of ignorance of the whole" (perché descrivendo con pochi colpi, e mostrando poche parti dell'oggetto, lasciavano l'immaginazione errare nel vago e nell'indeterminato di quelle idee fanciullesche, che nascono dall'ignoranza dell'intiero) Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. Rolando Damiani (Milan: Mondadori, 2015). A few months later (*Zib.*, 172), while defining his theory of pleasure, the young Leopardi develops an oft-quoted reflection about "la siepe" (the hedge) and its function: only by obscuring a part of reality is it possible to go beyond the daily life world. The desire for a "veduta ristretta" (a view that is restricted) originates from "the desire for the infinite, because then, instead of sight, the imagination is at work and the fantastic takes over from the real" (il desiderio dell'infinito, perché allora in luogo della vista, lavora l'immaginazione e il fantastico sottentra al reale) (12-23 luglio 1820). In his examination of the Leopardian poem *L'Infinito* (*The Infinite*), Fabrizio Podda notices that "a temporary suspension of disbelief" (sospensione momentanea del pensiero) is necessary to cross the threshold between reality and irreality: "There is a figure in the text which indicates that step physically, or rather geometrically: the hedge, an object in the scene turned into a syntactic shifter. As it is an obstacle, it forces the viewer into of a new level of perception" (C'è una figura nel testo che segna fisicamente, direi geometricamente, quel passaggio, ed è la siepe, che da oggetto della scena diviene shifter sintattico, costringendo, in quanto ostacolo, l'innesco di un nuovo livello della percezione). Fabrizio Podda, "'Attraverso la mobile speranza'. Spazio e sintassi nella poesia di Franco Fortini," in *Spazio e spazialità poetica nella poesia italiana del Novecento*, eds. Mario Moroni and Laura Incalcaterra (Leicester: Troubador Publishing Ltd., 2005), 148n41. In Leopardi's *Operette*, the device enabling an enhancement of perception is the evocative depiction of characters and landscapes: a few significant details increase the reader's power of imagination, directing them towards dimensions that exceed the limits of ordinary existence.

which was instead relevant in the literary tradition for characters such as the devil, who is depicted through a detailed iconographical representation.[9]

It is crucial to observe that reality and imagination co-exist in Leopardian discourse: the interlocutors of his dialogues are individuals, maybe gossipy or arrogant, and at the same time are sprites, devils, or social phenomena such as Fashion. Leopardi chooses to 'domesticate' the fantastic making it an everyday experience, in order to present the moment of subversion of the rule, namely the supernatural intrusion, as though it has already happened; he thus removes every fabulous and fantastical connotation from his characters, who are able to lucidly analyse the world they face, due to their condition of being in between, both true and imaginary. This 'Rhetoric of the Unreal'[10] determines a dismantling of reality and its laws: if the fantastic is real, by contrast the world is absurd, and what the reader can interpret is both authentic and fictional, reasoned and emotional, or even scary.[11] Thus the 'otherworldly' *Operette* question the Aristotelian logic for adopting a wider line of thinking, by joining rational and irrational elements; in this respect, it is possible to connect Leopardi's real/fantastic to the author's notion of "ultrafilosofia," a cognitive tool for investigating reality as a whole, avoiding "the limitations of analytical reason [which] separates [elements] from the chaotic bundle of which reality consists, [instead weaving them] together with the synthetic power of imagination."[12]

Leopardi rejects the visionary fantastic that was dear to Romantic literature. Devils, sprites, the undead and Death itself are not confined to a marginal otherness, frightening and consolatory at the same time, but also

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[9] Valentina Milli recognizes in the language of the fantastic a linguistic void, that is also a "semantic void: the fantastic event produces a demolition of the usual order of reality, without creating a new order [...]; the fantastic is characterized by both emptiness and absence, in direct opposition to the 'wholeness' of reality" (vuoto semantico: l'evento fantastico produrrebbe una demolizione dell'ordine consueto della realtà senza tuttavia ricrearne uno nuovo [...]; il fantastico [è] caratterizzato dal vuoto e dall'assenza, in diretta opposizione alla 'pienezza' del reale). Cf. Valentina Milli, *Truth is an odd number. La narrativa di Flann O' Brien e il fantastico* (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2015), 13.

[10] Cf. Brook-Rose, A Rhetoric of the Unreal.

[11] The motif of the fantastic as real will become dominant in works of the later twentieth century, such as, to quote one of the most famous examples, *Die Verwandlung* (1915) by Franz Kafka.

[12] Cf. Daniela Bini, "Giacomo Leopardi's *Ultrafilosofia*," in *Italica*, 74 (Spring 1997), 52. In the original manuscript, which can be consulted in the critical edition by Fiorenza Ceragioli and Monica Ballerini, the word used is "oltrafilosofia." I decided to maintain the variant "ultrafilosofia" throughout this article as "ultrafilosofia" is more extensively represented in the critical literature.

far removed from ordinary life. Leopardi's supernatural instead, mirrors the surface of the world, revealing in this process what it conceals, namely its frightening and horrific nothingness.

Dialogo della Moda e della Morte is emblematic of the way Leopardi approaches the fantastic genre.[13] Its starkness is typical of his style, and applies to characters generally rich in characterization, like Death.[14] The ensuing tension acquires a particular epistemological value: the literary iconography of Death and Fashion, with all its connotations, is invariably questioned.[15] Vague and indistinct, the 'odd couple' appears to the audience immersed in an abstract, indefinite landscape.[16] Death's senses are stultified

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[13] I intend herein to examine four *Operette*, which are particularly representative, in my opinion, of Leopardi's fantastic: *Dialogo della Moda e della Morte* (*Dialogue between Fashion and Death*), *Dialogo di un Folletto e di uno Gnomo*, *Dialogo di Malambruno e di Farfarello*, and *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* (*Dialogue between Nature and an Icelander*). *Dialogue Between Frederick Ruysch and His Mummies,* in which the fantastic themes are also central, is not included in this analysis because it has been widely examined by critics, so I will add only a few notes to other scholars' conclusions. Instead, as far as the other *Operette* are concerned, critical investigations have paid scant attention to the function of fantastic features, limiting their focus to the classical or folkloric sources of the various supernatural elements.

[14] The dialogue, composed between February 15 and 18, 1824, occupies the third place in the principal editions (1827, 1834 and 1835) of the *Operette morali*, after the *Storia del genere umano* (*History of the Human Race*) and the *Dialogo di Ercole e Atlante* (*Dialogue Between Hercules and Atlas*), and is closely connected to the first one. As Patrick Creagh suggests, "this is a further variation con brio on a theme suggested in the andante of The History: the silliness of mankind in general, but especially of the modern age." Giacomo Leopardi, *The Moral Tales. Operette morali,* trans. Patrick Creagh (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1983), 50.

[15] However, Leopardi draws on a great number of sources for his invention, sources meticulously recorded by Raoul Bruni in "*Dialogo della Moda e della Morte* di Giacomo Leopardi," in *Per Leggere*, 21 (Fall 2011), 25-26. In his study, Bruni notes that the idea of a mortuary fashion is taken from a poetic dialogue by Saverio Bettinelli, *Amore e la Gran Moda*, in which Fashion hides a "sozzo scheletro" (filthy skeleton) under her clothes.

[16] Odd and hellish: the underworldly nature of Death is well-known, as is that of Fashion, who assumes a demonic role from the beginning, as Death crushes her: "Go to Hell." Cf. Bruni in this regard, according to whom the exclamation introduces a "contesto infernale, tra macabro e grottesco" (hellish context, between macabre and grotesque). "*Dialogo della Moda e della Morte* di Giacomo Leopardi," 35. The abused exclamation hides a deep truth: Fashion will exhibit devilish behaviour as she cruelly torments men and women forcing mankind to submit to her silly dictates.

or inadequate: she has "mala vista" ("I don't see very well")[17] and can't use glasses, as glasses powerful enough do not exist and she couldn't wear them anyway. Leopardi's Death falls into the canonical iconography of a 'skull faced' reaper, one who is moreover afflicted by weak hearing, as she herself complains. Blindness and deafness propose a representation that abandons the medieval fantastic system to embrace the classical one, where Death conceals the Greek Thanatos, often depicted with closed eyes, and Tyche/Fortuna (Fortune), "cieca e sorda," (blind and deaf). Leopardi himself could find examples of the mythological Fortuna in his father's library, for example in Gozzi's writings, which provide further insights and suggestions for the composition of the *Operetta*.[18] The overlapping of mythological themes and literary sources generates an unsettlingly oxymoronic character, whose veiled appearance just hides two hollow sockets. Most importantly, her mission is carried out with complete randomness and in the feverish and senseless way that is typical of Tyche/Fortuna. Defined as "pazzaccia" (foolish) by Gozzi in his short story *Dov'è Prudenza, è ogni deità* (366), this figure is forced, like Leopardi's Death, into a relentless and frantic motion. Indeed it is the impoverished representation of Death that makes room for the surprising 'triumph' of Fashion, who declares her condition of sisterhood, as "l'una e l'altra tiriamo parimente a disfare e rimutare di continuo le cose di quaggiù" (you and I together keep undoing and changing things down here on earth).[19] An inexorable metamorphosis eliminates any kind of persistence in human affairs, challenging their ontological self-importance. Thus, their dialogue reveals that submission to fashion's obsession is but a degradation of humanity, which has been transformed into a foolish circus of freaks, of mutilated and tortured individuals:

> I haven't refrained nor I am refraining now from playing many games comparable with yours [Death's], such as, for instance, piercing ears, lips, or noses with holes and causing them to be torn by the trinkets I hang in those holes; charring the flesh of men with red-hot brands, as I make them

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[17] Giacomo Leopardi, *Operette Morali. Essays and Dialogues*, ed. Giovanni Cecchetti (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 66, 67.
[18] Leopardi found the definition of Fortune as a "Dea cieca e sorda" in a short story titled *Dov'è Prudenza, è ogni deità* (366-84, 371). The collection is Gozzi's, *Opere in Versi e inProsa del conte Gasparo Gozzi viniziano*, vol. 4 (Venice: da' torchj di Carlo Palese, 1794), in which the satire *Di una visita fatta all'inferno*, may be the possible inspiration for the very *Operetta*, as Bruni suggests (*Dialogo della Moda e della Morte*, 26, 35). There, Gozzi imagines a fashionable netherworld, where *fashionistas* find their hellish doom.
[19] Leopardi, *OM*, 68, 69.

do for beauty's sake; misshaping the heads of babies with bandages and other trappings […]; crippling people with tight shoes; cutting off their breath and making their eyes pop out because of their tight corsets.[20]

Leopardi's character serves as an inverted image of the eighteenth-century's proclaimed goddess, who, by feeding the illusion of eternal youth, condenms humankind to a non-life,[21] with the dead walking in the open air. Fashion has generated a dystopian world, where the living dead, like in a science-fiction scenario, unravel the antinomies of reality. Existence is a living death, where the illusion of beauty has produced only suffering and deformed bodies. Outside of the constraints of a formal logic, the structural element of estrangement is the double, as Fashion exchanges her role with Death, producing apprehension and disturbance.[22]

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[20] "Non sono però mancata e non manco di fare parecchi giuochi da paragonare ai tuoi [della Morte], come verbigrazia sforacchiare quando orecchi, quando labbra e nasi, e stracciarli colle bazzecole che io v'appicco per li fori; abbruciacchiare le carni degli uomini con istampe roventi che io fo che essi v'improntino per bellezza; sformare le teste dei bambini con fasciature e altri ingegni […]; storpiare la gente colle calzature snelle; chiuderle il fiato e fare che gli occhi le scoppino dalla stretture dei bustini." Ibid. The idea of clothes that torture who wears them was probably suggested to Leopardi by the reading of Filippo Pananti's work, *Il poeta di teatro: romanzo poetico* (Milan: G. Silvestri, 1817). The poem satirizes the pitiful life of a playwright who cannot afford buttons and uses instead twisted pins that "always prick his body, / and when they stick to his skin, / the poor gentleman sees stars" (sempre gli punzecchiano la carne, / e quando gli si attaccano alla pelle, / il povero signor vede le stelle), 12.
[21] Fashion says: "I have ordered the world in such manner and customs that life itself, both of the body and of the soul, is more dead than alive" (Ho messo nel mondo tali ordini e tali costumi, che la vita stessa, così per rispetto del corpo come dell'animo, è più morta che viva). Addressing her sister Death: "And while in ancient times you had no other property except ditches and caves where you sowed bones and dust in the darkness, which are seeds that bear no fruit now you have land under the sun; and the people who move and walk about with their own feet are, so to speak, entirely yours even without harvesting them" (E quando che anticamente tu non avevi altri poderi che fossi e caverne, dove tu seminavi ossami e polverumi al buio, che sono semenze che non fruttano; adesso hai terreni al sole; e genti che si muovono e che vanno attorno co' loro piedi, sono roba, si può dire, di tua ragione libera, ancorchè tu non le abbi mietute, anzi subito che elle nascono). Leopardi, *OM*, 72, 73.
[22] "Leopardi's creation makes Fashion a real and true double of Death" (L'invenzione leopardiana fa della Moda un vero e proprio doppio della Morte). Cf. Bruni, *"Dialogo della Moda e della Morte,"* 26.

On the other hand, Fashion is also affected by a kind of sensory obtuseness that mirrors the blurred vision and deafness of her macabre sister. Her "vocina da ragnatelo" (spider-web voice),[23] was probably introduced by Leopardi to express his dislike of the habit of conducting conversations in a soft-spoken way, but also as an implicit criticism of contemporary society, "bent upon negating anything natural and instinctive."[24] However, the word "ragnatelo" in this context also refers to the myth of Arachne. A few lines before, Death had in fact reproached Fashion for her inaudible tone: "In caso che tu non parli col tuo pensiero o con persona che tu abbi dentro la strozza, alza più la voce" (If you are not talking to yourself or to someone who is inside your throat, raise your voice).[25] 'Strozza' is a term borrowed from Dante, a reminder that the *Operetta* is strewn with references to the first canto of the *Commedia*. It is easy for reader to link the spider-web voice to Arachne's legend with its Dantean appropriation, the "folle Aragne" (mad Arachne) confined to canto XII of Purgatory as she atones for her arrogance. In the *Operetta*'s upside-down world, in contrast, Fashion/Arachne proclaims her power over a mankind bound by the laces of vanity. The scenario of the *Operetta* appears as a living hell, where sins, such as the obsession for appearances, are glorified while humanity lies suffering.

Yet the couple's weakened senses have a further, uncanny, meaning. Inhabiting the subterranean netherworld, they represent the condition of otherness, where senses are dampened, and even negated, as occurs in the many hells of the classical literary tradition.[26] This *Operetta*, as Bruni notes,

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[23] Leopardi, *OM,* 68, 69.

[24] Giovanni Cecchetti, in Leopardi *Operette morali*, 513n3.

[25] Leopardi, *OM,* 68, 69.

[26] In Leopardi's works, the inhabitants of the afterlife have generally dulled senses, like the confused and oneiric memory of life in Ruysch's mummies, or the voice of the dead in *Paralipomeni*, "oscura, fioca, a stento decifrabile" (obscure, tiny, difficult to decipher). Cf. Loredana Castori, "Magico leopardiano. Il limite estremo: tra il 'sudato sogno' e la condizione larvale," in *ItaliaMagica. Letteratura fantastica e surreale dell'Ottocento e del Novecento*, ed. Giovanna Caltagirone and Sandro Maxia (Cagliari: AM&D, 2008), 759. Further proof of this other nature of the dialogue's protagonists, present also in the more fatuous of the two, is the Doppelgänger who seems to inhabit Fashion, who could have, as Death assumes, someone "dentro alla strozza" (inside her throat). Cf. Leopardi, *Operette morali*, 68, 69. This would explain her soft voice. The clue intends to underline the incommunicability of mundane conversations, but it generates a teratomorphic and devouring figure that subtly recalls the violence perpetrated against men. The motif of the diminished/denied vision, along with the obsession with sight, is typical of the 'fantastic' during all time periods and geographic latitude. Cf. Remo Ceserani,

presents a system of mythological and fictional/literary levels. The descriptive vagueness of the beginning appears as strategic, as it does not restrict the role of the imagination while allowing for the stratification of a complex network of meanings. Death/Thanatos/Tyche and Fashion/Arachne join forces to underline the fickleness of humanity and to mock its illusions. Confirming this is the final dialogue's image of a world devoid of immortality:

> Fashion: "So now if someone dies, you can rest assured that there isn't a particle of him that isn't dead, and he'd better go right underground in his entirety, just like a fish who's swallowed up head and bones in a mouthful."[27]

The joint power of Fashion and Death has turned the world into a cemetery, and it is only natural that existence, in its superficial appearance, will be entirely devoured. The biblical image of an earth-monster swallowing its sinners, archetypal in Judaic culture,[28] unequivocally conveys humanity's disquieting insignificance:

> I was frightened to find myself in the midst of nothingness, a nothing myself. I felt as if I were suffocating, thinking and feeling that all is nothing, solid nothing.[29]

Il fantastico (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996) 25, 29, 83. The theme challenges the usual perception of reality, considered superficial and misleading; 'fantastic' discourse instead proposes a more in-depth view. These differences notwithstanding, the focus on seeing and eyes is central in one of the most renowned fantastic short stories by E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Der Sandmann* (1815), where the motif is similarly connected to death.

[27] "Moda: 'Al presente, chiunque si muoia, sta sicura che non ne resta un briciolo che non sia morto, e che gli conviene andare subito sotterra tutto quanto, come un pesciolino che sia tranguigiato in un boccone con tutta la testa e le lische.'" Leopardi, *OM,* 74, 75.

[28] In the Bible's Book of Numbers, sinners are punished by being eaten alive by a giant mouth that coincides with the earth itself. "But if the Lord creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up, with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the Lord." Cf. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*, New Revised Standard Version, eds. Michael D. Coogan et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Book of Numbers 16:30. In the Book of Isaiah (5:14), the ravenous monster is Sheol, the underworld: "Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure."

[29] "Io era spaventato nel trovarmi in mezzo al nulla, un nulla io medesimo. Io mi sentiva come soffocare considerando e sentendo che tutto è nulla, solido." (*Zib.*, 85);

Leopardi preserves a minimalist style throughout the collection, providing no physical description of the *Operette*'s protagonists, like in the 'fantastic' *Dialogo di un Folletto e di uno Gnomo*. In this dramatic work, information is generally provided through action and clues, as the reader learns of the characters' location before discovering who they actually are.[30] The gnome in this text is a chthonic spirit, probably derived from Renaissance magic,[31] who emerges out of the bowels of the Earth to observe human activity.

This dialogue clearly demonstrates the effect of an "estrangement from the familiar," as presented by Brooke-Rose, as a basic element of the fantastic (*Rhetoric of the Unreal*, 19); at the same time the *Operetta* shows the subversive function of the literary supernatural. Death and Fashion are both 'reduced', one to a mad old woman and the other to a goofy young one; the depiction highlights the collapse of the false Romantic myths of the 'bella morte', indeed of the 'fashion of the death'. It may be said that the 'domestication' of the fantastic in this *Operetta* is perhaps more similar to a "parodical debasement" which maintains serious and comic elements, to cite an expression from *Bakhtin's* theory of the *carnevalesque*, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 21. The two sisters, albeit ridiculous, retain their unsettling connotations, converting daily reality into a mortuary and ephemeral object. The theme of death in life, more precisely of mental processes which vampirize existence, is typical of fantastic literature; cf. at least *The Oval Portrait* (1842), by Edgard Allan Poe.

[30] On the 'theatrical' structure of the *Operetta* see Emilio Giordano, "Uno sguardo oltre la fine. Leopardi, il folletto e uno gnomo," in *La dimensione teatrale in Giacomo Leopardi*, Atti dell'XI Convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani (Florence: Olschki, 2008), 424; and Giuseppe Sangirardi, *Il libro dell'esperienza e il libro della sventura. Forme della mitografia filosofica nelle "Operette morali"* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2000), 104-5. Leopardi "propone silenziosamente alla nostra mente particolari nascosti nelle battute dialogiche che si stemperano e si mescolano fra loro fino a formare una figura, non netta, ma sfumata, più legata forse all'interiorità che all'esteriorità dell'immagine" (quietly suggests to the readers hidden details within the dialogues, details that gradually blend to create an indistinct but nuanced shape, more closely linked to the interiority than to the exteriority of the image) (Foresti, "Il dialogo di un folletto," 111). The Sprite and the Gnome do not belong to the objective world, so their thoughts, not preoccupied with human matters, are sharper and more capable of reaching beyond reality's surface. Leopardi's literary invention seems to anticipate some recent dystopian fantasies, such as *Dissipatio H. G.*, written between 1972 and 1973 by Guido Morselli. Cf. Fabio Pierangeli, "Le *Operette morali* e *Dissipatio H. G.* di Guido Morselli: dell'estinzione e di un'ultima pietà," in *Quel libro senza uguali. Le "Operette morali" e il Novecento italiano*, eds. Novella Bellucci and Andrea Cortellessa (Rome: Bulzoni, 2000), 271-81.

[31] The first to coin the term 'gnome' (gnome) is probably Teofrasto Bombaste von Hohenheim, better known as Paracelsus (1493-1541), in his *Liber de nymphis*

In the Sprite's exclamation, "Oh sei tu qua" (Oh, you are here),[32] the deictic "here" indicates an unspecified place, between the sky and the underworld, in which the two characters dialogue; the absence of living beings suggests a virtual stage, the ideal vantage point from which to observe the extinction of all humans.[33] Examining the literary sources in Leopardi's library and his *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* (*Essay on Ancient Popular Mistakes*), Foresti concludes that the gnome is closely linked to the Earth, and to superstitious beliefs, a demigod or supernatural creature, able to discover hidden treasures. The Sprite is instead connected to Hermes; both protagonists are therefore intermediaries "tra il mondo terreno e il mondo olimpico" (between the earth and Olympus).[34] As such, they share a similar hermeneutical function: they help explain the reasons behind the annihilation of humanity.[35] Giordano compares the couple to the chorus of ancient Greek tragedies given its function of drawing an exemplary lesson from events, to pronounce the "nuda, disillusa verità" (naked, disillusioned truth).[36] A further possible literary source is Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, where the exchange between Ariel and Caliban helps clarify the sense of the fantastic featured in the *Operetta*.[37] As Ariel does with Caliban, the Sprite torments his more

Sylphis, Pygmaeis, Salamandris et de Caeteris Spiritibus; the word could be derived from the Greek *genomos*, earth-dweller, or from the Greek root *gnosis*, knowledge.
[32] Leopardi, *OM*, 86, 97.
[33] The sprite tells the gnome that, "gli uomini sono tutti morti, e la razza è perduta" (men are all dead and their race is lost): "Il fantasioso 'day after' […] vive così su un palcoscenico vuoto e privo di sicuri confini," (the fantastic "day after" […] is thus played on an empty stage that lacks clear borders). Cf. Giordano, "Leopardi, il folletto e uno gnomo," 428.
[34] Cf. Foresti, "Il dialogo di un folletto," 110.
[35] In the dialogue the gnome is called by the Sprite "figlio di Sabazio" (son of Sabatius), a Thracian-Phrygian god connected to popular mystery cults and to the orgiastic rites of Dionysos; these religious beliefs had both a hermeneutical and soteriological function. The gnome's character refers to that area of chthonic deities, symbols of nature's uncontrollable forces, of an otherness that can't be explained with rational tools. Death/Thanatos and Nature/Cybel, belong to the same mythological field, which appears in *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*.
[36] Giordano, "Uno sguardo oltre la fine. Leopardi, il folletto e uno gnomo," 429.
[37] It can be of some interest to note that Leopardi had certainly read Shakespeare, but had not understood him deeply. The annoyance and the fundamental misunderstanding that Leopardi displays towards every theatrical genre, except ancient Greek tragedy, is well known; playwriting was too 'objective' for a lyrical poet such as he was. His opinions on Shakespeare therefore are certainly superficial, as Singh notes: "One has the impression that although Leopardi knew some of Shakespeare's works including Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, and Romeo and Juliet,

unsophisticated partner, mocking his simplicity, and when the Gnome imagines the demise of the human race as having consequences, the Sprite retorts that nothing has actually changed. The Gnome ('son of Sabatius', a deity involved in a process of death/rebirth), echoes the demonic nature of Shakespeare's Caliban when he expresses the desire that one or two men might be resurrected:

> Yet I would like one or two of that lousy bunch to come back to life so that we could find out what they'd think, seeing that in spite of the disappearance of the human race, everything else is still there and keeps on going just as before while they thought that the whole world had been created and sustained only for them.[38]

If the Sprite and the Gnome recall *The Tempest*'s duo, then humankind can be equated with Prospero's realm, where a man, who arrogantly imposed his laws and rules, is destined to forfeit his supernatural powers, as well as his authority to preside over the process of life and death.[39] Leopardi's *Operetta* suggests, through the Gnome's words, that this extraordinary power can now be exercised only by otherworldly characters, whilst humankind is not even capable of preventing its own demise. Celtic mythology, of which Sprites and Gnomes are part, is offered not in order to evoke the 'marvelous' as a form of compensation to the flatness of daily life, but rather to highlight the hidden anxieties and the forces mining from within; all the typical Romantic 'gothic' themes become superfluous, and

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his perception and analysis of the art and genius of Shakespeare (not as poetic as it was dramatic) does not have the authoritativeness and critical acumen that are normally associated with Leopardi's critical mind" (Si ha l'impressione che, sebbene Leopardi conoscesse alcune opere di Shakespeare tra cui Amleto, Otello, Macbeth e Romeo e Giulietta, la sua percezione ed analisi dell'arte e del genio non tanto poetico quanto drammatico di Shakespeare non abbia quell'autorevolezza ed acutezza critica che normalmente associamo con la mente critica di Leopardi). Cf. Ghan Singh, "Leopardi e Shakespeare," in *La dimensione teatrale in Giacomo Leopardi*, Atti dell'XI Convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani (Florence: Olschki, 2008), 313.

[38] "Ben avrei caro che uno o due di quella ciurmaglia risuscitassero, e sapere quello che penserebbero vedendo che le altre cose, benchè sia dileguato il genere umano, ancora durano e procedono come prima, dove essi credevano che tutto il mondo fosse fatto e mantenuto per loro soli." Cf. Leopardi, *OM*, 90-91. A 'return of the living dead' is represented in *Dialogue Between Federico Ruysch and His Mummies*.

[39] [Prospero] *"graves at my command / Have waked their sleepers, open'd and let 'em forth / By my so potent art. But this rough magic / I here abjure."* William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, eds. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, Act V, scene 1 (London: A&C Black, 1999), 288.

the fantastic figures survive only to witness humankind's end and mock humans' hubris, which is at the root of the disaster. The presence of the fantastic in the text is then intended to determine a 'critical distance', which subverts the usual order of things, and demonstrates the invalidity of an anthropocentric point of view: the wars and killings described by the Sprite are ridiculed as the activities of "monelli" (rascals), despite their having ultimately caused humankind to suffer annihilation; kingdoms and empires, likened to bubbles that kept "gonfiando e scoppiando" (swelling until they burst), have now vanished;[40] the entire human mythological/cosmological tradition is ridiculed, as is Fortune, who, after the end of humankind, "si è cavata via la benda, e messosi gli occhiali" (has taken off her blindfold, and has put on glasses)."[41]However, both the Sprite and the Gnome are guilty of human presumption when they state that the world had been "Tutto il mondo fosse fatto e mantenuto per loro soli" (created and sustained only for them).[42] The fantastic exercises its desecrating function also against itself and the Bakhtinian "parodical debasement"[43] undermines both humankind's activities and its imaginative capacity, of which the supernatural personages are the product. Literary and mythological traditions therefore join together to reveal the ephemeral substance of our existence.

According to Barbara Foresti, in *Dialogo di Malambruno e di Farfarello* (*Dialogue between Malambruno and Farfarello*) the ridiculed magician, already present in other works by Leopardi but here referring to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, serves to debunk popular superstition.[44] Farfarello, Malambruno's stooge, is an unusually wise devil, quite different from the Dantesque character of Malebolge (*Inferno*, Cantos XXI-XXII). His matrix can be found in the draft of a Leopardian tale, *Senofonte e Niccolò Machiavello* (*Xenophon and Niccolò Machiavelli*).[45] As in other dialogues by Leopardi, the participants and the social context are not characterized. The reader accidentally learns that Farfarello has a tail—the only element borrowed from the traditional demonic iconography—and that the action plays out in an enclosed space, when the magician threatens to hang Farfarello "per la coda a una di queste travi, se tu non mi ubbidisci subito senza più parole" (by your tail from one of these beams if you don't obey

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[40] Leopardi, *OM*, 88, 89.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid., 90-91.

[43] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 21.

[44] Foresti "Leopardi e la magia," 23-36. Malambruno is a magician presented in Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote* (*El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha*), (Madrid: Juan de la Cuesta, 1605), cap. XXXIX, XL, Vol. II.

[45] Cf. Foresti, "Leopardi e la magia," 31-32.

me immediately).[46] Foresti underlines "il poetico del personaggio indefinito" (the poetic of the indefinite character),[47] in reference to supernatural and legendary figures; actually the point is not aesthetic but referred to the function of this descriptive 'void', which is central in Jackson's theory of the fantastic as subversion, as mentioned above: "By attempting to make visible that which is culturally invisible […] the fantastic introduces absences," and it "moves into, or opens up, a space without/outside cultural order."[48] The hidden, transgressive concept, which can be presented only in negative terms, is the inability for human beings to experience pleasure.

When Malambruno implores Farfarello to let him feel just a mere instant of happiness we are reminded of Leopardi's well-known 'theory of pleasure'. Farfarello cannot satisfy Malambruno's desire because although humans already love themselves endlessly, endless happiness cannot be achieved. The Faustian myth is questioned and, along with it, the entire Romantic movement, which had hoped to overcome human finiteness by relying on supernatural forces. Indeed the literary topos of the diabolical pact is not only criticized but it is also ridiculed: Malambruno's request is insignificant and the two characters—a civilized devil and an inept magician—constitute an overturned, debunked version of their literary forerunners, who are recalled to the reader's mind only in name, as their actions are drastically different.[49] The allusions to the literary tradition surely have an antiphrastic meaning: for Leopardi, the marvelous belongs in a fictional realm and, as the author seems to say, no witchcraft or devilry can alter the current situation; death, as Malambruno says, is the only solution. The 'unreal as real' is on the scene once again, to deny any human activity and humanity's overall existence. Leopardi's "negative rationality,"[50] however, recovers the Faustian pact, as the devil gives the magician a sort of

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[46] Leopardi, *OM*, 98, 99.

[47] Cf. Foresti, "Leopardi e la magia," 36

[48] Jackson, *Fantasy*, 69, 42.

[49] In the dialogue, even the characters mentioned in passing, like Ciriatto, Baconero, Astiatorre, Alichino, belong to a specific literary source: Ciriatto and Alichino, like Farfarello, are in Dante's *Inferno*, Cantos XXI-XXII; Baconero is in *Il malmantile riconquistato*, by Lorenzo Lippi, Vol. V; Astarotte can be found in *Morgante*, by Luigi Pulci, XXV Canto. Farfarello is a recurrent figure in epic and fantastic literature: he is in *Morgante*, along with Astarotte; in Canto VII of *Orlando Furioso* by Ariosto he is transformed into a horse for Melissa, a sorceress; he is a character presented in *Orlando Innamorato*'s continuation by Nicolò degli Agostini (IV, IX, 95, 1-4); and lastly, he is quoted in the seventh of *Le piacevoli notti (The Facetious Nights)* of Giovanni Francesco Straparola.

[50] The expression is quoted from Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*; for the author it "constitutes the meaning of the modern fantastic" (42).

wisdom and higher knowledge: the awareness of his own nothingness as, Malambruno concludes, "Il non vivere è sempre meglio del vivere" (not living is always better than living).[51] The fantastic in this dialogue doesn't constitute a gateway to 'another' dimension, but it becomes a means to understand deeply how false, fictional and misleading the real world is, particularly the idea of being able to draw on happiness, even if only for one moment.

This brief *peretta* is arguably one of the darkest in Leopardi's collection, for its negative vision of the value of poetic invention and of Romantic myths, which are unable to deliver humans from their mortal condition.

In *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*, the fantastic element runs throughout the entire text, defining places and situations, organising the narrative within the dialectics of animate and inanimate life.[52] The natural landscape disguises an aggressive anthropomorphic element that communicates the sense of a threatening reality. The space of the *peretta* is an unsettling liminal place. The unnamed protagonist, who has escaped human society, is now confronted with nature and its uncharted territory: "he was once wandering in the interior of Africa when he crossed the equator into a region never before explored by man" (Andando una volta per l'*interiore* dell'Affrica, e passando sotto la linea equinoziale in un luogo non mai prima *penetrato* da uomo alcuno).[53] "Interiore" and "penetrato" give the sense of a motion towards an enclosed space, of a vertical rather than horizontal journey towards the unknown core of the earth. By the time Leopardi wrote, the Southern hemisphere had already been connoted, in literature, as an alien and inscrutable space, where enigmatic and supernatural figures hold human beings captive, eventually causing their

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[51] Leopardi, *OM*, 102-03. In an *Operetta* based on 'negation' it is not surprising that the structure of the dialogue itself is questioned: the two characters share the different points of the theory of pleasure equally, giving rise to a unique discourse, which is distributed between two participants, on a formal level. It is further necessary to consider that in *Don Quixote*, Malambruno has a double fictional status, as a magician he is also part of a complex ploy organized by the dukes to mock the protagonist: the giant and grotesquely evil wizard, who gave a countess and her maids beards that cannot be removed, doesn't exist.

[52] "The extraordinariness of the text consists precisely in the perfection of the fantastic structure, which is mandatory and represents a means of generating non-rational signs and expressions" (La straordinarietà del testo consiste proprio nella perfezione della struttura fantastica, che è imprescindibile e rappresenta il veicolo che genera segni ed espressioni non razionali). Cf. Loredana Castori, "Magico leopardiano," 758.

[53] Leopardi, *OM*, 184-85.

demise. The journey itself is conceived, in Dante's *Inferno* and in the *Operetta*, as a dangerous act of hybris, because it entails an infringement of the limits given to humankind. Leopardi confirms this point by comparing the Icelander's situation to that of Vasco de Gama, as the explorer faced the giant Cape of Good Hope, looming over him "to dissuade him from entering those uncharted waters" (Per distorlo dal tentare quelle nuove acque).[54] Behind De Gama, the reader also perceives the presence of Dante's Ulysses, recognising that the Icelander's encounter with the gigantic woman may have a similar tragic ending.

> At first he imagined it to be made of stone, like those colossal figures he had seen on Easter Island many years before. But as he drew nearer, he discovered that it was the huge body of a woman, seated on the ground, her bust erect.[55]

This uncanny atmosphere is described in Sigmund Freud's essay *Das Unheimlich* (1919) where, drawing from Jentsch's studies, he writes: "A particularly favourable condition for awakening uncanny sensations is created when there is intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one."[56] The animate and inanimate characteristics of a woman, made of both flesh and stone, facing the Icelander, determines not so much a cognitive hesitation, which would be, according to Todorov, the crucial experience of the fantastic, but a displacing coexistence of reality and unreality.[57] Other sources of the uncanny are the double and the involuntary repetition, such as the iteration of images of 'threatening rocks' that Mount Purgatory becomes for Ulysses, The Cape of Good Hope for De Gama, or the mysterious divine figures from Easter Island. Replication involves an

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[54] Ibid.

[55] "Vide da lontano un busto grandissimo; che da principio immaginò dovere essere di pietra, e a somiglianza degli errni colossali veduti da lui, molti anni prima, nell'isola di Pasqua. Ma fattosi più da vicino, trovò che era una forma smisurata di donna seduta in terra, col busto ritto." Ibid.

[56] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Collected Papers*, trans. J. Riviere (London: The Hogarth Press, 1949), 4:385.

[57] There is no hesitation as the Icelander understands, from the first moment, that the stone giant statue is a living being. It lacks also the "parodical debasement" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* 21), that has been examined in other *Operette*, however the subversive function of the fantastic is maintained since the latter, as it collides with reality, subverts it, contradicting beliefs that were common in the society of the early 1800's: Rousseauian nature reveals her evil face, and the faith in the progress is questioned by the useless escape of the Icelander.

increasingly manifest transition from the non-living to the living, so that the inanimate rocky mass in Dante transitions into the dynamism of the Cape, and into complete humanization in Leopardi.[58]

The double returns in the tale of the protagonist who is escaping a hostile environment:

> At times I had to flee as fast as I could from rivers that pursued me as if I had done them some wrong. Many wild beasts I had never provoked with the slightest offense tried to devour me; many snakes tried to poison me; in various places flying insects almost consumed me to the bone.[59]

This threatening Nature is only the embodiment of a terrifying reality, where the personification of the inanimate is enhanced by the humanization of beasts, which nature assigns to actions that results in harm for humans. The liminal location of the *Operetta* gradually becomes coterminous with the Earth: to prevent the suffering caused by society, the Icelander lives in solitude, but he is forced to confront the hardship of different climates and their wilderness. His endless flight will eventually stop in front of the very nature he tried with all his determination to avoid. A distressing uniformity dominates a world with a labyrinthine architecture, devoid of shelter and escape. Nature is Minotaur's double, a devouring monster waiting for humans to fall into her jaws: "So flees the squirrel from the rattlesnake until he finally falls into its jaws. I am she from whom you're fleeing." (Così fugge lo scoiattolo dal serpente a sonaglio, finchè gli cade in gola da sé medesimo. Io sono quella che tu fuggi).[60]

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[58] Freud argues that "having been an assurance of immortality, [the double] becomes the ghastly harbinger of death." It clearly highlights the process of return of the repressed: "The quality of uncanniness can only come from the circumstance of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since left behind, and one, no doubt, in which it wore a friendlier aspect." Cf. Freud, *The Uncanny*, 387. The "involuntary repetition which surrounds with an uncanny atmosphere what would otherwise be innocent enough, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable." Cf. Freud, *The Uncanny*, 390. In the dialogue there is also a ternary iteration (a recognizable fairy-tale structure) in the motif of Nature as persecutor: the first instance occurs during the Icelander's tale, the second in the meeting with the statue, the last in the episode of the devouring lions.

[59] "Alcune volte mi è bisognato fuggire a tutta lena dai fiumi che m'inseguivano, come fossi colpevole verso loro di qualche ingiuria. Molte bestie salvatiche, non provocate da me con una menoma offesa, mi hanno voluto divorare; molti serpenti avvelenarmi; in diversi luoghi è mancato poco che gl'insetti volanti non mi abbiano consumato infino alle ossa." Leopardi, *OM*, 190.

[60] Ibid., 185.

Comparable to a gigantic man-eating ogre, indifferent in her malevolence, Leopardi's Nature sums up various folkloric features, which alone remove the "paradigm of reality."[61] Nature confirms her surreal manifestation, she is the *domina* of the upside-down world that traps the Icelander.[62]

> The huge body of a woman [...], her back and her elbow resting against a mountain. And she was not a statue, but alive   her face at once beautiful and awesome, her eyes and her hair raven black. She looked at him fixedly for some time, without speaking. Finally she said.[63]

The few descriptive traits are, as is usual in Leopardi, very significant. The giant woman leans on the mountain, with which she is one and the same. Here, there seems to be a reference to the cult of Magna Mater or Cybel, identified with the mountain in Anatolian sacred tradition.[64] The chromatic element is also relevant. In Nature's raven black hair and eyes darkness dominates, as in the sacred figure of Cybel, adored in the Middle East and later in Rome in the form of a black stone. A famous depiction of this very ancient goddess is in Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, an important source of inspiration for this *Operetta*, where Nature's impact bears a close resemblance to the terror generated by the Divina Mater's religious cortege.[65] Another Lucretian quote is to be found in the conclusion: the worn

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[61] In his "Per una delimitazione del genere," in Remo Ceserani et al., eds., *La narrazione fantastica* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1983), 37-73, Lucio Lugnani introduces the notion of "paradigm of reality," which is questioned by the eruption of the fantastic. "Per una delimitazione del genere," in *La narrazione fantastica*, eds. Remo Ceserani et al. (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1983), 54.

[62] "Any penchant for monumentalization can be interpreted as the emergence of a surreal fascination given by the hyperbole of magnitude" (Qualsiasi inclinazione alla momunentalizzazione può essere interpretata come l'affiorare di una fascinazione surreale suscitata dall'iperbole della grandezza). Cf. Francesco Rinaldi, *Il surreale e l'architettura del Novecento,* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2004), 94. Regarding the folkloric themes of man-eating ogres and giant ogres, cf. Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1932-1936), respectively G. 11.2 and G. 100-10.

[63] "Una forma smisurata di donna [...], appoggiato il dosso e il gomito a una montagna; e non finta ma viva; di volto mezzo tra bello e terribile, di occhi e capelli nerissimi; la quale guardavalo fissamente; e stata così un buono spazio senza parlare, all'ultimo gli disse." Leopardi, *OM*, 184-85.

[64] Cf. Claudia e Luigi Manciocco, *L'incanto e l'arcano: per un'antropologia della Befana* (Rome: Armando, 2006), 72; Lynn E. Roller, *The Cult of Anatolian Cybele* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

[65] "Quo nunc insigni per magnas praedita terras / horrifice fertur divinae Matris imago" (Wearing this emblem, through the world she rides, / their Mother Divine;

out and starved lions who eat the Icelander ironically suggest the "leones biiugos" (yoked lions) that Lucretius, in accordance with the iconographic tradition, describes as they pull the goddess' chariot.[66]

Nature/Cybel is a combination of inert substance and vital impulses, which suggests a fantastic driven by the instinctual and chthonian unconscious dear to ancestral mythology. Furthermore, the mythological depictions have Dantean echoes, geographical places distant and fabulous, like the Cape of Good Hope and Easter Island, through which Leopardi succeeds in multiplying the supernatural figure of the stone giant, until it coincides with the earth: a treacherous place where humans live in pain and suffering. The notion of earth as a labyrinth, and of nature as an animated and aggressive monster, help illustrate Leopardi's philosophy of disillusionment and suffering. Happiness is an impossibility on earth as well as in another (literary) dimension. The oxymoronic depiction of Nature's face, beautiful and awesome at the same time, indicates the persistence of desire, often linked to the fantastic.[67] Evoked by the tension to trespass and explore the unconscious, desire is represented as an impulse, a fascination for those unsettling characters that form the 'theatre of the supernatural', where the tragic tear between subject and object is dramatically laid bare.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Leopardi's fantastic doesn't aspire to disconnect readers from reality, but rather to give them more powerful tools to comprehend it.[68]

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men quake before her idol) Cf. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 2.608-10; Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*, trans. Frank O. Copley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), 51.

[66] "Quare magna deum mater materque ferarum / et nostri genetrix haec dicta est corporis una. / Hanc veteres Graiun docti cecinere poetae / sedibus in curru biiugos agitare leones, / aeris in spatio magnam pendere docentes / telhirem neque posse in terra sistere terram." (Hence earth is called at once 'great mother of gods', / 'mother of beasts', 'life-giver of mankind'. / The ancient poets of Greece have sung of her / enthroned in her chariot, driving her yoke of lions. / The poets teach that earth hangs in midair / for all its weight: earth cannot rest on earth). Cf. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 2.598-604; Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*, 50-51. The *Operetta* reveals other Lucretian reminiscences, from the notion of a world deprived of gods, distant and indifferent to the fate of humans, to the theme of "se fugere" (escape from oneself). Cf. Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 3.1053-85.

[67] Michela Vanon Alliata, "Introduzione," in *Desiderio e trasgressione nella letteratura fantastica*, ed. Michela Vanon Alliata (Venice: Marsilio, 2002), 7-18.

[68] The development of a rational and hermeneutical fantastic precedes the literary supernatural of the next century. As Calvino writes, "in the twentieth century, the

The traits of the protagonists in *Dialogo della Moda e della Morte* draw from the literary and mythological traditions in order to conjure up the grotesque figures of a mortuary fashion and a fashionable death that expose life as a macabre race, and human activity as futile pursuit. In the debate between a Sprite and a Gnome, the folkloric dimension the couple inhabits does not belong to the realm of fabulous representations. On the contrary, here the fantastic is utilized to recognize and confront the insignificance of human existence. Similarly, the characters of Malambruno and Farfarello provide evidence of humanity's tragedy. Created with the strongest desire to feel pleasure, humans are denied even a single moment of enjoyment. The final deadly confrontation is produced by the encounter with Nature, the gigantic female figure who symbolizes a system that is indifferent to humans, focused on perpetuating the automatisms of production and destruction. Nature is Leopardi's masterful invention. Drawn from Greco-Roman mythology, she represents a modern uncanny, the disquieting and inexorable omnipresence that reminds humans of their impermanence and inconsequentiality.[69] In *Zibaldone* Leopardi often argues how, in order to

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fantastic is present more as an intellectual than as an emotional element: it emerges as irony, game, as a wink, as a mediator of contemporary humans' nightmares and hidden desires" (nel Novecento è un uso intellettuale [e non più emozionale] del fantastico che s'impone: come gioco, ironia, ammicco, e anche come mediazione sugli incubi e i desideri nascosti dell'uomo contemporaneo). Italo Calvino, "Definizioni di territori: il fantastico," in *Una pietra sopra. Discorsi di letteratura e società* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), 216. In the same essay Calvino also recognizes a direct link between Leopardi and Buzzati, whose style is distinguished by "an extremely well monitored and rational fantasy" (una fantasia estremamente sorvegliata e razionale"). Italo Calvino, "Tre correnti del romanzo italiano d'oggi," ibid., 66. We can also find similarities between Leopardi and Primo Levi, as Baldini notices: "Levi's best stories share a kinship with the Leopardian moral operetta to the extent that they are short works of prose of fantastic invention whose purpose is to raise philosophical questions, particularly those of a moral or ethical nature" (I migliori racconti di Levi hanno una parentela con l'operetta morale leopardiana nella misura in cui sono brevi prose di invenzione fantastica, il cui fine è suscitare domande nel lettore, spingerlo a porsi interrogativi filosofici, in particolare di natura etica e morale). Cf. Anna Baldini "Le operette morali di Primo Levi: *Trattamento di quiescenza*, *Verso occidente* e *Una stella tranquilla*," In *Atti di IncontroTesto*, 1st ed. Siena, ottobre-novembre, 2011 (Ebook, Pisa: Pacini, 2011), 63. On the same comparison, cf. also Anna Baldini's "Primo Levi e i poeti del dolore (Da Giobbe a Leopardi)," *Nuova rivista di letteratura italiana* 5, no. 1 (2002), 161-203.
[69] Past and present join in a discourse which aims to critically investigate coeval society: "seemingly archaic forms are adapted to address contemporary anxieties, and [...] the fantastic elements become sophisticated tools for interrogating social

arouse terror and fright, it is not necessary to write about ghosts, vampires, and the non-living, as the Romantics did. Life itself is dreadful and horrifying, and looking into it through the poet's rational fantastic, his original combination of "ragione e sentimento" (reason and emotion)[70] allows us to know it as it really is, without illusions and pretences, and to admit our insignificant part in it.

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issues." Stacie L. Hanes, *The Sense and Sensibility of the 19th-Century Fantastic* (PhD diss., Kent State University, 2013), 6.

[70] Francesco De Sanctis, *Studio su Giacomo Leopardi*, ed. Raffaele Bonari (Naples: Morano, 1905), 157.

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Chapter Five

La vita solitaria, a Fryean Idyll?

Johnny L. Bertolio

Both in its original manuscript form (dated very likely 1821) and in its early print editions—in the journal *Il nuovo ricoglitore* (January 1826), and then in the collection *Versi* (Bologna: Stamperia delle Muse, 1826)—*La vita solitaria* (*The Solitary Life*) is the last idyll written by Leopardi. It concludes the first phase of his poetic experience by bringing it to its saturation point, and saying farewell, albeit temporarily, to poetry in general. This "idillio degli idillii" (idyll of idylls)[1] is the only one of its group that is divided into stanzas. It describes the various moments of a single day, from the morning (first stanza) to midday (second) to night (fourth), all of them being summarized in the third stanza.[2]

This very succession immediately recalls famous poets from the past (Giuseppe Parini and Ippolito Pindemonte, among others) but only at first glance. What a reader familiar with symbolic criticism might see here is a perfect example of that cyclic dimension on which Northrop Frye based his vision of literature, if not of human reality. Although symbolic criticism was met with certain, and not completely unfounded, reservations,[3] we will attempt to interpret *La vita solitaria*'s structure in light of the most fruitful Fryean concepts as elaborated separately and as part of the analysis of the English idyll *Licydas* by John Milton.

As is well known, Frye identifies four phases to explain the myth "around a figure who is partly the sun, partly vegetative and partly a god or archetypal human being." The first is "the dawn, spring and birth phase," which expresses "myths of the birth of the hero, of revival and resurrection,

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[1] Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, ed. Luigi Russo (Florence: Sansoni, 1945), 143.

[2] Cf. Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, *Sonavan le quiete stanze: sullo stile dei Canti di Leopardi* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2006), 164; and Luigi Blasucci, "Introduzione e note a *La vita solitaria* di Leopardi," *Siculorum Gymnasium* 58-61 (2005-2008), *Studi in onore di Nicolò Mineo*, 1:272.

[3] Cf. Ezio Raimondi, "La critica simbolica," *MLN* 84, no. 1 (1969): 11-14.

of creation and (because the four phases are a cycle), of the defeat of the powers of darkness, winter and death." Next is "the zenith, summer, and marriage or triumph phase," which comprises "myths of apotheosis, of the sacred marriage, and of entering into Paradise," and is normally associated with the idyllic genre. Third is "the sunset, autumn and death phase," including "myths of fall, of the dying god, of violent death and sacrifice and of the isolation of the hero." Finally, there is "the darkness, winter and dissolution phase," which gathers "myths of the triumph of these powers; myths of floods and the return of chaos, of the defeat of the hero, and Götterdämmerung myths."[4] These categories, both individually and combined, are then associated by Frye with a specific literary genre.

A close analysis of the parable of the 'I' in *La vita solitaria* on the basis of Frye's theory proves that Leopardi elaborated a new concept of idyll. The presence of the poet in the text, and his desire to describe those situations, in some cases quite ordinary ones, where he experiences glimpses of happiness, are perhaps the most striking features of Leopardi's idylls. However, a literary and linguistic analysis of the verses will show how Leopardi carefully constructed *La vita solitaria* on a delicate balance of all the cyclic phases of myth as delineated by Frye.

Strictly speaking, the cycle that dominates in *La vita solitaria* is neither seasonal nor epochal: in fact, it merely covers the span of a day. Nevertheless, the three phases mentioned (i.e. morning-midday-night) can be read as corresponding to spring, summer, and winter, respectively. The one missing, that is, the evening/autunm, instead, pervades all the others, and constitutes the natural habitat of the poem's hero, to wit the first-person poet. He does not experience rebirth, apotheosis or definitive dissolution; rather, with rare exceptions, he lives in a constant state of falling, isolation, and dejection.

As Leopardi wrote a few years later in the final paragraphs of the *Cantico del gallo silvestre* (*Canticle of the Wild Cock*; 1824), for any living creature the greater part of life is dominated by a "withering" phase, although every new day and new season gives humans the illusion that they are flourishing. Such a state seems to correspond, on a larger scale, to the awareness that Leopardi developed of his own personal condition in the idylls. Moreover, in the *Cantico* Leopardi dwells on the same sequence of days, seasons, and ages that are partly at work in *La vita solitaria*, and behind which it is possible to grasp deeper implications.

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[4] Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 15-16.

1

Readers of the first stanza of *La vita solitaria* feel a sense of joy for the new day that has just begun. The typical "awakening" contains realistic elements, albeit described with a very literary flair: the morning rain ("la mattutina pioggia," v. 1), a chicken (termed "gallinella," v. 3, and not the generic 'gallina'),[5] a peasant (solemnly called "l'abitator de' campi" [the inhabitant of the fields], v. 4), the rising sun ("il Sol che nasce," v. 4), the poet's house (an Arcadian[6] "capanna," v. 6), the soft little clouds, the birds' first whispers, the fresh, light breeze, the smiling valleys ("e i lievi nugoletti, e il primo / degli augelli susurro, e l'aura fresca, / e le ridenti piagge," vv. 8-10). Here, Leopardi adopts a Petrarchan stance by depicting daily objects and facts with lofty language or lengthy periphrases.[7]

Nonetheless, we already find elements denoting some negativity: if "tremuli" (tremulous [rays], v. 5—"trepidi," 'trembling' in the *Versi* edition)[8] and "cadenti" (falling raindrops, v. 5) can be considered literary images or natural attributes of a rainy day, the very fact that it is raining ("picchiando" [beating], v. 7), albeit "softly" ("dolcemente," v. 7), gives readers the impression of a tormented awakening. And such an impression would not be wrong: after a short time, this tranquil rural imagery is suddenly interrupted by its urban counterpart. The city walls are described as 'baleful' ("infauste," v. 11), and their memory leads the poet towards sorrow (within himself) and hatred (from others), and finally to an anguished view of nature.

The poet feels an incessant sense of pain ("doloroso / io vivo," [I live sorrowful,] vv. 13-14), and immediately afterwards says that he will die with the same prevailing sensation ("tal morrò," v. 14). According to him, at this point, one possible solution to his suffering would be to turn to nature for help. Yet he realizes that nature is not interested: she (I will dare to consider nature a woman in English as in Italian, on the basis of the Leopardian implications of the feminine gender) is simply indifferent to unhappy human beings. He is left with a single further ideal solution, which nonetheless remains hypothetical: suicide. As Leopardi reflects in the

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[5] Blasucci, "Introduzione," 276.

[6] Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, eds. Mario Fubini and Emilio Bigi (Turin: Loescher: 1964), 131.

[7] For this Petrarchan tendency in contrast to the 'material' attitude of Dante, see Luigi Blasucci, "Ancora su Leopardi e Petrarca," in *Studi di letteratura italiana per Vitilio Masiello*, eds. Pasquale Guaragnella and Marco Santagata (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2006), 2:171-74.

[8] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian are mine.

Zibaldone in the same year (1821), since the primary natural goal for living beings, that is happiness, cannot be fulfilled in the modern age, even the 'natural' prohibition against killing themselves is no longer valid (2241-42).

This unsettled beginning, which starts with a promising morning and ends with a possible suicide, shows how original Leopardi's interpretation of the idyllic genre is: he gives voice to his personal emotions on a literarily forged background. Although unknown to his contemporaries, Leopardi's late definition (from the year 1828) of his youthful idylls is actually the following: "situazioni, affezioni, avventure storiche del mio animo" (situations, affections, historical adventures of my spirit).[9]

Already in the first stanza of *La vita solitaria*, the 'autumnal' dimension seems to prevail over its 'spring' counterpart. This alternation between a positive and a negative feeling, or, as Blasucci observes, the 'euphoric'-'dysphoric' strain, penetrates all Leopardian idylls: with the exception of *L'Infinito* (*The Infinite*), which does not convey any negative component whatsoever, the other texts in the series were born under the sign of "pur" (and yet), that is of a pleasurable option emerging temporarily from adverse conditions.[10]

2

An apparent exception to this devastating emotional state suddenly strikes the reader in the second stanza, which has been labelled as a "vero idillio nell'idillio" (true idyll within the idyll).[11] Here the poet finds himself in a sunny environment that seems to be taken directly from the literary tradition rather than from a specific landscape close to his hometown of Recanati.[12] It is noon and this time of day is particularly vulnerable to the numinous presence: in a famous passage in the *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* (*Essay on the Popular Mistakes of the Ancients*) always mentioned in this regard,[13] Leopardi recalls that during the golden age of the human species noon was the typical moment chosen by the gods to reveal themselves on earth. After the appearance of crime, however, humans began to fear, rather than desire, encounters with the gods. In the

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[9] *Disegni letterari XII*, in Giacomo Leopardi, *Poesie e prose*, ed. Rolando Damiani (Milan: Mondadori, 1988), 2:1218.

[10] Blasucci, "Introduzione," 274, and "Appunti sui *Versi* del '26 e in particolare sugli 'idilli'," *L'Ellisse* 9, no. 2 (2014): 21-22.

[11] Blasucci, "Introduzione," 273.

[12] The commentaries always mention the estate of San Leopardo, where the Leopardi family used to spend their summers.

[13] Leopardi, *Poesie e prose*, 2:701-712.

Judeo-Christian tradition, God appeared to Adam and the angels to Abraham during (or right after) the meridian rest, and it was the noon-time demon who raged against human beings with exceptional violence (*Psalms* 91/90:6).[14]

Nevertheless, the midday depicted by Leopardi does not resemble that of the idyllic tradition extending from the ancient Greek poet Theocritus to the Italian baroque poet Giovan Battista Marino. Leopardi instead dwells on the immobility of nature that reflects his own, and even the cicadas, that usually try to defy the noon heat by singing, are silent (v. 29). The landscape is possessed by a "very deep calm" ("altissima quiete," v. 33) that immediately reminds us of the end of the first idyll, *L'Infinito*. Yet the shipwreck that Leopardi imagines in *L'Infinito* concerns the poet's mind, which is fulfilled by thinking and contemplating. On the contrary, the communion with nature suggested in *La vita solitaria* represents a sort of "nirvanic annihilation,"[15] where no perception is active: no time, no space, no sense, no thinking remains. In the poem, all those negative terms ("non" and "né") effectively destroy the idyllic situation at its very foundations. The sequence of "nots" adopted by Leopardi to describe the noon moment, according to Luigi Russo, recalls the medieval theological definitions of God, whose being is ineffable and therefore always labelled as *not* visible,

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[14] On this figure cf. Roger Caillois, *I demoni meridiani*, ed. Carlo Ossola (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998); Andrea Natali, "Réécriture par Leopardi du topos mythologique et littéraire du démon méridien," *Cahiers d'études romanes* 27 (2013), 359-72; and, on its impact on Leopardi's thought, Fabio A. Camilletti, *Leopardi's Nymphs: Grace, Melancholy, and the Uncanny* (London: Legenda, 2013), 71-81.

[15] Cf. Aurelia Accame Bobbio, "Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Werther* e l'origine dell'idillio leopardiano," in *Leopardi e il Settecento. Atti del I Convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani* (Recanati 13-16 settembre 1962) (Florence: Olschki, 1964), 200; Leopardi, *Canti*, eds. Fubini, and Bigi, 132; Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, eds. Giuseppe and Domenico De Robertis (Milan: Mondadori, 1978), 200; Mario Andrea Rigoni, *Il pensiero di Leopardi* (Milan: Bompiani, 1997), 95; Arnaldo Di Benedetto, "*La vita solitaria* e le condizioni della reintegrazione," in *Tra Sette e Ottocento: poesia, letteratura e politica*, ed. Arnaldo Di Benedetto (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 1991), 112; Lucio Felici, "Meridionali, meridionalità, meriggio," in *Lo Zibaldone cento anni dopo: composizione, edizione, temi*, Atti del X Convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani Recanati-Porto Recanati 14-19 settembre 1998) (Florence: Olschki, 2001), 2:698-99; Luigi Blasucci, "Le modalità della 'voce' negli idilli leopardiani," in *La dimensione teatrale in Giacomo Leopardi*, Atti dell'XI Convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani (Recanati, 30 settembre-2 ottobre 2004) (Florence: Olschki, 2008), 10.

not locatable, and so on.[16] In *La vita solitaria*, however, there is no divinity to discover but everything to forget.

If Goethe's young Werther sensed the presence of the "omnipotent Being" through the most insignificant creatures, including mosquitoes,[17] the poet of *La vita solitaria* dreams of a direct fusion with nature free of any divine mediation. The sun is quiet above him, the lake's surface is flat and motionless, both animals and trees are silent (no human beings are allowed here), whereas, in the case of the poet, his body almost feels as though it is melting away (vv. 35-36).

A sense of death lingers in the second stanza as well. It is not by chance that it has been linked to the *Coro di morti* (*Choir of the Dead*) in the *Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie* (*Dialogue of Frederik Ruysch and His Mummies*), that is with a "life without desire,"[18] and with the old age of a deserted universe described in the *Cantico del gallo silvestre*: "Del mondo intero, e delle infinite vicende e calamità delle cose create, non rimarrà pure un vestigio; ma un silenzio nudo e una quiete altissima, empieranno lo spazio immenso" (Of the entire world and of the numerous vicissitudes and calamities of the created things not even a mark will remain; but a nude silence and a very profound quiet will fill the immense space).[19]

As already mentioned, in the Italian literary tradition another author had devoted himself, among many other genres, to the composition of idylls: Giovan Battista Marino. Marino's verse collection *Sampogna* (*Bagpipe*) consists of twelve mythological idylls, and it was with these in mind that Marino wrote several passages of his masterpiece, *L'Adone* (*Adonis*). Although Leopardi had a negative view of the 'Marinist' vein of Italian literature,[20] a comparison with Marino helps us to better understand

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[16] Leopardi, *Canti*, ed. Russo, 146.

[17] Quotations are from *Verter*, opera originale tedesca del celebre Signor Goethe, trasportata in italiano dal D. M<ichel> S<alom> (Venice: Giuseppe Rosa, 1788), 5-6. Leopardi read the 1796 edition.

[18] Cf. Adriano Tilgher, *La filosofia di Leopardi e studi leopardiani* (Bologna: Massimiliano Boni, 1979), 191-94; and Di Benedetto, "*La vita solitaria*," 112.

[19] Giacomo Leopardi, *Poesie e prose*, 2:165, quoted in Fernando Figurelli, *Giacomo Leopardi poeta dell'idillio* (Bari: Laterza, 1941), 67.

[20] In the *Zibaldone*, Marino (or "Marini") is not mentioned. Leopardi criticized him in the *Discorso sopra Mosco* (*Discourse on Moschus*) because in his idyll *Il rapimento d'Europa* (*The Rape of Europa*) Marino had "expanded," "lengthened" and "corrupted" the corresponding poem by Moschus (Leopardi, *Poesie e prose*, ed. Mario Andrea Rigoni [Milan: Mondadori, 1987]], 1:476). Marino is also counted among the barbaric poets in the Ovidian tradition in the *Discorso di un italiano*

Leopardi's innovation. All the idyllic episodes included in *L'Adone* (cantos 5 and 19) tell stories of unhappy and tragic love that mirror the main one between Adonis and Venus. They share almost identical elements: death in the prime of life during a hunting expedition; the presence of water (spring/river); midday as the moment of love; the contrast between fire and ice in the rhetorical devices.

In another text examined by Frye, Milton's pastoral elegy *Lycidas*, all the solar elements of the idyll intertwine with the crepuscular ones of tragedy. Lycidas, as Frye maintains, is the new "dying god," and he is linked to various natural cycles: of the sun, of the seasons, of water.[21] Behind Lycidas there is Milton's historical friend (Edward King) but also his mythological archetype, Adonis.

The same can be said of the first-person poet in *La vita solitaria*: he inhabits a very idyllic landscape (on a hill, near a lake), in a very evocative time of day (noon), and dreams of dissolving into nature. Just like Adonis and Lycidas, the 'I' in *La vita solitaria* lives on a threshold, where he temporarily forgets the agony of life, and aspires to a peaceful and sense-free state.

<h1 style="text-align:center">3</h1>

Love is traditionally incorporated within idylls, be it happy or unhappy, pleasurable or tragic. In Leopardi, too, love has a meaningful presence, but it is banned from the hyper-idyllic second stanza. It appears in the third stanza, which begins under the sign of "Amore, amore" (Love, love), and the verse itself (39) follows a very peculiar metrical rhythm.[22] A sentiment that has now dissipated from the poet's breast, love introduces an elegiac tone to the poem, in a final attempt to combine the renmants of ancient imaginative poetry with modern sensibility—and in fact in the *Versi* edition two elegies are published after *La vita solitaria*, according to a sequence that follows a very natural flow.

In the third stanza some of the elements that we observed as typically idyllic appear once again: the contrast between fire and ice (a cold hand took the once burning poet's heart, which is now placed in ice: vv. 40-42), and the youthful moment of life when that feeling took place ("nel fior degli

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intorno alla poesia romantica, ed. Vittorio Gatto (Rome: Archivio Guido Izzi, 1992), 33, 70.

[21] Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 119-20.

[22] As demonstrated by Blasucci, "Introduzione," 283, and Raffaella Rosati, "La tradizione letteraria nella *Vita solitaria*," *Studi e problemi di critica testuale* 75 (2007), 55.

anni" [in the prime of life], v. 43). This cluster of metaphors, which is also found in letters that Leopardi wrote at this time, suggests a strong sense of the seasonal, if not simply day-long, cycle: spring (prime of life), summer (fire), and winter (ice), while autumn is absent but lurking behind the attenuation of powerful sensations that are progressively abandoning the poet.

To describe the precise period when he was in love, Leopardi adopts a periphrasis of classical origin ("Era quel [...] tempo" [It was a time...], vv. 44-45 = *Tempus erat* [...]) that in ancient Greek and Latin literature was used to initiate digressions. In this stanza, instead, it seems to introduce a fairy tale (a sort of 'once upon a time there was a lively man, a person still capable of sentiments'). Marked by impermanence, that period is defined as "sweet and irrevocable" ("era quel dolce / e irrevocabil tempo," vv. 44-45): this expression underlines two new polar opposites, of pleasure and inexorability, and confirms the euphoric-dysphoric perspective that permeates all Leopardian idylls.[23]

Yet, at present, the poet experiences "ferreo sopor" (literally an "iron-like state of drowsiness," v. 68), which must not be confused with the quiet desired in the previous stanza. This apathetic lethargy represents precisely that permanent dysphoric background to the entire collection of idylls, which the poet is able to overcome only on rare occasions.

The very mention of love, albeit far away in reality, is nonetheless so powerful that it brings to the poet's mind those moments in which he felt his heart beating, and makes him realize that he is still able to experience traces of that emotion in his present life. These epiphanies are of course superbly idyllic, and display all the features that Leopardi considered suggestive: light and heat ("piagge apriche" [sunny hills], v. 56)---either during the day or at night the poet needs to be warmed: in the first case, by the sun's light ("sole," v. 57), in the second one, by the summer heat ("estiva," v. 61). Another idyllic experience is that of silence and quiet ("tacita aurora" [silent dawn], v. 58; "placida quiete" [calm quiet], v. 60); solitude ("l'erma terra" [the lonely ground], v. 63; "nelle romite stanze" [in the solitary rooms], v. 65); and above all, the pleasure coming from a melodious and penetrating song of a girl indistinctly heard in the distance ("di fanciulla [...] odo sonar [...] l'arguto canto" [I hear the melodious song of a girl], vv. 63-66).

The idyllic options are as various as they are rare, and they dwindle until they finally disintegrate. Love belongs to the earliest memories, and the only

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[23] The contrast has been noted by Blasucci, "Introduzione," 284. The same has been said of Silvia's eyes ("ridenti e fuggitivi" [smiling and transient], *A Silvia*, v. 4).

human creature that can still lift the poet's spirit lives in the night and out of his reach. Each of those situations is able to nourish sweet impulses (v. 69), but the poet's heart is frozen and—by means of an even stronger metaphor—turned to stone.

Leopardi frequently describes this state in his *Zibaldone*, where it is often connected to the drying up of his poetic inspiration. The following page is one of those instances (and if we were looking for a cinematographic representation of it, we could think of Fred, the protagonist of the film *Youth* by Paolo Sorrentino, afflicted by the same discomfort):

> The state of resigned desperation, which is the last step of the sensitive man, and the final sepulchre of his sensibility, his pleasures, and his sufferings, is so deadly to sensibility, and to poetry (in all the meanings and extent of the term), that although misfortune, and its perception in actuality, seems and is (apart from the above state) the most lethal thing possible to poetry (not only immediate, but also habitual misfortune, which wretchedly depresses the imagination, the feelings, the mind), nevertheless, if it can happen that a new and intense misfortune gives rise to some feeling in a man who is in that state, that point, for such a person, is the best suited, the best he can hope for, to the power of concepts, to the poetic, to eloquence of thought, to the yield of a heart and imagination that before were barren. The new suffering in that case is like a cautery which restores some feeling, some span of life to numbed bodies. The heart gives a sign of life, momentarily senses itself again, since what is distinctive and unpoetical about resigned desperation is precisely that one is no longer visited or touched even by suffering. But these inadequately poetic effects, inadequately (and also feebly) alive, are fleeting, indeed momentary, because such a man, in spite of the magnitude of his new misfortune, quickly falls back into the lethargic state of resignation. (*Zibaldone*, 2159-61, 24 novembre 1821)[24]

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[24] "Lo stato di disperazione rassegnata, ch'è l'ultimo passo dell'uomo sensibile, e il finale sepolcro della sua sensibilità, de' suoi piaceri, e delle sue pene, è tanto mortale alla sensibilità, ed alla poesia (in tutti i sensi, ed estensione di questo termine), che sebbene la sventura, e il sentimento attuale di lei, pare ed è (escluso il detto stato) la più micidial cosa possibile alla poesia (nè solo la sventura attuale, ma anche l'abituale, che deprime miseramente l'immaginazione, il sentimento, l'animo); contuttociò se può succedere che nel detto stato, una nuova e forte sventura, cagioni all'uomo qualche senso, quel punto, per una tal persona, è il più adattato ch'egli possa mai sperare, alla forza dei concetti, al poetico, all'eloquente dei pensieri, ai parti dell'immaginazione e del cuore, già fatti infecondi. Il nuovo dolore in tal caso è come il bottone di fuoco che restituisce qualche senso, qualche tratto di vita ai corpi istupiditi. Il cuore dà qualche segno di vita, torna per un momento a sentir se medesimo, giacchè la proprietà e l'impoetico della disperazione rassegnata consiste appunto, nel non esser più visitato nè risentito neppur dal dolore.

4

The fourth and final stanza opens with an exquisitely Leopardian invocation to the moon, whose ray descends benignly onto the poet. One can breathe an almost Franciscan aura in this appeal to a moon that is a mute *sister*, and spectator of Leopardi's poetry and feelings. If *brother* sun of the second stanza of *La vita solitaria* encouraged an exceptional nirvanic annihilation under its powerful light, the moon promises a more ordinary, albeit pleasing, sense of calm and rest.

The nocturnal atmosphere elaborates on the verses from the third stanza, where the poet had evoked the above-mentioned song of a girl working at night. Contrary to the typically sunny atmosphere of classical idylls, here Leopardi writes what an idyll is for him. Midnight, and not midday, is actually his ideal hour, and the moon, not the sun, becomes the source of his consolation. If the second stanza describes a midday situation by telling the reader what does *not* happen then, and the third one, which describes concrete events, allows the poet to abandon his apathy, the fourth stanza identifies, more broadly, the natural context in which his heart can beat.

Here, the negative sign applies to those individuals to whom the moon's light is hostile because it reveals their misdeeds: thieves, adulterers, and evil persons in general. For the hares and poet, however, the moon's light is a benevolent one, under which they can dance and stroll freely, respectively: for example, when, as a young boy, he admired and was admired (as in the *Passero solitario* [*The Solitary Thrush*], v. 35). The moon's ray seems here to open the same wide landscape that he partly saw, partly imagined in *L'Infinito*: "lieti colli e spaziosi campi" (happy hills and spacious fields, v. 94) to the poet's gaze.

In the last stanza, too, the Fryean state of the dying god is still at work. Night, or its seasonal counterpart (winter), reflects a sense of finality and death, and nevertheless it represents another 'euphoric' occurrence in the poet's life. Such a twofold strain pervades the whole idyll: when the landscape appears favourable (like morning, in the first stanza), the poet thinks about something ominous (death), and when the setting would normally suggest a dreadful state of mind (such as darkness), the poet feels most at ease.

Ma questi effetti miseramente poetici, miseramente (e anche languidamente) vivi, sono passeggeri, anzi momentanei, perchè un tal uomo, malgrado la grandezza della sventura nuova, ricade assai presto nel letargico stato di rassegnazione." Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, eds. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 933-34.

For this reason, *La vita solitaria* appears to be immersed in a Fryean falling phase, associated with autumn and with the dying god, an in-between moment neither full of life nor fully immersed in death. In his last idyll, Leopardi immortalises his own fall, whose quintessence is represented by the "ferreo sopor," that is a hostile degeneration of "quiete." Only the voice of a young lady and the light of the moon are able to make the poet rise from his gloomy state—the last idyllic pulses of his frozen heart.

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PART III

ON POETICS AND LINGUISTICS

Chapter Six

Metre and Style in Leopardi's *Puerilia*

Leonardo Bellomo

1

The majority of Giacomo Leopardi's *Puerilia* was produced between 1809 and 1810, when the author was eleven and twelve years old. These texts were collected and edited in 1972 by Maria Corti and, along with some letters, they are the first documents regarding the poet's intellectual history.[1] Some of these texts are in prose (they are scholastic exercises in Italian and in Latin; cf. *Prose italiane varie*, *Latinae exercitationes variae* and others), but most of them are in verse. The present contribution will focus on the latter. Young Leopardi's poems are sometimes translations (mostly from Horace's *Odes*, but also from Ovid and from an anonymous French writer) but are more often original compositions. As is already known, their themes and motifs are extremely conventional: they are frequently inspired by classical or biblical sources, such as *Catone in Affrica* (Cato in Africa), *Le notti puniche* (The Punic Nights), *La libertà Latina* (Latin Freedom) etc.; and *Sansone* (Samson), *I re magi* (The Three Wise Men), *Il diluvio universale* (The Great Flood), etc., respectively, or they are typical of eighteenth-century pastoral literature, such as *La campagna* (The Countryside),

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[1] Giacomo Leopardi, *"Entro dipinta gabbia." Tutti gli scritti inediti, rari e editi. 1809-1810*, ed. Maria Corti (Milan: Bompiani, 1972). Bibliography specifically related to Leopardi's *Puerilia* is not very ample. In addition to Corti's introduction, it is worth remembering Michele Dall'Aquila, "Lingua e stile nei versi e nelle prose della puerizia e dell'adolescenza," in *Lingua e stile di Giacomo Leopardi*, Atti del convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani (Recanati 30 settembre-5 ottobre 1991), (Florence: Olschki, 1994), 381-392; Luigi Martellini, "Genesi del pensiero filosofico leopardiano," in *Leopardi. Poeta e pensatore/Dichter und Denker*, eds. S. Neumeister and R. Sirri, (Naples: Guida, 1997), 87-104; Cesare Mario Trevigne, *Il mondo dei "Puerilia" di Giacomo Leopardi*, Florence, Centro di ricerche Anazetesis, 2011; and about young Leopardi's translations: Valerio Camarotto, *Leopardi traduttore. La poesia (1815-1817)* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2016).

La Spelonca (The Cavern), etc. Yet, in the collection, we can also find some facetious letters in verse addressed to acquaintances or to Leopardi's family members, hymns that celebrate Christian holidays, such as *Per il giorno delle ceneri* (For Ash Wednesday), *Per il Santo Natale* (For Holy Christmas), and many moralistic fairy tales with animals as main characters, a genre that was very popular in the eighteenth century, such as *A favore del Gatto, e del Cane* (*In Favour of Cat and Dog*), *L'Asino, e la Pecora* (*The Donkey and the Sheep*), *La Rosa, il Giglio, e il Serpilio* (*The Rose, the Lily, and the Wild Thyme*), etc. None of these texts are truly introspective or could be defined as lyrical (at most, we can say there is a lyrical element in the shepherds' monologues in idylls like *La Spelonca* and *L'amicizia* [*Friendship*]); they are all narrative or, to be more exact, descriptive. Indeed, in a well-known note in the *Zibaldone* (144-45) in which he remembers the phases of his poetic career, Leopardi explains that he acquired a real capacity for self-analysis and for expressing his feelings and affections in verse only in 1819.[2] During that year, a serious eye disease compelled him to spend a fair amount of time in darkness, which forced him to meditate deeply and reflect on the human condition, happiness, and life's misfortunes. Consequently, his poetry became more philosophical and sentimental, that is to say modern, whereas before it had been dominated by images, guided only by the faculty of imagination, like ancient poetry.

The following analysis will consider the *Puerilia* from a formal point of view, describing their stylistic features and metric choices, especially in respect to their connections to syntactic strategies. The aim is to identify the cultural coordinates within which Leopardi's first creative efforts developed, and, at the same time, to recognise links and divergences between the poet's juvenile and mature language, i.e. that of the *Canti*.

2

Young Leopardi's verses owe a great deal to eighteenth century poetry, which was extensively represented in Count Monaldo's library. The first sign of this heritage is the enormous variety of metres employed in the *Puerilia*. The cycle devoted to Cato (*Catone in Affrica*) is exemplary of an experimental aptitude: the story of Caesar's famous enemy is told in ten texts, each with a different form (the first is a preface in prose, followed by

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[2] Cf. Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, eds. Micheal Caesar and Franco D'Intino, trans. Kathleen Baldwin et al. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

odes and *canzonette* with various schemes, a *canzone*, a sonnet, *sesta rima*, terza *rima* and free hendecasyllables, in Italian *endecasillabi sciolti*).[3]

The metres prevalent in the *Puerilia* are typical of the eighteenth century: the *ode* and the *canzonetta*.[4] As was typical of the period, Leopardi prefers four verse strophes, most of which are undivided.[5] We can detect two main typologies:

a) quatrains with alternate rhymes composed of different kinds and combinations of lines: a1) *settenari* (abab: Horace's *Odes* I.XXIV [I.31]); a2) *ottonari*, sometimes with oxitone rhyme in odd lines ($a_8$bab: cf. *Appendice* II, III, X, XI, XVII; $a_8$babt: Horace's *Odes* II.II [II.2], II.XV [II.20]; both employed very often by Frugoni, but also by Vittorelli, Rolli, Meli); a3) hendecasyllables (ABAB: *Catone in Affrica*, *La morte di Abele* [*Abel's Death*] Horace's *Odes* II.VI [II.9], II.XIII [II.17]; a scheme that was frequently adopted in Chiabrera's *Canzoni*); a4) hendecasyllables and *settenari* (AbAb: I.VII [I.8]; used by Fantoni, and later by Carducci, to imitate the epodic system); a5) Paolo Rolli's hendecasyllables, in other

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[3] Some clarification is needed about Italian metrical terminology. A *canzone* is a metre composed of a series of hendecasyllables and *settenari* strophes of identical metrical form and rhyme scheme, generally followed by a shorter *congedo* (valediction); each strophe conventionally falls into two parts, known as the *fronte* and the *sirma*; the *fronte* could be divisible in two metrically identical segments, called *piedi*. A *sesta rima* is a form composed of strophes of six hendecasyllables with two alternating rhymes and a rhyming couplet. A *terza rima* is composed by a variable number of groups of hendecasyllables which follow the rhyme scheme ABA BCB CDC…YZY Z (with an isolated final line). The *canzonetta* is a variant of the *canzone*, without internal metrical articulation and usually composed of shorter lines.

[4] For the graphical representation of the metrical schemes, the following conventions will be employed: 1) Major letters represent hendecasyllables, when they do not have any number subscripted; they could represent double *quinari* or Rolli's hendecasyllables when they have 5+5 and 5_s+5, respectively, subscripted; 2) Minor letters without numbers subscripted indicate *settenari*, otherwise the other short verses according to the indication; 3) If only the typology of the first verse is signalled, it means that all the verses have the same one; 4) P, T and S stand for paroxytone, oxytone and proparoxytone non-rhyming lines; if subscripted, they stand for paroxytone, oxytone and proparoxytone rhyming lines; 5) A colon means that a strophe is divided into two sections.

[5] Cf. Francesco Bausi and Mario Martelli, *La metrica italiana. Teoria e storia* (Florence: Le lettere, 1993), 205-8; Rodolfo Zucco, *Istituti metrici del Settecento. L'ode e la canzonetta* (Genoa: Name, 2001), 197-217. For the distinction between undivided, twin and composed strophes, cf. ibid., 13-16.

words double *quinari* with the first hemistich proparoxytone ($A_{5s+5}BAB$: Horace's *Odes* I.VI [I.7]; I cannot find other examples of this).[6]

b) quatrains with alternation of unrhyming proparoxytone and rhyming paroxytone lines, could, in this case too, have varying lengths and numbers of syllables: b1) *settenari* (sasa: *La campagna III*, *Il Pastore e la Serpe* [*The Shepherd and the Snake*] strophes 1, 2 and 5, the two *La Tempesta* [*The Storm*], *L'Ucello* [*The Bird*], *Catone in Affrica* III, *La Fortuna* [*Fate*], *La Rosa, il Giglio, e il Serpilio*; Horace's *Odes* I.XIII [I.16], I.XX [I.26], I.XXIII [I.29]; the so-called "quartina savioliana," invented by Frugoni as a modification of Magalotti's metre, but made famous by Savioli's *Amori* [*Loves*], first published at the end of 1750s); b2) *quinari* ($s_5$asa: *La campagna* I; the Savioliana variant is quite common, for example in Frugoni, Fantoni, Meli); b3) *ottonari* ($s_8$asa: *La campagna* V; certainly rarer, maybe it is not fortuitous that it is documented in Casti, an author who was highly esteemed by Leopardi); b4) hendecasyllables (SASA: Horace's *Odes* I.XV [I.18], I.IV [I.4], I.XXII [I.28]; found frequently in Fantoni's *Odi*); b5) hendecasyllables and *settenari* (SaSa: I. XXVII [I.36], II.XIII [II.18]; a scheme employed to imitate the Archilochean system and iambic couplet, by De Coureil and Venini respectively).[7]

The data above show that the "quartina savioliana" is one of young Leopardi's favourite metres, and it is worth looking at one example of it. The syntactic structure is very elementary: there are paratactic sentences that correspond to the lines, and no rhetorical word order inversions. In both strophes, there is a stronger logical pause that divides the quatrain into two couplets, following Savioli's preference.[8] All these stylistic choices work together to create a *cantabile* (smooth singing style; literally 'singable') effect peculiar to melic poetry.

> Il crudo verno sciogliesi,
> Torna la primavera,
> Nè più nel cielo vedesi
> L'atra tempesta, e nera.

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[6] Cf. Zucco, *Istituti metrici del Settecento*, 197-201; Bausi and Martelli, *La metrica italiana*, 228. Inside square brackets, I refer to Horace's numeration; Leopardi employs a different one, because he numbers the *Odes* he translates progressively, skipping some of them.

[7] Cf. Zucco, *Istituti metrici del Settecento*, 204-7, 212-14; Rodolfo Zucco, "Imitazioni metriche oraziane nel Settecento," *Nuova rivista di letteratura italiana* 2 (1999): 386.

[8] Cf. Antonio Pinchera, "La quartina settenaria "elegiaca" negli "Amori" di Ludovico Savioli," in *Chi l'avrebbe detto? Arte, poesia e letteratura per Alfredo Giuliani*, eds. Corrado Bologna, Paolo Montefoschi, and Massimo Vetta (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994), 270-71.

Non più alle stelle s'ergono
Alte, e spumanti l'onde,
Ma stese in calma placida
Bacian le opposte sponde. (*Campagna* III.1-8)[9]

In addition to the quatrains, other kinds of strophes are frequently found in the *Puerilia*: rhyming couplets of hendecasyllables (*A favore del gatto e del cane*), *ottonari* (*L'Asino, e la Pecora*; *Appendice* IV, V, VII, VIII), *quinari* (*Appendice* XVII) and double *settenari,* which in the Italian literary tradition are also called *versi martelliani* (*Contro la Minestra* [*Against Soup*] *Appendice* XIV); tercets that follow the metrical scheme created by Rolli in his *Endecasillabi* ($A_{5S+5}SA_{5S+5}$: *Clelia passa il Tevere* [*Clelia Crosses the Tiber*) or a simplified variant of it (ASA: *Catone in Affrica* X, translation from Ovid's *Elegies* I.7, which is employed also by Fantoni e Saluzzo Roero).[10] There are also many types of sestets. Two of them have three different rhymes and are made up of *ottonari* and *quaternari*: both imitate Chiabrera's model, but the first is only inspired by it, whereas the second is taken from the Ligurian poet's *Canzonette* ($a_8a_4bb_4cc$: Horace's *Odes* I.XXVIII [I.37]; $a_8a_4bcc_4b$: Horace's *Odes* II.V [II.7]).[11] The other sestets are made up of a quatrain with an alternation of proparoxytone lines that do not rhyme, paroxytone rhyming lines and a rhyming couplet: the verses used are either *settenari* (sasabb: *La campagna* IV, Horace's *Odes* II.III [II.3]; also in Meli and Frugoni, among others), hendecasyllables (SASABB: Horace's *Odes* II.XIV [II.19]; no other examples documented to the best of this author's knowledge), or hendecasyllables and *settenari* (sAsAbB: Horace's *Odes* II.X [II.15]; sasabB: *Catone in Affrica* VI; both are uncommon and found in an unfinished ode by Parini and in Da Ponte, respectively).[12]

Furthermore, there are five ode strophes of 10, 11 and 12 lines. Their metrical schemes are extremely interesting: PApAPBbPCC, *La morte di Saulle* [*Saul's death*]; pPaApbBppcC, pApAbbpcCDD, pAApPBBpPCC,

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[9] "The cruel winter disappears, / spring comes back / and the sky / is not black, dark and stormy anymore. / The high waves / do not rise spurning to the stars anymore, / but they kiss the opposing banks, / settling quietly." All translations of Leopardi's *Puerilia* are mine.

[10] Cf. Zucco, *Istituti metrici del Settecento*, 194-95; Bausi and Martelli, *La metrica italiana*, 225-26.

[11] Cf. Mario Martelli, *Le forme poetiche dal Cinquecento ai giorni nostri*, in *Letteratura italiana. Le forme del testo. I. Teoria e poesia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), 582-85; Zucco, *Istituti metrici del Settecento*, 230-31; Bausi and Martelli, *La metrica italiana*, 214.

[12] Cf. Zucco, *Istituti metrici del Settecento*, 231-32.

sasaBBscsc Horace's *Odes* II.1 [II.1]; II.VIII [II.13], II.XI [II.16]; II.VII [II.10]. All of them have a rhyming couplet in the middle and at the end of the stanza (except the fifth), which allude to the traditional *canzone*'s *concatenatio* and *combinatio*; they simultaneously exhibit a very innovative structure because of the numerous unrelated rhymes (four, five, three and five). This is the reason why this kind of strophe is also called rhythmic. In the eighteenth century, it enjoyed a certain circulation (the first comparable attempt is Chiabrera's),[13] and it seems to have been an important antecedent and model for Leopardi's *Canzoni*: as is widely reported in the scholarship, in these texts, rhymes become increasingly sporadic (in the *canzoni libere* uniformity between stanzas will be abandoned as well).[14] The fifth strophe is slightly different from the other four, due to the presence of proparoxytone lines and the identity of the scheme of the first and the last four verses: it appears to be composed of two "savioliane" quatrains with rhyming couplets of hendecasyllables dividing them.

In the *Puerilia,* there are not only undivided strophes, but also twin strophes, although less numerous: as customary, the two half strophes are linked by a final oxytone rhyme. We can document one single example of a double sestet strophe of *quinari* (ssasasbt : scscsbt: Horace's *Odes* I.XXVI [I.35]; also in Frugoni and Lamberti, more common in *settenari* which is the metre Manzoni adopted for *Cinque maggio*).[15] Double quartets are employed more often. Three different schemes are recognisable: a) sssat : sssat (*Catone in Affrica* V, Horace's *Odes* II.IV [II.6]; very common in Frugoni); b) paabt : pccbt (*Per il Santo Natale, Per il giorno delle ceneri*; the scheme of Vittorelli's *Anacreontiche* and many of Frugoni's poems, which were very successful in the 18th century); c) saabt : sccbt (*La Campagna* II; utilised in Parini's *Brindisi* [*The Toast*] and many other eighteenth century authors, like Frugoni, Meli, Fantoni, etc.).[16] Leopardi will reutilise this metre in the *Risorgimento*, the only *canzonetta* in his mature production, written after a long period of poetic silence. It is interesting that the reawakening of his lyric inspiration passes through the revival of rhythms from the *Puerilia*: these new and mature lines are fed by his first infantile poetical attempts. In a sense, it is in line with Leopardi's belief that poetry's sources belonged to childhood (because at this age some

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[13] Ibid., 87-97.

[14] For studies regarding the *Canzoni*'s metrics, cf. at least Francesco De Rosa, *Dalla canzone al canto. Studi sulla metrica e lo stile dei "Canti" leopardiani* (Lucca: Pacini Fazzi, 2001).

[15] Cf. Zucco, *Istituti metrici del Settecento*, 157-58.

[16] Ibid., 135-40.

of the poets' fundamental qualities, like imagination and the ability to delude oneself, are particularly developed).

One of the texts mentioned above deserves greater attention: *Per il giorno delle ceneri*. In this poem, the pastoral musicality contrasts with the grave and solemn topic. Therefore, it seems to confirm a notion that the poet would develop more accurately in his later writings, namely, that negative content in poetry could be pleasant, because the work of genius is always delightful, even though it ruthlessly describes the tragedy of the human condition.[17] We can observe that the syntax, which is very paratactic, divides every quatrain into two couplets, as in the previous poem. Yet, there are some simple anastrophes (for example: v. 17 *brevi sono*; v. 19 *trattener poss'io*; v. 20 *di morte il fiero stral*, etc.) which make the *canzonetta* rhetorically richer.

> Se così brevi sono
> I dì del viver mio,
> Nè trattener poss'io
> Di morte il fiero stral;
>
> Nò ch'aspettar non voglio,
> Che giunga all'improvviso
> Mi giova il grande avviso
> Per cura del mio mal.
>
> Forse di questa notte
> Io non vedrò l'aurora,
> Di questo giorno ancora
> La notte io non vedrò.
>
> Mi stia dunque in pensiero,
> Ch'ho da morire adesso
> Perchè morendo spesso
> Meglio morir saprò. (*Per il giorno delle ceneri*, 17-32)[18]

A final example concerns a compound strophe, which is divided into two parts linked by a rhyme (like twin strophes), but each part has a different metrical scheme.

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[17] Cf., for example, Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 259-61.

[18] "If the days of my life are so short and I cannot hold the cruel arrow of death, I do not want to wait: may the grand and unexpected announcement assist my illness. Maybe I will not see the dawn at the end of this night, or the night at the end of this day. My mind needs above all to consider that I have to die now, because if I die often I will learn how to die better."

In eighteenth century authors, there could sometimes be profound changes between the two; in Leopardi's text, the variation is minimal. In the first half of the *stanza,* there are four not rhyming paroxytone *quinari* (before the final oxytone); in the second, there are four not rhyming proparoxytone ones (p₅pppat : ssssat: Horace's *Odes* II.IX [II.14]). It is worth considering that this technique would be employed in the first two of Leopardi's *Canzoni,* in which even and odd number strophes have different structures.

Two general observations can be made regarding the poems considered so far. First, it was not rare for Leopardi to employ as proparoxytone words that should be regarded as paroxytone. Indeed, for etymological reasons, we could not consider the nexus that involves an 'I' as a divisible syllable when the 'I' come from: a) L (*rugghio, sabbia, scoppio*: *Catone in Affrica* III.7 e 13; V.37); b) is associated with a previous consonant's doubling (*gabbia*: *L'Ucello,* 1); c) is a signal of palatality, in words that follow an uninterrupted Latin tradition (*taglia*: *La campagna* II.21; *biondeggia, meriggio, faggio*: *La campagna* IV.3, 25 e 36; *minaccia, faccia, eccheggia*: *Catone in Affrica* III.14, 23, 51; *grandeggia*: *Catone in Affrica* V.75, etc.). These prosodic mistakes could depend on the youth and inexperience of the poet (indeed, nothing similar can be found in the more mature *Risorgimento* [*The Reawakening*]), but not necessarily, as they are quite common in eighteenth and nineteenth century poetry.[19] Secondly, young Leopardi's *settenari* are almost always melic.[20] The most frequent prosodic schemes are 2nd 4th 6th and 1st 4th 6th, as we can also notice when reading the texts quoted above: in *Campagna* III's strophes, for example, the two rhythms are constantly alternated in even and odd number lines. We can sometimes find a contiguous ictus on the 2nd and 3rd syllables (*Il Pastore, e la Serpe,* 20: "Al *suol mor*to trabocca;" *La Campagna* IV.22: "Di *molle ar*so sudore;" *La Fortuna,* 4: "Su' regni ampj stendete," both with sinalefe, etc.) and slightly less often on the 3rd and 4th (*La Campagna* IV.19: "Sempre più l'opra avvanzasi," etc.). An isolated stress on the 3rd is missing. Instead, the *Canti's* author will not respect this convention, looking for greater rhythmic variety instead.[21]

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[19] Cf. Aldo Menichetti, *Metrica italiana. Fondamenti metrici, prosodia, rima* (Padua: Antenore, 1993), 191-99.

[20] For information concerning the melic *settenario,* cf. Zucco, *Istituti metrici del Settecento,* 39-43.

[21] Cf. Andrea Pelosi, *"Il corpo de' pensieri." La versificazione dei* Canti *leopardiani* (Pisa: ETS, 2013), 57-66 and 267-74.

3

As noticed in the last paragraph, Leopardi makes use of *ode* and *canzonetta* schemes for his translations from Horace. The Asclepiad system V, Archilochean IV, Alcmanian and Hipponax system are always rendered in these forms (the Asclepiad system I, one could add, is expressed in non-rhyming proparoxytone double *quinari*: I.I [I.1]). However, the poet often employs the so-called *metri barbari,* namely schemes which try to imitate classical metrics.[22] It is clear that he knew Giovanni Fantoni's attempt to create similar structures and that he deeply assimilated his lesson. Indeed, we can find examples of Fantoni's variant of the Alcaic system ($S_{5s+5s}Saa$), which embraces some of Rolli's suggestions (the first two lines are not rhyming proparoxytone double *quinari*) and some of Pallavicini's (the second two are rhyming paroxytone *settenari*).[23] Here is one quatrain from Ode I.VIII [I.9] (but cf. also I.XIV [I.17], I.XXI [I.27]):

> Vedi, che il gelido Soratte è candido
> Di neve rigida, e i boschi piegano
> Dal gel, che a' fiumi l'onda
> Rattien tra sponda, e sponda. (*A Taliarco*, I.VIII [I.9])[24]

The scheme coincides with the Asclepiad system III reformed by Fantoni (starting from Chiabrera's attempt and rhyming the final two *settenari* and is used, in the *Puerilia,* for Asclepiad strophes as well (I.XI [I.14], I.XVII [I.21]). Leopardi is also inspired by Fantoni's third Asclepiad IV system ($sA_{5s+5s}sA_{5s+5s}$), which he modifies by rhyming the odd instead of the even number lines ($aS_{5s+5s}aS_{5s+5s}$: I.III [I.3]).[25]

The young poet, however, does not follow Fantoni in his interpretation of the Sapphic minor system. The scheme $ABAb_5$ dates from the sixteenth century.[26] Fantoni's innovation is on the prosodic level: he always stresses the 1st, 4th and 8th syllables of the three hendecasyllables and the 1st of the final *quinario,* trying to imitate the rhythm of the Sapphic hendecasyllable and of the *adonio*, respectively.[27] In the *Puerilia,* this metrical obligation is not respected. In the following quatrain, for example, all of the four lines

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[22] For an overview of the problem, cf. Bausi and Martelli, *La metrica italiana*, 222-28; Zucco, *Imitazioni metriche oraziane*.

[23] Cf. Zucco, *Imitazioni metriche oraziane*, 364-65, 371-72.

[24] (You see the icy mountain Soracte standing white with freezing snow, the woods bowing because of the cold, and the rivers freezing within their banks).

[25] As noticed also by Zucco, *Imitazioni metriche oraziane*, 368.

[26] Cf. Pietro Beltrami, *La metrica italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1991), 307-08.

[27] Bausi and Martelli, *La metrica italiana*, 224.

have different prosodic features: a) 2nd 6th 8th 10th; b) 3rd 6th 10th; c) 2nd 4th 6th 8th 10th; d) 2nd 4th.

> I pesci si posar degli olmi in cima,
> E le Damme sull'onde procellose
> Contrario a quel, che far soleano in prima
> Nuotar paurose. (*Ode Saffica a Cesare Augusto*, I.II [I.2])[28]

The Sapphic minor system is the most common in Leopardi's versions of Horace (I.II [I.2]; I.IX [I.10], I.X [I.12], I.XVI [I.20], I.XVIII [I.22], I.XXIX [I.38]) and it is worth noting that he employs it to translate the Asclepiad system II too (I.V [I.6], I.XIX [I.24]; also in the double *quinari* variant $A_{5s+5}BAb_5$: I.XII [I.15]).

4

In the *Puerilia*, there are also traditional metres like madrigals (15, 1), Dantesque *terza rima* (*Il Sole, e la Luna* [*The Sun and the Moon*]; *I filosofi, e il Cane* [*The Philosophers and the Dog*]), *sesta rima* (*Balaamo; Catone in Affrica* III) and sonnets (*La morte di Ettore* [*Hector's Death*], *La tempesta della Flotta Trojana* [*The Trojan Fleet's Storm*] *La Morte* [*Death*], *Per Messa novella* [*For the new mass*]; *Catone in Affrica* XI. *Cesare Vincitore* [*Victorious Caesar*]; *Sonetto pastorale* [*Pastoral Sonnet*] XVI, XVII, XVIII, XIX, XX). The last two in particular were quite widely diffused in the eighteenth century. *Sesta rima* was employed, among others, by Fantoni (in the *Notti* [*Nights*]) and by Giambattista Casti in the narrative poem *Gli animali parlanti* [*Talking Animals*], which Leopardi admired (he would adopt the metre for his three versions of the Pseudo Homer's *Batracomiomachia* [*The Battle of Frogs and Mice*]). The number of sonnets in eighteenth century poetry is surely larger: in 1809 and 1810 the young Giacomo wrote eleven of them (and another six in 1817, before abandoning this metre, namely *Letta la vita dell'Alfieri scritta da esso* [*After Reading Alfieri's Life, Written by Himself*], and the parodic five *In persona di ser Pecora fiorentino beccaio* [*In the Person of Sir Sheep Florentine Butcher*].[29] It is truly remarkable that five of them have pastoral themes and are not in hendecasyllables, but in *ottonari*. In the following example the simplicity

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[28] "Fish stuck in the top of elms, and terrified deer swam in stormy waves, where they did not use to swim before."

[29] As Fabio Magro clearly shows in the sixth chapter of "Il Settecento, tra crisi e modernità," which is included in *Il sonetto italiano. Dalle origini a oggi*, ed. Fabio Magro, Arnaldo Soldani (Rome: Carocci, 2017).

of the syntax never crosses the metrical divisions and proceeds mostly using couplets (always in the quatrains, whereas each tercet has one line isolated):

> Come oimè, fedel Damone,
> Sempre inseguemi sventura!
> Con l'arnento quel caprone
> Si smarrì, che n'avea cura.
> N'andò in cerca Coridone,
> Che il guidava a la pastura,
> Nè tornò, forse un Lione
> Addentollo in selva oscura.
> Ma chi è mai quello, che lento
> Verso noi rivolge il passo?
> Mira là, vedi l'arnento.
> Coridone a noi ten' riedi,
> Sopra quel rotondo sasso
> Il sudor tergendo siedi. (*Sonetto* XVIII).[30]

This kind of sonnet, called anacreontic, is closely related to the *canzonette* and, indeed, it is typical of eighteenth-century experimentalism.[31] The link with this tradition also appears in the metrical schemes selected. All the quatrains have alternate rhymes (ABAB), which are in the minority in Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, but become increasingly common during the eighteenth century. The tercets have two possible structures, both rather common in Arcadia's anthologies: one is also the second most frequent in Petrarch CDC : DCD), whereas the other is absent in his sonnets (CDC : EDE).[32]

The fact that young Leopardi called four of his compositions '*canzoni*' is also worthy of attention. The choice of terminology seems to have been dictated by thematic reasons (they all describe dark and solemn events, like

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[30] "Alas! Faithful Damon, how misfortune always chases me! The goat got lost with its flock. Corydon, who led the animals to graze, went searching for them. And he did not come back, maybe a lion bit him in a dark wood. But who is coming toward us at a slow pace? Look there, see the flock. Corydon, you are coming back to us and sit on that round stone, wiping your sweat [away]."

[31] For information on this metre, cf. Rodolfo Zucco, "Il sonetto anacreontico (ed altre sperimentazioni settecentesche sul sonetto)," in *Stilistica e metrica italiana* 1 (2001): 223-58.

[32] Cf. Magro, *Il Settecento, tra crisi e modernità*, 21-23; Andrea Pelosi, *Sincronia e diacronia delle rime*, in *La metrica dei* Fragmenta, ed. Marco Praloran (Padua: Antenore, 2003), 505-10.

storms, night-time scenes and deaths),[33] because these texts are very heterogeneous from a metrical point of view. *La tempesta* is a "quartina savioliana" and *Fra l'atre oscure* [*In the dark gloom*] is a sestet composed of *settenari* and one hendecasyllable (sasabB). As mentioned before, *La morte di Saulle* is an ode with undivided strophes, which could be interpreted as another innovative *canzone* (like many composed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). Only *S'asconde il sole* [*The sun is hiding*] looks almost like a regular, traditional *canzone*: it has one unrelated rhyme and there is no *concatenatio*, but its stanzas are divided into two *piedi* and one *sirma* that ends with a *combinatio* (aBCaBCPDdEFF).[34] The marmer in which the syntax interacts with the form is extremely interesting: the syntax is contained by metrical partitions only in the first strophes, whereas, in the others, it always crosses one or both of the boundaries. Below are the two initial stanzas: in the second there is a strong enjambment between the two feet (*percossi* / *timpani*) and a subordinative connection between the second foot and the *sirma* (*dal fragor riscossi* / *Lo stuol romano…*). The search for tension and contrast between syntax and metre will be distinctive of the *Canzoni* and, in a slightly different way, of Leopardi's last poems.[35] The syntactic link through the strophes is also noteworthy: in the first, there are many short coordinate clauses (describing the context) all governing the temporal dependent that opens the second one (and presents a well-delimited action). This is a construction called *cum inversum*, of Latin origin, but often employed in Italian, especially in a narrative context. Thus, following the higher level of style and metre, periods seem to be longer and more complex (although still largely grounded on parataxis and coordination), compared to the ones below.

> S'asconde il sole; un nero
> Oscuro manto infra l'opaco orrore
> Vedesi intorno ottenebrare il cielo,
> Regna dal soglio altero,
> E lo scettro leteo stende il sopore;
> Tutta cuopre natura un denso velo;
> Giace la terra in cieco obblio sepolta;
> Posan tranquille ne le folte selve
> Le taciturne belve;

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[33] Cf. Andrea Pelosi, "Un percorso metrico leopardiano," in *Stile Novecento. Saggi di stilistica e metrica da Leopardi a Svevo* (Florence: Cesati, 2006).

[34] As Pelosi, "Un percorso metrico leopardiano," 16, tells us, the two *piedi* are identical to the ones in Testi's *canzone* (*Contro gli eccessi del lusso*) included in Leopardi's *Crestomazia*.

[35] Cf. De Rosa, *Dalla canzone al canto*.

Pallide larve, e mute erran d'intorno;
Del feroce Scipion lo stuol pensoso
Occupa incerto sonno, ed affannoso.

Quando al guerriero suono
De la tibia marzial, dei rimbombanti,
Elastici metalli, e dei percossi
Timpani al forte tuono,
A l'eccheggiar di trombe risuonanti
Destansi a un tratto, e dal fragor riscossi
Lo stuol Roman, la Mauritania turba
Indossan l'armi, e gli ampj scudi alteri,
E i nobili cimieri,
Snudan gli acciari, alzan l'insegne aurate,
E d'esse al folgorar vedesi intorno
Vinta la notte, e già rinato il giorno. (*Catone in Affrica* VIII.1-24)[36]

One year later, in 1811, in his translation of *Ars poetica* (*The art of poetry*), Leopardi would similarly employ another closed metre that is very common in the Italian poetic tradition: the *ottava rima*. The young poet follows the canonical division into four couplets only in 28.8% of the stanzas, whereas this occurs in about 80% of cases in classical poems, such as Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*.[37] It is not uncommon for him to completely alter the strophe structure by situating most of the syntactic pauses in the middle of the lines. In the following example, the main speech junction falls at the midpoint of lines 2, 4, 5, 6: this also creates an enjambment over the strongest metrical break in the *ottava* (between sestet and rhyming couplet).

Un orciuol cominciò con presto giro
Veloce ruota; eh, che mai dir dovrei

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[36] "The sun hides itself; a black dark cloak obscures the sky spreading opaque terror; fierce obscurity is imposed from its throne and the sceptre of Lethe spreads drowsiness; a thick veil envelops nature; the earth lies buried in a blind oblivion, taciturn wild beasts sleep silently in dense woods; pale and silent ghosts wander around; Scipio's group of warriors has a restless and uncertain sleep; when the warlike sound of military horn, of resounding kettledruns and the echo of ringing trumpets wake up the Roman army and the Mauritanian crowd; they all grab weapons, they haughtily raise their broad shields and noble crests, they unsheathe their blades and raise their golden insignia, and suddenly their glitter defeats the night and brings back the day again."
[37] Cf. Leonardo Bellomo, "L'ironia delle forme. Metro e sintassi nei *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia*," in *Stilistica e metrica italiana* 17 (2017): 155-213.

Se mentre attento un tal lavor rimiro,
N'escisse un orinal? Tutto tu dei
Semplicemente espor: penso e sospiro
Onde scoprire il ben; se i versi miei
Brevemente talor scriver procuro,
Mi si fa notte, e batto il capo al muro. (*L'arte poetica di Orazio travestita ed esposta in ottava rima*, VI)[38]

At the end of his poetic career, in his only subsequent attempt at this metre (*Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia* [*The War of the Mice and the Crabs*]), Leopardi would proceed in exactly the same way, breaking the *ottava's* rigid skeleton from the inside.

5

One final metrical form in the *Puerilia* are the free hendecasyllables, which were documented for the first time in the sixteenth century, but became a very important metre, especially in the eighteenth century. They are employed in ten poems (*Sansone, La spelonca, L'amicizia, La libertà Latina, I re Magi, Catone in Affrica* IX, *Le notti puniche, Il diluvio universale, Appendice* XII, XIII) and this is the only metre used for this juvenile collection that Leopardi would constantly employ in subsequent years (many of his masterpieces, such as the *Idilli, Le ricordanze*, etc., are in *sciolti*). In these texts, more than in the others, his stylistic choices seem to anticipate some distinctive tendencies of his mature language, especially when the poet discusses congenial topics (such as solitude in *La spelonca*), or when he describes natural landscapes and nocturnal scenes (again *La spelonca, Le notti puniche*, etc.) or in the characters' lyrical monologues (*L'amicizia*, etc.). Above all, the lack of a real metrical structure in the free hendecasyllables allows or at least facilitates unconstrained syntactic movement, and this is one of the main features of the *Canti*. A passage from the *Spelonca* is exemplary in this respect, as the link between this text and *La vita solitaria* (*The Solitary Life*) has already been suggested by Corti (same topic: solitude; one lexical convergence: *infide mura* and *cittadine infauste mura*).[39] This early poem also shares the night setting and the

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[38] (A fast lathe started to mould a large urn: what should I say if, while I am admiring that work, the urn becomes a chamber-pot? Whatever subject you choose, be careful to preserve simplicity: I alternate between reflection and sighing, striving to find excellence; if I'm searching for brevity in my poetry, night falls down around me and I beat my head on the wall).

[39] Leopardi, *Entro dipinta gabbia*, 155-56.

presence of some words mostly related to the semantic sphere of sleep (*giacere, posare, cura*) with *La sera del dì di festa* (*The Evening of the Holiday*). It is important to emphasise some other aspects related to the architecture of speech that these poems have in common (and, more generally, pertain to all of Leopardi's *sciolti*). Firstly, there is a high number of syntactically open lines at the beginning and at the end (eight out of twelve), a decreasing coincidence of logical and metrical pauses (which mostly fall in the centre) and the consequent abundance of enjambments, which are sometimes quite strong (for instance in lines 7-8 and 9-10).

> Notte già regna, in un sopor tranquillo
> Giaccion le genti, e non avvien, che rompa
> Il tacito silenzio aura fischiante,
> Nè l'abbajar del vigile mastino;
> Tutto riposa; ma riposo, e tregua
> Tirsi non trova in sul notturno letto
> Volgesi irrequieto, il pensier tetro
> De le diurne cure, e de gli odiati
> Aspri travagli, a cui tuttor si espose
> Agitan l'alma, ed il turbato spirto
> Pace trovar non sa; sorge, e dolente
> Così la noja in meste voci esprime. (*La Spelonca*, 1-12)[40]

In the following section, where the poet gives voice to the shepherd Tirsi, both the use of the interrogative mode, as well as the deployment of verses into three parts rather than the canonical two, recur. These expedients aim to increase both melodic dynamism and pathos. It is no coincidence that they also occur very often in shepherd Damon's monologue in *L'amicizia* (cf. particularly lines 26-48): clearly, they are particularly appropriate for expressing sentimental effusion.

> "Misero! e qual contento ora ti apporta
> Il fulgid'oro, il lusinghiero argento,
> Ch'avido ricercasti? e qual vantaggio
> Aver tu puoi da l'alto onor, che invano
> Trovar bramasti, se del cuor la pace,
> Se la gioja perdesti? indarno ammassi
> Con avido desìo ricchezze insane,

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[40] "The night reigns, people sleep quietly and neither whistling air or the bark of an alert mastiff break the silence. Everything rests; but Tirsi has no rest or break; he fidgets anxiously in his bed; daytime worries and his hateful hard toils' gloomy thoughts upset him, and his troubled spirit cannot find peace; so boredom rises and speaks painfully with a sad voice."

Contento, libertà, pace, riposo,
Fuggon lungi da te; che pensi?" e immerso
In profondo dolor la mesta fronte
Con la destra puntella, e tace; intanto
Scendeano innosservate a lievi stille
L'involontarie lacrime; le affrena
Tirsi doglioso, e a le pupille appressa
Il bianco lino; indi la mesta face
Spegne, e si stende su l'odiose piume,
E sospirando il chiaro giorno aspetta.
Quand'ecco ascolta a taciturni passi
Avvanzarsi qualcun, l'orecchio tende
Sorge, e la face estinta incerto avviva,
Gira il guardo dubbioso, e mira... un'Ombra...
Una Larva avvanzarsi... egli feroce
Stende al ferro la man, lo snuda, e "fuggi
Esclama, Ombra fatal, fuggi, che cerchi?
Perchè da le funeste, oscure tombe
De' viventi a turbar la pace uscisti?"
"Taci; l'Ombra gridò; taci una Larva
Non è quel, che tu vedi, un Nume è desso
De le foreste il Dio, riponi il brando,
O malcauto mortal; vieni, che speri?"[41]

Here, the syntactic constructions are quite simple: sentences are generally short, and the lack of coincidence with the metre is what mainly links the lines. It is also interesting to observe the presence of a figure of

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[41] "'Oh miserable one! What sort of happiness comes from dazzling gold and flattering silver, that you avidly searched for? And what advantage could you gain from high honours, which you uselessly yearn for, if you lost peace of mind and joy? You collect in vain insane riches with avid desire; happiness, freedom, peace and rest escape you: what are you thinking?' And immersed in a deep sorrow, he holds his sad forehead with the right hand and he falls silent; in the meantime unseen tears shed in small drops involuntarily; suffering Tirsi stops them and rubs a white linen onto his eyes; then he extinguishes the miserable flame and he lies down on his odious bed, and sighing he waits for a bright day. When he perceives somebody who is moving forward silently, he listens carefully, he stands up and rekindles the extinguished flame hesitantly, he turns his head doubtfully and sees…a Shadow, a ghost who is coming forward […] he takes his sword ferociously, he unsheathes it and exclaims: 'Run away, deadly Shadow, run away! What are you searching for? Why did you leave dark, baleful graves to disturb the peace of the living?' The Shadow shouts: 'Stop talking, stop talking! I am not a ghost, I am a god of the forest. Put your sword away, o incautious mortal! Come here, what do you think you are doing?'"

speech closely related to parataxis: the polysyndeton. Leopardi would employ it in a very characteristic way in the *Canti* (the most famous example is in *L'Infinito* (*The Infinite*), but he starts to make use of it in these texts (especially in *Le notti puniche*, I.38-42: "Miro su' tesa tela alle annerite, / Ampie pareti appese i dubbj eventi / De l'Affricane sanguinose pugne / Descritti, e pinti da fedel pennello; *E i mari, e le ferrate, erranti navi, / E l'aste, e l'armi, e le lucenti spade;*" and *Il diluvio universale*, 54-60: "Muggir s'ascolta la ramosa selva, / E gli alti faggi, e le robuste quercie, / E i cerri antichi, ed i fronzuti pini / Svelti dal suol rotansi in aria, e sassi / Traggon da l'ima terra, e polve, e sterpi, / Che come oscura nube alzano al cielo / Gli austri fischianti [...] ."[42] There is not yet the syntactic variety that would be typical of the mature Leopardi's poetic discourse,[43] however, in the poems with free hendecasyllables one finds different and more complex architectural solutions. Thanks to the lack of a closed metric structure, sometimes the syntax can become more articulated, linking several verses within a single period. The longest and most hypotactic is probably in *La libertà romana difesa sulle mura del Campidoglio* (*The Roman Freedom Defended on the Campidoglio's Walls*) It spans 25 lines and is divided into three sections. These syntactic segments are uncharacteristically separated by full stops, but connected by subordination. In the first, we find a long comparative clause (43-56), in the second the main clause and its many coordinates (57-62), in the third a shorter temporal subordinate clause (62-67). Even though the construction is complex and developed over three paratactic blocks, there is still a considerable distance between this and the periodic style we encounter in the *Canzoni* and in the last *Canti*.

> Qual chi per campo di verdure ameno
> Lieto tra i fiori il passo errante move
> E d'un ruscello al mormorio gradito
> Corre ansioso, e il praticel trascorre:
> Vede repente fuor de l'erba sorgere
> Trilingue biscia altera, ed infocata,
> Che fischia, e sbalza, e via sguizzando fugge:
> Atterrito, ed incerto allor si arresta
> Dubbiando se pur debba al serpe orrendo
> Con ferro ardito, e forte incontro gire
> Ovver se debba a lui volgere il tergo,
> Ed a veloce timorosa fuga
> La sua vita affidar: tema e valore

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[42] Cf. Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, "Note di sintassi poetica leopardiana," in *Leopardi antiromantico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012), 75-106.

[43] Ibid.

Pugnan fra lor ne l'atterrito petto.
Non altrimenti dubitando resta
La spaventata Libertà; dal sonno
Vede oppressi i suoi figli, e mira intanto
Minacciosi innoltrarsi i Galli alteri;
De la città conosce il rio periglio,
Nè sollevar gli amici suoi gli è dato.
Quando al fragor de l'armi, al mormorio
De le nemiche turme alfin destate
In rauco suono al ciel grida eccheggianti
Innalzan l'oche, ed atterrite fanno
Battendo l'ali risuonar le strida. (*La libertà romana difesa sulle mura del Campidoglio*, 43-67)[44]

Moreover, the stylistic tone can be elevated by manipulating word order. This is a very refined rhetorical strategy, which can compensate for the lack of phonic connections in the metre. Indeed, when anastrophes or hyperbatons are placed between the lines, they increase the melodic continuity and bond.[45] One good example is in the first verses of *Catone in Affrica* IX, which starts with an interlocking construction: main clause verb – gerundive object – main clause subject – gerundive verb (1-2: "Di già *sorgeva* il luminoso cocchio / *Febo* guidando…"). An infinitive subordinate follows, preceding the main clause; inside it there is another inversion, because the two objects are placed before the verb (2-5: "[…] e i sottoposti colli, / E i vasti campi ad indorar, veloce / Per l'eterea magion volgeva il corso […]"). The beginning of *Le notti puniche* III is also very interesting: probably, it is not by chance that many of these figures are in the *exordium* of the texts, which is traditionally more marked rhetorically. The first clause

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[44] "As someone who joyfully wanders through pleasant fields of vegetation and flowers, runs anxiously next to an agreeably whispering stream, and crosses the meadow; he sees a three-tongued, haughty, angry snake emerging from the grass and whistling, jumping, slipping and running away; then he stops because he doesn't know if he should take on the dreadful snake with his brave sword, or save his life by running away quickly and fearfully: dread and valour fight each other in his terrified heart. So the frightened Freedom is doubtful; she sees her sons oppressed by sleep and in the meantime she watches the arrogant Gauls venturing into the city; she is aware of the terrible danger, but she cannot save her friends. When the geese are woken up by the weapons' clang and the murmuring of the enemy troops, they shout out hoarsely to the sky above and their terrified shrieks resound with their beating wings."

[45] For theoretical problems about the functions of inversion and enjambments, cf. Menichetti, *La metrica Italiana*; and Arnaldo Soldani, *La sintassi del sonetto* (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2009).

begins with its object (modified by a participle), which is distanced from
the verb and the following subject by the interposition of a relative clause
and a gerundive one: the construction spans six lines. The word order
'object-verb-subject' is typical of ancient Italian, which helps emphasise the
first component in terms of intonation: it guarantees an oratorical tone that
is appropriate for historical texts, like the ones mentioned earlier.

Il plumbeo scettro umor leteo stillante,
Intorno a cui le fosche penne scuote
Il tacito sopor, la turba alata
D'ingannevoli sogni; in alto soglio
Assisa stando distendea sul mondo
L'oscura notte; al suo voler son pronte [...] (*Le notti puniche* III. 1-6)[46]

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This examination of the *Puerilia* clearly shows the extraordinary
technical talents of their author, which are even more remarkable when one
considers his age at the time. This analysis documents and proves that the
roots of Leopardi's poetic culture are in the eighteenth century's poetic
metre. His metric solutions are unquestionable proof of this, most
manifestly in the *odi* and *canzonette*. The influence of the melic tradition is
more evident in the older texts. It is true that the author of the *Canti* will
write only one *canzonetta*, *Il Risorgimento*, however, the idea of poetry as
pure *canto* will continue to play a key role: the search for the effects of
cantabile can be seen in many of his compositions, especially in those
written between 1828 and 1830, during the Pisan-Recanati period.[47] The
first *canzoni libere* stand out for the linearity of their syntax, and for the
harmony between it and the metre, all features that are typical of the
canzonette repertoire. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the important literary

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[46] "Sitting on high throne, the dark night raises her oppressive sceptre, dripping
Lethe's humor [in the sense of a liquid], over the world. Around it the silent sleep,
the winged group of deceptive dreams shake their dark feathers; they are ready to
satisfy her wishes."
[47] As is well known, the *Canti* are divided in four sections. The first two, called
Canzoni and *Idilli*, are composed in the same arc of time (1818-1822), but in
opposite styles; the second two collect the poems written in two chronologically
consecutive periods, which the poet spent in Pisa and Recanati (1828-1830) and in
Florence and Naples (1831-1837). During the Pisa-Recanati period Leopardi starts
to employ a new metrical form, called *canzone libera*. The *canzone libera* is not
composed of prosodically uniform strophes, but instead of a free alternation of
hendecasyllables and settenari, which doesn't follow a rigid rhyme scheme.

critic Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo defined *A Silvia* as a transcendental *canzonetta*.[48]

Furthermore, it is worth insisting on another point: Leopardi's experimental inclinations are driven by his familiarity with eighteenth century poetry and its penchant for experimentation. This is clear not only because he employs such a large quantity of different metres, as happened more generally in the poetry of that period, but also because of the variety of schemes adopted. The young poet seems to be inspired especially by writers such as Savioli, Rolli, Frugoni and Fantoni (cf. sections 2 and 3). What is particularly remarkable is Leopardi's reclamation of Fantoni's *metri barbari*, a proof of his direct reference to this poet (cf. section 3). Although imitating these models, Leopardi sometimes takes a personal stance: like his predecessors before him, he intervenes by taking advantage of the possibility of varying metric structures, using not rhyming lines to create new forms (cf. especially the five ode strophes of lines 10, 11 and 12 and the composed strophe mentioned in 2). The employment and the development of these features is a prelude to the process of extrication from metric restriction conducted in the *Canti*'s *canzoni*, which, from the first examples, subvert the classic Petrarchan model to gradually become *libere*. Leopardi's *Puerilia* could be seen as paradigmatic, as they remind us that nineteenth century metric innovations had their basis and premises in the previous century. Leopardi's early poetic work, as many other examples prove, confirm the notion that any historical and aesthetic period contains both interruptions, breaks, and continuities.

Another critical element that emerges is Leopardi's natural talent for building and organizing sentences and periods, as seen in his early poetic production. Certainly, the *Canti*'s author would reach higher levels, but the *Puerilia* manifestly points to key metric features that will be developed and perfected in the mature years. The architecture of his speech is often elementary (always so in the *canzonette*: cf. paragraphs 2), but sometimes it is quite complex, especially in the poems dominated by a solemn tone and a graver metre (*canzoni*, free hendecasyllables: cf. par. 4 and 5). In these same texts in particular, Leopardi seems to have a certain familiarity with word order alteration: he employs anastrophes and various rhetorical constructions and also uses their cohesive melodic effects to link lines more strictly.

What is perhaps more interesting is the poet's profound awareness and sophisticated interpretation of the relationship between metre and syntax. In

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[48] Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, *Sonavan le quiete stanze. Sullo stile dei* Canti *di Leopardi* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006), 34.

the *canzonette* and in other similar forms, he harmonises the two elements; in the closed forms (like the *canzoni* and the *ottave*) he usually produces a conflict, trying to disrupt the metric structure from within: a comparable stylistic gesture is highly appropriate to the antagonistic attitude of the lyrical I, which will resurface in the *Canzoni* and the *Paralipomeni*, where both metric style and content are subversive. From an historical point of view, this highlights the dynamic relationship Leopardi entertains with the literary tradition, which is simultaneously appropriated and undermined. In the free hendecasyllables, syntax seems to proceed quite freely due to the lack of a metric reticulum: the lines are constantly linked by a period's 'arcs', which are sometimes quite ample, and, quite particularly, by an extraordinarily high number of enjambments. This technique will constitute the main stylistic feature in the *Canti*, where Leopardi makes use of this classical tool much more often than his predecessors and most of his contemporaries.[49] This choice is grounded in his need to articulate speech in a more personal way, which is, in its turn, the expression of the increased emphasis the Romantics placed on subjectivity. It seems as if the young Leopardi felt a natural urge towards this mode of expression. As an adult, with the development of his own philosophical "system," the choice of a highly theoretical poetry would drive this impulse to strengthen the lyrical I.

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[49] For an overall review of the *Canti*'s enjambements, cf. Leonardo Bellomo, "Procedimenti inarcanti nei *Canti* di Leopardi," *Studi di filologia italiana* 74 (2016):143-214.

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Chapter Seven

Leopardi's Linguistic Typology of Poetic Forms: A Neglected Chapter in the History of Poetics

Stefano Versace

Introduction

This study is concerned with a set of reflections on poetic forms and languages contained in Giacomo Leopardi's private notebook, known as the *Zibaldone*; I argue that these reflections, apparently unrelated to one another, instead constitute a unitary thread that leads back to a coherent theoretical framework, developed by Leopardi right at the beginning of his notebook. This framework, modelled on his reading of Montesquieu's *Essay on Taste*, supports a clear line of inquiry, whose goal is to investigate the inherent co-existence of patterns of variation and universality in the world's poetic forms, and which is developed throughout the entire *Zibaldone*. Henceforth, I will refer to this research program as the *linguistic* Montesquieu *poetic forms* (from now on dubbed *LeopTyP*). *LeopTyP* never received a full-fledged formulation by Leopardi, nor a label that would set it apart from all other reflections on poetry or on differences across cultures, hence also across different poetries. Yet, *LeopTyP* 1) is fully recognizable as such under the assumption that when Leopardi is reflecting on language and poetry he always fuses a typological perspective with an encompassing unitary framework which includes precise examples, and 2) it does play an important role both in the development of Leopardi's thoughts on poetry and human nature, and in his actual poetic practice. *LeopTyP* is in itself inherently linguistic, because every time we find reflections on structures and variations in the world's poetries in the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi always reasons on the basis of his knowledge of linguistic rules and structures.

The present study does not consider the sources for Leopardi's thoughts on the typology of poetic forms; that is, it does not present a philological argument. The reasons for this stance may be found in the fact that these sources are limited, and scattered; this is particularly true for his linguistic sources.[1] What, however, matters to the unity of *LeopTyP* is the specific way in which Leopardi's thoughts on the linguistics of poetic form hold together; this internal thread should be thus thought of as coherently following precise theoretical assumptions that link together a multiplicity of data.

The object of this study, that is, the linguistic-typological perspective informing Leopardi's reflections on poetic forms, might not only be relevant to scholars interested in reconstructing Leopardi's intellectual profile; it might also promote reconsideration of a rather neglected branch of poetics. We can delineate this perspective by deriving a few basic questions from the following points into: all human beings can speak a language, and these languages differ from one another following complex structural and geographical patterns. Human beings also develop cultures, and, within these, poetries, that is, kinds of verbal art that express culturally significant meanings by means of particular forms. These forms can be termed "poetic" when they involve sometimes diverse but prescriptive kinds of regulation of the language, such as, for example, poetic meter or rhyme, or sectioning of texts into smaller units such as strophes. What are these regulations? What explains their differences as well as their similarities across languages, as well as cultures? Why have different cultures developed sometimes very different kinds of poetry? And why do some universal traits in these poetries always seem to be present, sometimes migrating from one culture to another? Rarely have literary scholars tackled such questions, especially if also trying to welcome the complexity of possible answers. Perhaps more important, rarely were these questions addressed in a unitary, holistic fashion, that could provide precise answers to clearly formulated questions in order to set the standards for a strong tradition of studies within

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[1] Cf. Stefano Gensini, *Linguistica leopardiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984) and, by the same author, "The History of Linguistic Ideas in the Age of the Enlightenment and the Early 19th Century," in *Italian Studies in Linguistic Historiography*, ed. Tullio De Mauro and Lia Formigari (Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 1994), 167-90.

the discipline of poetics.[2] This gap still exists for current literary linguistic studies, despite significant advancements in the study of poetry and of language.[3] While the above holds true in general, this might not always be the case if we take less official, unpublished or just less known works into consideration. Here I claim that this is the case of the *Zibaldone*.

Understanding the unitary form of Leopardi's reflections on poetic forms is the key to accessing *LeopTyP*, and vice versa. Thus, if my argument is correct, Leopardi i) consistently connects the above-mentioned variation to linguistic differences in the examples he discusses, and ii) clearly individuates poetic types, that is, recurrent forms that characterize the appearances of poetry in different times, and cultures. Acknowledging the presence of a linguistic-typological line of inquiry on poetic forms within the *Zibaldone*, then, is not only a goal in itself, but could simultaneously pursue the goal of gaining a deeper understanding of Leopardi's mind, thus also his poetic practice. Put in a wider perspective, recognizing *LeopTyP* is not only something that we owe Leopardi as an intellectual; reflecting on the premises on which Leopardi based his typological work might in turn provide the grounds to reconsider the potentials of linguistic typology for current psychological, anthropological, and literary-linguistic theorizing. I suggest that considering how these ideas were expressed *then*, that is, in Leopardi's words, provides the reader interested in poetry with a depth of insight the importance of which should not be underestimated.

The argument unfolds as follows. Section 2 provides a close reading of Leopardi's approach to Montesquieu, and shows how it can be seen as the early formulation of a way of thinking about poetic forms. Section 3 shows how several, apparently unrelated passages of the *Zibaldone* actually have much more in common than one might think: they all show, according to the present reading, tight interconnections to the thoughts analysed in Section 2. This makes them all legitimate constituents of a coherent set of reflections about the linguistic typology of poetic forms. Section 4 illustrates how other realms of Leopardi's intellectual activity, such as his poetry and philosophy, in fact also presuppose this typology and how it

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[2] Cf., for example, Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (Tübingen: Francke, 1948); Eduard Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa vom VI. Jahrhundert v. Chr. bis in die Zeit der Renaissance* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1958); Mikhail Gasparov, *A History of European Versification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[3] For a review of the current state of poetic typologies, cf. Stefano Versace and Nigel Fabb, "A Database as a Method of Raising Typological Questions about Poetic Form," in *Proceedings of Conference on Language Documentation and Linguistic Theory*, vol. 3 (London: SOAS, 2011), 289-96.

informs what I suggest one could designate as Leopardi's *biopoetics program*. In Section 5 I draw some conclusions from my argument by suggesting that there exist ways to link *LeopTyp* to contemporary contributions to the study of human culture and mind; most questions discussed in this essay have yet to be answered today, and the *biopoetics program* as defined here may represent a rich source of inspiration not only for understanding Leopardi, but for future literary theorizing as well.

How to Read Montesquieu in Recanati

In a note dated 6th July 1820 (at the beginning of the *Zibaldone*), Leopardi discusses his reading of Montesquieu's *Essay on Taste*.[4] Leopardi's note echoes, in particular, a remarkable passage that may be found in this essay, which reads as follows:

> *The way in which we are constituted is entirely arbitrary.* We could have been made as we are or differently; but if we had been made differently, we would have felt differently; an organ more or less in our machine would have produced a new eloquence, a new poetry; *a different make-up of the same organs would have produced still another kind of poetry.* For example, if the constitution of our organs made us capable of greater concentration, this would do away with all the *rules* that keep the arrangement of a subject in proportion to the length of our concentration; if we were capable of a greater penetration, this would put an end to all the *rules* based on the degree of our penetration. *In a word, all the laws that derive from the fact that our machine is made in a certain fashion would change if our machine were made differently.*[5]

Several aspects of this reflection must have struck the young Leopardi. In particular, the idea that a cultural token, such as poetry, is informed by the physiological constitution of those individuals that produce it, rather than by any metaphysical laws, has a profound impact on the development

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[4] This was part of the collaborative project of the *Encyclopédie*, see Jean le Rond D'Alembert, Denis Diderot, Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, and (François-Marie Arouet) de Voltaire, "Taste," in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, trans. Nelly S. Hoyt and Thomas Cassirer (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2003). http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.168 (accessed June 16, 2016). Originally published as "Goût," in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris, 1757) 7:761-70. Quotations are from the online source.

[5] Throughout this essay, the italics in quotations are mine.

of Leopardi's system of thought.[6] Most importantly, Montesquieu provides Leopardi with a reflection on the form and causes of the things that exist, one that feeds into the thoughts Leopardi will develop in the years to come, namely, a critique of a strong, literal version of Platonism. In Montesquieu's words, "the way in which we are constituted is entirely *arbitrary* [...]; if we had been made differently, we would have *felt differently*." The connection between how we feel things and the way our organs are made must have provided Leopardi with strong support in the development of his materialistic and relativistic opinions. At this point in his life, however, poetry had become Leopardi's main preoccupation together with philosophy and philology. Montesquieu establishes a direct link between the way human beings are constituted and the form of poetry they produce. This link must have given Leopardi a way to connect his other scholarly interests with the inquiry into poetic forms, which, in turn, his philological studies must have shown to vary according to patterns that largely were—and still are—unclear. In other words, relativity reigns in the kinds of cultural tokens that we produce as human beings, and in the ways we perceive them. A scholar of ancient and modern literatures, Leopardi is well aware of that. If the form of these tokens can be explained by the way our respective organisms are constituted, then the respective features of these tokens, their similarities and differences must also be connected to the way "organisms are made," hence to their psychology.

Along these lines of reasoning, (human) nature is the principle that provides us with a psychological faculty in the first place. Montesquieu must conclude: "in a word, *all the laws* that derive from the fact that our machine is made in a certain fashion *would change if our machine were made differently*." Laws, or rules, are something that can be formalized, or at least expressed. This implies that we can further the understanding of "our machine" if we look at the laws that we see applied in the products of our psychology. Hence, in the poetries of the world—a product of our respective psychologies—we should find patterns of similarity and diversity that can be formalized as laws, or rules.

In *Zib.*, 154-55, Leopardi discusses his reading of the above passage:

> From what Montesquieu says [...] it follows that the rules of literature and the fine arts cannot really be universal and applicable to each of us. It is true, of course, that in the important and fundamental respects we are all alike,

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[6] For a recent perspective on the otherwise classic topic of Leopardi's materialism, cf. Cosetta Veronese, "Glosses on the Margin of Leopardi's Materialism," *Appunti leopardiani* 2 (2011): 34-40.

and therefore the underlying rules of literature and the fine arts are universal. But many small and mediun differences exist between one population and another, between one individual and another, and especially between one period and another [...] It follows that literature and the arts, which, for the reasons given earlier, are subject to universal rules at some basic levels, nevertheless in many respects must differ enormously according not only to the different natures but also to the many variable qualities.[7]

What is striking here is that Leopardi is not simply reporting Montesquieu's opinion. Rather, he starts by opposing Montesquieu with his own perspective: "it is true, of course, that [...] we are all alike, and therefore the underlying rules of literature are universal;" and subsequently integrates the two arguments by outlining a reasonable mediation. This takes the form of a difference between two co-existing levels: a basic one, where universal rules apply, and a variable one, where the different natures and cultures of human beings can express a high degree of variation. Taking this reasoning a step further, both these two levels must play a role in determining the forms cultures may take; what the scholar and thinker of literature, poet and philologist, is specifically confronted with are texts, and their forms. His experience tells him that these forms must inherit, in some of their traits, both the basic-universal and the variable-specific level in which human psychology manifests itself. In other words, Leopardi develops a clear-cut vision of rules that are universal, because they apply in cultures connected only by the fact of being products of human nature in the above passage. This clear-cut, simple reasoning visualizes differences in individuals' behaviours with regard to poetry over time and places, while offering, at the same time, a way to think about these behaviours in a strikingly coherent framework.

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[7] "Da quello che dice Montesquieu [...] deducete che le regole della letteratura e belle arti non possono affatto essere universali, e adattate a ciascheduno. Bensì è vero che la maniera di essere di un uomo nelle cose principali e sostanziali è comune a tutti, e perciò le regole capitali delle lettere e arti belle, sono universali. Ma alcune piccole o mediocri differenze sussistono tra popolo e popolo tra individuo e individuo, e massimamente fra secolo e secolo. [...] la letteratura e le arti, quantunque pel motivo sopraddetto siano soggette a regole universali nella sostanza principale, tuttavia in molti particolari debbano cangiare infinitam. secondo non solamente le diverse nature, ma anche le diverse qualità mutabili, vale a dire opinioni, gusti, costumi ec. degli uomini, che danno loro diverse idee della convenienza relativa." Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, ed. Giuseppe Pacella (Milan: Garzanti, 1991); all Italian quotations from Leopardi's notebook are taken from this edition. Translation from Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, eds. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

It should be noted that Leopardi does not explicitly define here (nor, to my knowledge, elsewhere in the *Zibaldone*) what he exactly means by "universal" and "variable" rules. Nor does he specifically clarify what appropriate data to this line of inquiry would look like. Finally, even his use of the term "rule" itself has not yet been specifically investigated with regard to the *Zibaldone*. However, it is worth considering that the notion plays a rather ubiquitous role in French sixteenth century linguistic thought.[8] Furthemore, Leopardi does show he is somehow aware of the sixteen-seventeenth century debate over universal grammar in French linguistics, discussed for example in *Zib.,* 2416-19. Although it is difficult to reconstruct this link by means of a purely philological argument, I suggest that it is nonetheless possible to get a sharper understanding of Leopardi's key dichotomy between universal and variable rules by taking *Zib.,* 154-55 extremely seriously, and by considering to what extent this way of thinking informs virtually any discussion of poetry and language in the *Zibaldone*. In what follows, I thus claim that Leopardi coherently adopts these assumptions as a viable working hypothesis for investigating typological differences and patterns of universality-with-variation in the poetic forms of the world's languages.

LeopTyP

In the course of the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi provides technical discussions of numerous examples of poetic forms or features, in several languages; he had knowledge of some of them, some he even spoke, and some others he barely heard of. I quote at length the first such discussion, which is devoted to the nature of some special poetic metrical rules surfacing in Latin and in Ancient Greek:

> […] wherever two or more vowels are encountered in a row, whether at the beginning or in the middle or at the end of words, those vowels for the most part and as *a general rule count as a single syllable*, as if they formed a diphthong, even if according to the ordinary laws of prosody they do not. *Except if these vowels are at the end of the line*, where very often (*as in Italian*) they count as two syllables, but often still as one, as in this from Phaedrus:

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[8] As reported, for instance, by Douglas A Kibbee, "Language Variation and Linguistic Description in 16th-Century France," in *North American Contributions to the History of Linguistics*, ed. Francis Dinneen and Konrad Koerner (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1990), 49-66.

Re.pen.te ve.cem san.cta mi.sit re.li.gio[9] [holy religion suddenly spoke]
(. x . x)(. x . x)(. x . x)

[…] This is an acatalectic iambic trimeter, that is, it has six pure feet, and
the penultimate short one is not the syllable gi in religio, but the syllable li.
Likewise in Catullus, although here and as far as metrical rules are
concerned, he is a good deal more diligent than others […]. In the first line
of Wealth by Aristophanes: Ὡς ἀργαλέον πραγμ'εστιν ω Ζευ και θεοί [such
a bitter thing it is, o Zeus and gods] […] the word ἀργαλέον is trisyllabic.
And note that by writing Ὡς ἀργαλέον πραγμ'εστ' ω Ζευ και θεοί this verse
was effortlessly turned into an iambic trimeter or pure senarius in
accordance with the rules of Greek prosody. It is evident from this that the
poets who wrote in "imitation of prose" as Cicero says of the Comic Poets,
more or less regularly employed such double vowels, etc., as diphthongs, so
that in everyday speech (which clung far more tenaciously to antiquity than
did writing) they were regarded and pronounced as single syllables, in
Greece and Latium alike.[10]

Leopardi discusses a formal problem in the metrical scansion of Ancient
Greek and Latin metrical poetry here. His attention focuses on the fact that
a correct scansion must sometimes count one syllable where there are two
in the language (or vice versa). The phenomenon of deliberately disregarding

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[9] For the reader's convenience, I have parsed the Latin line below the example
according to Leopardi's indications. I have used the symbol "." to indicate syllable
boundaries, as well as below the line, a short syllable, and x to indicate a long one,
the brackets indicate the groups that make up a trimeter, called *metra*.

[10] "[…] dovunque s'incontrano due o più vocali alla fila, o nel principio o nel mezzo
o nel fine delle parole, quelle due vocali per lo più e quasi regolarmente stanno per
una sillaba sola, come formassero un dittongo, quantunque non lo formino, secondo
le leggi ordinarie della prosodia. Fuorchè se dette vocali si trovano appiè de' versi,
dove bene spesso [come ne' versi italiani] stanno per due sillabe, ma spesso ancora
per una sola, come in questo verso di Fedro: *Repente vocem sancta misit religio*.
[…] Questo è un giambo trimetro acataletto cioè di sei piedi puri, e la penultima
breve, non è la sillaba *gi* di *Religio*, ma la sillaba *li*. Similmente in quel verso di
Catullo, sebbene in questo e nelle leggi metriche, più diligente assai degli altri, […].
Nel primo verso della Ricchezza di Aristofane Ὡς ἀργαλέον πρᾶγμ' ἐστὶν ὦ Ζεῦ καὶ
Θεοὶ la parola ἀργαλέον è trisillaba. E notate che scrivendo Ὡς ἀργαλέον πρᾶγμ'
ἐστ' ὦ Ζεῦ καὶ Θεοὶ, senza nessuna fatica questo verso riusciva giambo trimetro o
senario puro, secondo le regole della prosodia greca. Dal che si vede che quei poeti i
quali scrivevano, come dice Tullio dei Comici, a *somiglianza del discorso*, [Oratoris
cap. 55] adoperavano quasi regolarmente siffatte vocali doppie ec. come dittonghi, e
conseguentemente che l'uso quotidiano della favella [tenace dell'antichità molto più
che la scrittura] le stimava e pronunziava per dittonghi, o sillabe uniche, sì nella Grecia
come nel Lazio." Leopardi, *Zib.*, 1152-53; Leopardi's emphasis.

the actual phonological representation is the by-product of the combination of two linked but distinguishable entities, language and metre, and it is also pervasive in Italian metrics.[11] Leopardi's argument unfolds on the basis of an extremely clear distinction between phonological and metrical form, if we were to state it in somewhat more modern terms. These two forms can be seen as closely interacting, yet distinct in many regards when it comes, for example, to their mechanisms in poetic metre. There is enough evidence for us to recognise a similar process occurring in both the Greek and Latin metrical system: a process that counts elements, and at the same time chooses how these elements should be counted on the basis of the metre, sometimes disregarding phonological elements. Leopardi finally concludes by considering that the phenomenon is attested in *Greece and Latium alike*, thus linking the behaviour of two different languages because both are dealing with a very similar metrical system. In the light of the framework sketched in the previous paragraph, Leopardi is stating that metrical rules are, at some level, universal on the basis of a typological generalisation.

In *Zib.*, 2330-31 (5 January 1822), a later thought on the same topic, Leopardi goes back to the very same point, this time explicitly relating the difference between the scansion of the line and its actual phonology to the very difference between rhythm and metre. The rhythmical form was not necessarily associated with the metrical form as the poetic form arose; but the latter was still in use as people's perception of the linguistic elements making up a metrical line changed. In this argumentation, we again find a combination of typology, and theory:

> Those lines of the comic, iambic poets, etc, *were almost rhythmic*, that is, *regulated and measured by the number of syllables and the disposition of accents* (even if the latter was rarely observed) rather than by the value and quantity of each syllable. *So it means that, according to the rhythm, double vowels had to be pronounced as monosyllables rather than as dysillables.* etc. Therefore, among the common people, indeed in everyday pronunciation, they were monosyllables, and not anything else, until the recent period of the Latin language (since this same practice is much more noticeable in the deliberately rhythmic lines of later times), etc. etc.[12]

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[11] Cf. Aldo Menichetti, *Metrica italiana: Fondamenti metrici, prosodia, rima* (Padua: Antenore, 1993).

[12] "Tali versi de' comici, giambici, ec. erano quasi ritmici, cioè regolati e misurati piuttosto sul numero delle sillabe, e la disposizione degli accenti, [poco anche osservata] che sul valore e quantità di ciascuna sillaba. Dunque vuol dire che secondo il ritmo, tali vocali doppie si dovevano pronunziare piuttosto come monosillabe che dissillabe ec. Dunque pel volgo, anzi nella pronunzia quotidiana esse erano monosillabe, e non altrimenti, fino agli ultimi tempi della lingua latina

Here, Leopardi is integrating the previous passage with the idea that *those lines* were different from the classical instances of the same metre (designed for a quantity-based metrical system), in the sense that they added a regular distribution of syllables and stresses, that is, rhythm. It becomes clear then that Leopardi is addressing a case of interference and change between two metrical systems, Latin and Greek, when the former became exposed to the latter, and borrowed from it. In his discussion, a poetic metre based on the counting of stresses and syllables would be a parasitic form substituting for the previous quantity-based system.

This reasoning does not quite appear as a sporadic note if we frame it within the perspective that we termed *LeopTyP*: human beings, and their poetries, are subjected to both universal rules and variable rules. The former consist of somewhat more abstract and stable principles (in this case, the need, in verbal art, to regulate linguistic form in some ways); the latter instead follow parameters influenced by history, sociological and idiosyncratic changes, as well as chance. Both kinds of rules interact, and are somehow part of human nature, hence of culture, and poetic forms: metrical poetry is one such form, and—Leopardi seems to suggest here— can be studied in this perspective.

We may also read *Zib.,* 1207 in a very similar way, although it requires specifying the original framework and its psychological underpinnings further:

> How many things could be said about the *infinite variety of men's* opinions and feelings regarding harmony in words […] I will simply make some observations regarding harmony in verse. *A foreigner, or a prattling child,* if they should chance to hear Italian verse, would not only feel no delight but *their ear would not discern any harmony nor would it distinguish it from prose.*[13]

In this passage, relative to the aesthetic perception of poetry, we see a clear application of the *LeopTyP* framework, and, secondly, the implicit statement that poetic forms are always filtered by the respective source language. If, with respect to a given language and poetic form, an individual

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[giacchè questo med. costume si può molto più notare ne' versi espressam. ritmici de' bassi tempi] ec. ec."

[13] "Quante cose si potrebbero dire circa l'infinita varietà delle opinioni e del senso degli uomini, rispetto all'armonia delle parole. […] Osserverò solo alcune cose relative all'armonia de' versi. Un forestiere o un fanciullo balbettante, sentendo versi italiani, non solo non vi sente alcun diletto all'orecchio, ma non si accorge di verun'armonia, nè li distingue dalla prosa."

is a "foreigner, or a prattling child," s/he will not be able to find any pleasure in being exposed to it. This statement is not without consequences for *LeopTyP*: even if the variable rules mentioned above may lead to a potentially *infinite variety* of opinions and perceptions of verse, this infinity is not unconstrained. It is each individual's mother tongue that traces the lines along which these perceptions can develop; the possibility of the perceptions themselves is nonetheless part of our human endowment, thus supporting the intuition that some basic rules of these perceptions may well be universal.

In a further passage (*Zib.,* 1211), we find yet another explicit discussion of the nature of metrical rules, this time in biblical Hebrew: this language expressed a poetic tradition of which we only possess the text. We do not have any knowledge, in contrast to Ancient Greek, of the poetic rules that, we might assume, must be encoded in the text itself.[14]

> It is claimed that a number of books of scripture are metrical and there is a high probability that this is the case. But no one has found out what meters they are composed in, though many have tried. And they never will be able to find out, unless by chance, because there is no rule that teaches us what seemed to the Jews to be harmony with respect to words. And what other reason for this could there be but the fact that absolute harmony does not exist? If it existed, the rule would be found, especially since those words which are claimed to have constituted a harmony exist in a complete and ordered state.[15]

Interestingly, in the perspective of *LeopTyP*, this reasoning eventually takes the form of a rhetorical question. This indicates that Leopardi takes the problem of metricality in the books of scripture as a confirmation of an argument formulated in a previous passage of the text; I suggest that this reasoning is the one expressed in *Zib.,* 154-5, because the same terms (e.g. "rule," "harmony") apply to the very same objects, that is, poetic forms, and describe them as particular cases of the general reasoning. Here, in

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[14] Cf. the discussion of metricality of the Psalms of the Old Testament in Nigel Fabb and Morris Halle, *Meter in Poetry: A New Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 268-83.

[15] "Si pretende, ed è probabiliss. che parecchi libri scritturali sieno metrici. Ma in quali metri sieno composti nessuno l'ha trovato, benchè molti l'abbiano cercato. E non si potrà mai trovare se non a caso, non essendoci regola che c'insegni qual fosse quella che agli Ebrei pareva armonia rispetto alle parole. E ciò per qual altra ragione, se non perchè non esiste armonia assoluta? Se esistesse, la regola sarebbe trovata, massime esistendo tutte intere e ordinate quelle parole, che si pretendono aver formato un'armonia."

particular, Leopardi is telling us that, without a hint of what concept of metre may be valid in a given tradition, we might never be able to access the rules governing it, although we need to assume that a rule existed which was adhered to by a given people and language. Again, along the lines of *LeopTyP*, the overall reasoning can be understood as seeing a (universal) rule that measures lines surfacing in countless different ways as a (variable) parameter.

In the remainder of the passage, Leopardi moves on to consider the phenomenon of rhyme. In his discussion, he makes clear that the consequences for anybody interested in understanding poetic forms in a linguistic-typological perspective are profound:

> […] regular conformity of their cadence, that is in the rhyme. *Rhyme would have seemed extremely unpleasant and barbarous to the ancient Greeks and Romans*, etc., even though *it could have been adapted no less to their language than to ours, and to the actual forms of verse that they used*, which are very often similar to or virtually the same as a number of our own forms, especially Italian ones. And *furthermore, it would have been easier for them because of the greater number of words, just taking into account the infinite abundance and variety of the inflections of each of their verbs and nouns*, etc. (avoiding for now any comparison with the wealth of the various languages). So that *they could have used rhyme better than we and more agreeably, that is, more naturally*, doing less violence to the sense, the verse, the harmony of its structure, the rhythm, etc. And nonetheless they shunned it as much as we search it out and their verse, accustomed as we are to their harmony, would strike even us as barbarous and repulsive if rhyme was added.[16]

This last passage contains a two-fold development for *LeopTyP*: the acknowledgment that the spread of poetic forms in the world's languages

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[16] "[…] conformità regolare della loro cadenza, cioè nella rima. La quale sarebbe sembrata spiacevolissima e barbara agli antichi greci e latini, ec. alle cui lingue si poteva adattare niente meno che alle nostre, ed a quelle stesse forme di versi che usavano, che bene spesso o somigliano, o sono a un dipresso le medesime che parecchie delle nostre, massimamente italiane. E di più sarebbe stata loro più facile, stante il maggior numero di consonanze che avevano, ed anche il maggior numero di parole, considerando, se non altro [per non entrare adesso nel paragone della ricchezza] l'infinita copia e varietà delle inflessioni di ciascun loro verbo o nome ec. Così che avrebbero potuto usar la rima meglio di noi, e più gradevolmente, cioè più naturalmente, forzando meno il senso, il verso, l'armonia della sua struttura, il ritmo, ec. E nondimeno la fuggivano tanto quanto noi la cerchiamo, ed a noi stessi, avvezzi all'armonia de' loro versi, parrebbero barbari e disgustosi ponendovi la rima." Leopardi, *Zib.*, 1207-8.

follows unclear patterns, and that differences in linguistic form do not necessarily correspond to differences in the poetic forms of one or the other tradition. The interplay of poetic rules that a typological inquiry would uncover may lead to sometimes opaque outputs. Our understanding–Leopardi implicitly tells us–should focus on explaining the gaps in the diffusion of poetic types, such as, for example, rhyme. Rhyme, a distinctive feature of many European poetic traditions, is not present in Ancient Greek poetry, despite the relative greater wealth of rhyming possibilities offered by the language, which would have facilitated (made more *natural*, comments Leopardi) that feature. This means that there is no immediate link between a language and a given feature of poetry, but that other factors come into play. It is in this sense, I suggest, that we may read Leopardi's reference to *naturalness* (an intrinsic value, both for him and Montesquieu) in this passage: general poetry tends to naturalness but poetic rules might sometime impose excessively unnatural constraints on the language; therefore, if we want to explain the absence of rhyme in Ancient Greek poetry, we should conclude that poetic forms are not necessarily determined by the possibilities of a language. The same reasoning is taken even further, as it is then extended to test its potential typological coverage when applied to other languages:

> […] Which of us feels the harmony of Eastern verses or strophes? I won't speak of German and English verse, or German metric prose, in relation to the Italians. The Italians recognize harmony in French verse far more quickly and readily, because French is a language and harmony more akin to our own.[17]

It ought to be stressed that the point here is not whether Leopardi is right or not in a single judgement about a specific example, but that he sharply sees what questions may be asked, and what framework might someday provide an answer. This perspective inherently derives from the conjunction of his philological and philosophical and, at last, anthropological interests, as well as from his being a poet. It is through this complex perspective that Leopardi manages to correlate specific features of poetry with language and general cognitive processes. Yet the exact correlation of language and poetry escapes his understanding as much as ours, as demonstrated by the

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[17] "Chi di noi sente l'armonia de' versi orientali, o delle strofe loro? Non parlo de' versi tedeschi o inglesi, o della prosa tedesca misurata ec. in ordine agl'italiani. I quali molto più presto e facilmente riconoscono un'armonia ne' versi francesi, perchè lingua ed armonia più affine alla loro." Ibid., 1211.

fact that Leopardi goes back to the issue, for example in this much later note (split between *Zib.*, 4273 and 4497):

> In the Latin version of that passage in Pope's Rape of the Lock (Canto 1) which contains the description of the toilette, done by Dr Parnell (a most bizarre version, and which would seem rather from the eighth century than the eighteenth, since it consist of verses in which each half-line rhymes with the other half, for example, "Et nunc dilectum speculum / pro more retectum / Emicat in mensa, quae splendet pyxide densa"[...]), I find the following two lines: "Iduit arma *ergo* / Veneris pulcherrima *virgo*: // pulchrior in pr*aesens* / tempus de tempore cr*escens* //, *where ergo is made to rhyme with virgo, and praesens with crescens what do the Italians have to say about this pronunciation*? See p. 4497.[18]

> Thus, the foreigners, having perverted their writing by wanting to use it to express Latin rather than vernacular pronunciation, and then becoming accustomed to this perversion, indeed forgetting all about it and thinking of their way of writing as natural and logical. They then set about perverting Latin pronunciation, *operating the same difference between written Latin and its pronunciation and the writing of their own vernaculars. It is natural and logical* that those who wrote their language badly have trouble reading others. Especially ones they know only in writing.[19]

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[18] In the example above, line and half-line breaks have been added to facilitate the reader's comprehension of the point.

"Nella versione latina di quel passaggio del Riccio rapito di Pope [Canto 1.] che contiene la descrizione della *toilette*, fatta dal Dr. Parnell [versione assai bizzarra], e che parrebbe piuttosto fatta nell'ottavo secolo che nel decimottavo, poichè consiste di versi dei quali ogni mezzo verso rima coll'altro mezzo, p. e. *Et nunc dilectum speculum, pro more retectum, Emicat in mensa, quae splendet pyxide densa*, [...] trovo questi due versi, di séguito: *Induit arma ergo Veneris pulcherrima virgo: Pulchrior in praesens tempus de tempore crescens, dove, come si vede, ergo fa rima con virgo, e praesens con crescens*. Che dicono gl'italiani di questa pronunzia? V. p. 4497." Leopardi's emphasis.

[19] "Così gli stranieri, dopo avere snaturata la loro scrittura p. voler esprimer con essa piuttosto la pronunzia latina che la volgare, abituati poi a questo snaturamento, anzi dimenticatolo, e pigliando p. naturale e p. logico il loro modo di scrivere, vengono a snaturare la pronunzia latina, facendo dal latino scritto al pronunziato quella differenza che sono usati e necessitati a fare dalla pronunzia alla scrittura de' loro volgari [2. Mag. 1829. Recanati]. È naturale e conseguente, che chi scrive male la propria lingua, legga male le altre. Massime quelle che non gli sono note se non p. iscrittura."

This passage matters to *LeopTyp* not because of its conclusion,[20] but because it problematises further the role that languages may play as 'filters' in the manifestation of the respective poetic forms. In the case Leopardi discusses, we see a poetic form in Latin that associates metre with end- and middle rhyme. The rhyming segments italicised in the above example, however, show that what the author of the Latin translation at issue considered was possibly a rhyme would not coincide with what Leopardi assumes to be the phonological system of Latin. Beside Leopardi's judgement, it is interesting to notice that in this instance he deals once again with variable manifestations of a potentially universal rule: poetic rhyme. Rhyme which may either not be present at all in some languages or poetic traditions (e.g. Ancient Greek), or it might be borrowed from other traditions, and then be filtered through the target language (as in the extreme case of the Latin version of the *Rape of the Lock*, which appears to be drawing on an Anglo-Germanic rhyming practice); this filter will not produce the same output in all cases, as it will bring the aesthetic potentials of rhyme to fruition only relative to a speaker of the same language. By reading these notes, there is a clear sense in which we see human cognitive traits—determined by universal features of our organism—appearing to be interwoven with the infinite variability of languages and the subsequent stages of the ontogenetic development.

In this section, I have discussed different examples that show how Leopardi, throughout the *Zibaldone*, often takes up issues that deal with the typology of poetic forms. I have shown how these do not come as random, occasional reflections, but they originate in his critical reading of Montesquieu's *Essay on Taste*. This provided Leopardi with a productive framework that then supported all his reflections on universals and variability in the poetic forms of the languages of the world. Several other passages of the *Zibaldone* belong, by topic or line of argumentation, to *LeopTyp*, such as *Zib., 307-10* (on poetic rules changes), 1961 (which contains a reading note about an essay on the great differences between form, rhythm, etc. in Skaldic traditional poetry), 2976-81 (on the connection between the form of a language, and the length of its metres), and 4452-57 (a note from reading Niebuhr). In the next paragraph, I show that other passages of the *Zibaldone*, although they do not always directly address the typological issue, also feed into *LeopTyp*, thus providing it with further support.

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[20] Probably based on a misunderstanding of Parnell's text; here I am grateful to Jonathan Hope (p.c.) for making me aware of this possibility.

LeopTyP as a Biopoetics Program for Literature and Theory

In this section, I consider passages in the *Zibaldone* which, while they do not necessarily discuss specific technical issues in the typology of poetic forms, could and—I suggest—should be read as part of the theoretical framework *LeopTyP*. I formulate a question regarding the relationship of Leopardi's own poetic practice to his structured knowledge of foreign poetic forms; and I suggest that the latter may shed some further light on the former.

Let us first consider what I take to be the most explicit of such typology-informed considerations, the well-known passage *Zib., 4234-36*:

> *Poetry can be divided, in substance*, into only *three* real, principal *kinds*: lyric, epic, and dramatic. Lyric poetry is the firstborn of all; it is to be found *in every nation, including savage ones*; it is more noble and more poetic than every other kind; it is true and pure poetry in its every form [...][21]

Leopardi tells us here that some form of lyric poetry must belong to the general nature of human psychology, regardless of culture, and that this naturally lends itself to a typological generalization. Most important, the remainder of the passage specifies how this typological perspective should be connected to the aesthetic dimension, and, in particular, to an investigation of the ways language may be regulated in poetry:

> [...] it is *to be found in anyone*, whether cultured or not, who *seeks recreation and consolation* in song, and *with words measured in whatsoever way*, and *with harmony*; it is a free and straightforward expression of any living and deeply held human feeling.[22]

With the expression "measuring words" Leopardi is opening up to a rather far-sighted view of metre, one that admits 1) many possible and diverse ways to control line length (i.e. counting syllables, duration, quantity, words, phrases, etc.), and 2) each poetry as having its own rules for determining harmony, which in turn is the ultimate reason of being for

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[21] "La poesia, quanto a' generi, non ha in sostanza che tre vere e grandi divisioni: lirico, epico e drammatico. Il lirico, primogenito di tutti; proprio di ogni nazione anche selvaggia; più nobile e più *poetico* d'ogni altro; vera e pura poesia in tutta la sua estensione; [...]." Leopardi's emphasis.

[22] "[...] proprio d'ogni uomo anche incolto, che cerca di ricrearsi e di consolarsi col canto, e colle parole misurate in qualunque modo, e coll'armonia; espressione libera e schietta di qualunque affetto vivo e ben sentito dell'uomo."

the phenomenon "poetic meter." Given that (1-2) vary according to the different "dispositions or organs," it follows that at least some of the differences between poetic forms may indeed be explained by a deeper investigation of human nature, in particular of its cognitive faculties. Together with different other factors (ranging from physical to socio-historical ones), these are likely to play a role in determining the complex interplay of universal and variable features Leopardi addresses with *LeoTyp*.

Let us now consider the earlier passage in *Zib.*, 1285-86, one of the many discussions of the nature of language that may be found in the text:

> [...] *Let us now try to reconcile the above observations with the facts*. It seems that the *Oriental languages were the first in the world*. It is certainly the case that the Western Alphabets came from the East, and therefore that the first alphabets were Eastern, and that the first inventor of the alphabet must have been Eastern. *Now the Eastern alphabets lack signs for the vowels at the outset*. This seems strange. So far as the analysis of articulated sounds is concerned, *it seems to me that the vowels, being in reality the principal elements, should be the first and most easily found*. Many critics strive in a somewhat forced fashion to recover the vowels in the original alphabets from the East. *But let us consider the matter as philosophers*, and see just how much our judgment [...] differs from that of the first person or persons who, without any guidance or help, conceived of this highly subtle and abstruse operation [...]. *The vowels were considered to be sounds inseparable from the other articulated sounds, they were thought of as virtually unarticulated, as inexpressible parts of speech.*[23]

What we see in this passage, apart from the specific topic, is first of all a clear exposition of Leopardi's way of thinking when it comes to methodological issues. He thinks of a problem (the absence of vowels in some graphic systems, notably the most ancient), makes a few observations,

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[23] "Incorporiamo queste osservazioni coi fatti. Pare che le lingue orientali fossero le prime del mondo. Certo è che gli alfabeti occidentali vennero dall'oriente, e quindi orientali furono i primi alfabeti, e orientale dovette essere il primo inventore dell'alfabeto. Ora gli alfabeti orientali mancano originariamente de' segni delle vocali. Questo pare strano. Nell'analisi de' suoni articolati pare a noi che le vocali, come elementi in realtà principali, debbano essere i primi e più facili a trovarsi. Molti Critici vogliono forzatamente ritrovar le vocali ne' primitivi alfabeti d'Oriente. Ma consideriamo la cosa da filosofi, e vediamo quanto il giudizio nostro [...] differisca dal giudizio del primo o dei primi, che senza alcuna guida e soccorso, concepirono questa sottilissima e astrusissima operazione. [...] Le vocali furono considerate come suoni inseparabili dagli altri suoni articolati; come suoni quasi inarticolati; come parti inesprimibili della favella [...]."

and then applies a typological perspective (here comparing Eastern to Western alphabets). In other words, he looks for examples that can be idealised in the same way however far apart culturally they might be. Then, he *considers the matter as a philosopher*, that is, first analysing it, and then combining an inductive reasoning on the behaviour of other individuals, coupled with a deductive attitude towards the case in point. This is exactly what happens in all the cases discussed in the previous paragraph. This way of reasoning typically informs any reflection on the nature of poetic forms.

I suggest that the particular reflections referred to as *LeopTyP*, seen in this light, do create a set of their own not only because of their being coherently framed and unitary, but also because they intersect with a matter of greatest importance for Leopardi, that is, poetry. Consider, for example, the peculiar deconstruction of poetic genres that he achieves in his later poetry, for example in the *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* (*Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia*).[24] In this poem, the strophes of a *canzone*, normally fixed in length and rhyme scheme, freely vary in number of lines and have occasional rhymes and assonances. Leopardi was supposedly inspired to compose this *Canto* by a typological note that he cites in his readings.[25] Similarly, in an early note *Zib., 39-40*, where Leopardi fantasises about a *nameless poetry*, i.e., a poetry beyond genre-specific regulations, one sees that this very idea of *nameless poetry* appears in the context of a discussion of how Homer's poetry differed from modern poetry. Similarly, the fact that Leopardi never abandoned metrical form, among the various possible poetic forms, might also be read as a choice partly deriving from his typological knowledge. In other words, Leopardi knows that *measuring* language is the only feature that always belonged to the true essence of lyrical poetry, and therefore, being a universal rule and not a variable one, it should not be subject, in essence, to historical or cultural change.

Furthermore, if what I have here termed *LeopTyP* is indeed an organic line of inquiry, it should be supported by an iconic formulation. I suggest that this, together with a general philosophical framing, comes with *Zib.,* 3241:

> What we may affirm with certainty is that *nature*, by which we mean *the universe of things, is made up, fashioned and ordered towards a poetic effect*, or rather arranged and deliberately ordered to produce *a general poetic effect*, as well *as other particular effects*, relating to the whole or to

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[24] Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans. Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 192-203.
[25] Leopardi, *Zib.*, 4399-4000.

this part or that part. *Nothing poetic is to be found in its parts by separating them one from another*, and by examining them one by one with the mere light of precise geometric reason; *nothing poetic in its means, in its forces and internal or external mechanisms*, in its processes thus divided and considered separately.[26]

This famous passage, well-known to Leopardi's commentators, expresses the idea that the interactions of which the *universe of things* is made are ordered towards a poetic effect. This rather general statement appears in a different light if we take it to be in a dialogue with the Montesquieu's passage quoted at the outset: it is the way we--as human beings--are constituted that determines our poetry (and cognitive faculties). In nature, says Leopardi, there is a general drive towards poetry, which is not to say that poetry exhausts all the things that exist. This drive towards poetry is a general force, which then gets influenced, modified, or sometimes overthrown by other general and particular forces of nature. A poetic effect is, according to Leopardi, an effect that typically relates to perceived whole entities, and never to their parts considered separately. Taking this a step further, it is clear that this idea refers to the impossibility to experience processes that are separated from one another as poetic. This last idea, and Leopardi's sense of wonder in making this statement,[27] contribute to the meaning of the notes, which according to my argument constitute *LeopTyP*: these should be thought of as the holistic attempt to look at philological and ethnological data within an analytical perspective, but keeping in mind what these data are traces of how this human poetic drive found expression in space and time.

This program crucially connects poetry to human biology, and it promotes a closely interconnected understanding of the two; this idea, of course, influences the way Leopardi looks at poetry, as in this passage, in which he tries to explain specific aspects of the supposed form of the songs

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[26] "Si può con certezza affermare che la natura, o vogliamo dire l'università delle cose, è composta, conformata e ordinata ad un effetto poetico, o vogliamo dire disposta e destinatamente ordinata a produrre un effetto poetico generale; ed altri ancora particolari; relativam. al tutto, o a questa o quella parte. Nulla di poetico si scorge nelle sue parti, separandole l'una dall'altra, ed esaminandole a una a una col semplice lume della ragione esatta e geometrica: nulla di poetico ne' suoi mezzi, nelle sue forze e molle interiori o esteriori, ne' suoi processi in questo modo disgregati e considerati […]."

[27] For a mention of Leopardi with regard to the specific topic of "wonder," cf. Ronald Hepburn, "Wonder," in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes, 54, no. 2 (1980): 18-19.

of Homer (their length, metrical form, etc.) by referring to the assumed wider use of memory's capabilities, as in *Zib.,* 4322-24:

> I still think that his [Homer's] verses where rhythmical, not metrical in other words *made to a certain sound, not to a regular and constant measure*, and that they were reduced to this by the diaskeuasts [...] Likewise, it is probable that the verses of Dante were originally (and in the intention of the author) rhythmical and then reduced more or less into metrical form in the 14th century. And likewise, the verses of the English poet Chaucer were [...] but given that Homer truly and *deliberately composed his songs in such a way as to remember them and teach them to others*, then, also excluding any idea of a plan, it would not be out of place to suppose a certain particular relationship between these songs, to think that Homer, while composing some of them, remembered the others he had composed, and continued, or shall we say, to continue the narration, without (I repeat) thereby aiming to a particular destination [...] it is certain that Homer, in gradually composing each one, *remembered those which preceded.* [28]

The relationship of form and content between the texts of the different Homer songs is driven by his need to retain the previously composed songs in his own memory. Further discussion can be found of the close relationship between poetic forms, as opposed to prose, and their being determined not by cultural choices but by the interplay between the poetic drive, cognitive faculties and the medium available in each period of civilisation, for example in *Zib.,* 4343-44.

In sum, when Leopardi remarks: "La prosa in verità, precedette da per tutto il verso, come è naturale; ma il verso conservato precedette quasi da per tutto la prosa conservata" (*Prose* in fact, speaking in absolute terms, *preceded verse everywhere,* as is *natural*: but *written verse preceded prose almost everywhere; Zib.,* 4522), he does so because he sees the capabilities

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[28] "Aggiungo che credo ancora che i suoi [di Omero] versi fossero ritmici, non metrici, fatti cioè ad un certo suono, non ad una regolata e costante misura; alla quale [...] fossero ridotti in séguito dai diascheuasti ec. Così è probabile che originalmente e nell'intenzione dell'autore fossero ritmici i versi di Dante, ridotti poi p. lo più metrici nello stesso secolo 14.o E così, [...] furono puramente ritmici i versi dell'inglese Chaucer. [...] Ma posto che Omero componesse veramente e meditatamente i suoi canti, in modo da ricordarsene esso poi sempre, e da insegnarli altrui, allora, esclusa anche ogn'idea di piano, non sarà poi fuor di luogo il supporre tra questi canti una certa tal qual relazione; il pensare che Omero nel compor gli uni, si ricordasse degli altri che aveva composti, e intendesse di continuarli, o vogliamo dire, di continuare la narrazione, senza, (torno a dire) tendere perciò ad una meta. [...] è certo che Omero nel compor gli uni di mano in mano, si ricordava de' precedenti."

of human memory decreasing in societies that adopted writing. Along the same lines, Leopardi sees verse (i.e. lineated and, in his words, *measured* texts) as something that does not have a biological primacy because writing verse is less successful a behaviour than writing prose, easier and more immediate. Nevertheless, the use of 'measuring' verse survives in specific realms of culture because, embedded in cultural evolution, is the drive to seek *recreation* and *consolation* through poetic forms, as Leopardi stated in *Zib.,* 3241, and these effects would only be available in human language when its form is regulated in some ways.

I suggest naming this idea a *biopoetics* program. This is a program that Leopardi pursued both in theory and in practice. Since there is a fundamental resemblance between all human beings, it is only the study of how different kinds of poetry come into being, exist, and sometimes die that could possibly reveal what is *universal* and what is *variable* in human poetic behaviour, and teach the poet Leopardi how to create poetry beyond genre classification. *LepTyP* constitutes the kernel of this program. Acknowledging the necessary interconnection of both *biopoetics* and *LepTyP* as two strands of a research program in its own right may constitute a further step towards a deeper understanding of Leopardi's mind.

Conclusions

In this study, I have argued that there exists a previously neglected research program in the linguistic typology of poetic forms hidden within the pages of Leopardi's *Zibaldone*. Here, I have shown which passages of the text shape this program and how they are all connected by the presence of an underlying framework. What is certain is that Leopardi 1) analytically distinguishes forms from one another (for example, metre from rhythm); 2) considers how forms may change, both over time and place, and then asks question as to why some forms did not spread in one period or environment and if that is determined by the host language (as in the case of the form 'rhyme' in Ancient Greek); 3) in all the cases I have discussed, he seeks unity and universal features in the diverse forms of poetry.

I would like to suggest that there are three senses in which we may read–and value--this poetic typological concern in Leopardi. The first sense is the most obvious: Leopardi shows a constant interest in comparing things that he judges to be somehow related; and he does so throughout the *Zibaldone*, whether he is discussing state systems, or customs, or languages. Even if one might be tempted to see *LepTyP* as a particular case of this more general intellectual attitude, I suggest that in this case the 1) tighter and 2) more stable relationship of the above-discussed passages to what I have

claimed to be the framework justifies considering the reflections as a line of inquiry in its own right. In this analysis, I have deliberately not considered the sources for *LeopTyP*, which may be well sought in the works of the names recurring in the *Zibaldone*, i.e. Forcellini, Angelo Mai, etc. Here it suffices to motivate this concern on the basis of Leopardi's education, firmly based in philology: it is just natural, in this perspective, to be trained to constantly compare different cultural items. In addition to this, Leopardi operates in an epoch that, in Europe and certainly in the German-speaking world, saw an outburst of new approaches that addressed the study of linguistic variation as something that could only be furthered by adopting a comparative perspective.[29] It is thus possible that Leopardi was at some point exposed to these ideas, for example through his friendship with Niebuhr (see, e.g. the note on comparativism with reference to Niebuhr in *Zib.,* 4428). This would not, however, explain the early outset of the *LeopTyP* in the *Zibaldone*, as shown in section 2 of this article.

The second sense involves a reference to Sperber's notion of "epidemiology of representations,"[30] and applies it to literary forms. Sperber suggests that cultural forms are, in essence, similar to viruses, in that a representation must develop in a first individual's mind, and then affect other individuals: if the representation is evolutionarily strong enough, it might survive, spread across times and cultures. This idea is not significantly different from what Leopardi implicitly and explicitly discusses when he looks, for example, at the presence of poetic rhyme in one culture or another. Claidiere et al. have reworked Sperber's idea into a particular model for the mechanism of cultural reproduction, namely one that questions the standard Darwinian framework.[31] As they suggest, cultural objects typically evolve by following both a preservative and a constructive pattern, unlike in biological evolution, where species evolve by preserving the most successful individuals of a species.[32] This is relevant for my argument for *LeopTyP* because, going back to the passages discussed earlier, we find that Leopardi is asking precisely these questions on the basis of very peculiar data, i.e. data drawn from poetic forms. Furthermore, if the typological idea is so

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[29] For a historical-linguistic framing of the idea of comparativism across 1700 and 1800, cf. the essays collected in *Leibniz, Humboldt, and the Origins of Comparativism*, eds. Tullio De Mauro and Lia Formigari (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1990).

[30] Cf. Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

[31] Cf. Nicolas Claidière, Thomas Scott-Phillips, and Dan Sperber, "How Darwinian is Cultural Evolution?" *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* (31 March 2014), B 369.

[32] Claidière et al., "How Darwinian," 3.

pervasive in Leopardi's poetics and poetry, one could go a step further and see this idea precisely as a virus, a representation, that took hold of Leopardi's thought at an early stage, was exposed to a reading of Montesquieu—as occurred with many of his contemporaries–and somehow never abandoned his thought.[33]

The third sense finally takes into consideration the striking modernity of *LeopTyP*. In these notes, Leopardi is asking questions that have not yet been answered, and, perhaps more importantly, that are rarely asked. He asks these questions with a surprising ability to separate forms from one another, and to understand actual data in the light of the possible cognitive processes behind them. Current theories of meter often address the problem of how to understand variation in the possible metrical forms in the languages of the world within coherent theoretical frameworks.[34] In another contribution,[35] Fabb critically discusses the hypothesis that poetic forms are developments of the source language; this is in itself an idea whose confirmation or rebuttal crucially needs to be substantiated by typological research. Versace and Fabb illustrate the present stand of the poetic typological enterprise, and lay out the most important questions implicit in a possible general typology;[36] these questions specifically address the form of poetic types, as for instance meter, rhyme and parallelism, among other features. These examples of contemporary work on the theory of poetic forms are all, more or less explicitly, based on hypotheses about the variations found in these forms; interestingly, these hypotheses still owe much to the terms laid out in the 19th century, and in *LeopTyP* as well.

A deeper understanding of Leopardi's position with regard to poetic typological issues might thus contribute to the redefinition of this contemporary debate and, perhaps, to giving it a more prominent role in the study of the human poetic faculty. The main problems for a poetic typology still remain the same, that is, interoperability between sometimes very different data, as well as the fact that different questions need to be mediated through a theoretical framework comparable to the ones available in

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[33] Here the reference would again be to De Mauro and Formigari, *Leibniz, Humboldt, and the Origins of Comparativism*, particularly the contribution by Pierre Swiggers, "Comparatismo e grammatica comparata," 281-99.

[34] Cf. Kristin Hanson and Paul Kiparsky, "A Parametric Theory of Poetic Meter," in *Language* 72, no. 2 (1996): 287-335; and Fabb and Halle, *Meter in Poetry: A New Theory.*

[35] Cf. Nigel Fabb, "Is literary language a development of ordinary language?" In *Lingua* 120, no. 5 (2010): 1219-32.

[36] Cf. Versace and Fabb, "A Database as a Method of Raising Typological Questions about Poetic Form."

linguistic typology.[37] This hypothetical framework could allow us to better identify the data or some of their aspects as meaningful objects of inquiry. Setting aside the problem of what data to collect, we know that a clear, explicit framework for poetic typology is not available at present. The main questions are yet to be formulated, and we are unable to explain why exactly there is variation in the forms of poetry that humankind has developed over the centuries, and why this variation is coupled with the evident stability of other phenomena (as in the case of rhyme, more evidently than meter). Here I have shown that some important traces of this line of inquiry can be rediscovered in *LeopTyP*. This consists, in a nutshell, in seeing the diverse manifestations of the human drive to poetry as connected, albeit via the mediation of individuals' respective language. By engaging us with these queries, Leopardi has offered us valuable insights to use when studying the form and transmission of the kinds of cultural objects we refer to as poetry. It is in the unity of these notes that, I suggest, further research could find an important contribution to the typological inquiry into poetic forms.

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[37] Cf. William Croft, *Typology and Universals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

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Part IV

Readings of Leopardi

CHAPTER EIGHT

ONCE AGAIN ON LEOPARDI AND THE SPACE OF POETRY

LUIGI BLASUCCI

If the feeling of self-sufficiency provided by Leopardi's poetry is fairly strong for most readers, the sense of very close ties to his philosophical convictions is just as strong. This is the case not only in works with an explicit ideological content, such as *Bruto minore* (*Brutus*), *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* (*Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia*), *La ginestra* (*The Broom Flower*), but also in works where the everyday and lived life emerge to a greater degree, such as *Alla luna* (*To the Moon*), *La vita solitaria* (*The Solitary Life*), and *Il sabato del villaggio* (*Saturday in the Village*).

In this regard my friend Antonio Prete has used a felicitous Heidegger-inspired expression, "pensiero poetante" (poetising thought). But why, one asks oneself, does this thought want to poetise? In other words, why was Leopardi not satisfied with his achievements in composing the *Zibaldone*? (I know the more appropriate question would be the opposite: why was Leopardi not content with the composition of the *Canti*? But here, I want to emphasise the point of departure of Leopardi's thought, in order to attempt to define the role poetry will eventually have within the author's mental map).

Leopardi's speculation proceeds in inexorable fashion. Starting from 18th century sensist and materialist premises, it reaches its radical conclusions

about the human condition: in other words, that philosophy, "dolorosa ma vera" (painful but true), about which the protagonist of *Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico* (*Dialogue Between Tristan and a Friend*) talks, and which we can very well define, inverting the two terms, as a philosophy that is "vera ma dolorosa" (true but painful). Here are some of its desolate assertions: the life of human beings is regulated by mechanical laws, which make all autonomous spiritual values completely illusory; individuals, with their irremovable self-love, are haunted by an infinite urge for pleasure, which, since it can never be completely fulfilled, condemns them to a perpetual state of emptiness and dissatisfaction; living beings in nature are inserted in a cycle of production and destruction, which is ordered not with a view to their happiness, but only to the perpetuation of existence.

Leopardi's poetry is born within, not outside, these painful reflections: it essentially wants to be the affirmation of an individual's stance towards a reality that would want to make him/her a mere instrument. The affirmation of this stance can take different forms: I will point to some in the *Canti* with a 'gaze from above' which will privilege the nature of Leopardi's different modalities rather than their temporal sequence. I will therefore not follow a diachronic criterion, similar to that in the historical reconstructions of his 'poetic career', but rather a typological and descriptive one.

A first type of claim by the Leopardian subject is the nostalgic yearning for a happiness that is no longer achievable in the present, but which did actually exist, both in the history of humanity and that of individuals. This happiness was basically the result of an ignorance of mechanistic laws, which allowed individuals to enjoy a state of actual well-being. The poet therefore engages in the commemoration of dual stages of happiness: one historical, pertaining to the ancients and primitive peoples; the other biological-existential, pertaining to children, who have not yet reached the knowledge of the "arido vero" (arid truth), that sad prerogative of adulthood. In the first case I am referring to the cycle of *canzoni* (lyrics) from *Angelo Mai* (*To Angelo Mai*) to the *Inno ai Patriarchi* (*Hymn to the Patriarchs*); in the second to the cycle of Pisan-Recanatese lyrics, from *A Silvia* (*To Silvia*) to *Il sabato del villaggio*.

This poetry dedicated to regret consists of two moments: a positive, devoted to the nostalgic recall of the past and a negative devoted to a denunciation of the sorry present. The second moment, which is, without fail, always present following each evocation of what had been gratifying for individuals who were still unaware, poetically reinforces the first, insofar as it highlights its unrecoverable fascination. Let me quote two examples. I take the first from the *Inno ai Patriarchi*, a section which refers to Adam, the father of the human species. Here we find the representation

of a prehistoric solitude, filled with cosmic astonishment:

> Tu prime il giorno, e le purpuree faci
> delle rotanti sfere, e la novella
> prole de' campi, e duce antico e padre
> dell'umana famiglia, e tu l'errante
> per li giovani prati aura contempli;
> quando le rupi e le deserte valli
> precipite l'alpina onda feria
> d'inudito fragor, quando gli ameni
> futuri seggi di lodate genti
> e di cittadi romorose, ignota
> pace regnava; e gl'inarati colli
> solo e muto ascendea l'aprico raggio
> di febo e l'aurea luna [...] (vv. 22-34)

> You, ancient guide and father [Adam]
> of the human family, were the first to see the day,
> the purple fires of the revolving stars,
> the newborn flowering fields,
> the wind that blows across the freshened meadows,
> when the cascading alpine waters
> struck the cliffs and uninhabited
> valleys with unheard sound; when unheard-of peace
> reigned in the pleasing future habitats
> of happy peoples and their busy cities,
> when, silent and alone,
> Phoebus's brilliant light and the gold moon
> climbed the unplowed hills. (vv. 22-34)

There follows nostalgic regret for that state of innocence and the lugubrious forecast of a future filled with guilt and catastrophes:

> [...] Oh fortunata
> di colpe ignara e di lugubri eventi,
> erma terrena sede! Oh quanto affanno
> al gener tuo, padre infelice, e quale
> d'amarissimi casi ordine immenso
> preparano i destini! (vv. 34-39)

> Oh blessed, gentle home on earth,
> unaware of sin and tragedy! Oh, how much pain
> does destiny imagine for your offspring,
> unhappy father, what a vast array
> of bitterness! [...] (vv.35-39)

I take the other example from the fourth stanza of *A Silvia* (who can forget that enchanted opening?), in which the poet conjoins the happy condition of the expectation of a "vago avvenire" (undefined future) shared by the two youths, in other words Silvia and the poetic persona:

> Che pensieri soavi,
> che speranze, che cori, o Silvia mia!
> Quale allor ci apparia
> la vita umana e il fato! (vv. 28-31)

> What tender thoughts we had,
> What hopes, what hearts, Silvia!
> How fate and human life
> Looked then![1]

With its desolate conclusion, in which the extent of life's deceits, albeit with differing outcomes (the death of all hope for the poet, physical death for Silvia), becomes obvious to both youths:

> O natura, o natura,
> perchè non rendi poi
> quel che prometti allor? perchè di tanto
> inganni i figli tuoi? (vv. 36-39)

> Ah, nature, nature, why
> Can you never make good
> Your promises? Why must you
> So deceive your children?[2]

A second type of claim could be listed under the heading of "piaceri dell'immaginazione" (pleasures of the imagination), using a Leopardian expression (*Zib.*, 4415), which in its turn echoes the title of some of Joseph Addison's works. This time it is not a question of regrets about the past, but rather experiences lived in the present by an individual with an adult and disillusioned consciousness, but one endowed with great sensibility. A subject of this kind, in whose ranks the poet does not hesitate to include himself, can enjoy some of the pleasures of interiority by means of the imagination, while maintaining an awareness of their illusory nature. Insofar as these pleasures can be shared by a, albeit limited, number of people, they end up maintaining some elements of objectivity: a sort of

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[1] Giacomo Leopardi, *Selected Poems*, trans. Eamonn Grennan (Dublin: Dedalus, 1995), 55; Grennan does not include line numbers in his translation.
[2] Ibid., 55.

ontology of illusion therefore.

The idylls of 1819-1821 (*L'Infinito, La sera del dì di festa, Alla luna, La vita solitaria*) (*Infinity, The Evening of the Holiday, To the Moon, The Solitary Life*), belong to this series of compositions, where the poetic subject's unhappiness, either manifest or understood, constitutes the psychological point of departure for mental operations that are essentially compensatory. In the case of *Alla luna*, it will be the discovery of the gratifying value of remembrance, whether joyous or painful:

> Oh come grato occorre [...]
> il rimembrar delle passate cose,
> ancor che triste e che l'affanno duri!
>
> How welcome then
> The remembrance of things past   no matter
> How sad, and the heart still grieving.[3]

Or, in the case of the *Vita solitaria*, of the discreetly soothing function of solitude in the fields for a sensitive soul aggravated by the experience of social life. In the *Sera del dì di festa*, after repeated declarations of unhappiness by the lyrical subject:

> e qui per terra
> mi getto e grido e fremo
>
> I sink down, cry out, my whole body
> Trembling.[4]

The artisan's song has a function that is, in its own way, calming, and his melancholy disappearance into the depths of the night echoes the dissipation of the poet's personal desperation. The mother of all illusions is still that of the infinite, evoked especially in the eponymous composition. The poet knows that in objective reality infinity does not exist: there are only circumscribed areas of vastness; but the inability to discern their borders due to a physical impediment (a hedge or something equivalent), allows individuals to think of them as infinite, and lose themselves in them with their imagination. For him this is the source of prolonged pleasure: "perdersi," "errare," "naufragare" (foundering), are the verbs of duration that best depict these gratifying states of the imagination.

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[3] Ibid., 27.

[4] Ibid., 23.

The mother-illusion of the infinite in its turn generates others in Leopardi's poetry: but it is always discernible at their root. Thus, the celestial ghost of the "donna-che-non-si-trova" (the-woman-that-cannot-be-found) in the lyric *Alla sua donna* is, if one considers carefully, no more than a projection of the infinite in the sphere of love. The leap of imagination, made possible in the 1819 idyll by the presence of a hedge, is here produced by conditions of distance and concealment so as to allow 'thought' to perform the leap from reality to dream. All this is already implicit in the vocative with which the lyric opens:

> Cara beltà che amore
> *lunge* m'inspiri *o nascondendo il viso,*
> fuor se nel sonno il core
> ombra diva mi scuoti,
> *o ne' campi ove splenda*
> più vago il giorno e di natura il riso; (vv. 1-6)

> Beloved beauty who inspires
> love from afar, your face concealed
> except when your celestial image
> stirs my heart in sleep, or in the fields
> where light and nature's laughter
> shine more lovely.

The gap between reality and dream, just suggested here, becomes explicit in the closure of the second stanza, where the poet does not exclude the presence of a real beauty of equal perfection, denying it the celestial character granted to the woman of the dream however:

> [...] Ma non è cosa in terra
> che ti somigli; e s'anco pari alcuna
> ti fosse al volto, agli atti, alla favella,
> saria, così conforme, assai men bella. (vv. 19-22)

> But nothing in the world
> resembles you: if someone else should boast
> your looks, your gestures or the way you speak,
> she would, however like you, be less lovely.[5]

Even if we don't consider the diversity of their objects, *Alla sua donna* and *L'Infinito* have a different underlying plan as their foundation. In the

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[5] Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans. Paul Lawton (Dublin: UDC Foundation for Italian Studies, 1996), 79.

1819 composition, the pleasure of the infinite is never threatened by any declaration of grief on the part of the poet, who is totally immersed in the ecstasy of his "fiction": no negative expression is interposed between "Sempre caro mi fu" (This lonely hill was always dear to me) and "naufragr m'è dolce" (foundering is sweet). On the contrary, the yearning for the hyper-uranian woman is not devoid of the recognition of the poet's and his fellow humans unhappy condition: from the initial "o te la sorte avara / ch'a noi t'asconde agli avvenir prepara?" (Or does the miser, fate, who hides you from us keep you for the future?) to the final "di qua dove son gli anni infausti e brevi" (from here, where years are both ill-starred and brief), the evocation of the celestial creature is always associated with the denunciation of a negative situation by the lyrical subject. It is precisely the simultaneous presence of both ecstasy and heartbreak which constitutes the poetic specificity of the lyric *Alla sua donna*.

The infinite-indefinite theme therefore, is the leitmotif of a series of texts composed under the banner of an ontology of illusion. This allows us to tie the lyric *Alla sua donna* to the first compositions in the so-called "ciclo di Aspasia" (Aspasia cycle), *Il pensiero dominante* (*The Dominant Idea*) and *Amore e Morte* (*Love and Death*), two love poems onto which the shadows of Leopardi's infinite-indefinite continue to be projected. It is sufficient to quote two passages from these compositions, where not only the motif, but also the expressive modalities can attest to their belonging to the poetic constellation of the infinite. I will quote the beginning of the twelfth stanza of *Pensiero dominante*, where the equation 'amorous ecstasy' = 'infinite' is obvious:

> Che mondo mai, che nova
> immensità, che paradiso è quello
> là dove spesso il tuo stupendo incanto
> parmi innalzar! dov'io,
> sott'altra luce che l'usata errando,
> il mio terreno stato
> e tutto quanto il ver pongo in obblio! (vv. 100-106)

> Towards what world, what fresh
> immensity, towards what paradise
> does your prodigious spell so often seem
> to lift me up! And there
> I wonder in another light than usual
> and I forget my earthly
> condition and life's true reality.[6]

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[6] Ibid., 121.

I will quote a passage from the second stanza of *Amore e Morte*, where being deprived of that infinity is seen as a motif that can lead the enamored subject to long for death:

Forse gli occhi spaura
allor questo deserto: a se la terra
forse il mortale inabitabil fatta
vede omai senza quella
nova, sola, infinita
felicità che il suo pensier figura [...] (vv. 34-39)

Perhaps the eye takes fright
Faced with life's wilderness; perhaps the mortal
discerns he cannot live henceforth on earth
without this fresh, unique
and boundless happiness
which constructs his imagination?[7]

In both cases we may have noticed how not only the lexicon (*immensità, stupendo incanto, errando, obblio*; *spaura, deserto, infinita felicità* [immensity, overwhelming magic, wandering, oblivion, terrifies, desert, unending happiness]), but also some metrical and syntactical modalities (for instance the enjambments "nova / immensità" and "infinita / felicità" valorise the infinitive terms, *immensità* and *felicità* respectively, in the *rejet*) recall the texts Leopardi devoted to actual infinity. In fact, in the last verse of the second passage, "infinita / felicità che il suo pensier figura," one finds the same mental mechanism used to evoke infinity: where *figura* (conceives) is a synonym of *finge* (sees with the mind's eye; *L'Infinito*, v. 7).

There is a fundamental difference however between these two compositions of the Aspasia cycle and *Alla sua donna*: in the former compositions the pleasures of the imagination seem to be, more than sought after, imposed on, almost endured by, the subject, due to the vital force of amorous illusion, the most powerful of all. This is the reason for the sometimes dramatic character of Leopardi's amorous discourse, in which the vitality of illusion challenges the evidence of truth:

Ahi finalmente un sogno
in molta parte onde s'abbella il vero
sei tu, dolce pensiero;
sogno e palese error. Ma di natura,

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[7] Ibid., 127.

infra i leggiadri errori,
divina sei; perchè si viva e forte,
che incontro al ver tenacemente dura,
e spesso al ver s'adegua,
nè si dilegua pria, che in grembo a morte. (vv. 108-116)

Finally, alas,
sweet thought, in you I find much of that dream
where truth appears embellished;
a dream and manifest illusion. Yet
among the sweet illusions,
you are divine by nature, so alive
and potent, stubbornly resisting truth
and often resembling truth
and only fade when in the lap of death.[8]

The verse "che incontro al ver tenacemente dura" posits the contrast between the reality of truth and the force of amorous emotions in decidedly antagonistic terms: this is the greatest homage that the author of a philosophy, according to his own definition "dolorosa ma vera," [painful but true] could pay to the vitality of an illusion.

Given the precariousness of that difficult cohabitation, it was inevitable that sooner or later it would collapse: and in fact the Aspasia cycle ends with the denunciation of love as "estremo inganno" (extreme deceit), and with a critical reflection on the nature and the modalities of that deceit: I am alluding to the two compositions that conclude the cycle, *A se stesso* and *Aspasia*.

With these two texts, but above all with *A se stesso*, we have arrived at what one could call the third way in which the Leopardian individual finds compensation: the direct denunciation, with no further reparations, of the negatives of existence. In this case I will again follow a typological rather than a chronological criterion, which allows me to include compositions far apart in terms of their dates of composition, such as *Bruto minore*, *A se stesso*, the two "sepulchral" compositions, and *La ginestra*. Just like those in the ontological illusion category, these are also anchored to the present: but with their respective values inverted.

From the point of view of its reception, this is the most controversial aspect of Leopardi's poetry, in other words not only the aspect that is most difficult for believers in a positive religion (Tommaseo or Capponi for instance) to accept, but for lay people as well, Mazzini, Croce or Gramsci for instance, who agree in believing that Leopardi's denunciation of the

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[8] Ibid., 121.

"male di vivere" (the ills of life), is not constructive, but distracting, an ideological dismissal that in its turn also leads to a poetic dismissal. Compared to them, readers with a religious background, such as Leopardi's contemporary Vincenzo Gioberti, or the early 20th century critic Giulio Augusto Levi seem to be more attuned to the poet's views on the negative. A statement by Gioberti, according to whom the poet, when deploring the nullity of everything humans enjoy as good, "non fa se non ripetere le divine parole dell'*Ecclesiaste* e dell'*Imitazione*" (is doing no more than repeat the divine words of *Ecclesiastes* or the *Imitatio*); or another made by Levi, according to whom the poet, in his poetry, re-enacts Christ's experience on the cross, when he feels abandoned by the Father, are both statements not devoid, in their own fashion, of a certain 'sympathy' for the poet.

The valorisation of compositions such as those recalled above, or of still others from the *Canti*, where the denunciation of the negative only characterises part of them (we already mentioned the 'dysphoric' moments in texts such as *Ad Angelo Mai*, *Alla Primavera*, and *Inno ai Patriarchi*), is a noteworthy step forward in the Leopardi criticism of the last half century. It did not limit itself to a simple inversion of evaluation, but each time motivated its assent with precise stylistic analyses, adhering to the specific characteristics of the individual compositions. Thus, in the particular case of the lyrics, the recognition of a poetic force of the 'negative' (a historical negative, summed up in the expression "secol morto" (dead century) employed by the poet in *Angelo Mai* to refer to his age) entailed focusing on an expressive technique founded on Leopardi's use of the "ardiri" (ca. 'darings'), understood both as the use of full-bodied metaphors (giving concepts such as tedium, otium, and nothingness an almost material consistency, and endowing them with a sort of epic elevation) and referring to the energy and speed of the poetic language, endowed with a lexicon tending towards the expressionistic and with brachylogical figures which point to Horatian conceits. ●n this occasion it will suffice to quote, merely as samples, the following: an example of the first type can be found in the following excerpt from *Angelo Mai*, where the negative concept of nothingness acquires a certain bodily consistency:

> […] ●h te beat●,
> a cui fu vita il piant●! A n●i le fasce
> cinse il fastidi●; a n●i press● la culla
> immot● siede, e su la t●mba, il nulla (vv. 72-75);
>
> ●h happy ●ne f●r wh●m lament was life!
> B●red●m wrapped us in ●ur swaddling cl●thes;
> and n●thingness guards ●ur cra●le and ●ur t●mb. (vv. 73-75)

and for the second type the ending of *A un vincitore nel pallone,* where the poet, declaring he prefers the risks of life to ennui provides us with a powerful representation of the otiose passing of time, similar to a muddy river, a passage endowed with an icastic force that in some ways seems to anticipate that of the Baudelairian *fleurs du mal*:

> Nostra vita a che val? solo a spregiarla:
> beata allor che ne' perigli avvolta,
> se stessa obblia, nè delle putri e lente
> ore il danno misura e il flutto ascolta... (vv. 60-63)

> What is our life worth? Nothing but disdain.
> Blessed then, when, danger all around,
> it forgets itself and doesn't count the loss
> of the slow, stagnant hours, or hear them ebb; (vv. 60-63)

A very different negative situation, tied to the personal denunciation of the "ingarmo estremo" (the extreme deceit), in other words amorous illusion, will be invoked in the lyric *A se stesso*, which, with *L'Infinito* and *Alla luna*, is the shortest of the *Canti*, but unlike them, is peppered with seven syllable verses and the use of rhyme. The most substantial difference is, however, that provided by syntax: a dense succession of brief sentences (twelve in the course of sixteen verses, of which one is made up of a single verb, *Perì,* between two full stops), which thanks to the systematic non-coincidence with the measure of the verses will achieve powerful 'syncopation' effects:

> Or poserai per sempre,
> stanco mio cor. Perì l'inganno estremo
> ch'eterno io mi credei. Perì. Ben sento,
> in noi di cari inganni,
> non che la speme, il desiderio è spento... (vv. 1-5)

> Now you will rest for ever,
> my weary heart. The last illusion's dead
> that I believed eternal. Dead. I know
> too well not just our hope
> but our desire for fond deceits has gone.[9]

When one reads a text of this nature in which the force of negation is equal to the energy of its rhythmic pulsation, one recalls a famous page from

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[9] Leopardi, *Canti*, LA, 133.

the *Zibaldone,* where similar poetic effects are contemplated and almost theorised. Let me quote the first section as an apt conclusion to my essay:

> It is a property of works of genius that, even when they represent vividly the nothingness of things, even when they clearly show and make you feel the inevitable unhappiness of life, even when they express the most terrible despair, nevertheless to a great soul that finds itself in a state of extreme dejection, disenchantment, nothingness, boredom, and discouragement about life, or in the most bitter and *deathly* misfortune [...], such works always bring consolation, and rekindle enthusiasm, and, though they treat and represent nothing but death, they restore, albeit momentarily, the life that it had lost.[10]

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[10] "Hanno questo di proprio le opere di genio, che quando anche rappresentino al vivo la nullità delle cose, quando anche dimostrino evidentemente e facciano sentire l'inevitabile infelicità della vita, quando anche esprimano le più terribili disperazioni, tuttavia ad un'anima grande che si trovi anche in uno stato di estremo abbattimento, disinganno, nullità, noia e scoraggimento della vita, o nelle più acerbe e mortifere disgrazie [...] servono sempre di consolazione, raccendono l'entusiasmo, e non trattando nè rappresentando altro che la morte, le rendono, almeno momentaneamente, quella vita che aveva perduta." (*Zib.*, 259-60); Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone,* eds. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 177.

Chapter Nine

On Poetic Cosmology

Antonio Prete

A Premise

It is probably my exposure to Leopardi's writings that has led me to avoid any predefined critical methods, whether in a stylistic or a historico-critical direction. The purpose is to make oneself ready to listen or to make notes on the text's margins: in other words make every attempt to remain on the same wavelength as the author's thought and imagination. In these cases criticism can consist in nothing more than narrating one's own reading experience. It is necessary to make note of these transitions, one could call them inner transitions, in other words moments in which the text influences our ways of feeling: enchantment and fascination are sometimes such that the shift from reading to writing appears necessary. On the other hand, *exegesis,* the action the text exercises on us, is no more than the transcription of a word, a way of thinking or imagining, into the rhythm of one's own feelings. For this very reason, however, it is also the perception of a need, that of shifting to a writing that takes its point of departure from the text and resonates in harmony with it, moves in its space, while also transforming itself into words that belong to the person writing. Something similar occurs in the course of a translation, which, since it *remains in the shadow of the other language*, puts an expression from the original into play, but simultaneously expresses the language, style, and even the interior rhythms of whoever is translating.

The point of this premise is not to justify what follows, but only to warn readers that the reflections on Leopardi that have been expressed here are really digressions and are therefore presented in fragmentary fashion. Yet all digressions can only be sustained if they take place in a discursive field, if, in other words, they follow an argumentative line. In this case the topic

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* This essay was translated from the Italian by Mark Epstein.

is what one could call Leopardi's *cosmological passion*. In other words, the poet's ties both to areas of knowledge that go from astronomy to questions about the infinite, as well as cognitive dynamics that constantly search for extreme vantage points from which to observe. His is a leap of thought that is always located at the heart of an ultimate distance; and, from this vantage point, the poet is able to observe the world's travails, its illusions, and its spectres of power.

On the Infinite

In *L'Infinito* (*The Infinite*), imagining a beyond is always a bodily act of imagination. The first verse—"Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle" (This lonely hill was always dear to me)[1]—already places a *mi* (to me) at the centre of its horizon of feeling, of affects that surpass all limited temporality (*sempre* [always]): a perception of self which entails profound visual and internalized relations, with both a hill (*colle*) and a hedge (*siepe*). A hill and a hedge that are not sudden apparitions, nor discoveries, nor visual objects upon which to rest one's gaze, but are rooted in a profound sense of belonging, both habit and tie, and this is the reason the adverb of an unbounded temporality (*sempre*) can announce and describe them. From the *mi* placed at the heart of the first verse an arc is traced which then rests on the *mi* of the seventh verse, where a subject that thinks within and with the fiction ("io nel pensier *mi* fingo" [in thought I imagine myself]),[2] makes its appearance, and from here leaps forward to the *mi* of the last verse: "E il naufragar *m*'è dolce in questo mare" (and sweet it is to shipwreck in this sea). In the course of its development the poetry of infinity lands on these three bodily accents, almost as if it wanted to anchor the odyssey of boundless time and space to the corporeality of feeling(s). These *mi*, in their physical determinateness, in their energy, and in their circumstantial finitude, seem to reflect the definite article from the idyll's title. The idyll has made the object of determination something that is beyond any determination or definition, in other words: the infinite. That same infinite which, for the poet, as an entry from the *Zibaldone* testifies, exists, like nothingness, only in language. To bring the supreme absence into language, to name the unnameable, represent the unrepresentable, is precisely poetry's task: a language that hosts the visible and the invisible, actual presence as

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[1] Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans. Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010), 107; from now on referred to as GA.

[2] Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans. Paul Lawton (Dublin: UCD Foundation for Italian Studies, 1996), 55; from now on referred to as LA.

opposed to appearance, that which can be configured and the absence of all configuration.

In these bodily rhythms therefore, in the feelings of an 'I' that, above all, embodies the power of fiction *within* thought, as well as with thought, we find the contours of excess outlined. In other words, it is the sentient 'I' that creates a space where boundaries and temporality dissolve as such, and where the attempt at representation of the *eternal* is staged. In this manner, it can develop as a comparison between the rhythms of presence and those of absence, between the sounds of "a season" that is close by, audible, defined, and the bottomless void of the "morte stagioni" (the dead seasons).[3] That which is beyond language itself resonates in an entirely corporeal imagination: *a celestial physics and a physics of feelings are conjoined*. The rhythm of the senses defined by the word 'I' and the rhythm of the ultra-temporal are fused in the language of poetry: a language whose daring is here revealed in full. This is its ultimate and electrifying task: to express the infinite knowing full well that it is impossible, to move thought to the threshold of the unthinkable, and from that boundary to enact a 'shipwreck'. A shipwreck and a thwarting of thought, of an intellect that wants to *comprehend* the infinite. Even the language of poetry risks falling prey to this shipwreck when faced with the task of expressing the infinite by comprehending it, even within fiction. But it is precisely in language that the refractions of the infinite reverberate and become visible; visible and audible reverberations of the indefinite, in all its figural expressions. And it is precisely these figures of the indefinite that belong to what Leopardi calls the "poetic." Leopardi resorts to the image of the sea (Baudelaire will refer to it decades later as an "infini diminutif"), a form of infinite 'next door', the visible aspect of an invisible infinite, in other words an infinite that is approachable in its human, comprehensible, form. Leopardi would use the expression *parvenza* (semblance) of the infinite. Within this depiction of a shipwreck we find a raft: the body is that raft. It is referred to by the *mi* of "m'è dolce," in which the *mi* of the first verse ("mi fu") is reflected, after having lingered on the *mi* of *finzione* (fiction) ("io nel pensier mi fingo"). The body perceives the shipwreck as sweet. The *dolzore* of the poetry of the *stilnovisti* surfaces in this pleasure that supervenes when confronted with thought's powerlessness in attempting to express the infinite. The odyssey of the imagination that attempted the representation of the *interminati spazi* (unbounded spaces) and the *sovrumani silenzi* (silences / Deeper than

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[3] Giacomo Leopardi, *Selected Poems*, trans. Eamon Grennan (Dublin: Dedalus, 1995), 21; from now on referred to as GR.

human silence),[4] of the *profondissima quiete* (deepest quietitude),[5] reaches the threshold of an entirely physical dread ("ove per poco / il cor non si spaura"); and while the adventure is given a fresh start, sparked by a sound and the physical proximity of a natural event–the rustling of the wind among the vegetation, it does not reach any safe haven: it pauses hovering over the void of the impossible, the superposition of the infinite and nothingness. In the course of this pause the self no longer experiences dread, but the end of thought, the drowning and negation of the self, of thought as the capacity to express the infinite. During this pause the body, its pulsations, make their presence felt once again. We witness the self-perception of a self, poised on an extreme threshold, where thought recognizes its own powerlessness. Poetry is a language of the body, a language of feeling: it reveals the perception of a sweetness no longer attainable when facing the infinite, but, instead, when faced with its visible, vicarious, terrestrial, figurative embodiment: the sea. Not a theoretical metaphor—"the great sea of being"—but the semblance of something beyond the boundaries, which does not annihilate us but gently returns us to the perception of one's feeling(s). This is, once again, the language of poetry. The perfume of a flower in the abyss.

Astronomical Observation and Poetic Interrogation

What surprises us in Leopardi is the movement that, starting with a childish and adolescent interest for heavenly phenomena, attains the heights of poetic interrogation; that, starting with scientific observation, arrives at reflections that acknowledge the pulsations of finitude within the yawning maw of that abyss that is the cosmos. The observation of a solar eclipse as a child, the thirteen-year-old's attention to the passage of a comet, the explorations with a telescope, the scholastic and erudite work of the *Dissertazione sopra l'origine e i primi progressi dell'Astronomia* (*Dissertation on the Origins and First Achievements of Astronomy*) and finally the countless excursions among the classics: narratives, lexicons and travelogues. These will sustain the composition of the *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* e della *Storia dell'Astronomia* (*Essay on the Popular Errors of the Ancients* and *History of Astronomy*); they can be seen as the premises of a later questioning that will lead to a number of comparisons: between the visible and the depths, the individual's singularity and the rhythms of the universe, the beauty of the landscape and the

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Leopardi, *Canti*, LA, 55.

omnipresence of the rhythms of *physis*, in other words those of decline and rebirth. Leopardi's research is a rare example of dialogue and correspondence between science and poetry, knowledge and lyricism. His fascination with knowledge does not close in on itself but onto a specific kind of knowledge, one that moves along the paths of the fantastic—along Vico's 'via fantastica'—on a planet earth where it is of the utmost importance to ask oneself the 'why?' question(s) about the world, the condition(s) of the individual exposed to the rhythms of the universe, the pain(s) of living beings in their interactions with all other living beings. Philology is transformed by Leopardi from passion for the text, its tradition, reconstruction and interpretation, to that which the etymology of the word actually expresses, in other words *love of language,* and therefore of poetry. Something analogous occurs with astronomy: from the pleasure of observation and erudite reconstruction of sources, from a taste for cultivated and minute investigations about the transitions and discoveries occurring within a discipline, to a celestial interrogation, or more specifically the exploration of two heavens, the exterior and visible and the interior and hidden. We reach the acme of this resonance between the two heavens each time that, facing the moon's appearance, its nocturnal path, its setting, the poet moves from the physics of the heavens to the physics within, from the sky above us to the sky within us: this is what sparks the movement of *ricordanza.* The moon, whose light both veils and reveals things, induces Leopardi to an exploration of the theatre of our interiority, against whose backdrop time, in its irreversible determination, appears. Together with what has already passed, one finds lost images—faces, voices, and lights that return in their transparent simulacra to be placed within a new time: the time of poetry.

Lunar Presences

The first essay contained in *Il demone dell'analogia*[6] was entitled *La luna leopardiana* (*Leopardi's Moon[s]*). In it, I attempted to read the lunar presences in the *Canti,* following the rhythm of their stupendous advance through the verses, and linking them to Leopardi's reflections on light, nightly phenomena, as well as the exploration of one's inner being and remembrance(s). That essay ended with some pages titled *"Pulchra ut luna": postilla sugli attributi lunari* (*"Pulchra ut luna": Note(s) on Lunar Attributes*), in which I reviewed the sources for and the forms of his analogies between the moon and the feminine. Here, I would like to add a

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[6] Antonio Prete, *Il demone dell'analogia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1986).

twofold annotation to that past essay: one tied to memory, the other to some verses from the *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* (*Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia*).

Others will probably have had similar experiences. My connection to Leopardi, and the choice to spend so much time in the company of his writings, dates back to my memorisation of the *Canto notturno* in early adolescence, and consequently, the superposition of his verses onto the contemplations of the moon rising over the countryside, or setting over the sea. To observe the moon rising above waves of olive-trees, gradually gaining clarity while continuing to rise in the sky, or hiding behind the clouds, only to regain splendour when reappearing; to observe the moon's nightly immersion in the sea, beyond the Moorish tower, as even the glimmers of its wake on the waters would gradually fade when, during the summer, I found myself several miles from my town, on the Ionian coast of the Salento, meant evoking, almost as if I were bent on courting those celestial appearances, Leopardi's verses. Leopardi's poetry, and by no means only the *Canto notturno*, accompanied those lunar appearances as if it were the evening star. Some of my thoughts may certainly have been sparked by the moon's triumph in the sky, but with them, or even before them, there were the poet's verses. They were in some sense inseparable from her epiphany, that tacit, candid, silent, naked, falling, placid, pensive, attractive, delightful, virginal, intact, benign, and solitary fellow traveller, the eternal pilgrim. It was as an adolescent, on my first trip to Recanati, which included a nocturnal stopover in Assisi, that I witnessed the difference between Leopardi's moon, seen from the Appennines, and the moon I had observed in the Salento: the sense of enchantment that imbued this experience only strengthened its effects. This geographic truth survived to generate a distinction, to loosen an identification—perhaps to once inject the poetry with the energy of its uniqueness—adding to a charm that was tied to its distinction from the real, landscape included. An extraordinary moon, "de le notti reina" (queen of the night),[7] had arisen in the sky, leaving the dark line of the mountains behind: their outline could however still be seen against its light. I gave up on sleep and managed to find a place in the hotel from which I could observe the moon's nightly peregrinations at length. During this enchanted interval, I recalled the verses of the *Canto notturno* but, at a certain point, I noticed that different thoughts, including memories and images of that other, Salento, moon, were flooding my mind. The image that now appeared to me above the olive-trees and which, as it climbed, lost all ties to other terrestrial forms, such as the lines of hills or

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[7] Leopardi, *Canti*, LA, 73.

the towers on the knolls, was all alone, on high, the sky fully extending around it. The moon was all light, a figure of light, a silver synthesis of light, sailing above the plains only to then set over the sea. I thus came to understand that Leopardi's moon was not bound to either the Appennines, or the Tyrrhenian *Tramonto della luna* (*The Setting of the Moon*), but was detached from any geographic bond: both sphynx and companion, confidante and aperture onto absolute alterity, threshold of distance and emblem of cosmological proximity, a figure with which to question the meaning of existence and the enigma of the universe. In the process of establishing the difference between the moons from the Appennines and the Salento, I realized how distant Leopardi's moon(s) was from these geographic settings. The Salento moon did not appear to me detached from its terrestrial bonds, the figurative embodiment of a cosmology to be questioned, or an interiority to be explored. The appeal that writing later had for me may have also been due to the experiences from that lunar night.

At this point let's briefly consider the following famous verses from the *Canto notturno*:

> Pur tu, solinga peregrina,
> Che sì pensosa sei, tu forse intendi,
> Questo viver terreno,
> Il patir nostro, il sospirar, che sia;
> Che sia questo morir, questo supremo
> Scolorar del sembiante,
> E perir della terra, e venir meno
> Ad ogni usata amante compagnia
> E tu certo comprendi
> Il perché delle cose, e vedi il frutto
> Del mattin, della sera,
> Del tacito, infinito andar del tempo.
> Tu sai, tu certo, a qual suo dolce amore
> Rida la primavera,
> a chi giovi l'ardore, e che procacci
> Il verno co' suoi ghiacci.
> Mille cose sai tu, mille discopri.
> Che son celate al semplice pastore. (vv. 61-78)

> Yet a solitary ceaseless wanderer like you,
> Broody as you are, might understand
> The lives we lead on earth,
> The ways we suffer, why we sigh, what dying means:
> That last warm trace of colour fading
> As we perish from the face of the earth
> And leave behind us all

Our old friends and loving company.
And indeed you know right well
Why things happen, what morning means,
And evening and the ever-winding silent
Stream of time. You, you surely, know
On what sweet beloved of its own
The springtime smiles, whom the burning
Sun of summer cheers, who finds delight
In winter with its snow and ice.
You know a thousand things like these
And understand a thousand more
Hidden from a simple shepherd.[8]

The knowledge the wandering shepherd attributes, even if in dubitative form, to the moon leads back to the beliefs, repeatedly mentioned by Leopardi, of ancient humans—in Vico's terms of the "primi uomini" (first humans), who "furon poeti" (were poets)—about the life of the planets. But even beyond beliefs evoked by Leopardi in his *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi*, an important tradition had underscored the living element within *physis*: from Empedocles' "pensiero delle cose" (thoughts of things) to the "groan" at the creation St. Paul had mentioned in his Epistle to the Romans (8:22). This living element, which, in the *Discorso di un italiano intorno alla poesia romantica* (*Discourse on Romantic Poetry*) leads to life's pulsations joining together the gaze of a child and that of the ancients, in a fantastical relation with a world that is not abstract but inhabited by voices, sounds and calls in *Alla primavera o delle favole antiche* (To Spring) it becomes an animating principle, dispersed and consumed by the "atra / face del ver" (the dark fire / of knowledge).[9] A *poetic physics* presides over the shepherd's questions. And over the poet's as well. He then shifts his point of observation to the moon, to a distance that allows him to unveil that which habit has rendered opaque and dusty: question about ultimate meaning(s). Devoted to abstraction and the *sense of history*, our civilization, according to Leopardi, removes the knowledge of death. Starting from this point, and all the way to the composition of *Ginestra* (The Broom), Leopardi will search for different forms in which to cast his strong convictions in this area. This is a knowledge that the moon may be privy to, one that is not only concerned with individuals, but with existence as such: the bond that conjoins human and earthly existence (the

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[8] Leopardi, *Selected Poems*, GR, 87. Grennan does not include line numbers in his translation.

[9] Leopardi, *Canti*, GA, 67.

"perir della terra" [perishing of the earth]). Lunar knowledge also concerns the principles of the earth itself, its movement, its rhythm, with its alternation of days and seasons, the blossoming and withering, which in their cyclical succession seem to know no end: this is time that opens onto more time, a finitude that dissolves into the infinite ("tacito, infinito andar del tempo" [silent, endless pace of time], v. 72). Some years earlier, while composing the ending of *Cantico del gallo silvestre* (*The Canticle of the Wild Cock*), Leopardi thought that this enigma had both persisted and remained unresolved during the course of human presence on the earth: "Tempo verrà, che esso universo, e la natura medesima, sarà spenta [...], un silenzio nudo, e una quiete altissima, empieranno lo spazio immenso. Così questo arcano mirabile e spaventoso dell'esistenza universale, innanzi di essere dichiarato né inteso, si dileguerà e perderassi" (The time will come when this universe, and nature herself, will be spent[...]. a bare silence and deep quiet will fill the immensity of space. So this marvellous and terrifying mystery of universal existence, before it is either declared or understood, will disappear and be lost).[10] Perhaps the moon knows something about this enigma. As it proceeds, the shepherd's questioning loses its dubitative tone, and comes to attribute knowledge of life's rebirth, in other words love, to the moon ("Tu sai, tu certo, a qual suo dolce amore / rida la primavera" [certainly you know for whose sweet love / spring smiles] vv. 73-4); he also sees the moon as privy to relations between the living and their conditions of habitation on this earth, to relations between living beings and the visible and sensory order of nature.

This questioning, which, as it continues, also involves stars in the enigma, "l'aria infinita" (endless air), "quel profondo / infinito seren" (that deep, eternal blue) and "questa / solitudine immensa" (this huge solitude) has a final destination, an ultimate question, the principle of all knowledge: "and who am I?" This then is the issue that prompts the shepherd's questioning. The moon's light, in revealing the landscape and the relations between the indefinite forms of the visible—-the desert, the sky—their relationship with the infinite, also reveals to the shepherd, the poet, and the man, that place of interiority, that hidden sky, where the question *who am I* coincides with questions on the meaning of being in the world, on the meaning of the world itself. By revealing these connections, and exhibiting the enigma on which they rest, the light of the moon has been transformed into inner light, the distance from oneself has illuminated "the self," the gaze on the universe has been turned into a gaze on the self. Without losing a

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[10] Giacomo Leopardi, *Moral Fables*, Trans. J. G. Nichols (Richmond: Alma Classics, 2017), 144.

sense of finitude. Since the desert, and the moon above it, are there to express the non-figurable infinite that looms over all living beings by means of their presence.

The Starry Element. Notes

The moon's centrality to Leopardi's poetry has often marginalized the topic of those other heavenly bodies, the stars, in the minds of readers. Yet they also are sources of strong impulses for questioning and meditation. As we just saw in the questions posed by the wandering shepherd. He asks himself "ed io che sono" (And what am I?)[11] at the very moment his gaze is being directed by the verse "E quando miro in cielo arder le stelle." (and [...] as I / Behold in heaven the fiery stars).[12]

This gaze directed at the stars raises thoughts, opens new paths and sparks inner explorations. The gaze Werther directed at the stars during the anguish induced by his falling in love, contrasts the eternity of the heavenly bodies ("le stelle non cadranno" [the stars will not fall]) to the fragility and exposure of the earthly passion: a prelude to that request for the protection of love that Romantic lovers will make to the stars, to their extra-temporality (Leopardi's motif of the "calda disperazione" [warm desperation], if one follows its traces in the *Zibaldone*, leads back to his reading of Goethe's work). Instead the gaze the shepherd/poet addresses to the stars does not here counterpose the limited to the unlimited, the transient to the eternal, but instead leads us, with a leap that is both theoretical and poetic, to a horizon that includes, within the very same enigma, both starry elements and the human condition. In other words, the enigma of the universe. Yet it is precisely the gaze directed at the stars—a gaze that preserves both the same movements and that same astonishment of both child and ancient humans—which, by highlighting the sense of disorientation and lack of knowledge, leads one to another line of questioning, one that concerns the theatre of our interiority. The dream of an elevated point, that is the source of happiness, of flights that know and name the stars, visits both shepherd and poet, prior to the reflections on the tragic nature of existence itself: "Forse s'avess'io l'ale / da volar su le nubi / e noverar le stelle ad una ad una [...]" (Maybe if I had wings / to fly above the clouds / and count the stars out one by one),[13] a dream that for the Rilke of the *Seventh Duino Elegy* will include a passing beyond death, because the stars are beyond a time that

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[11] Le●pardi, *Canti*, GA, 199.
[12] Le●pardi, *Selected Poems*, GR, 87.
[13] Le●pardi, *Canti*, GA, 2●1.

is expressible, even beyond the time of the angels themselves: "● *einst tot sein und sie wissen unendlich, / alle die Sterne : denn wie, wie, wie sie vergessen!* " (● *to be dead at last and know them eternally / all the stars: for how, how, how to forget them!*).[14]

Leopardi's *Ricordanze* (*Remembrances*) also open with a contemplation of the stars. The return is a return to the contemplation of the heavens: the stars, the "vaghe stelle dell'●rsa" (sweet stars of the Great Bear)[15] sparkle above the "paterno giardino" (paternal garden). Just as they did previously. In the course of this return we find his "ragionare" (reasoning) with the stars. A verb from love poetry, the Dantean "ragionar d'amore" (reasoning of love), is transposed here to a cosmological dimension: to indicate the breath of life, the intensity of the questioning, that are contained in these contemplative acts. The lyric's beginning, with its renewed adoption of the contemplative stance, which reaches an accord with an already known and familiar, visible world, despite its boundless cosmological opening, seems to evoke the same mood one finds in Hölderlin's *Der Wanderer*, calmness after anxiety, a recognition of one's belonging to nature after the estrangement inherent in the wandering. The poet's gaze, which is here directed towards the stars, discloses another gaze, and another kind of listening: that "mirare" (gazing) at the sky during far away nights, the sound of that "rana rimota alla campagna" (frog out in the countryside),[16] which accompanied the sight of the wandering firefly "appo la siepe / e in su l'aiuole" (flitted among hedges and flowerbeds),[17] to the whispering of the wind along the "viali odorati" (fragrant avenues of trees)[18] and in the cypresses to the voices resounding "sotto il patrio tetto" (under my father's roof).[19] As in the case of the lunar apparitions, the contemplation of the stars also reveals the return of ancient images. It is precisely these echoes that come from a great distance, that fill the time and space of our interiority, that the poet defines as *ricordanze*. Let us recall the passage from *Zibaldone* 515: "So that the present sensation does not derive directly from things, it

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[14] From: *The Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, tran. A.S. Kline, Poetry in Translation, 2001. http://www.poetryintranslation.com/klineasrilke.htm, Date of consultation: September 22, 2018.

[15] Leopardi, *Canti*, L A 87.

[16] Leopardi, *Canti*, GA, 179.

[17] Leopardi, *Selected Poems*, GR, 63.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Leopardi, *Canti*, GA, 179.

is not an image of objects, but an image of the childhood image, a recollection, a repetition, a reechoing, or reflection of the old image."[20]

The cosmological transition of the lyric *Alla sua donna* (*To His Lady*) takes place not on the plane of remembrances, but on that of amorous feelings which originate in the unknowable, the irrecoverable and the absolutely absent. As is well known the poet writes: "L'autore non sa se la sua donna (e così chiamandola, mostra di non amare altra che questa) sia mai nata finora, o debba mai nascere; sa che ora non vive in terra, e che noi non siamo suoi contemporanei; la cerca tra le idee di Platone, la cerca nella luna, nei pianeti del sistema solare, in quei de' sistemi delle stelle" (The author doesn't know if his lady [and by thus invoking her name, he shows he loves no one but her] has ever been born yet, or ever will be born; he knows she does not now live on this earth, and that we are not her contemporaries; he searches for her among Plato's ideas, on the moon, on the planets of the solar system, on those of the systems of stars).[21] He then adds, interposing a veil of irony between himself as author and the feelings in his verses: "Se questa Canzone si vorrà chiamare amorosa, sarà pur certo che questo tale amore non può né dare né patir gelosia, perché, fuor dell'autore, nessun amante terreno vorrà fare all'amore col telescopio" (Should one want to call this a song of love, what is certain is that this love will not engender or suffer jealousy, because, apart from this author, no lover will want to make love by telescope).[22]

The distance of the woman to whom the hymn is addressed by the unknown lover is therefore a cosmic distance. The verses carry the language of the love-poets and even their amorous doctrines towards the extreme of a threshold where the impossible is superimposed on the feeling of deprivation, the sublimity of assent is inflected as turmoil and anxious throbbing–not without a guarded acceptance of the forms traditionally employed by poetic *expressions* of love–in other words that which is prior to form, the non-figurable, is the source of desire. The incorporeal is what triggers the physical feeling of love. The tradition of the sublime is turned

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[20] Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, eds. Michael Caesar and Franco d'Intino, trans. Kathleen Baldwin et al. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014). "[...] la sensazione presente non deriva immediatamente dalle cose, non è un'immagine degli oggetti, ma della immagine fanciullesca: una ricordanza, una ripetizione, una ripercussione o riflesso della immagine antica." Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, ed. Giuseppe Pacella, (Milan: Garzanti, 1991), 284.

[21] Translated by Mark Epstein.

[22] This is from the tenth of his *Canzoni* in the *Preambolo* (Preamble) to the reissue of the "Annotazioni," in *Nuovo Ricoglitore* (September 1825). Translated by Mark Epstein.

upside-down: no longer the resonance of an apparition, but the resonance of an absence. Which is still, however, one of way of imagining love, being caught in its anguish; in its very title (*Alla sua donna*) expresses an intimacy that is both ironic and real, abstract and corporeal. The essence of an absolute and unrecognizable alterity which is the source of love may have the status of an idea that is contemptuous of ever assuming a "sensibil forma" (form perceptible by the senses). Or it may reside in an elsewhere that is beyond all cosmic celestial bodies:

> O s'altra terra ne' superni giri
> Fra' mondi innumerabili t'accoglie,
> E più vaga del Sol prossima stella
> T'irraggia, e più benigno etere spiri; (vv. 50-3)
> [...]
>
> or if some other planet shelters you
> among the teeming worlds that spin in space,
> and, brighter than the sun, a nearby star
> sheds light on you in purer atmospheres,
> [...][23]

The cosmic backdrop on which this fantastic semblance devoid of either figure or form appears endows this incredible love with a desire that is so absolute that it pervades the infinite. Could this be desire itself which, searching for its source wanders into a maelstrom of celestial bodies, where there might be traces of origins?

Finally, the starry night of *Ginestra*. The poet's eyes rest on their twinkling, in the midst of reflections about the dark sides of a civilization that has erased the sense of finiteness, excised human frailty and the knowledge of death, allowing an illusory sense of dominion over nature and the course of history itself to triumph:

> Sovente in queste rive,
> Che, desolate, a bruno
> Veste il flutto indurato, e par che ondeggi,
> Seggo la notte; e su la mesta landa
> In purissimo azzurro
> Veggo dall'alto fiammeggiar le stelle,
> Cui di lontan fa specchio
> Il mare, e tutto di scintille in giro
> Per lo vóto seren brillar il mondo. (vv. 158-66)

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[23] Leopardi, *Canti*, LA, 79.

Often I sit at night on these deserted
slopes which the hardened flood
clothes in a black that seems to undulate,
and over the sad plain
I see the stars
burning up above in purest blue,
which the sea reflects in the far distance
and, twinkling everywhere, the world
glistens in the empty sky.[24]

A Neapolitan nocturne. Gorgeous in a movement which, from the shores, where the signs of a violent volcanic eruption, and therefore of human exposure to decline, are visible, rises to the skies, and from there once more directs its gaze to the sea, a sea that mirrors the starry heavens; in the course of reflecting these two immensities, the night expands to the point of coinciding with the world itself, with a starry universe whose sparkle is the alphabet of a language closed in its as yet undeciphered radiance. The gaze returns once more to search the furthest reaches, losing itself in them and finding itself by means of that contemplation formed by comparing the visible and the invisible, between the here and now and the beyond, between the opening of the worlds and the revelation of the human condition:

E poi che gli occhi a quelle luci appunto,
Ch'a lor sembrano un punto,
E sono immense, in guisa
Che un punto a petto a lor son terra e mare
Veracemente; a cui
L'uomo non pur, ma questo
Globo ove l'uomo è nulla,
Sconosciuto è del tutto; e quando miro
Quegli ancor più senz'alcun fin remoti
Nodi quasi di stelle,
Ch'a noi paion qual nebbia, a cui non l'uomo
E non la terra sol, ma tutte in uno,
Del numero infinite e della mole,
Con l'aureo sole insiem, le nostre stelle
O sono ignote, o così paion come
Essi alla terra, un punto
Di luce nebulosa; al pensier mio
Che sembri allora, o prole
Dell'uomo? (vv. 167-85)

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[24] Leopardi, *Canti*, GA, 297-99.

And when I peer out at those lights
That seem no more than specks from here
But are in fact so huge that truly
Land and sea are specks to them,
Where not just man himself but this
Great globe where man is nothing
Isn't known at all; and when I gaze on out
At those infinitely more remote
Clusters of stars that look like clouds,
To which not merely man, not earth,
But all our stars together, numberless
And vaster than we can imagine,
The golden sun itself among them,
Are either invisible or else appear
As those clusters themselves appear
To us on earth   just a smudge
Of cloudy light   then what can I make
Of you, my family of man?[25]

The gaze into the stellar distance discloses a boundless imaginative wandering: on the one hand the vast celestial bodies that appear as dots, on the other the earth and the sea and therefore the space of human dwelling which themselves also appear as dots, lost in space. In the course of the gaze's wanderings a thought begins to take shape, namely that the earth itself, that globe compared to which humans are nothing, is actually unknown: what appears to us as the world—or the visible, or history—is enclosed inside the unknown, it is almost a figure of the non-existent. Resonances from Pascal's comparisons resurface here. And they expand: to the point of leading thoughts of the self and the world into a boundless and unknowable vastness, on whose stage human daring, and his/her progressive illusion of the historic edification of a civilization, disappear into insignificance, are less than nothing.

The gaze immediately resumes its adventures, contemplating and questioning: "e quando miro / quegli ancor più senz'alcun fin remoti / nodi quasi di stelle, / ch'a noi paion qual nebbia" ([...] and when I gaze on out / At those infinitely more remote / Clusters of stars that look like clouds).[26]

The nebulae (knowledge of astronomy is here conjoined with poetic form) and the stellar masses transport the imagination towards its limits and its *pari*: to be able to give a form and a name to a universe whose maw yawns open in a flaming vortex of life. It is a life that the word infinite gives

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[25] Leopardi, *Selected Poems*, GR, 113-15.
[26] Leopardi, *Selected Poems*, GR, 113.

residence to, but without understanding it, because it also is only a word lost in the unnameable of a space beyond language, beyond the human mind. *Inexpressible*, like the stars: Rilke will also endow these thoughts with poetic form. This breakout of thought towards the extremes of the imagination, towards what lies beyond the visible, opens up not only a new point from which to observe the earth, but also the solar system, our own galaxy, elements lost in an infinite that no language can comprehend. That "punto / di luce nebulosa" which the galaxy is, and, within it, the system of stars, planets and heavenly bodies and this "questo oscuro /granel di sabbia, il qual di terra ha nome" (this obscure grain of sand called earth)[27] as Leopardi will write further on, are the true threshold of comparison of our finiteness. They are the true horizon, in which the knowledge of human beings, and the construction of their human relations must be situated: to the point of outlining a jointly responsible community, an "umana compagnia" (human brotherhood)[28] founded on "l'onesto e il retto / conversar cittadino" (open, honest civil life).[29] This gaze onto the "oscuro granel di sabbia" named earth brings to mind the gaze in the *Coro dei morti* (*Chorus of the Dead*) which, while also starting from a point of absolute distance, was transformed into the question: "Che fu quel punto acerbo / che di vita ebbe nome?" (What was that bitter instant / We called life?).[30] Two thresholds from which the observation of human existence regains its true dimensions, removed from all illusory amplifications, and all anthropic ideological centrality.

As far as the Neapolitan nocturnal scene is concerned, the poet's meditation takes place in the course of the starry sky opening onto the ocean. A meditation that the broom flower gathers within its figure. Frail and yet resistant, the broom remains within the circle of finiteness, the knowledge of death, and within that circle, with its delicate fragrance, it grasps the rhythms of life.

Thus, the smile of poetry.

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[27] Translated by Mark Epstein.

[28] Translated by Mark Epstein.

[29] Leopardi, *Selected Poems*, GR, 113.

[30] Ibid., 49.

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CHAPTER TEN

"QUELLA FORMA DI RAGIONAR
DIRITTA E SANA":
AN EXEGESIS OF SOME PHILOSOPHICAL
STANZAS IN LEOPARDI'S *PARALIPOMENI*

ANDREA PENSO

The *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia* (*The War of the Mice and the Crabs*) represent one of the most mature outcomes in Leopardi's philosophical and political speculation, and not only because of their late appearance in his literary production. The poet's ideas, which were the result of extended periods of reflection, are carried to the extreme in this short poem's octaves through the aggressive, though measured, use of satire. The *Paralipomeni* are in fact Leopardi's crowning achievement along his path within the canon of satirical poetry. Imagined as a continuation of the ancient *Batracomiomachia*,[1] the short poem portrays precise historical events, disguised beneath the fictitious war between the Mice and the Crabs. The references are to the Italian and European political situation at the beginning of the nineteenth century, caught between the Restoration, various insurrections (1820-21, 1830) and fierce political debates. Many of the motifs that recurred in the previous satirical poems, such as *Palinodia al Marchese Gino Capponi* (*Palinody to Marquis Gino Capponi*) and *I nuovi Credenti* (*The New Believers*), are also important in the *Paralipomeni*. The criticism of the blind optimism of his contemporaries, who believed in an imminent golden age to be brought by progress, the attack on the cultural milieus popular at that time, the ridiculing of his detractors, still have a

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[1] When he was young, Leopardi translated the *Batracomiomachia* three times: in 1815, in 1821, and in 1826.

fundamental role in the structure of the poem.[2] But compared to those earlier experiences, in the *Paralipomeni* Leopardi engages in a more comprehensive and pitiless analysis, delivered by means of a completely new form of poetry. In fact, for the first time the poet attacks his targets by regressing human events to an inferior state, following the canons of the mock-epic and of the *zooepic*, the genres the book aspires to emulate. The Italian tradition of mock epic poetry had produced masterpieces such as *La secchia rapita (The Stolen Bucket)* by Alessandro Tassoni (1616), which represented a model Leopardi used for certain aspects of the *Paralipomeni*, together with the works of some foreign masters of the genre such as Pope and Byron. An even more strict relation links Leopardi's work with the *zooepic* poem *Animali parlanti (Talking Animals)* by Gianbattista Casti (1802), one of the most representative of the genre in the history of Italian literature. Compared to all these previous experiences, the *Paralipomeni* are characterised by a deeper level of intellectual commitment and a more serious attitude towards the portrayal of society's malfunctions.[3] In this study I will first demonstrate how Leopardi attacked and mocked certain philosophical trends that were in vogue during the nineteenth century, by adopting completely new communicative strategies to reach his target audience; second, the ways in which the *Paralipomeni* opened the path for the extreme message that will later be delivered by *La ginestra (The Broom)*.

It is easy to see that it is the second part of this peculiar epic poem, in particular, to be marked by a ferocious stance against the philosophical theories popular at the time: for Leopardi, it is all about asserting his own truth, which manifests itself in the progressive ridiculing, degrading of and polemicising against metaphysics, spiritualism and that *a priori* way of thinking which were the cornerstones of the Restoration and which he opposed with all his might. In this regard, the first twenty-five octaves of the fourth *canto* of the *Paralipomeni* are certainly the most emblematic: they prove fundamental in the short poem's architecture as they constitute a substantial turning point in the pace of the tale due to the presence of a long and often complex digression. The narration is put aside in favour of a philosophical deflection in which Leopardi attacks the philosophical consensus of the time. This digression is a chance for the poet to express some of his pessimistic views on history and the human condition, from its

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[2] Cf. Attilio Brilli, *Satira e mito nei Paralipomeni leopardiani* (Urbino: Argalia, 1968); and Andrea Penso, "Elementi di continuità tra la *Palinodia* e i *Paralipomeni*: appunti per una lettura diacronica e comparativa," *Appunti Leopardiani* 7, no. 1 (2014): 49-65.

[3] Cf. Andrea Penso, "Tradizione eroica e tradizione eroicomica nei Paralipomeni di Leopardi. Saggio di raffronti," *Il capitale culturale* 13 (2016): 299-319.

natural state to its gradual civilising process. However, it is above all an excoriating polemic against the dominant philosophy of his time, which was promoted by French ideologists of the Restoration (De Bonald, Lamennais, De Maistre) and by some Italian moderates. These intellectuals had asserted the dogma that language and each human being's social state were gifts from divine providence, which they placed at the very foundations of their philosophical and political system; and they also stated that those same human beings had fallen from their original state of grace because of their corruption. The pre-texts which Leopardi leans on to begin his long political and philosophical attack, at the beginning of the fourth *canto*, are mostly represented by the works of De Maistre (humankind, which is to blame for its own fall from a state of grace, can slowly make its way back to civilised life as a result of divine intervention) and Lamennais (against atheism and relativism, obstinately entrenched in his rigid fideistic and supernatural views in the name of his theories of "common sense" or "universal consent"). Leopardi's negation of these ideas is essentially due to the fact that progress, as in the fulfilment of human destiny, according to those catholic, traditionalist authors, is only possible in a celestial perspective. The "common sense" motifs manifestly recur in the *Paralipomeni*, especially in the last canto, which we will discuss briefly later. In fact, the full-fledged parodic attack of the short poem's last verses unveils the ultimate meaning of those philosophical speculations, which had started to appear with increasing frequency after the digression in the fourth canto, and which were methodically disseminated as the tale unfolded.

Leopardi vs. Eighteenth Century Philosophies: *Paralipomeni* IV.1-25

Let us focus on those octaves which introduce the philosophical element, after three cantos in which the narration and the political and historical themes were prominent. The philosophical digression in the fourth canto is initially brought about thanks to a simple, though malicious, metanarrative. Leopardi comments on the events narrated in the previous cantos and wonders how they may have astounded the reader. In the first two stanzas, he mockingly worries about being called a liar or a fool since he is writing about the ancient dealings of the Mice's kingdom as if they had happened yesterday or the day before yesterday, implying they are in many ways similar to the events of contemporary Europe.[4] However, according to the

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[4] In support of our exegesis we will refer to Ernesto Caserta's English prose translation of the *Paralipomeni*, since there are no poetic translations available in

poet, the reader should not find it odd that he has portrayed the events happening in the mice's world as similar to those of his time. This, he says, is by virtue of the latest philosophical "discoveries." The poem soon takes on a more serious tone. The poet's political stance is enhanced and more evident, thus anticipating the imminent breakthrough: the pause in the narration takes this basic animal fable to a much higher level. In fact, what was thus far perceived as literary play and incidental satire, is now supported by a vigorous backdrop of philosophical and polemical arguments which shine a new light on the tale. It is as if the once two-dimensional tale has acquired a third one: a dimension in which the tale of humankind becomes idealised, and reason is the very basis for a plot which presents a very complex structure, even mirroring the lyrical tension of the *Ginestra*.[5] Therefore, according to "what the sages have recently discovered, speculating with the mere intellect on the condition of mankind"[6] (this being the first attack against that spiritualist stance which Leopardi opposed, preferring the sensible and "experimental" side of knowledge), the current civil state of Europe was primitive, and it was just starting to move towards *'magnificent and progressive destinies'*. On the contrary, the savages' condition was not natural and primitive as had been believed so far, but

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English. Caserta adopted a conservative approach to the contents; therefore, his work seems particularly well suited to the goals of the present essay. Cf. Giacomo Leopardi, *The War of the Mice and the Crabs*, trans. Ernesto G. Caserta (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 61, (from now on shortened as *War*): "Perhaps, honourable readers, this story has caused you to wonder now and then. And as it is the habit and nature of men to pass judgment very easily, perhaps, though well-disposed towards me and friendly, you have thought more than once that I must be either a liar or a fool, / because I have represented the things of the mouse kingdom, which owing to their antiquity are so remote from us that, as appears clear from several indications, they may be compared with those of ancient India the customs, the speech, the institutions, the genius, the least and the most important affairs like ours, as if they had been yesterday or the day before." (Maraviglia talor per avventura, / Leggitori onorandi e leggitrici, / Cagionato v'avrà questa lettura. / E come son degli uomini i giudici / Facili per usanza e per natura, / Forse, benchè benevoli ed amici, / Più di un pensiero in mente avrete accolto, / Ch'essere io deggia o menzognero o stolto, / Perché le cose del topesco regno, / Che son per vetustà da noi lontane / Tanto che come appar da più di un segno, / Agguaglian le antichissime indiane, / I costumi, il parlar, l'opre, l'ingegno, / E l'infime faccende e le sovrane, / Quasi ieri o l'altr'ier fossero state, / Simili a queste nostre ho figurate).
[5] In this regard, cf. Gennaro Savarese, *L'eremita osservatore: Saggio sui "Paralipomeni" e altri studi su Leopardi* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1995). In this ground-breaking study the author pointed out the importance of the philosophical digression in the poem.
[6] Leopardi, *War*, 61.

degenerated, the corruption of the perfect society their fathers had enjoyed. After all, it is not wise to think that a guilty state of being, like the savage one, is natural (octaves 3-5).[7] The narrator, to avoid being accused of anachronism, puts forward an anti-rousseauian paradox.[8] It is the same paradox De Maistre himself used to reverse the meaning of 'nature' and 'natural', and overturn those philosophical priorities which defined what the state of nature was in Rousseau's view. In fact, De Maistre considered Rousseau's ideas about the state of nature as the most unnatural of all; although it could not be compared with modern concepts of society and civilisation, one could easily identify in it the typical characteristics of primitive states or the barbaric non-European states. In addition, De Maistre believed it was a human-made state of degeneration. For theological reasons, mankind must have been created perfect, in his most civilised and socialised state, which is what the extremely catholic philosopher De Maistre believed man's true natural state to be. Leopardi's views on how and why human history moves forward are diametrically opposed to this: there is no superior being, no divine gifts (be that language or institutions,

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[7] Ibid., 61-62: "But with a wonder every suspicion like a mist will be removed from your mind by reading, if you have not yet read, what the sages have recently discovered, speculating with the mere intellect on the condition of mankind: that the present civilized state of Europe must still be called primitive. / And that those whom the common people call savages, who in the hottest and coldest lands, naked in the sun, in the wind, in the storm, and provided only with a natural roof, are happy, as soon as they are weaned from the breast, to be nourished with grass and worms, and fear the breezes and the branches and that, melted by the sun, the celestial vault will fall; / they don't lead a natural and primitive life, as up to now was believed, but have fallen through so defective a corruption from a perfect civilization, in which their ancestors had lived as in their own native society: because to judge a state as wicked as the savage to be natural is not very sensible." (Ma con la maraviglia ogni sospetto / Come una nebbia vi torrà di mente // Il legger, s'anco non avete letto, / Quel che i savi han trovato ultimamente, / Speculando col semplice intelletto / Sopra la sorte dell'umana gente, / Che d'Europa il civil presente stato / Debbe ancor primitivo esser chiamato. // E che quei che selvaggi il volgo appella / Che nei più caldi e nei più freddi liti / Ignudi al sole, al vento, alla procella, / E sol di tetto natural forniti, / Contenti son, da poi che la mammella / Lasciâr, d'erbe e di vermi esser nutriti, / Temon l'aure e le frondi, e che disciolta / Dal sol non caggia la celeste volta; // Non vita naturale e primitiva / Menan, come fin qui furon creduti, / Ma per corruzion sì difettiva, / Da una perfetta civiltà caduti, / Nella qual come in propria ed in nativa / I padri dei lor padri eran vissuti: / Perchè stato sì reo come il selvaggio / Estimar natural non è da saggio)

[8] The application of this paradox is an example of the author using antiphrasis to actually vindicate Rousseau's principles. Cf. also Liana Cellerino, *Tecniche ed etica del paradosso. Studio sui Paralipomeni di Leopardi* (Cosenza: Lerici, 1980), 114.

cf. *infra*) at its origins. If one grants these premises about humankind's original state, it is impossible to expect humankind's history to have a predestined or certain development. Quite the contrary, Leopardi's conclusions are inevitable: our civilisation is nothing but the accidental result of the clash of material and inescapable forces.[9] In the *Paralipomeni* these ideas are expressed with bitter irony by the poet, as we can see in octaves 6-8.[10] These stanzas are based on another theory Leopardi had always tried to disprove: the idea that nature is devoted to the well-being of living things. The poet opposes the assumption that nature revolves around humans, or that it was purposefully created for them to exploit in the interest of progress. Leopardi's polemic is aimed at those who obtusely refuse to see the truth, seeking refuge in the reassuring promise of an imminent golden era, full of progress and wealth (octave 7): this is nothing but an attempt to

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[9] Regarding this topic, cf. also the pages Leopardi wrote in *Zibaldone* in August 1821, more specifically 1477 and the following. The edition of reference is Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, eds. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013) (from now on shortened as *Zib.*).

[10] Leopardi, *War*, 62: "it being impossible that nature, always concerned with the welfare of the animals and above all of man, who it seems we all agree is her principal work, should have destined to man, as if appropriate, required, and adapted to him, a life so wretched and so harsh that he is frightened at the very thought of it. / Nor does it seem possible for the true and perfect state of man to be at the end of as long a road as our species seems forced to tread before becoming civilized, where a hundred years are a day as far as results are concerned: so slow is his progress on those paths which lead him from the trees to civilization. / Because it would have been unjust and cruel and by no means befitting, for as many human beings as had to be born and die before civilization was attained to have been predestined to unhappiness, not through any vice or guilt of their own, but innocently, through original disposition and their natural fate." (Non potendo mai star che la natura, / Che al ben degli animali è sempre intenta, / E più dell'uom, che principal fattura / Esser di quella par che si consenta / Da tutti noi, sì povera e sì dura / Vita, ove pur pensando ei si sgomenta, / Come propria e richiesta e conformata / Abbia al genere uman determinata. // Nè manco sembra che possibil sia / Che lo stato dell'uom vero e perfetto / Sia posto in capo di sì lunga via / Quanta a farsi civile appar costretto / Il gener nostro a misurare in pria, / U' son cent'anni un dì quanto all'effetto: / Sì lento è il suo cammin per quelle strade / Che il conducon dal bosco a civiltade. // Perchè ingiusto e crudel sarebbe stato, / Nè per modo nessun conveniente, / Che all'infelicità predestinato, / Non per suo vizio e colpa, anzi innocente, / Per ordin primo e natural suo fate, / Fosse un numero tal d'umana gente, / Quanta nascer convenne e che morisse / Prima che a civiltà si pervenisse).

escape reality where human beings, though innocent and naïve, cannot avoid their destiny of misery (octave 8).[11]

In octaves 9-10, the poet draws the first conclusions from the theory he had sarcastically explained in the previous verses.[12] First of all, that uncivilised and feral ways of living are here considered to be corrupted and not natural: it is a state in which the savages have become spoiled, betraying their own destiny, and they have inevitably fallen from their original state of perfection. Furthermore, as providentialism states, it is no less than divine providence that has bestowed this privileged position upon mankind. Therefore, to avoid blasphemy, it is necessary to acknowledge that humankind was born civilised and only became barbaric afterwards: it was imperative to promote the idea of a perfectly civilised original state in order to avoid the risk of being seen as accusing the divine of brutality or injustice. This is a truly beautiful conclusion (Leopardi's sarcasm is at its best in this part of the poem), but rather unusual and somewhat peculiar: in fact, it is the result of an *a priori* reasoning, "forma di ragionar diritta e sana" (a healthy and straight form of reasoning), which automatically proves any other logic worthless, since it shapes facts and arguments for the sole purpose of supporting a principle which is not supposed to be doubted in the first place. In Leopardi's view, the *a priori* reasoning was the very epitome of the utter intellectual confusion of eighteenth-century culture. In

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[11] This idea is already present in some passages of the *Zibaldone*: cf. the entries 2232-36, written in December 1821. In addition, the end of the *Inno ai Patriarchi* (*Hymn to the Patriarchs*; 1822) is remarkable: the poet, ironically brings up the extraordinary example of the Californians, a population still living in the golden age, therefore proving the original innocence of humankind.

[12] Leopardi, *War*, 62-63: "Consequently it is believed that the rough and savage life is corruption, not the natural state, and that insulting his destiny man falls here from a great height, I mean from the civilized level, where divine wisdom was careful to place him: because if we don't want to outrage heaven, he is born civilized and later on becomes savage. / This conclusion, which however nice will seem to you unusual and strange, derives from no other source but that straight-forward and healthy form of reasoning which in the schools is still called a priori, beside which every other nowadays appears vain, which poses as certain some principle and bends and arranges everything else to fit it." (Resta che il viver zotico e ferine / Corruzion si creda e non natura, / E che ingiuria facendo al suo destino / Caggia quivi il mortal da grande altura; / Dico dal civil grado, ove il divino / Senno avea di locarlo avuto cura: / Perchè se al ciel non vogliam fare oltraggio, / Civile ei nasce, e poi divien selvaggio. // Questa conclusion che, ancor che bella, / Parravvi alquanto inusitata e strana, / Non d'altronde provien se non da quella / Forma di ragionar diritta e sana Ch'a priori in iscola ancora s'appella, / Appo cui ciascun'altra oggi par vana, / La qual per certo alcun principio pone, / E tutto l'altro a quel piega e compone).

the case of spiritualism and providentialism in particular, he points out the custom of bending reality so it can fit in with predetermined theories, as well as with a baffling mix of reactionary tendencies and dreams of progress. Therefore, the conclusion he draws in octave 11 is certainly an *a priori* one, albeit presented with the aggressive irony typical to this part of the canto.[13] The providentialism in this notion of history gives nature an essentially motherly role: its only purpose is humankind's happiness. This is because providentialism is widely based on the dogma of teleological eudemonism. Leopardi then renews his polemic on a political level by describing the uniformity of De Maistre's ideas and those of the 'new believers', labelling those new ideologies as small-minded 'apriorism'. He shows how arbitrarily assigning the role of protector and facilitator of humankind's happiness to nature has led to abnormal conclusions, which the poet submits to a grotesque parodic process in order to highlight the lack of logic in the arguments of the opposite party. For example, according to De Maistre's theory of original perfection, institutions, as well as language, precede humankind, for their origins are found beyond it, and they are immutable in their perfection ("the city came before the citizen"). On the subject of the New World, for instance, De Maistre had given his opinion in the discussion on whether to recognise the United States as a democratic republic or not. The American example was dangerous, because it could serve as proof of the possibility of a new political system, created and instituted entirely by a new community of citizens. This was clearly inconceivable in De Maistre's view. The degeneration of American savages was another key argument to confirm humankind's utter helplessness when faced with divine designs: their ability to act is nullified by the divine, which supersedes everything else.

Let us go back to the *Paralipomeni*. As octave 12 begins, Leopardi's own view begins to emerge. The poet is now focused on refuting the arguments he had introduced in the previous verses, and this coincides with a breakthrough in the quality of the narration. Gone are the grotesque caricatures of the beginning which give way to the finely crafted exposition

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[13] Ibid., 63: "It is assumed for certain that Nature is always concerned with the well-being of the animals, that she loves them heartily as the good mother hen does with the chick she has under her wings: and it being evident that the life mortals lead in the woods is harsh and wicked in every respect, it is necessarily concluded in the name of logic that the city came before the citizen." (Per certo si suppon che intenta sia / Natura sempre al ben degli animali, / E che gli ami di cor, come la pia / Chioccia fa del pulcin ch'ha sotto l'ali: / E vedendosi al tutto acerba e ria / La vita esser che al bosco hanno i mortali. / Per forza si conchiude in buon latino, / Che la città fu pria del cittadino).

of his own materialistic and pessimistic philosophy. The poet calls on the power of his truth to expose the world's lies, and he does so with an energy and a literary tension which will reappear only in the *Ginestra*. Octaves 12 and 13 completely overturn the philosophy ironically stated in the earlier octaves,[14] unveiling a line of reasoning which carries to the extreme some opinions the poet had previously expressed mainly in *Zibaldone*.[15] If humans were free of preconceived notions, and if they were prepared to look upon the facts of the world rationally, according to the principles of the Enlightenment, they would easily understand that nature lacks any kind of compassion for its children. It is, on the contrary, their ancient enemy: here, the idea of nature as malevolent and indifferent towards human events comes back in Leopardi's work, as strongly and resolutely stated as it already was in *Zibaldone*, in the *Operette morali*'s *Dialogo della natura e un islandese* (*Moral Tales' Dialogue of Nature and an Icelander*), and as it will be affirmed in the *Ginestra*. Humans should easily perceive that nature's aim is certainly not the well-being of humankind. In fact, it is impossible to discern nature's true design. Beginning from these two premises, inspired by a "philosophy of nature," Leopardi comes to a conclusion seemingly oriented to a "social philosophy": should the circumstances just illustrated be proven true, then it would be possible to logically conclude that "the citizen came before the city." The poet overturns octave 11's content, and in so doing he emphasises that institutions are man's achievement, not some gift from above. Thus, Leopardi reintroduces a fundamental detail which De Maistre had ignored in his work, Rousseau's social pact. The poet strongly reasserts that society is nothing but a purely human construction, confirming his position *vis à vis*

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[14] Ibid., 62-63: "If minds were free and open to what facts and reason could teach and not inclined to one opinion more than another, if they were able to call Nature pitiless and deprived of whatsoever sort of kind feeling and ancient and principal executioner and enemy of her children, / or addressed to any end sooner than to what we call our good or evil, and to confess that the view of her purpose is removed from our mortal sight, and even the knowledge of whether or not she is truly freed of purpose, and if indeed she really has one, what it is, we would still say with every other age that the citizen came before the city." (Se libere le menti e preparate / Fossero a ciò che i fatti e la ragione / Sapessero insegnar, non inchinate / A questa più che a quella opinione, / Se natura chiamar d'ogni pietate / E di qual s'è cortese affezione / Sapesser priva, e de' suoi figli antica / E capital carnefice e nemica; // O se piuttosto ad ogni fin rivolta, / Che al nostro che diciamo o bene o male; / E confessar che de' suoi fini è tolta / La vista al riguardar nostro mortale, / Anzi il saper se non da fini sciolta / Sia veramente, e se ben v'abbia, e quale; / Diremmo ancor con ciascun'altra etade / Che il cittadin fu pria della cittade).

[15] Cf., for example, entries 4205-9, written in September 1826.

Rousseau's philosophy: the state of society and socialisation are not an integral part of man's natural condition, on the contrary, they indicate a definite detachment from the state of nature. Those same savages that were, for De Maistre, the symbol of humankind's decay, are actually the proof of nature's indifference and hostility towards her creatures: she has abandoned them at birth, leaving them alone on a perilous and most strenuous road to civilisation. According to Chiara Fenoglio, this is how the 'savages' became the emblem of a residual primeval humanity, which distinguishes itself from civilised Europe by what it lacks: savages are not privy to analytical and rational thought, nor are they aware of calculus or geometry. They are completely immersed in forms of "mythical thinking," where the world is said to be one where all living beings are in total harmony with nature. Moreover, they do not suffer from the diseases which affect the 'civilised ones', being as they are: "a cento doppi nel fisico più sani, forti, allegri d'aspetto, e certo nel morale e nell'interno felici, che non questi europei" (physically hundreds of times healthier, stronger, more cheerful in aspect, and certainly happier in terms of morale and inwardly, than are the Europeans; *Zib.*, 3660), whose nature "può […] esser corrotta, ma non corretta." (can […] be corrupted, but not corrected; *Zib.*, 293-94).[16]

The process of civilisation has condemned humankind to the impossibility of knowing nature. In fact, the ancient people, now wrongly considered as primitive and ignorant, were utterly unaware of the concept of reward or punishment in the afterlife. That is to say that they did not establish any connection between the social norms of civil life and the religious beliefs concerning the afterlife. Leopardi's anti-spiritualism is never in doubt: even in this poetic fantasy about a kingdom populated by mice, where the concepts of reward or punishment in the afterlife do not exist, it is clear that the poet refuses any theological or teleological extremism. Leopardi believes it is imperative to constantly reaffirm that society is based only on the virtues of human beings. It is born from the union of hard-working people, and it endures despite, or, even better, because of death looming over them. That is why the poet condemns his century's irrational faith in progress, and with it, all that contributes to its dissemination, including the press, literature and the social sciences of Count Leccafondi, who always had the progress of the mice's understanding at heart. However, the

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[16] The explicit connection between the progress of civilisation and the consequent deterioration of the body by unnatural causes had already been mentioned in the thoughts of August 17th: the Californians are healthier because they are not civilised, because they live in conditions that many see as similar to those there were/are in heaven. On this topic cf. Chiara Fenoglio, "'Cela n'est pas clair'. L'aldilà dei *Paralipomeni*," *Rivista internazionale di Studi Leopardiani* 5, (2005): 1-13.

Leopardi that we see in these *Paralipomeni* is not blindly denying progress: in fact, the poet repeatedly proves his understanding of the long, and almost inevitable, path that leads humans from the woods to civility, as well as to the establishment of social constructs, which are man's proudest creation. By stating these truths, Leopardi wishes not only to negate the providential idea of nature, but also the tacit theological allusion to a society that is nothing but a divine emanation, which was born perfect and had subsequently fallen because of the corruption of human beings. Thus progress is only refused as a concept when it carries the presumption of an optimistic development of history: humankind will succeed because divine providence generously bestows the gifts of language, society and civil institutions. Leopardi describes the journey from the inhospitable and wild woods to civilisation, and he narrates how the dealings of citizens create cities, and not vice-versa. The city is not the beginning of history, it follows it, and it is the product of specific—sometimes tragic—events. Octave 14 presides over the polemic against *a priori* philosophy, which asserts truths without actually proving them, and assigns reasons and explanations about what man is destined to according to what is convenient.[17] This stanza also works as an introduction of the new thematic unit which is at the centre of the second part of the digression. In fact, octaves 15 and 16 distinguish themselves as counterposed to the main philosophies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[18] The *a priori* philosophy Leopardi so disdains is

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[17] Leopardi, *War*, 63: "Philosophy is nothing but an art which, assigning the reasons for what man is resolved to believe about whatever issue, as best as she can fills the papers or the ears sometimes as a school, with more or less cleverness according to the capacity that the teacher or author happens to possess." (Non è filosofia se non un'arte / La qual di ciò che l'uomo è risoluto / Di creder circa a qualsivoglia parte, / Come meglio alla fin l'è conceduto, / Le ragioni assegnando empie le carte / E le orecchie talor per istituto, / Con più d'ingegno e men, giusta il potere / Che il maestro e l'auter si trova avere).

[18] Ibid., 63-64: "I mean that philosophy which reigns uncontested in our century and which with relatively little struggle had no less fortune in the other centuries, except in the one previous to this, when, if thought is whole I dare say, each faculty of ours progressed to those heights from which soon it must incline towards the bottom. / In that age, in spite of a hard struggle, another philosophy was seen to reign, before which our age, brave and prompt, drew back as soon as she became aware of what displeases her most and matters most: that the other was in substance bitter and wicked; not that she was really able on her own to prove false in her principles or the premises." (Quella filosofia dico che impera / Nel secol nostro senza guerra alcuna, / E che con guerra più e men leggera / Ebbe negli altri non minor fortuna, / Fuor nel prossimo a questo, ove, se intera / La mia mente oso dir, portò ciascuna / Facoltà nostra a quelle cime il passo /Onde tosto inchinar l'è forza al basso. // In

dominant in the current century. It is met everywhere with approval, an approval it had in fact also enjoyed in previous centuries. Only in the eighteenth century had society not bowed its head to authority, thus bringing knowledge to unparalleled heights. In that age a very different philosophy was dominant, that of the Enlightenment. The philosophy of the nineteenth century did not dare to walk down an essentially bitter and sad path, and lacked the means to negate the principles and premises of that line of thinking, and consequently gave in to the safety of believing in what was convenient. These octaves are to be read as a claim on the materialistic and enlightened doctrine of the eighteenth century, albeit without forgetting Leopardi's tendency to pessimism. In fact, the Enlightenment is a distressing philosophy which gives humans truth, but not happiness. This idea is strongly reiterated in the *Paralipomeni*. The poet is, by his own definition, a disciple of facts and reason, which are pivotal starting points of his thought, but also unwelcome concepts in the Restoration era. That is why Leopardi sees that era as a decline compared to the naturally pessimistic conclusions eighteenth century's materialism started to draw from the analysis of the relationship between human beings and nature.

In octave 17 Leopardi attempts a deeper analysis of the motivations that brought about his age's return to spiritualism.[19] The poet lays down a harsh psycho-sociological explanation for what was, to him, a philosophical degeneration: the refusal of the truth comes from within, it is a failure of the reasoning process and of the most basic cognitive mechanisms. One refuses to see the truth by cutting out all painful and troublesome aspects of the hermeneutical process, and continues to ignore them, in a downward spiral that ultimately leads to the assimilation of the lie. During the Enlightenment this lie was seen as an obstacle set up by authority, in order to impair humankind's autonomous power of judgement: it was a deliberate attempt

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quell'età, d'un'aspra guerra in onta, / Altra filosofia regnar fu vista, / A cui dinanzi valorosa e pronta / L'età nostra arretrossi appena avvista / Di ciò che più le spiace, e che più monta, / Esser quella in sostanza amara e trista; / Non che i principii in lei nè le premesse / Mostrar false da sè ben ben sapesse).

[19] Ibid., 64: "But whether or not these were proved to be false or true, misshapen or beautiful, their consequences were not those which man has decreed to believe in firmly and will believe in firmly as long as the stars move from east to west through their usual orbit: because it seems that for his own peace he needs such a faith in them, whether truth or dreams." (Ma false o vere, ma disformi o belle / Esser queste si fosse o no mostrato, / Le conseguenze lor non eran quelle / Che l'uom d'aver per ferme ha decretato, / E che per ferme avrà fin che le stelle / D'orto in occaso andran pel cerchio usato; / Perchè tal fede in tali o veri o sogni / Per sua quiete par che gli bisogni).

to transfigure human ambitions and overlay reality with them. Even if the premises of octave 16 ever came true, their outcome would surely not be what humans have proclaimed as forever set: it seems as if they need the serenity provided by the reassuring principles of the *a priori* philosophy, be they true or false. This self-deceiving mechanism then becomes history. Restoration intellectuals refuse reality and truth because it is too demanding and too painful to endure. In octave 18 the polemic shifts its focus from apriorism to innatism, a common controversial subject during the Enlightenment.[20] For Leopardi, innate ideas are nothing more than an unfortunate ancestral habit that has led to humankind's loss of critical ability and the use of reason. The theme of innatism as a habit is continued in octaves 19 and 20.[21] From these stanzas we can infer what free and knowledgeable minds could empirically learn from facts and reason. According to Leopardi, learning is above all a deductive process which recognises the flaws in time honoured beliefs. The greatest obstacle on the path of knowledge is prejudice. By eliminating it, humans can go back to the original state of nature, naïve and ignorant but also prone to understanding the world in an uncontaminated, uncorrupted way. Humans have abandoned all scientific questioning, submitting to conformity rather

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[20] Ibid.: "And furthermore, because for a long time his mind has been used to such a faith, and every faith to which the mind is accustomed seems to be produced by an innate conscience: for as habit is very easily exchanged with nature, so it easily happens that people take their habit for reason." (Ed ancor più, perchè da lunga pezza / È la sua mente a cotal fede usata, / Ed ogni fede a che sia quella avvezza / Prodotta par da coscienza innata: / Che come suol con grande agevolezza / l'usanza con natura esser cangiata, / Così vien facilmente alle persone / Presa l'usanza lor per la ragione)

[21] Ibid.: "And I believe that learning most of the time is nothing else, if one were to consider it seriously, but the perception of foolish beliefs contracted by the mind from carrying them around a long time and the painful recovery of the knowledge, which age took away from us, of the child, who indeed neither knows nor sees more than we but does not believe that he sees or knows. / But in fact at once judge every thought to be absurd if it is out of the ordinary, and we don't consider that the world and truth could be an absurdity to our frail intellect: we cry mystery because every human concept still turns out to be a mystery, yet we want to fashion the mysteries and the absurdities within our brain as we please." (Ed imparar cred'io che le più volte / Altro non sia, se ben vi si guardasse, / Che un avvedersi di credenze stolte / Che per lungo portar l'alma contrasse, / E del fanciullo racquistar con molte / Cure il saper ch'a noi l'età sottrasse; / Il qual già più di noi non sa nè vede, / Ma di veder nè di saper non crede. // Ma noi, s'è fuor dell'uso, ogni pensiero / Assurdo giudichiam tosto in effetto, / Nè pensiam ch'un assurdo il mondo e il vero / Esser potrebbe al fral nostro intelletto: / E mistero gridiam, perch'a mistero / Riesce ancor qualunque uman concetto; / Ma i misteri e gli assurdi entro il cervello / Vogliam foggiarci come a noi par bello).

than reason, preferring to conveniently accept the presence of mysteries rather than face the distressing reality of true understanding.

Octaves 21 and 22 are a direct call to the readers, and the poet almost apologises for his long digression, but also points out that he never lost sight of his original subject.[22] Leopardi then returns to the tale of the mice, and he recalls the last verse of the very first octave, where he had mentioned a possible argument against him: he could have been called a liar and a fool for representing the facts of the mouse's kingdom as similar to our own (cf. above). However, after such a long and varied digression, the reader surely must understand that the association between the dealings of ancient mice and modern events is neither foolish nor false: the poet has deployed a robust philosophy in support of his own work! Our state truly is ancient and primitive, and not only ours: the state of each animal is just as ancient and primitive as humankind's, and this situation puts all living beings, animals and humans, ancient and modern, on the same level. Otherwise, it would be unjust if nature had condemned only beasts to a scant life devoid of pleasure and full of pain. With this brilliantly ironic excuse, Leopardi is justified in associating humans to animals: more than depicting them as companions enduring the misery nature has inflicted upon them (as he has already done, and will do much more radically in the *Ginestra*), the poet overturns this perspective and ironically opposes the present state of society, as well as what French spiritualists viewed as its rosy and perfectible future. The poet exploits one of the cracks in the opposite side's theory, and uses antiphrasis to slowly demolish it from the inside. In fact, by bringing animals to the same level as humankind, he lowers the latter to their level, implying that no privileges were ever accorded to the human species. It is in octave 23

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[22] Ibid., 54-64: "Now, my readers, getting down to the point at which, through a long and tortuous path always intending, I have arrived, you can see by this time how it happens that the very ancient relatives of the mice are portrayed in your imagination just like the people of today, not through deception or foolishness on my part, / but due to the fact that our state, not just of men but of every animal that lives anywhere in the air or on the earth, is truly ancient and primitive. Because it would be unjust for the infinite multitude of the animals to be condemned by their very nature to a life deprived of almost every pleasure and full of woe." (Or, leggitori miei, scendendo al punto / Al qual per lunga e tortuosa via / Sempre pure intendendo, ecco son giunte, / Potete ormai veder che non per mia / Frode e sciocchezza avvien che tali appunte / Si pingan nella vostra fantasia / De' topi gli antichissimi parenti / Quali i popoli son che abbiam presenti: // Ma procede da ciò, che il nostro stato / Antico è veramente e primitivo / Non degli uomini sol, ma in ogni lato / D'ogni animal che in aria e in terra è vivo, / Perchè ingiusto saria che condannato / Fosse di sua natura a un viver privo / Quasi d'ogni contento e pien di mali / L'interminato stuol degli animali).

that the reader discovers all the weak points of spiritualism and providentialism.[23] Through a corollary that autonomously derives from the earlier stanzas, the poet states that *all* species originally lived in a civilised state, but that they then fell into misery, due to their actions: it is certainly not God's fault if the living face these conditions of misery and anguish, since He had originally provided them with a state of well-being. If it seems to us that the mouse's life is filled with fear and sadness, it is its fault, the cause of its own corruption (octaves 24 and 25).[24] Nature certainly did not condemn them to the misery they endure, nor did it cause their diaspora. The theses that the poet opposes are here negated and ridiculed at the very moment they are exposed and attributed to such an outdated representative. In these verses, the difference between mice and humans is almost completely lifted, evidence that the recipients of Leopardi's gritty irony are indeed his fellow human beings.

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[23] Ibid., 65: "Consequently all of their species came into the world civilized, each one according to its natural degree, and all of them, through their own fault, fell to the bottom from such a fortunate state, and now they are wretched. And heaven, which had provided well for their needs, has no fault in their miserable state." (Per tanto in civiltà, data secondo / Il grado naturale a ciascheduna, / Tutte le specie lor vennero al mondo, / E tutte poscia da cotal fortuna / Per lor proprio fallir caddero in fondo, / E infelici son or; nè causa alcuna / Ha il ciel però dell'esser lor sì triste, / Il qual bene al bisogno avea provvisto).

[24] Ibid.: "If the life of the little mouse, who looking around is never sure, who flees and at every quiver is struck with horror, appears to us full of anguish and fear, we must suppose that the misery which the mouse is suffering nowadays, and to which perhaps he was led in part by the events these papers narrate, is corruption and not his natural state. / And perhaps in that time began the dispersion of his race, which, having lost its original and proper home, has been made to wander over the earth, like the Jewish people, who, in exile and scattered, find it hard to adjust to hundreds of places, and remember the temple of Hierosolyma and the fields of Palestine and weep." (E se colma d'angoscia e di paura / Del topolin la vita ci apparisce, / Il qual mirando mai non s'assicura, / Fugge e per ogni crollo inorridisce, / Corruzion si creda e non natura / La miseria che il topo oggi patisce, / A cui forse il menâr quei casì in parte / Che seguitando narran queste carte. // E la dispersion della sua schiatta / Ebbe forse d'allor cominciamento; / La qual raminga in sulla terra è fatta, / Perduto il primo e proprio alloggiamento, / Come il popol giudeo, che mal s'adatta, / Esule, sparso, a cento sedi e cento, / E di Solima il tempio e le campagne / Di Palestina si rammenta e piagne).

Leopardi and the Animals' Avernus

The criticism of the Restoration theories, which began in the fourth canto, starts anew when the distance between mice and humans is eliminated also at the 'visual' level: this occurs at the end of the *Paralipomeni*, with the entrance into the brute's Avernus and the appearance of the theme of death. For instance, in the seventh canto, the intrusion of the only human character, Daedalus, coincides with a renewal of the attack on spiritualistic philosophies. In octave 10 Leopardi speaks of Daedalus' "desire" to look for the animals' hell, which he thought was immortal, for common sense deemed humans' hell immortal as well. It is through Daedalus' words (which, thanks to antiphrasis, the poet uses to express some of his thoughts) that Leopardi tackles faith in the immortality of the soul: the very foundation of spiritualistic philosophy is destroyed through a series of paradoxical arguments over the course of six octaves (VII.11-16, see *infra*). Starting from octave VII.10[25] it is possible to see how the process of disproving and ridiculing spiritualistic arguments works. Leopardi shapes Daedalus' speech in such a way that the truth (Leopardi's real belief) and the parody of the spiritualistic thesis are no longer distinguishable. Leopardi initially applies the theory of the soul's immortality to all living beings, which means that the concepts of the afterlife now concern them too: this is how, through Daedalus' words, the poet uses his adversaries' own arguments against them. However, this strategy, which we could call *figure of negation*[26] ("it is not *I* who says so, but the orthodox doctrine itself," a typical technique of Enlightenment writing), is more original since Leopardi supports a thesis that is opposed to both the spiritualists' and Daedalus': the distance between the ironic negation ("it is not *I*") and its literal meaning (there is no such thing as a soul) is now doubled. Therefore, Leopardi bends the structure of this derisive literary reasoning to better suit his needs: by employing

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[25] Ibid., 92: "he was, as to his fellow-men, as to companions, always courteous in every way possible. But after he had thus learned the languages of many kind of animals from many places and hence understood the most hidden qualities of the weakest and of the strongest, a desire which had pursued him for many years had begun to grow in his heart." (Come a simili suoi, come a consorti / Sempre in ciò che poteva era cortese. / Ma dopo aver così di molte sorti / E città d'animai le lingue apprese, / E quinci de' più frali e de' più forti / Le più riposte qualitadi intese, / Un desiderio in cor gli era spuntato / Che l'avea per molti anni esercitato).

[26] As already suggested by Franco Brioschi, "Misantropia, satira, sarcasmo nei *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia*," in *Il riso leopardiano. Comico, satira, parodia*, Atti del IX Convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani, Recanati 18-22 settembre 1995 (Florence: Olschki, 1998), 549.

Daedalus' words to use his adversaries' own arguments against them (those arguments advocating the immortality of the soul, now applied to all living beings), he skilfully upholds a thesis that opposes both Daedalus and his adversaries. Therefore, Daedalus' speech is to be interpreted as the opposite of what it actually appears to be: Daedalus' heresy proves to be a direct consequence of his dogma. The irony only becomes more pronounced as the poem continues (octaves 11 and 12).[27] It is simply intellectual curiosity that draws Daedalus to look for the underworld, certainly not the canonical "fatal errand" (fatale andare) and this completely reverses the concept of the catabasis. On a second level, the repetition of "eternal" as well as the use of "common sense" (comun senso) is an antiphrasis to indicate the poet's disagreement with these ideas. Any man who is not willing to lie to himself recognises that there is a difference between men and animals, but it is a quantitative difference ("from less to more" [da meno a più]), not a qualitative one. Once it is established that one's substance is spiritual ("rejects the matter" [rigetta la materia]), it would be absurd to state that the other's is material ("the other admits to it" [l'altra l'ammetta]). Daedalus refuses any substantial or qualitative difference between humankind and beasts and he logically concludes that, what is conceded to one must be applied to the other as well, especially on the subject of the fundamental questions on mortality or immortality of the soul. The materialistic purpose of the poet becomes clear in these verses, as he has quietly built up to this moment through Daedalus' paradoxes, which he used as a "subterranean" platform from which to explain his ideas (once again taking inspiration from

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[27] Leopardi, *War*, 92: "A compelling desire to find, by going all over the world, through some outward sign the underworld of the animals, as others searching discovered ours ; that is to say, that place where after death lived eternally the ego of the animals, which seemed to him demonstrated by common sense to be eternal like ours / Because, he said, whoever doesn't want to close his eyes to the sun or deny his conscience and lie to himself must be certain that from the intelligence of the beasts to that of human progeny the difference is of from less to more, not of the sort that if one rejects the matter, the other admits it." (Un desiderio di dovere, andando / Per tutto l'orbe, a qualche segno esterno, / Come il nostro scoprire altri cercando, / Degli animali ritrovar l'inferno, / Cioè quel loco ove al morir passando / Vivesse l'io degli animali eterno, / Il qual ch'eterno fosse al par del nostro / Dal comun senso gli parea dimostro. // Perchè dicea, chiunque gli occhi al sole / Chiudere, o rinnegar la coscienza, / Ed a sè stesso in sè mentir non vuole, / Certo esser dee che dalla intelligenza / De' bruti a quella dell'umana prole / È qual da meno a più la differenza, / Non di genere tal che se rigetta / La materia un di lor, l'altro l'ammetta).

Rousseau).[28] Using a syllogism made up of a series of rapid antitheses, Daedalus explains in detail that the conclusions can be logically deduced from clear signs previously left in the text. The irrefutable starting point is the non-substantial difference between humans and animals: if animals are to be considered as beings of a material nature, then humans also should be. The only way to avoid a logical contradiction is to extend the principle of immortality to animals also (octave 13).[29] If reason shows that "the ego of the mouse […], or of the dog, or of any other mortal who clearly feels and thinks" (L'io del topo, del can, d'altro mortale, / Che senta e pensi manifestamente)—a remarkable *climax*—that is, the inner self of any being with awareness of its feelings, is nothing but matter, there is no reason why humans' inner self should not also be anything but matter. Furthermore, if we refuse the concept that animals have cognitive abilities, then it is only fair to question humans' abilities as well. Leopardi further complicates Daedalus' thinking by developing the premises of earlier lines of reasoning and readjusting their paradoxes. The polemic is now openly against spiritualism and apriorism (octaves 14 and 16).[30] It seems to the poet that

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[28] Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (Amsterdam: Marc Michel Rey, 1755), 31. This *Discours* contains, among other things, a possible source for the verse "è qual da meno a più la differenza": ("the difference is from less to more") "l'Homme ne diffère à cet égard de la bête que du plus au moins" (man does not differ in this regard from the animal than from more to less). The translation is mine.

[29] Leopardi, *War*, 92: "For certainly if I am allowed by right reasoning to consider the ego of the mouse a flimsy thing, or of the dog, or of any other mortal who clearly feels and thinks, I don't see why ours may not be just like these; and if the mouse or the dog doesn't really think or feel, I am allowed to doubt about my own feeling and thinking." (Che certo s'estimar materia frale / Dalla retta ragion mi si consente / L'io del topo, del can, d'altro mortale, / Che senta e pensi manifestamente, / Perchè non possa il nostro esser cotale /Non veggo: e se non pensa inver nè sente / Il topo e il can, di dubitar concesso / M'è del sentire e del pensar mio stesso).

[30] Ibid.: "He spoke in that manner. But it seems to me that two things, which it is nice to put together, prove more than anything else and almost as if it were engraved that the human mind believes what it has established as certain to such a degree that reason, force, or party can't dissuade it from that belief: one, that while without any doubt everyone assents to the dogma of Copernicus, / all the nations and schools are not, however, any less certain and persuaded that man, in short, without peers at his side sits as lord of the created mass, nor are the ancient fables, which picture the gods participating in our life and customs out of love for us, repeated in a less jocular and candid manner. / Two, that he who proceeds to inquire into the mysterious essence of the human mind is seen for the most part to leave aside completely, with impudent dissimulation and dishonesty, the question of the animals, as if it were alien to his own, and he doesn't care at all to define his own in such a way that it is

the human brain strongly believes only what it has chosen to believe, without any possibility of changing this opinion—"what it has established as certain" (ciò che d'aver per fermo ha stabilito): the verb "to establish" epitomises the sarcasm in the sentence, as it indicates that truth is a choice based on pre-established beliefs rather than an examination of the facts: it is an *a priori* truth. Accordingly, what has been said was irrefutably proven by two examples which should be considered together. First, despite the heliocentric theory being universally approved and recognised as true, both public opinion and philosophical schools of thought are still holding onto the immovable belief that humans are lords of this world, and are unequivocally at its centre. Additionally, human beings are still naively repeating and believing the "ancient fables" (antiche fole) according to which the gods lovingly take care of them, of their customs and their state of being. Here, criticism is focused on the anthropocentric perception of the world, on the refusal to fully comprehend Copernicus' work. The criticism of anthropocentrism is a recurring theme in Leopardi's work, from the *Operette morali* to *La ginestra* (vv. 154-201), and so is the sarcasm regarding the convention of giving anthropomorphic forms to the divine. In this octave, the attack seems to lack a specific reference, giving the impression of a broader historic and "geographical" allusion.

The other example, according to Leopardi, of the power of prejudice, is the one concerning modern philosophy. Modern philosophy is too fixated on exploring the mysterious essence of the human mind (which is an ironic hyperbole: Leopardi knows all too well that the arcane and the transcendental can never be understood by the human brain, which is completely material), and it deliberately and faultily dismisses the question of the animal intellect. The sensualist theories had originally begun to address it, but it was ultimately set aside by idealism and spiritualism.

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absurd to the other." (Così dicea. Ma che l'uman cervello / Ciò che d'aver per fermo ha stabilito / Creda talmente che dal creder quello / Nol rimova ragion, forza e partito, / Due cose, parmi, che accoppiare è bello, / Mostran quant'altra mai quasi scolpito: / L'una, che poi che senza dubbio alcuno / Di Copernico il dogma approva ognuno, // Non però fermi e persuasi manco / Sono i popoli tutti e son le scole, / Che l'uomo, in somma, senza uguali al fianco / Segga signor della creata mole, / Nè con modo men lepido e men franco / Si ripetono ancor le antiche fole, / Che fan dell'esser nostro e de' costumi / Per nostro amor partecipare i numi. // L'altra, che quei che dell'umana mente / L'arcana essenza a ricercar procede, / La question delle bestie interamente / Lasciar da banda per lo più si vede / Quasi aliena alla sua, con impudente / Dissimulazione e mala fede, / E conchiuder la sua per modo tale, / Ch'all'altra assurdo sia, nulla gli cale).

Therefore, the "questione delle bestie" (matter of the beasts; the medieval Italian "questione" refers to a very specific method of problem solving) is treated as if it were not part of the philosophical analysis. In this part of the poem, the lexicon and the style become much more direct, showing how much Leopardi cared for this subject, and how great his frustration was in seeing such an important theme being discarded in this fashion. Those who ignore the fact that certain theories regarding human intelligence become absurd concepts when applied to animal intelligence are the same who too often give up on objectivity and intellectual honesty.

Conclusions

The final examination of the afterlife and the soul carries Leopardi's arguments to the extreme by pulling together his original philosophical positions. For instance, in the eighth canto, the poet ironically declares that the purpose of primitive funeral rites is without a doubt the "universal consenso" ("the universal consent" of *Paralipomeni*, VIII.15: a reference to one of French spiritualism's theories) of "the most uncouth and most feeble minded peoples," (d'ogni popol più insulso e più milenso) and of every "sluggish and uncultured mind" (d'ogni mente infingarda e inerudita). This is the same universal consent that the French philosophers of the Restoration would produce to demonstrate on one side the certainty of the afterlife and on the other the immortality of the soul. They do not want to admit that their corrupted imagination (which is praised nonetheless!) cannot imagine what death is. The Avernus of the brutes is therefore the evidence of Leopardi's materialism and anti-transcendentalism. In the midst of the huge island that forms the orderly afterlife destination of every species of animal, including humans, one can feel with clarity both the triumph of death and a sense of ruin. Leopardi's spirited denigration of spiritualism reaches its climax in this powerful and macabre poem, which undermines the false current dogmas with its vision of the mortality of all that exists. According to Leopardi, De Maistre and Larnennais (among others) had effectively killed reason in the name of "intellectual conscience" and "universal consent," which was consistently employed to confront the fundamental human questions in the absence of a logical process. The poet convincingly rejected the very notion of a "universal consent," which would have rendered acceptable the idea that human behaviour was not guided by consciousness, with all its tragic consequences. In the *Ginestra*, Leopardi will denounce the unacceptability of an existence where reason must submit to irrationality. Humanity's development rests on the eradication of ancestral beliefs and prejudices, this is the meaning of the *Paralipomeni*'s fourth canto's

digression; it is an acknowledgement and a call to all humans to commit themselves to take action.[31] With the notion of a society born in spite of, and even against Nature, Leopardi outlines the path that will lead him, philosophically, to the *Ginestra*. There, Leopardi will openly attack spiritualism, starting from the emblematic opening epigraph from the Gospel of Saint John: "And men loved darkness rather than light."[32]

Lorenzo Geri describes this verse as nothing but an objurgation of all who refused the materialism of the Enlightenment, preferring to it a spiritualistic interpretation of historical development.[33] The poet quotes John as a provocation: the light is that of the Enlightenment, of a reason that does not bring happiness but unveils the truth, a light that is paradoxically rejected in favour of the darkness of a providential spiritualism. Leopardi mocks religious superstitions, persuaded as he is that irrationalism is supremely dangerous. This explains the problematic relation Leopardi had with Catholic conservatives, guilty of championing an afterlife of rewards and punishments which had nothing to share with the classical idea of the Avernus, with its titanic acceptance of death. Leopardi's atheism put Nature, not God, at the centre of the Universe, while humankind, at the mercy of a powerful and unpredictable force, could only accept, heroically, its fate. Thus, in *Ginestra* (vv. 78-86):

> Così ti spiacque il vero
> dell'aspra sorte e del depresso loco
> che natura ci diè. Per questo il tergo
> vigliaccamente rivolgesti al *lume*
> *che il fe palese*: e, fuggitivo, appelli
> civil chi lui segue, e solo
> magnanimo colui
> che se schernendo e gli altri, astuto o folle,
> fin sopra gli astri il mortal grado estolle.[34]

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[31] Cf. also Gennaro Savarese, *L'eremita osservatore,* 92.

[32] "E gli uomini vollero piuttosto le tenebre che la luce." John 16:19

[33] Lorenzo Geri, "La prospettiva apocalittica nella polemica di Leopardi contro lo spiritualismo," in *Apocalissi e letteratura*, ed. Ida De Michelis (Rome: Bulzoni 2005), 144, 153.

[34] "The truth about the bitter fate / And miserable condition nature handed us / Made you unhappy. So you turned your backs / Like cowards on the light that made it clear. / And while you run from it, / You call the man you follows it a coward, / And a great spirit only him / Who, wise or foolish, fooling himself or others, / Extols human nature above the stars." Cf. Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans. by Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 286-309.

The light of the Enlightenment subverts John's words.[35] In accepting its presence and necessity, humanity will reject both the irrationality of religion, with its providential structure supporting the order of the cosmos, as well as the modern myth of progress.

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[35] By reversing the Christian and spiritualistic concept of human nature, Leopardi can reiterate man's innocence. Cf. *La Ginestra*, vv. 87-97 and vv. 111-25.

PART V

ON FACULTIES OF THE MIND AND BODY

Chapter Eleven

"I Can't Get No Satisfaction": Giacomo Leopardi's Theory of Pleasure

Alessandro Carrera

Se volete vederci felici, dateci un bel dispiacere.
(If you want to make us happy, give us a good displeasure.)
Neapolitan saying

Leopardian Consciousness as a Category of the Spirit

Giacomo Leopardi's "theory of pleasure" was his first and boldest attempt as a young and largely self-taught thinker to influence the philosophy of his time. Leopardi's reflections on the nature of pleasure do not constitute a fully formed philosophical edifice, but they make up in power of insight what they lack in systematic completeness. Part phenomenological observations and part intuitive assumptions, Leopardi's scattered notes in *Zibaldone* read like an exercise in metaphysical psychology, which he will subsequently crystallize in his *Canti* (*Poems*) and *Operette morali* (*Moral Tales*). Yet Leopardi's musings on happiness and pleasure have a deep significance on their own terms. They are in fact one of the main traits connecting their author to our current understanding of the knot that ties together desire, pleasure, and satisfaction—or the lack of it.

Leopardi is not unknown outside of Italy. He never was. In spite of Italian lamentations about the lack of recognition abroad of the "greatest Italian poet after Dante" (or after Dante and Petrarch, or after Dante together with Petrarch and Tasso, depending on who keeps the score), the list of European and English-speaking writers and thinkers who were cognizant of him in the nineteenth century, when very few works of his were available in translation, is quite impressive. Yet in the absence of a canonical translation (several exist, but until recently none took hold), the cultural capital he accumulated could not trickle down to the common reader. In

1998, Joseph Tusiani did a remarkable translation of the complete *Canti*. It was published in Italy and English-speaking tourists could buy it in Recanati's bookstores, but that was hardly the circulation it deserved. It is also likely that Tusiani's craftily chiselled English, although exceptionally faithful to Leopardi's Italian, might have sounded too "Italianate" to contemporary English and American ears. That we have now Galassi's limpid and reliable translation of *Canti* and Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino's astounding English edition of *Zibaldone* is indeed one of the main reasons why we can speak of our poet in English and without the usual feeling that we are losing too much when we discuss Leopardi in a language different from his own.[1]

Our hope is that these two works will be followed by new translations of the *Operette morali* and *Pensieri* (*Reflections*). The groundbreaking *Discorso sopra lo stato presente dei costumi degl'Italiani* (*Discourse on the present state of the customs of Italians*) will have to take its place, eventually, side by side with the recently translated *Discorso di un italiano intorno alla poesia romantica* (*Discourse of an Italian on Romantic Poetry*).[2] For the time being, it is just a pleasure (pun intended) that one can write on Leopardi and quote from *Zibaldone* without relying on partial or makeshift translations.

The word "*piacere*" appears in *Zibaldone* at a time when Leopardi did not date every entry, as he would do more or less regularly beginning with January 1820. The first occurrence dates back to 1817 or perhaps the first months of 1818 when the author was nineteen years old: "The most solid pleasure of this life is the vain pleasure of illusions" (*Zib.*, 51). In one single sentence, Leopardi introduces the binary, oxymoronic opposition that will shape his philosophy: the most certain pleasure is also the most insubstantial one; the most consistent pleasure lies in taking pleasure in something that is not consistent at all.

What Leopardi means by "illusion" contains a galaxy of meanings in need of being organised into solar systems. Classical mythology, which gave Western poetry countless images and tropes, had already become a lost illusion by the beginning of the nineteenth century. In Foscolo's *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (*The Last letters of Jacopo Ortis*; 1802) the illusion

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[1] All the quotes from *Canti* and *Zibaldone* are from these editions: Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans. Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2010), and Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino, trans. Kathleen Baldwin et al. (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2013).

[2] Giacomo Leopardi, *Discourse of an Italian on Romantic Poetry*, trans. Gabrielle Sims and Fabio A. Camilletti, in Fabio A. Camilletti, *Classicism and Romanticism in Italian Literature* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013), 113-74.

theme is in part related to mythological references that were then disappearing from modern verse—a theme that runs from Schiller's *The Gods of Greece* (1788) to Vincenzo Monti's *Sermone sulla mitologia* (*Sermon on Mythology*; 1825). Greek and Roman history, with its epic battles and awe-inspiring tales of courage and honour, is an illusion, because the values it embodied (virtue, valour, love for one's homeland, disregard for personal safety, and patriotic hatred toward the enemy) are now on the wane in the petty, reactionary, post-Napoleonic Restoration world that Leopardi inhabits. Political ideologies and faith in scientific and social progress are illusions too, but they are modern illusions subject to the whims of fashion, and as such could never aspire to the dignity that classical values once possessed.

Leopardi's absolute faith in the moral perfection of classical antiquity was the result of a hyper-literary, old-fashioned, and quite pedantic education. We should not overlook, however, the point of view Leopardi adopts. Unlike modern illusions, which cannot stand the test of rational criticism, classical illusions were not lessened by reason. What's more, they *gave pleasure*. They *created joy* and made life more bearable for those who embraced them. Hence, what was the nature of the joy they gave, and how can we recreate that joy in our times of destitute ideals? These questions, among others, prompted Leopardi to envision a theory of pleasure.[3]

The first long entry on the topic takes up pages 165-82 of *Zibaldone* and is dated July 12-23, 1820. Leopardi's point of departure, unsurprisingly scholastic, is the equivalence of pleasure (*piacere*) and happiness (*felicità*). In fact, Leopardi's reflections on happiness precede his interest in pleasure and occupy an early place in his intellectual development. In 1812, at fourteen years of age, Leopardi had penned a short *Dissertazione sopra la felicità* (*Dissertation on Happiness*) which began with the Aristotelian-Scholastic statement, "It seems that man was born for nothing but happiness."[4] The *Dissertazione* was an assignment from Don Sebastiano Sanchini, one of his private teachers. The cultural background of the Leopardi household was based on Aristotelianism filtered through Jesuit pedagogy. Unsurprisingly, Leopardi proceeded therefore to reject all the Epicurean and Platonist ideas of happiness. In this early stage of Leopardi's

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[3] The syntagm *"teoria del piacere"* appears for the first time at p. 172 (12-23 July 1820). It becomes "my theory of pleasure" (*la mia teoria del piacere*) at p. 1017 (6 May 1821). Antonio Prete's *Il pensiero poetante*, originally published in 1980, is still an essential starting point for the analysis of Leopardi's theory of pleasure.

[4] "L'uomo non sembra nato che per la felicità." Giacomo Leopardi, *Dissertazione sopra la felicità*, in *Poesie e prose, Volume secondo, Prose*, ed. Rolando Damiani (Milan: Mondadori, 1988), 492. The translation is mine.

education, happiness did not coincide with mundane pleasure. It had to be found instead in those actions that made one worthy of deserving eternal life and in a quasi-Rousseauian "civil happiness." Traces of the long debate on the "pursuit of happiness," which enjoyed a long life in the European public arena before being enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence, resurface in the otherwise unspecified notion of civil happiness.[5]

Fourteen-year-old Leopardi, however, introduces a rather peculiar example to demonstrate the impossibility of not desiring happiness. Cato of Utica found his happiness in destroying Carthage. He could not desire otherwise, yet such passion was not reasonable; hence, happiness is an irrational passion. The example contradicts the premise that happiness is the search of good for all and for one's salvation. Happiness at the destruction of Carthage was rooted in Cato's love for Rome, yet young Leopardi found it "passionate" rather than "civil." Two years later, at sixteen years of age, Leopardi wrote a series of *Discorsi sacri* (*Holy discourses*) in which he joined the chorus of the preachers of his time who found great solace in terrorizing the post-Napoleonic generations with their description of human beings as abject offspring of mud and vileness. It took him two more years to disentangle himself from religious guilt, but he was never entirely free from it thereafter. We might say in fact that his loss of faith in universal redemption was later reborn into his so-called "cosmic pessimism."

Leopardi was thirty-nine years old when he died, having fully experienced the melancholy of the young man. If we believe Melanie Klein, he did miss, however, the melancholy of adulthood, which is generally not achieved before one is over forty. Yet, it would not be fair to Leopardi's intelligence to dismiss his bleakness as a product of imperfect maturity. When Leopardi genderizes nature and accuses "her" of wickedness because she sentenced all her creatures to a life of grief, we must be aware of his dual aim, as a philosopher and as a poet. He dislikes things that are too perfect and whose only purpose lies in functioning forever. He brings nature to trial as if "she" were a living person because, *as a poet*, he still clings to the idea of nature as an organism (a notion that ran its course from Plato to Giordano Bruno) *versus* the Cartesian, mechanistic paradigm of nature (think of La Mettrie) as nothing else but a machine whose only purpose is to eject the non-functioning parts and keep on running.

Ultimately, *as a philosopher*, Leopardi made that paradigm his own. As a young man, he shaped his theoretical frame around Rousseau (his theory

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[5] Cf. Corrado Rosso, *Illuminismo felicità dolore. Miti e ideologie francesi,* (Naples: ESI, 1969), and *Felicità vo cercando. Saggi in storia delle idee* (Ravenna: Longo, 1993).

of pleasure can be traced back to *Julie or la Nouvelle Héloïse*, Sixth Part, Madame de Wolmar's Eighth Letter), Bayle and Fontenelle, with the addition of Montesquieu, D'Alembert, and Voltaire's entries on taste and aesthetic pleasure in the *Encyclopédie*. After assimilating Helvétius and Condillac, he became as sensualist and materialist as any French *idéologue* (he is, in fact, the only *idéologue* of relevance Italy has ever produced). Yet, as a prisoner of his frail body, he knew intimately that nature had rejected him as a non-functioning part. He knew that he was the child of an indifferent mother (Mother Nature *and* his own mother) and that nature would gladly silence all children who would ask their parents, "Why have you generated me? You did it for yourself, for your selfishness, but not for my happiness, of which you know nothing." Simone Weil made the same argument one hundred years later when she wrote in a pure Gnostic fashion that if souls who are "split in two" could decide about their coming into the world, they would definitely say no.[6]

The child's unhappiness, as happens in every respectable dysfunctional family, is the constant reminder of the parents' selfishness. In Leopardi, such dysfunctional status is taken to the existential extreme; that one creature, one alone, may be unhappy, is already a refutation of the order of the universe. One single broom flower vaporised in the lava of Mount Vesuvius is enough to declare the universe senseless. If Hegel had ever known of Leopardi, he might have fashioned for him a subcategory of the unhappy consciousness. In the realm of "Leopardian consciousness," the individual strives endlessly for happiness, yet no one will achieve happiness as long as even one creature remains unhappy in the vastness of cosmos. Leopardian consciousness makes the suffering of each single being, one at a time, the yardstick by which to measure universal suffering. This has nothing to do with solipsistic despair. Rather, it democratises suffering by extending the faculty to suffer to every creature, be it human, animal, or plant (possibly, no one in Western literature is less anthropocentric or even less biocentric than Leopardi is, but that aspect of him would require a separate analysis).

The Leopardian consciousness is the diametrical opposite of Leibniz's assurance that we are living in the best of all possible worlds. It is equally obsessive, though, because to Leopardi unhappiness is not a chance occurrence, but an absolute certainty. Everyone is unhappy, no exceptions.

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[6] "God asked us 'do you want to be created?' and we answered yes. He still asks us at every moment, and at every moment we answer yes. Except for a few whose soul is split in two; while nearly their whole soul answers yes, there is one point in it which wears itself out in beseeching: no, no, no!" Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 211.

If someone thinks the opposite, it is because he, she, or it, is under the delusion of a fleeting pleasure that will last only as much as it takes to leave them high and dry. The wisdom of unhappiness is not the sweet and sour taste whose habit is acquired through experience. It is there, at the beginning of life's journey. After that inauspicious start, one can discover very little else, except evidence that will reinforce what one knows already. Leopardi summed it all up at the age of twenty-two:

> The sense of the nothingness of all things, the inadequacy of each and every pleasure to fill our spirit, and our tendency toward an infinite that we do not understand comes perhaps from a very simple cause, one that is more material than spiritual. The human soul (and likewise all living beings) always and essentially desires, and focuses solely (though in many different forms), on pleasure, or happiness, which, if you think about it carefully, is the same thing. This desire and this tendency has no limits, because it is inborn or born along with existence itself, and so cannot reach its end in this or that pleasure, which cannot be infinite, but will end only when life ends. (*Zib.*, 165, 12-23 July 1820)[7]

Subsequently, Leopardi adds variations over variations, but the theme does not change. His conflation of desire, pleasure, and happiness is initially still mired in scholastic terminology and is not up to date with the more accurate French distinctions between *désir*, *plaisir*, and *bonheur*. However, Leopardi soon understands that the point he has made needs an assessment of the essence of desire even more than it does with regard to the nature of pleasure or happiness. Pleasure may be finite and contingent; desire is infinite. This betrayal of happiness (which can never be attained precisely because the desire for pleasure is infinite) is more than an existential conundrum; it is a logical contradiction in the heart of all beings and of Being itself.

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[7] "Il sentimento della nullità di tutte le cose, la insufficienza di tutti i piaceri a riempierci l'animo, e la tendenza nostra verso un infinito che non comprendiamo, forse proviene da una cagione semplicissima, e più materiale che spirituale. L'anima umana (e così tutti gli esseri viventi) desidera sempre essenzialmente, e mira unicamente, benchè sotto mille aspetti, al piacere, ossia alla felicità, che considerandola bene, è tutt'uno col piacere. Questo desiderio e questa tendenza non ha limiti, perch'è ingenita e congenita coll'esistenza, e perciò non può aver fine in questo o quel piacere che non può essere infinito, ma solamente termina colla vita." Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, ed. Giuseppe Pacella (Milan: Garzanti, 1991); all quotations in Italian from Leopardi's notebook are taken from this edition.

Leopardi *avec* Sade

For five years, from 1820 to 1824, Leopardi's indictment against this ontological deception gets wider and wider, although not necessarily deeper. Leopardi *feels* with unprecedented *pathos* and participation what would otherwise be a commonplace of Catholic education. The desire for *beatitudo* is infinite in Thomas Aquinas as well, and, as in Dante, it finds final solace only in God's infinite embrace. As soon as Leopardi is ready to articulate the power of infinite desire, however, he leaves the Scholastic language of his apprenticeship behind. Having now adopted the tenets of Sensualism, he lays out a metaphysical, non-empirical "principle of infinite pleasure" which nonetheless makes use of the language of physical experience.

> If a man could feel infinitely, of whatever kind the sensation was, provided it was not unpleasurable, he would be happy in that moment, because the feeling is so keen, and such keenness (not unpleasurable in itself) is pleasurable for man in itself of whatever kind it is. So a man would feel in that moment an infinite pleasure and that sensation, even though otherwise detached, would be an infinite pleasure, therefore perfect, therefore a man would be completely satisfied by it, and therefore happy. (*Zib.*, 4061, 5 April 1824).[5]

Despite the Romantic overtones of this statement, Leopardi's view is largely shaped by the rationalism and utilitarianism of eighteenth-century psychology and social theory, for which there is no doubt that human beings always behave to increase their welfare. He repeatedly reworks his theory, making it a jewel of exceptionally eloquent prose. His early engagement with Rousseau's philosophy of feeling, however, is still at odds with the Aristotelian framework with which he grew up. He cannot demonstrate that desire is necessarily infinite and no satisfaction will ever placate it, but he "feels" it, and he wants his feeling to be a certitude, a "subjective universality," as Kant would say in his *Critique of Judgment* (§ 6). Leopardi ignores the sharp distinction between knowledge and feeling that Kant had

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[5] "Se l'uomo potesse sentire infinitamente, di qualunque genere si fosse tal sensazione, purchè non dispiacevole, esso in quel momento sarebbe felice, perchè la sensazione è cosa viva, il vivo (non dispiacevole in se) è piacevole all'uomo p. se stesso e qualunque ei sia. Dunque l'uomo proverebbe in quel momento un piacere infinito, e quella sensazione, benchè d'altronde indifferente, sarebbe un piacere infinito, quindi perfetto, quindi l'uomo ne saria pago, quindi felice."

already expressed in 1764.[9] In truly Romantic fashion (we borrow here from Nietzsche's description of Romantic pessimism), Leopardi speaks for anyone "who suffers deeply, who struggles, is tortured, and who would like to stamp as a binding law [...] the real idiosyncrasy of his suffering [...] by forcing, imprinting, branding *his* image on them [all things], the image of *his* torture."[10]

Yet Leopardi is a reluctant Romantic. He is not content with feeling alone; he wants logic to support it. He then doubles down on an ontological demonstration of universal unhappiness that amounts to a flawed yet staggering critique of the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction. It goes as follows: if every being is imperfect since its inception, and therefore (according to Aristotle's tenet) strives to reach its perfection, then "the essence of being should include within itself the necessary cause and principle of being in an ill fashion." That is not the case, because "ill by its very nature is contrary to the respective essence of things and for that reason alone is ill."[11]

In other words, if the natural and optimal state of things is perfection, why are things imperfect? Why do they have to strive for perfection? Because Leopardi rejects the Christian notion of original sin as an explanation of the ontological difference between Being (perfect) and beings (imperfect), and because, in fact, he does not seem to recognise any ontological difference at all, his conclusion is that a logical contradiction has found its nest inside Being itself. Here comes the stab directed at Aristotle: "That fundamental principle 'A thing cannot both be and not be' seems absolutely false when you consider the palpable contradictions there are in nature" (*Quel principio "Non può una cosa insieme essere e non essere," pare assolutamente falso quando si considerino le contraddizioni palpabili che sono in natura*). Otherwise said, and *contra* Aristotle, Being

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[9] Cf. Immanuel Kant, "An Inquiry into the Distinctness of the Fundamental Principles of Natural Theology and Morals" (1764), in *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Lewis White Beck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949). On the same topic, cf. also Alessandro Carrera, "Del sentire la verità. Per Leopardi e Michelstaedter," in *Soggetto e verità. La questione dell'uomo nella filosofia contemporanea*, ed. Ettore Fagiuoli and Marco Fortunato (Milan: Mimesis, 1996), 199-207.

[10] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (§ 270), ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 236.

[11] "Di più che una tale essenza comprenda in se una necessaria cagione e principio di essere malamente, come può stare, se il male p. sua natura è contrario all'essenza rispettiva delle cose e perciò solo è male?" Leopardi, *Zib.*, 4099-4100, (3 June 1824).

is perfect and imperfect "at the same time and in the same respect" (to quote *Metaphysics* 1005b, 19-20). This is a logical impossibility, but it is real. Therefore, "the necessary unhappiness of all living things is certain" (*l'infelicità necessaria de' viventi è certa, Zib.*, 4099-4100, 3 June 1824).

Leopardi's deductive reasoning is marred by a dogmatic formalism that turns his verbal edifice into a self-fulfilling prophecy. His theory of pleasure is a phenomenology of *souffrance* (a term he often uses) wishing to pass for an ontology. He never asks whether it is in fact empirically demonstrable that each and every living creature is and will always be unhappy, nor does he entertain the possibility that an interlocutor might raise a hand and say, "Actually, I am reasonably happy. Can you disprove that?"

Kant, who in the *Critique of Pure Reason* laid out the distinction between affirmative (restrictive) judgement and infinite (non-restrictive) judgement, would have probably and cautiously articulated that "living things are non-happy" rather than "living things are unhappy," thereby leaving open all existential nuances that said things could experience in a non-necessarily-happy state.[12] Leopardi's approach is not so subtle. His propositions, even when they aspire to be logical, are oracular and dogmatic because they are ultimately *poetic*. Bypassing both determinate negation ("Living things are not happy") and infinite judgement ("Living things are non-happy"), he *posits*, "Living things *are unhappy*," and that is it. His propositions do not rely on a pre-existing knowledge. Based as they are on a conflation of ontology and morals (imperfection coincides with unhappiness) they *create* the knowledge they affirm.

What kind of knowledge is this? Freud, another metaphysician of pleasure, might describe it as a particular case of archaic fixation in an early phase of the pleasure principle, not yet tempered by the reality principle. Obviously, Freud had his share of problems when he tried to go "beyond the pleasure principle." He had to outline a dualistic metaphysics in which two infinite pleasures were included: the erotic impulse, striving towards the perpetuation of life, and the death drive that longs for the *ataraxia* of the inorganic world through the externalization of an inherent impediment, which, by preventing fulfilment, ushers in an endless yet reassuring frustration. Prior to Freud, two thousand years of watered-down Platonism and equally watered-down Aristotelian Christianity had almost managed to suppress the awareness of the death drive, which was indeed well known to the ancient civilizations and their gods of destruction. Romanticism brought

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[12] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason. Unified Edition* (Transc. Anal. Book I, Ch. I, Sec. II, § 9), trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), 123-28.

it back; later on, Freud found an updated language for it. It is in Romanticism, however, that the desire for unhappiness and the search for excessive and therefore painful pleasure loses the rationalistic traits of eighteenth-century Sensualism and Libertinism and explodes like the return of the repressed that it is.

At first glance, Leopardi's obsessively monistic, linear assessment of the pleasure principle looks quite pre-Romantic, or even simplistic, if measured against Freud's epic dualism. In fact, Leopardi's theory is so "simple" that it cannot be refuted. Worse, it cannot be falsified, because no *ad hoc* example could make a dent in it (to say, "I am reasonably happy" still means, "I am imperfect and therefore unhappy"). To look further into our analogy with Kant, Leopardi's notions of desire and pleasure are akin to transcendental objects. They are absolute presuppositions, yet they are absolutely posited by the subject (Leopardi himself). In other words, they are both cause and objects of themselves (pleasure is the final cause of desire; desire is the material cause of pleasure).

Should we, therefore, drop the entire thing? Certainly not, but before we unveil the hidden treasure that lies at the bottom of Leopardi's sea of desire (the sea at the end of *L'Infinito*), we must complete our *pars destruens* and delve further into the logical limitations of his theory. Its major weakness lies in the discrepancy between the high-redundancy level of its formulation (a magnificent rhetorical amplification) and the low amount of information it provides. Indeed, if we turn Leopardi's position on its head and maintain that human beings are obsessed with a desire for grief, that nature has created them so that they cannot but desire the greatest possible sorrow, and no matter what decisions they make, their only goal is to increase theirs and other people's suffering, and therefore the search for an impossible, unlimited happiness is nature's stratagem to push us toward the infinite pain of an infinite disappointment, the structure of Leopardi's argument would not change a bit. We would not be discussing Leopardi, though, but the Marquis De Sade, and instead of *Operette morali* and *Zibaldone* we would be reading *Philosophy in the Bedroom* and *Justine or the Misfortunes of Virtue*—or, better, we would be re-writing Lacan's essay, "Kant *avec* Sade" as "Leopardi *avec* Sade" and instead of pleasure we would be speaking of *jouissance*.[13]

We have already evoked the trinity of *désir*, *plaisir*, and *bonheur*. Not yet *jouissance* or enjoyment, Lacan's rendition of Freud's death drive—the odd fourth in an otherwise perfect *ménage à trois*. Leopardi had no way of

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[13] Cf. Jacques Lacan, "Kant with Sade" (1962), in *Écrits. The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 645-70.

knowing it, but his theory of pleasure was indeed a theory of *jouissance avant la lettre*, and—if we may venture that far—it uncannily mirrored Sade's theory of pain. If infinite pleasure is an impossibility, if it exists only as a "negative point of reference with regard to which every actually experienced pleasure falls short,"[14] the same can be said for the *jouissance* of absolute suffering, which, as Sade makes it clear, no one enjoys, neither the torturer nor the tortured.

As Lacan would say, the only way to achieve immediate, infinite pleasure is to break the symbolic order, which is something that human beings cannot do, because they speak, they have a language, they communicate. Sade's torturers never achieve immediate (non-mediated, non-symbolic) enjoyment because they cannot break the order. In fact, they *are* the order. Their enjoyment is mediated by the presence of the victim and made finite because the victim dies too soon and dies only once. Within the symbolic order, the only surrogate *jouissance* that human beings can endure is *jouissance de l'Autre*, mediated, that is, by the Big ●ther— language, writing, rituals, coded images; in short, the Law. We only enjoy (surreptitiously) *in* the Big ●ther, not by avoiding it. The desire for infinite pleasure is, ultimately, a desire for the ●ther's infinite desire. Namely, a desire that the ●ther's desire is truly infinite; if we find out that it is not, our attempt to grasp our share of pleasure by means of satisfying the ●ther's desire does fall apart. Leopardi's theory of pleasure and Sade's theory of pain, both mired in their obsessive search for infinite, non-symbolic, unmediated fullness of experience, are ultimately theories of hysterical melancholy.

> It f●ll●ws fr●m my the●ry ●f pleasure that man and any living being, even at the m●ment ●f the greatest pleasure ●f their life, want n●t ●nly m●re, but infinitely m●re than they have, that is greater pleasure t● infinity, and an infinitely greater pleasure, because they always want infinite happiness and theref●re infinite pleasure. And that man in each and every instant ●f his thinking and feeling life wants infinitely m●re ●r better than he has.[15]

The more we read such statements, the more a chill runs down our spine. Buried under Leopardi's never fully described pleasure (is it active, passive,

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[14] Slav●j Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2●●9), 188.

[15] "●alla mia te●ria ●el piacere séguita che l'u●m● e il vivente anche nel m●ment● ●el maggi●r piacere ●ella sua vita, ●esidera n●n s●l● ●i più, ma infinitamente ●i più che egli n●n ha, cioè maggi●r piacere in infinit●, e un infinitam. maggi●r piacere, per●cchè egli sempre ●esidera una felicità e ●uindi un piacere infinit●. E che l'u●m● in ciascun● istante ●ella sua vita pensante e sentita ●esidera infinitam. ●i più ● ●i megli● ●i ci● ch'egli ha." Le●par●i, *Zib.*, 4126, 12 March 1825.

physical, Aristotle's intellectual *eudaimonia*, sexual, gastronomical, the bliss of the satiated infant, or all of the above?), we hear the desperation of Durcet, one of the Lords in *The 120 Days of Sodom*, lamenting that the suffering he can inflict his victims is, after all, finite as nature, the cruel Mother, has given him the imagination to conceive a thousand crimes but not the physical means to perform them.[16] What bothers Sade's torturer is that the victim entertains a privileged relationship with death. His or her death poses the ultimate threat to the torturer's claim to infinite enjoyment. What bothers the Leopardian subject is that the cause-object of his desire is infinity itself and that indeed *nothing*, not even nothingness itself will save him from the abyss of an infinitely delayed enjoyment.

Is therefore Leopardi's theory of pleasure nothing more than a fascinating but ultimately obstinate and incomplete draft, portentously lacking in subtlety and not much different, literary style aside, from the adolescent resentment, horrendous sexual *tristesse*, and other teenage disasters summed up in thousands of pop songs, and perhaps most succinctly in the immortal t-shirt, "Life sucks and then you die"?

Leopardi *mit* Goethe

We have to wait until April 1825, when Leopardi is almost twenty-seven years old, to spot a few cracks in his fortress of solitude. This time his reflections on pleasure are spurred by a page of *La loi naturelle* by Constantin de Volney, one of the *idéologues*: "Is pleasure the principal and immediate object of our existence [...]? No: no more than pain is. [...] Pleasure, if taken beyond need, brings self-destruction [...]. Pain sometimes ensures survival."[17] Volney's argument forces Leopardi to reconsider his previous (let us call it "narcissistic") conflation of self-love and self-preservation (*Zib.*, 167, 12-23 July 1820; in other passages, however, Leopardi keeps them distinct). His counterargument distinguishes between the "aim of nature in general" and that of "human nature." The natural "end" of humans is pleasure, but "the end of existence in general" is neither happiness nor pleasure. Although nature provided some pleasure to the animals she created, "the mode of being" of each living being causes them

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[16] Marquis de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings* (Eighth Day), trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 364.
[17] Constantin de Volney, *Volney's Ruins: Or, Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires. To which is added, The Law of Nature*, trans. Thomas Jefferson and John Barlow (uncredited) (Boston: Josiah P. Mendum, 1869), 192.

"necessary and constant sorrow." Consequently, Leopardi reiterates with greater energy his critique of the principle of non-contradiction.

> An evident and undeniable contradiction in the order of things and in the mode of their existence, a terrifying contradiction, but not for that reason any less true: a great mystery, which can never be explained, unless we deny (according to my system) every absolute truth and falsity, and abandon in a certain sense the very principle of our understanding, *non potest idem simul esse et non esse* [the same thing cannot be and not be at the same time]. (*Zib.*, 4129, 5-6 April 1825)[18]

Here Leopardi indirectly acknowledges the positive role of pain in self-preservation or renunciation. In other words, we can cut off one of our limbs for the greater good of staying alive (self-love as in Rousseau's *amour de soi*). On the other hand, we may want to sacrifice our life for the sake of pride (self-love as in Rousseau's *amour-propre*). More importantly, Leopardi observes that "the natural end of any animal" is *not* its own preservation. According to Leopardi, there is no such thing as a "preservation instinct." The love of life and the avoidance of death is "a line of reasoning," not an instinct. Freud would somewhat agree, but only to a point. Self-preservation understood as reality principle belongs to the conscious ego; it is not an unconscious drive. Nor is pleasure, which is always conscious. Self-preservation as an *instinct*, however (Freud maintains that it is an instinct), belongs to the narcissistic libido, and has the function to accompany the living being to its biological death, warding off "any possible way of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself."[19] Differences aside, it is indeed striking to compare Freud's statement, "*the aim of all life is death*" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 32) with Leopardi's *Cantico del gallo silvestre* (*Song of the Wild Rooster*): "It appears that to die is the only object of the essence of things."[20]

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[18] "Contraddizione evidente e innegabile nell'ordine delle cose e nel modo della esistenza, contraddizione spaventevole; ma non perciò men vera: misterio grande, da non potersi mai spiegare, se non negando (giusta il mio sistema) ogni verità o falsità assoluta, e rinunziando in certo modo anche al principio di cognizione, *non potest idem simul esse et non esse*." Leopardi's emphasis.

[19] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 33.

[20] "Pare che l'essere delle cose abbia per suo proprio ed unico obbietto il morire." Giacomo Leopardi, *Cantico del gallo silvestre*, in *Poesie e prose*, 2:163; the translation is mine. In between Leopardi and Freud, Schopenhauer had stated that death is the "true result and to that extent the purpose of life," as Freud himself

Nevertheless, Leopardi is relentless; the only "natural and innate principle" remains "one's own happiness, and therefore pleasure." It is true that our reasoning about how to achieve pleasure may be misguided. When that reasoning fails, a man can convert his love for survival into self-hatred, but even if he kills himself, "he never stops loving above all else and trying as well to procure what he judges is his happiness, his greatest happiness."[21]

Leopardi has opened a door to a more articulate notion of pleasure—and then has shut it again. Apparently, there is no escape from this "happiness drive." We are back to square one, or perhaps not, as the door has not been properly closed. The "terrifying contradiction" that Leopardi has spotted is not inside Being, which has no "end," but between the individual's drive and nature's drive. They are both destructive (meaning, they both have sadistic components, aimed at the destruction of the love-object). The individual's search for infinite pleasure hides an appetite for self-destruction (for extreme regression, Freud would say). Nature, on the other hand, is always tangled up in a cycle of destruction 'to perpetuate herself as a single organism', to keep intact her power-to-create, which supersedes the well-being of all creatures for no reason whatsoever but 'nature's own *jouissance*'.

By using and even reaffirming the lexicon of utilitarianism, Leopardi has nonetheless shattered its foundation. As it happens, when the compulsion to repeat or death drive overcomes the pleasure principle the search for the greatest pleasure is indistinguishable from the search for the greatest pain. Leopardi does not distinguish between the two paths but he seems to glimpse what makes them so close. Precisely because of such ambivalence, Leopardi's inquiry on the nature of pleasure possesses a symptomatic value that brings it closer to an otherwise unsayable truth.

In fact, if we now go back to Leopardi's original statement (namely, that human beings are infinitely unhappy because pleasure is by its nature infinite and therefore unattainable by finite creatures), his theory shows a different side. Rather than an anatomy of melancholy, it looks like a handbook for aspiring titans. Indeed, Leopardi bids farewell to the Aristotelian-Stoic idea of the moral contentment as "middle of the road" (*medietas*) behaviour. Not even a Socratic hedonist like Aristippus of

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acknowledged in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 44. The quote is from "Transcendent speculation on the apparent deliberateness in the fate of the individual" (1851), in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 1:223.

[21] "non lascia mai di amare sopra ogni cosa e proccurare altresì quello che egli giudica essere sua felicità, e sua maggiore felicità." Leopardi, *Zib.*, 4132, 5-6 April 1825.

Cyrene, who theorized the search for pleasure as the art of seizing the moment without hope for the future, would measure up to Leopardi's radical stance. To enjoy the fleeting moment is impossible, for no instant is free from the anxious anticipation of the pleasure that we will enjoy or miss in the next instant.

Leopardi also erases by a stroke of the pen the negative concept of pleasure as the mere absence of pain, which had enjoyed a long and illustrious tradition from Locke and Montaigne to Pietro Verri's *Discorso sull'indole del piacere e del dolore* (*Discourse on the nature of Pleasure and Pain*).[22] It is true that the negative theory of pleasure was not entirely unfounded. It implied an economics of physiology that not even Freud would abandon. In fact, Freud accepts Gustav Theodor Fechner's conclusion (published in 1873) that pleasure in an organism equals stability while instability causes displeasure. "Unpleasure corresponds to an increase in the quantity of excitation and pleasure to a diminution. … The pleasure principle follows from the principle of constancy" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 2-3). Rather than a mere absence of pain, pleasure is a constant state of low excitation. There are too many instances, however, in which repressed sexual instincts are directed to substitutive satisfactions that the ego perceives as unpleasant, even though in other cases they would have been an occasion for pleasure. Where does Leopardi stand on this?

First, he follows Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757), which was in Monaldo Leopardi's library in Carlo Ercolani's Italian translation (1804). Burke had indeed articulated the most serious critique of negative pleasure. In Burke, pleasure is not just the absence or removal of pain.

> For if, previous to the pain, I do not feel any actual pleasure, I have no reason to judge that any such thing exists; since pleasure is only pleasure as it is felt [...]. I think I can discern clearly that there are positive pains and pleasures, which do not at all depend upon each other. Nothing is more certain to my own feelings than this.[23]

Consequently, Leopardi mocks the cruel irony of a pleasure conceived as nothing more than the cessation of pain. "Pleasure, child of suffering,"

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[22] Verri outlines the genealogy of pleasure as absence of pain in the foreword to his *Discorso sull'indole del piacere e del dolore* (1773), ed. Silvia Contarini (Rome: Carocci, 2001).

[23] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (Part One, Section II, Pain and Pleasure), ed. James T. Boulton (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 33.

he writes in *La quiete dopo la tempesta* (*The Calm after the Storm*), and he adds,

> ● gentle Nature,
> these are what you give us,
> these are the delights
> you offer mortals. Surcease from suffering
> is happiness for us. (*Canti* XXIV, vv. 42-46).

These "delights" do not amount to satisfaction. They assuage, but they do nothing to quench the thirst for *positive* pleasure, unbound by the necessity to keep the organism in a stable condition. It is worth noting that Burke calls "relative pleasure" or, better, "Delight" (p. 36), the pleasure that is relative to pain or serves as a relief from pain. The original lines that we have quoted are,

> ● natura cortese,
> Son questi i doni tuoi,
> ● Questi i diletti sono
> Che tu porgi ai mortali. Uscir di pena
> È diletto fra noi.

Galassi's translation has "delights" for "diletti" and "happiness" for "diletto," but perhaps Leopardi's repetition (*diletti* / *diletto*) should have been kept. It is likely that he was referring to the Burkean notion of relative pleasure and he wanted to use the right term even if it forced him to repeat it at a short distance.

In the end, such an inflexible quest for positive, absolute, egotistic pleasure (but let us call it for what it is: terrifying, *sublime* pleasure) is a scary Ego-Ideal injunction (the ideal the ego wants to conform to), no less demanding than the Christian command of universal love. In its own right, it is an ascetic practice; a hard, exclusive, and aristocratic vocation. In more personal terms, Leopardi's theory of pleasure is a colossal fight against the discourse of Father and Mother and most of all against the ethics of renunciation which is imparted to the Son (you shall suffer so that your Father can rejoice in Heaven). Anyone who has read Leopardi's last letters to his father can fathom how much his family was perversely rejoicing at his sufferings even as they did their best (which was not much anyway) to sympathize with him.

The Age of the Son that Leopardi wanted to initiate with his theory of pleasure was an accurate reversal of philistine Christianity. It had to be ascetic. It had to amount to self-sacrifice in order to steal as much *jouissance* as possible away from the sadistic double deity his parents represented. *A*

se stesso (*To Himself*), his poem of supreme renunciation, represents the achieved coincidence of asceticism and desire, or of ascetic withdrawal as the only possible fulfilment of infinite desire. In *A se stesso*, desire itself appears in the form of renunciation. For one thing must be clear: in renunciation as well as in sublimation, the power of desire remains intact. Or, as Freud himself put it, "Actually, we can never give anything up. We only exchange one thing for another."[24]

Leopardi knew Goethe's *Werther*, which might have had a substantial influence on his desiring obsession. We do not know whether he leafed through *Faust*. He does mention it in *Zib.,* 4479, 1 April 1829, together with Byron's *Manfred*, but Giovita Scalvini's first Italian translation of *Faust* appeared in print only in 1835. Unless Leopardi in Florence had the opportunity to see a draft of Scalvini's translation (which is unlikely), a direct knowledge of the text has to be excluded. Besides, his theory of pleasure predates all knowledge he could have had of *Faust*, and he remains suspicious of the excessive "daring and originality" (*la novità e l'ardire*; *Zib.,* 4479, his words of April 1, 1829) that one can find in Goethe and Byron's works. Yet when we read the *Zibaldone* entry written one day earlier, we cannot help but think that the demonic German *Doktor* would have agreed.

> For any degree of well-being, however great, by which the living being was not satisfied would not be happiness, nor would it be true *well*-being; and, vice versa, any degree of good, however small, by which the living being was satisfied would be a state that was perfectly fitting to that being's nature, and a state that was happy. Now contentment with one's own way of being is incompatible with self-love [...]; for the living being always of necessity desires a better state, a greater degree of good. That is why happiness is impossible in nature, and by its own nature.[25]

Whom is Leopardi addressing here? The "playful boy" of *Il sabato del villaggio* (*Saturday in the Village*), anxiously awaiting the first joys of

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[24] Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (1908), in *The Standard Edition of the Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and The Institute for Psychoanalysis, 1959), 9:144.
[25] "[...] qualunque massimo grado di ben essere, del quale il vivente non fosse soddisfatto, non sarebbe felicità, nè vero ben essere; e viceversa qualunq. minimo grado di bene, del quale il vivente fosse pago, sarebbe uno stato perfettam. conven. alla sua natura, e felice. Ora la contentezza del proprio modo di essere è incompatib. coll'amor proprio, [...]; perchè il vivente si desidera sempre p. necessità un esser migliore, un maggior grado di bene. Ecco come la felicità è impossib. in natura, e p. natura sua"). Leopardi, *Zib.*, 4477, 30 March 1829.

adolescence? Or perhaps Faust himself, who bets with Mephistopheles that no fleeting instant will ever satisfy him since he possesses an absolute, "Leopardian" certainty that his striving (*Streben*) for pleasure is truly infinite? Faust will never run the risk of being satisfied by any contingent result he might achieve. "Oh, never fear my promise may be broken," he says to Mephistopheles. "My utmost striving's fullest use / Is just the part I have bespoken."[26]

Freud again, who never heard of Leopardi but knew Goethe well, supports our comparison. There is no such thing as an instinct toward perfection, he says (Aristotle would be dismayed). The path that leads to "complete satisfaction" goes only backwards, and the compulsion to repeat is its *modus operandi*. Life instincts tend to repeat a pleasure they have already experienced. Death instincts tend to regress to a previous state in the organism's organization. In a minority of individuals, however, we can detect "an untiring impulsion toward further perfection." Such impulsion is, alas, the result of the instinctual repression on which civilization is based, and against which they are rebelling.

> The repressed instinct never ceases to strive for complete satisfaction, which would consist in the repetition of a primary experience of satisfaction. No substitutive or reactive formations and no sublimations will suffice to remove the repressed instinct's persisting tension; and it is the difference in amount between the pleasure of satisfaction which is *demanded* and that which is actually *achieved* that provides the driving factor which will permit of no halting at any position attained, but, in the poet's words, "ungebändigt immer vorwärts drängt."[27]

The poet is obviously Goethe, and the words are Mephistopheles', commenting on Faust after he has signed the contract. Faust is a hero of desire, but he is not a tragic hero. His unstoppable "forward-drive" functions as a shining armour against the moral catastrophes he incurs. Faust never encounters insurmountable finitude. Because he never sacrifices anything, he cannot be betrayed, which is the destiny of tragic heroes. His tragedy, as Erich Heller said, is that he is not capable of tragedy.[28] He fails, repeatedly, but he cannot suffer and has no passion for suffering. Leopardi, on the

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[26] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, ed. Cyrus Hamlin, trans. Walter Arndt (New York: Norton, 2001), vv. 1741-1743, 46.

[27] "Presses ever forward unsubdued" (translated by Strachey) Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 42. Walter Arndt translates, "Fate has endowed him with a forward-driving impetuousness" (49).

[28] Cf. Erich Heller, "Goethe and the Avoidance of Tragedy," in *The Disinherited Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 37-66.

contrary, knows how to suffer, has an intense love affair with suffering, and wants his theory of pleasure to be tragic. In fact, it is. Leopardi's nature is Greek *ananke* and every living being is a betrayed hero for suffering the scourge of necessity.

Today, we are no longer interested in happiness, which was an ethical ideal. Rather, we are obsessed by our desires, our enjoyments, and most of all by the constant search for a thrill, without which we do not feel alive (thrill translates *jouissance* better than enjoyment). We are not far from thinking that happiness is the greatest obstacle to the expansion of desire. According to Deleuze and Guattari (who are here speaking of courtly love, but there are deeply hidden affinities between courtly love and Leopardi, as I have argued elsewhere),[29] love that endlessly defers its fulfilment stands for "an achieved state in which desire no longer lacks anything but fills itself and constructs its own field of immanence." This field is not internal to the ego, as much as it does not depend on an external ego or a non-ego. "Rather, it is like the absolute ●utside that knows no Selves because interior and exterior are equally a part of the immanence in which they have fused." That is why "the slightest caress may be as strong as an orgasm" and orgasm is nothing but an unpleasant accident interrupting the flow of desire. "If pleasure is not the norm of desire, it is not by virtue of a lack that is impossible to fill but, on the contrary, by virtue of its positivity, in other words, the plane of consistency it draws in the course of its process."[30]

If for Lacan 'the Real' is always impossible (i.e. a desire that can never be satisfied), for Deleuze and Guattari the impossible is always real. Desire, we might say, "lacks nothing" to produce and reproduce itself. It is supremely *indifferent*. And if what matters about desire is only that its flow never stops, then Leopardi's theory of pleasure does incline toward Lacan (impossibility of satisfaction) as well as toward Deleuze and Guattari (satisfaction is irrelevant). Leopardi, in fact, had already reached the highest stage of ambiguity in his first substantial entry, "The desire for pleasure [...] has no limits of extent because it belongs to the substance of ourselves, not as the desire for one or more pleasures but as the desire *for* pleasure."[31]

[29] Cf. Alessandr● Carrera, *La distanza del cielo. Leopardi e lo spazio dell'ispirazione* (Milan: Me●usa, 2●11), 159-2●2.
[30] Gilles ●eleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. ●rian Massumi (Minneap●lis: University ●f Minnes●ta Press, 1987), 177. It is w●rth n●ting that the n●ti●n ●f "p●sitivity ●f pleasure" has an interesting ●urkean ●vert●ne.
[31] "Il dett● desideri● ●el piacere n●n ha limiti [...] per estensi●ne perch'è s●stanziale in n●i, n●n c●me desideri● ●i un● ● più piaceri, ma c●me desideri● *del* piacere." Le●pardi's emphasis; Le●pardi, *Zib.*, 165, 12-23 July 182●.

The Virgin Breast of Death

Leopardi seems to understand the nature of pleasure both a little less and a little more than Deleuze and Guattari. He *almost* knows that pure desire does not need happiness nor cares for orgasmic conclusion, but he is also in the unique position to warn the enthusiasts of endless flux that a desire without its object, be it Buñuel's "obscure object of desire" or Lacan's *object petit a*, in the end, will bore us to death. The phenomenology of boredom, which Leopardi explores in several phases of his work up until the peaks of *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* (*Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia*) and *Pensieri* LXVIII (where boredom is defined as a "sublime" feeling), is Leopardi's most important contribution to the analysis of affects. In fact, it is more timely and relevant to us than his theory of pleasure, except that the traversing of pleasure was (and is) the necessary prelude to his understanding of what boredom means.

Boredom (*taedium, noia, ennui*) is desire in its pure, suspended, non-objectified state. It is another form of pleasure, to be sure; a sophisticated melancholy in the tradition of Robert Burton and Albrecht Dürer. It is insufferable because it lacks nothing, not even the smallest *object petit a*, not even the most irrelevant perversion. *Noia* is self-sufficient; it has no outlets, which is why it leads to despair. Boredom (we may also call it with its current name, depression, although it is not exactly the same thing) is the *lieu* where illusion, reality, and semblance conflate in one vast expanse whose surface no difference can ripple. (Think of Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*, a truly Leopardian film, in which the end of boredom and the beginning of *jouissance* coincide with the end of all things.)

In his entire life, the only time Leopardi admitted that he had found a real moment of pleasure occurred during his trip to Rome when he paid a visit to Torquato Tasso's tomb.

> Friday, 15 February 1823, I went to visit Tasso's sepulcher and I wept. This is the first and only pleasure I have found in Rome. The road to get there is long, and no one takes it except to see the tomb. But could not one come all the way from America to enjoy the pleasure of crying for a couple of minutes? I am certain that the enormous amount of money that people spend here to procure themselves this or that pleasure is thrown to the wind, because instead of pleasure they get nothing else but boredom.[32]

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[32] "Venerdì 15 febbraio 1823 fui a visitare il sepolcro del Tasso e ci piansi. Questo è il primo e l'unico *piacere* che ho provato in Roma. La strada per andarvi è lunga, e non si va a quel luogo se non per vedere questo sepolcro; ma non si potrebbe anche venire dall'America per gustare il piacere delle lagrime lo spazio di due minuti? È

Contrary to Leopardi's own premises, the pleasure of crying over Tasso's tomb was real; it did not depend on anticipation or remembrance. For one fleeting moment, Leopardi enjoyed a whiff of melancholy that was the same thing as pleasure. It was not unmediated, though. It was filtered through Tasso's own melancholy and Leopardi's reading of it. With respect to the shallowness of modernity, Tasso was *positively* unhappy because he still knew, *per viam negativam*, what happiness used to be. He was pre-modern enough to understand the difference between *beatitudo* and *gaudium* (not just *gaudium paradisii*, but *gaudium* as joy). Tasso's unhappiness was cognitive, not nihilist. After Tasso, both happiness and unhappiness have become tainted with the nihilism of modernity.

Modern happiness, severed from the physical joy of one's body that belonged to the ancient, is impossible because it is constantly interrupted by desire, which is not the desire for happiness but the desire for enjoyment. Desire and boredom are the only passions left to reveal the pettiness of modern happiness, its tendency toward contentment and its avoidance of the heroic struggle that makes one great and tragically defeated. In other words, desire is the Stone Guest that comes to Don Giovanni's banquet of pleasure, and he knocks at Don Giovanni's door because Don Giovanni himself has invited him. The great libertine made no mistake about the infinite nature of his desire and the boredom that ensued. "Long live women, long live wine" (*Viva le femmine, viva il buon vino*) goes only so far. If he had been satisfied with the pleasures of women and drunkenness, those small objects, there would have been no need for him to invite the statue of the *Commendatore* to dinner. Only the *Commendatore* could give Don Giovanni the only thing he lacked: the supreme unhappiness, the supreme *jouissance*, the supreme thrill of Hell—which is also the supreme regression to a state where no other changes are contemplated and "the pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 57).

Leopardi's theory of pleasure, or *jouissance* in disguise, is a powerful *torso*, standing up in the cultural swamp of post-Napoleonic Italy where no one was equipped to understand it. He saw a problem where no other Italian intellectual was capable of seeing through the fog. We must refer again to Goethe. As we have already said, the unstoppable desire that Leopardi diagnosed in himself, in his fellow human beings, and in nature—so immense that it would destroy every "partial object" for nothing will satiate

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pur certissimo che le immense spese che qui vedo fare non per altro che per procurarsi uno o un altro piacere, sono tutte quante gettate all'aria, perché in luogo del piacere, non s'ottiene altro che noia." Letter to Carlo Leopardi, 20 February 1823, in Giacomo Leopardi, *Epistolario*, eds. Franco Brioschi and Patrizia Landi (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998), 1:653-54. The translation is mine.

it, not even the whole universe—was akin to Faust's desire to desire. Faust reassures Mephistopheles that no partial pleasure will ever quench his desire, and then, accordingly, proceeds to destroy every partial object he meets along the way, beginning with Gretchen and ending with the elderly couple living in the marshes of Netherlands, which he dreams to dry up. Faust is the ethical opposite of Don Giovanni. Not at all seduced by infernal *jouissance*, he is nonetheless terrified by boredom and old age. Leopardi was equally terrified by boredom, which nonetheless he found sublime, and by old age, which he knew he could not reach. In his theory of pleasure, Leopardi reveals his entire nature of repressed titan, a little Faust from the Italian province, disabled by illness and loneliness, not even worthy of a Mephistopheles coming to tempt him.

If, as a philosopher, he was sometimes held back by an outdated bibliography, as a writer and poet Leopardi did not fail to reach the clarity he strove for. *Dialogo of Torquato Tasso e del suo genio familiare* (*Dialogue of Torquato Tasso and His Familiar Genius*) crystallizes the notes of *Zibaldone* on the nature of pleasure. His early essay, *Memorie del primo amore* (*Memories of First Love*), realises the alchemical transmutation of the withdrawal of desire into an ecstasy of sublimation. Confronted for the first time with the experience of erotic impulse, the young poet immediately understands the measure of the distance he has to keep from his love object so that the experience of falling in love might be translated into the experience of falling into writing. *Memorie del primo amore* is a perfect case of *jouissance de l'Autre*, of displacing physical pleasure by circumventing it through the practice of writing. In the end, the only pleasure achieved through physical proximity that we find in Leopardi is death.

It occurs in *Amore e morte* (*Love and Death*), in which the contact with death's "virgin breast"—virginal, like the breast of a mythical mother—is one of the two moments, in all the *Canti*, when two bodies touch each other. The other instance is found in the over-romantic *Consalvo*, when the hero of the story, in point of death, grabs Elvira's hand and gets from her the last, belated, and desperate kiss. It is in *Amore e morte*, however, that the circle is complete and the death drive puts on the clothes of the pleasure principle like a Petrarch Madonna who veils herself to hide her indescribable beauty, which could also be the profile of a skull. Desire is infinite, but it ends on the shores of death. And the poet is he or she who can desire death without desiring to die, with no urgency and no haste. Leopardi *says* so in the last lines of *Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico* (*Dialogue of Tristan and a Friend*) in the iciest prose that the Italian language allows. In *Amore e morte*, however, he *shows* it in three simple lines: "May I simply wait serenely for

/ the day I'll lay my sleeping face / on your virgin breast" (*Solo aspettar sereno / Quel dì ch'io pieghi addormentato il volto / Nel tuo virgineo seno*; *Canti* XXVII, vv. 122-24).

One does not have to choose death. Death chooses us. One can choose, however, the Goddess of Death who takes the place of the Goddess of Love, and in so doing one achieves the supreme illusion of having chosen where in fact one's choice stands in the place of necessity. As Freud says in his analysis of the "three caskets" theme in mythology and literature, when the young man selects the fairest damsel among the three that have been offered to his choice, he always picks the one who stands for death, the Mother-goddess who is both creator and destroyer. This is how humans overcome death after having recognised it intellectually. "No greater triumph of wish-fulfilment is conceivable. A choice is made where in reality there is obedience to a compulsion, and what is chosen is not a figure of terror, but the fairest and most desirable of women."[33]

However, another reading of *Amore e morte* is possible, beyond the pleasure principle and beyond the death drive. One can choose to close all books, suspend all projects, ignore all hopes and disregard all promises of pleasure in an act of falling asleep *in death* that cannot have a "when" (we never know when we fall asleep) and has nothing to do with will, tenacity, desire, need, or drive. Getting into death is not a motion of the soul. It is a strange attraction. It brings subjectivity, or what is left of it, to the threshold of an eternal *dormition* in which the one who is about to "lay the sleeping face" will dwell forever.

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[33] Sigmund Freud, "The Theme of the Three Caskets" (1913), in *The Standard Edition of the Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and The Institute for Psychoanalysis, 1958), 12:298.

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Chapter Twelve

Giacomo Leopardi on the Act of Reading: The Boredom of Pastime Reading, the Cognitive Block of Studious Reading, and the Release of Agency from Instrumental Intentionality

Silvia Stoyanova

Introduction

Giacomo Leopardi, who has been celebrated for his exceptional erudition, offers a noteworthy perspective on the act of reading which examines how the intentionality of readers affects their aesthetic receptiveness and their cognitive capacity to attend to a text. I am adopting the term intentionality to render the notion of Leopardi's *intenzione*, which he uses to describe the reader's frame of mind, and which signifies both the commonplace concept of purposive intention and the philosophical one of "aboutness or directedness or reference of mind (or states of mind) to things, objects, states of affairs, events."[1] In his observations on the reading process, Leopardi juxtaposes two general typologies of readers—those who read "to pass the time" (*Zib.*, 346) or "per passatempo" (as a pastime) (*Zib.*, 4273), and those who read with "uno scopo" (a purpose) (*Zib.*, 346) or "per istudio" (as study)

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[1] Charles Siewert, "Consciousness and Intentionality," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Zalta, (Spring 2017 online edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/consciousness-intentionality/, consulted on April 20, 2017.

(*Zib.*, 1261)[2]—in order to analyse the impasse that each reader type tends to experience, namely that pastime readers grow disaffected by boredom while studious readers become cognitively impaired. Significantly, Leopardi uses these reader categories to describe also the particular frame of mind that readers may assume on occasion, regardless of their subject and habit of reading. He then proposes a dialectics between their two modes of intentionality in reading: in order to re-enter the flow of reading, pastime readers should acquire the purposeful mind frame of scholars, whereas studious readers should recover the leisurely disposition of reading to "passare il tempo" (pass the time) (*Zib.*, 1261).

Reader reception scholarship sets some useful parameters for discussing Leopardi's fragmented statements on how to engage successfully in the reading process. The notions of "entanglement" (Iser), "immersion" and "engagement" (Douglas and Hargadon), "absorption" and "entrancement" (Nell), of being "transported" (Holland) and "occupied" as if "on loan" (Poulet), which describe the reader's state of being affected by narrative, suggest that reading entails a pleasurable suspension of the self as the process of relating to something else unfolds—"we are preoccupied with something that takes us out of our own given reality."[3] The intensity of the readers' entanglement in the activity of reading depends on their "faculties of perceiving and processing," and rests on a precarious balance of familiarity and novelty to stimulate these faculties without overpowering them: "The reader's enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, i.e. when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play. There are, of course, limits to the reader's willingness to participate and these will be exceeded if the text makes things too clear or, on the other hand, too obscure: boredom and overstrain represent the two poles of tolerance."[4]

Leopardi likewise reflects on the interplay between familiarity and novelty necessary to keep the reader's affective and cognitive faculties engaged, as well as upon the many factors on which this engagement is contingent, such as the reader's erudition, experience, historical context, imagination, memory, mood, etc. Whereas these considerations deserve comprehensive discussion elsewhere, this brief study proposes to examine

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[2] Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, eds. M. Caesar and Franco D'Intino, trans. K. Baldwin et al. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013). All quotations from the *Zibaldone* are from the above translation and refer to the pages of Leopardi's manuscript. The original Italian text is quoted from *Zibaldone di pensieri*, ed. Giuseppe Pacella. (Milan: Garzanti, 1991).

[3] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 140.

[4] Ibid., 107-8.

Leopardi's observations on the aesthetic reception and cognitive processing of a text when the limits of boredom and overstrain are determined by the reader's intentionality, all other factors being equal. Leopardi's dialectical analysis of the antithetical modes of intentionality of the two types of readers exposes their shared element of instrumentality, which, as the argument herein goes, is the key to their corresponding failures to sustain the act of reading. Although the phenomenon of instrumental intentionality has widespread reverberations in Leopardi's thought, he does not articulate it in the terms employed here, which I borrow from twentieth century critical theory. Moreover, the greater part of his reflections on reading is comprised of phenomenological descriptions dispersed throughout the fragmented corpus of his *Zibaldone* notebooks, thereby posing additional discursive challenges to their critical interpretation. My endeavour to open up Leopardi's inquiry into the act of reading to further discussion, therefore, takes a cue from Michael Jennings' method of reconstructing Walter Benjamin's similarly fragmented theory of literary criticism and attempts a performative reading, whose task of engaging the reader in the hermeneutical process "relies to an unusual extent upon juxtapositions of citations."[5]

The Telic Boredom of Pastime Readers and the Telic Pleasure of Scholars

Every day you see people who read for no other purpose than to pass the time really enjoying the first few pages of a book, and then being unable to reach the end without being bored, even when the book has all the means to delight as much in the rest as at the beginning. But constant delight without some aim inevitably results in boredom, which is why those people who read just for amusement tire of it so quickly, and cannot imagine how people do find so much entertainment in reading, and they are continuously searching for variety and shift nauseatingly from one book to another without enjoying any of them other than in passing. (Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 346)[6]

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[5] Michael Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 10.

[6] "Vedete tutto giorno delle persone che non leggono per altro fine che di passare il tempo, trovar gran diletto nelle prime pagine di un libro, e non poterne arrivare al fine senza noia, quando anche quel libro abbia per se stesso tutti i mezzi per dilettare in seguito come nel principio. Ma l'uniformità del diletto, senza uno scopo, produce inevitabilmente la noia, e perciò queste tali persone che leggono per solo divertimento, si stancano così presto, che non sanno concepire come nella lettura si trovi tanto divertimento, e cercano del continuo di variare e passare nauseosamente da un libro a un altro, senza trovar mai diletto in veruno, se non lieve e passeggero."

On several occasions in his writings, Leopardi establishes an opposition between pastime readers and scholarly readers in order to explain the paradoxical predicament of the former, whose wish to pass the time pleasurably immersed in reading brings about boredom instead. At one level, Leopardi explains this phenomenon with his general theory of pleasure, according to which boredom comes with the continuity that dulls any enjoyable activity as it gets too familiar: "La continuità de' piaceri, (benchè fra loro diversissimi) o di cose poco differenti dai piaceri, anch'essa è uniformità, e però noia, e però nemica del piacere" (The continuing of pleasures (even if they are very different from one another) or of things scarcely different from pleasures is also uniformity, and so boredom, and so the enemy of pleasure; *Zib.*, 2600). On the other hand, pastime readers cannot sustain the continuity of the act of reading as they would like, because their activity is without further purpose—they read "just for amusement" (per solo divertimento) and "for no other purpose than to pass the time" (non [...] per altro fine che di passare il tempo). Conversely, "lo studioso [...] della lettura si prefigge sempre uno scopo, quando anche leggesse per ozio e passatempo" (the scholar always has a purpose even when he reads for leisure and to pass the time; *Zib.*, 346). The lack of telic direction of pastime readers, besides their single-minded objective to obtain pleasure and to pass the time, thus appears to prevent them from enjoying and extending the process of reading.

In chapter six of the *operetta Il Parini ovvero della gloria* (*Parini, or Concerning Fame*), where Leopardi reiterates the above description of pastime reading as an act of consumption that is initially fulfilling but then becomes unfulfilling and even nauseating, his language also draws attention to the different temporal experience of the two reader types. Pastime readers "fino sulle prime carte dei libri più dilettevoli e più soavi, dopo un vano piacere, si trovano sazi" (even *in the first pages* of the most pleasing and delectable books, after an empty pleasure, find themselves sated) because "questi tali non cercano altro in quello che leggono, fuorché il diletto presente" (these people look for nothing in what they read but *present* pleasure); they are "non mirando nella lettura ad alcun fine che non si contenga, per dir così, nei termini di essa lettura" (not aiming in their reading at any object that is not confined, so to speak, *within the limits* of that reading) and cannot fathom "come altri possa ricevere dalla lunga lezione un lungo diletto" (how others can, from a *long* reading, receive a *long* delight) (my emphasis).[7] By contrast, scholars are "come insaziabili

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[7] Leopardi, *Moral Tales*, trans. Patrick Creagh (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1983), 118. All italicized words in quotations are emphasised by the original author

della lettura" (insatiable for reading) and "provano un perpetuo diletto nei loro studi, continuati per buona parte del giorno" (take *perpetual* delight in their studies, pursued *for a great part of the day*), because "essi hanno sempre dinanzi agli occhi uno scopo collocato nel futuro, e una speranza di progresso e di giovamento" (they have ever before their eyes an object fixed in the *future*, and a hope of *progress* and improvement), and "nello stesso leggere che fanno alcune volte quasi per ozio e per trastullo, non lasciano di proporsi, oltre al diletto presente, qualche altra utilità, più o meno determinate" (even in the reading they sometimes do almost for diversion and amusement, they do not fail to have in view, beyond their *present* enjoyment, some other purpose more or less precise) (my emphasis).[8] In their wish to be immersed in the experience of what Iser calls "the presentness" of the text,[9] pastime readers limit the purpose of their reading to the immediate present, however they quickly lose their stimulation to read, finding no more than a fleeting pleasure. Instead, the scholars' telic projection of the progressive utility of their reading charts a temporal horizon, which enables them to stay pleasantly engaged for an extended period of time. The failure of pastime readers to dwell in the act of reading therefore appears influenced by their restricted temporal perspective and telic intentionality.

Leopardi's antithesis between the boredom of aimless pastime reading and the diversion scholars find in their purposeful reading leads him to establish that having telic direction and objectives of some gravity is the condition *sine qua non* for averting boredom in any activity: "E così tutte le altre occupazioni a cui l'uomo si affeziona, applicandoci un interesse, e uno scopo più o meno determinato, e più o meno grave e importante; dove la continuazione, la lunghezza e la monotonia, non arrivano mai ad annoiare" (The same applies to all the other occupations that people become fond of, when they involve an interest and a goal that is more or less precise, more or less serious and important, their continuation, duration, and monotony never lead to boredom; *Zib.*, 346-47). Leopardi believes that we experience a fundamental feeling of dissatisfaction when our field of action is confined to the immediate present: "Eccetto quelle [operazioni] che sono piacevoli per se stesse, [...] tutte le altre non sono dilettevoli se non fatte con uno scopo e una speranza, e un'aspettativa" (Apart from those [activities] which

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unless otherwise specified, as in this case. The original Italian text of *Parini* is quoted from *Tutte le poesie, tutte le prose e lo Zibaldone*, ed. Lucio Felici and Emanuele Trevi (Rome: Newton Compton, 2013), 544-45.

[8] Ibid.

[9] "This involvement, or entanglement, is what places us in the 'presentness' of the text and what makes the text into a presence for us." Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 131.

are enjoyable in themselves [...] all the others are enjoyable only if they are undertaken with a purpose, and a hope, and a prospect of something not present but to follow; *Zib.*, 268-69). Moreover, as he claims in *Parini*, without a horizon of expectations even "le cose che si stimano dilettevoli in se, disgiunte dalla speranza, vengono in fastidio quasi, per così dire, appena gustate" (the things held to be delightful in themselves, [...] we come to dislike, as it were, as soon as we have tasted them) and conversely "la speranza di qualche frutto" (the hope for some return) has the power to transform "moltissime occupazioni prive per se di ogni piacere, ed eziandio stucchevoli o faticose" (many occupations void in themselves of any pleasure, and even boring and wearisome) into the "gratissime e giocondissime, per lunghe che sieno" (most blithe and gratifying, long as they may be).[10]

Leopardi's view that the ability to be pleasantly occupied for extended periods of time, keeping the boredom of familiarity at bay as much in reading as in any other activity, hinges on the setting of goals, on learning, and on the hope to derive benefit, has some affinity with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's phenomenon of flow, which is most commonly experienced during reading.[11] However, even though the experience of flow follows a learning curve that is characterized "by a sense of novelty, of accomplishment," by having "clear goals and feedback" that are not "trivial,"[12] by "perceived benefits from increased knowledge and/or personal development,"[13] in psychological experiments flow is correlated to pleasure reading rather than to work reading or to study.[14] Csikszentmihalyi indeed observes that "productive work" can be satisfying, but "activities that provide enjoyment are often those that have been designed for this very

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[10] Leopardi, *Moral Tales,* 118.

[11] "Activities as diverse as rock climbing, ocean cruising, motorcycling, and factory work has been reported as producing flow, but the most common optimal experience noted in the research is reading," cf. Fausto Massimini, Antonella Delle Fave, and Marco Carli, "Flow in Every-Day Life: A Cross-National Comparison," in *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow of Consciousness*, eds. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Isabella Selega Csikszentmihalyi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 288-306; and Jeff McQuillan and Gisela Conde, "The Conditions of Flow in Reading: Two Studies of Optimal Experience," *Reading Psychology: an International Quarterly* 17 (1995): 110.

[12] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 46, 54.

[13] McQuillan and Conde, "The Conditions of Flow," 126.

[14] "[...] the large majority of the texts which provided the informants with flow were those which they had read for pleasure," Ibid., 109.

purpose."[15] In discussing the pleasure produced by entertainment, Douglas and Hargadon make an important distinction between the pleasure of "immersion" in the familiar schema employed by genre fiction and the entertainment industry, and the pleasure of "engagement" which draws on "our ability to call upon a range of schemas" and "to savour the results of our agency," where flow is a state that mediates between these two kinds of pleasure and depends on our individual tolerance of familiarity and novelty.[16] Victor Nell similarly juxtaposes two kinds of readers, placing emphasis on the different effect on individual consciousness that they seek in their act of reading: "type A," who are "after absorption" and are compelled to read because they want to "keep consciousness at bay;" and "Type B readers, who seek a heightening of consciousness" and who "will be inclined to lay aside books that offer little involvement [...]."[17]

Leopardi shares with flow and reader reception studies the importance of stimulating the growth of agency in order to experience pleasure in activity and avert boredom, but he denies entertainment activities any power to offer such stimulation:

> [...] public spectacles and entertainments in themselves, in the absence of other circumstances, are the most terribly tedious and tiresome things in the world, because they have no purpose but pleasure. This alone is desired, this alone is expected; and something from which pleasure is expected and demanded (like a debt) almost never gives it: indeed it gives the opposite. (*Zib*., 4266)[18]

Books written for the purpose of offering entertainment are likewise the least pleasing: "[...] i libri che mi hanno dilettato meno, e che perciò da qualche tempo io non soglio più leggere, sono stati sempre quelli che si chiamano come p. proprio nome, dilettevoli e di passatempo" (Those books which I have enjoyed least, and which for some time now I no longer have the habit of reading, have always been those which are described, as if with their proper name, as amusements and pastimes; *Zib*., 4273-74). Even though Leopardi's deprecation is without moralistic judgment, it calls

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[15] Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 51.

[16] Yellowlees Douglas and Andrew Hargadon, "The Pleasure Principle: Immersion, Engagement, Flow," *Hypertext* (2000): 154-56.

[17] Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 231-33.

[18] "[...] gli spettacoli e i divertimenti pubblici per se stessi, senza altre circostanze, sono le più terribilmente noiose e fastidiose cose del mondo; perchè non hanno altro fine che il piacere; questo solo vi si vuole, questo vi si aspetta; e una cosa da cui si aspetta e si esige piacere (come un debito) non ne dà quasi mai: dà anzi il contrario."

attention to the intentionality of the agents who produce and consume entertainment activities. His analysis in the passage quoted above (*Zib.*, 4266) suggests that the premeditated *telos* of entertainment activities ("they have no purpose but pleasure"), their objectification as "pastimes" (as if this were their "proper name"), and the instrumental expectation to obtain pleasure from them ("like a debt"), subvert the very intention to produce and receive entertainment. That is why, when he set out to read "p. semplice passatempo, ed a fine solo ed espresso di trovar piacere e dilettarmi" (simply to pass the time, and for the sole and express purpose of finding pleasure and delight), his reading turned into "noia e disgusto fin dalle prime pagine" (boredom and distaste from the very beginning; *Zib.*, 4273). However, his experience of pleasure in reading returned when he shifted his approach to the act of reading from the single-minded pursuit of the pleasure of immersion to a more open-minded engagement with the text: "p. occupazione, e p. fin modo di studio, e con fin d'imparare qualche cosa, o di avanzarmi generalmente nelle cognizioni, senza alcuna mira particolare al diletto" (I took it up again as an occupation, and as a way of studying, and in order to learn something, or to generally improve my knowledge, without any particular purpose of enjoyment; *Zib.*, 4273). In this passage, Leopardi is buttressing his previous claim that the pleasure of being occupied in activity (reading being the paradigmatic one) is unattainable when it is pursued as the sole objective of the activity: "In qualunque cosa tu non cerchi altro che piacere, tu non lo trovi mai: tu non provi altro che noia, e spesso disgust" (When you seek only pleasure in something, you never find it: you find nothing other than boredom, and often distaste; *Zib.*, 4266). Hence, reading the most delightful book with the single goal of receiving pleasure quickly becomes tedious, whereas "un matematico trova diletto grande a leggere una dimostrazione di geometria, la qual certamente egli non legge per dilettarsi" (a mathematician obtains great pleasure from reading a demonstration on geometry, which he certainly does not read for pleasure; *Zib.*, 4266). There is a crucial difference in the intentionality of the two types of readers, which goes beyond their antithetical objectives: leisure readers have an exclusive and manifest intention to gain pleasure, whereas scholarly readers are motivated by the more casual and open-ended intent "to learn something" and "to generally improve" their knowledge (*Zib.*, 4273 cited above).

Leopardi investigates further the phenomenon of boredom in pastime reading in relation to the psychology of expectation and links it to what he claims is the peculiar nature of pleasure: "Il piacere [...] non vien mai se non inaspettato; e colà dove noi non lo cercavamo, non che lo sperassimo[...]. Bisogna, per provar piacere in qualunque azione ovvero occupazione,

cercarvi qualche altro fine che il piacere stesso" (Pleasure only comes unexpectedly; and it is found where we are not seeking it, and have no hope of finding it [...] In order to experience pleasure in any action or occupation, it is necessary to seek some purpose other than pleasure itself; *Zib.*, 4266). Pleasure, in Leopardi's observation, behaves as a kind of "by-product state" which, in Jon Elster's definition, "cannot be brought about intelligently and intentionally," and even though such states are often "instrumentally useful, [they] cannot be chosen for their instrumental utility."[19] In a statement reminiscent of Leopardi's advice to find an alternative purpose in the pursuit of pleasure, Talbot Brewer likewise suggests that for aesthetic pleasure to arise our attention should be directed towards an objective other than pleasure which is of genuine interest to us: "you have scant hope of bringing it [pleasure] about unless you turn your mind from its pursuit and fervently pursue something else that you find independently compelling."[20] Conversely, writes Brewer, if we direct our single-minded attention only at the activity's "instrumental value," then it "would be directed not at the activity but at its expected results. Such attention [...] absents us from our activity and renders it burdensome."[21] This kind of instrumental attention, which is exclusively directed to the end result of the activity, similarly absents the agency of pastime readers from the potential experience offered by the text, and afflicts them with boredom.

Leopardi's statements on the boredom of pastime readers and the telic pleasure of scholars imply that, in order to be able to sustain the pleasure of reading, readers should approach it with an efferent yet open-ended frame of mind; otherwise, when their telic intentionality becomes an instrumental intention to gain pleasure, their affective experience of reading becomes obstructed. On the other hand, although the purposefulness of scholars enables them to extend their pleasurable absorption in reading, they are not impervious to boredom either. In the last sentence of chapter six of *Parini*, Leopardi states that scholars also lose their affective appreciation of books

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[19] Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 50, 56. Elster cites some examples of by-product states: "I can will knowledge, but not wisdom; going to bed, but not sleeping; [...] reading, but not understanding, etc." Ibid., 51. In fact, pleasure is not the only by-product state Leopardi observes; he compares the vain pursuit of worldly pleasures to the rather different desire for quietude which also eludes our willful intentionality: "the more it [quietude] is sought and desired in itself alone, the less it is found and enjoyed" (*Zib.*, 4267).

[20] Talbot Brewer, "Savoring Time: Desire, Pleasure and Wholehearted Activity," in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 6, no. 2 (2003): 159.

[21] Ibid., 151.

when "perché non si aspettano da loro alcuna utilità" (they expect no further benefit from them).[22] The pleasure of scholars inevitably relapses into boredom when their experience of the text has been integrated into the sphere of the familiar and they believe they have exhausted its potentiality. Nevertheless, there is a qualitative difference between the instrumental approaches of the two kinds of readers: in their pursuit of pleasure, pastime readers expect the spontaneous activation of their agency by the reading, whereas scholars harness theirs to purposefully draw benefits from their reading, which accounts for their different capacities to affectively respond to the agency of the text and, hence, to extend their act of reading.

The Scholarly Habit of Study and the Cognitive Block of Studious Attention

And the mind must not be kept invariably at the same tension, but must be diverted to amusements[...]. The mind must be given relaxation; it will arise better and keener after resting. As rich fields must not be forced for their productiveness, if they have no rest, will quickly exhaust them so constant labor will break the vigor of the mind, but if it is released and relaxed a little while, it will recover its powers; continuous mental toil breeds in the mind certain dullness and languor. Seneca, "On Tranquility of Mind"[23]

The importance of the telic purposefulness and fruitfulness of our occupations in Leopardi's thought is rooted in the Roman Stoic ethics of cultivating individual and civic agency.[24] As Novella Primo observes,

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[22] "And even scholars, the subject and nature of their studies having changed over the years, as often happens, can scarcely bear to read books by which at some other time they have been or could have been delighted beyond measure; and although they still have the intelligence and skill needed to appreciate their worth, they nonetheless feel nothing but boredom; for they expect no benefit from them." (E anche gli studiosi, mutate coll'andare degli anni, come spesso avviene, la materia e la qualità dei loro studi, appena sopportano la lettura di libri dai quali in altro tempo furono o sarebbero potuti essere dilettati oltre modo; e se bene hanno ancora l'intelligenza e la perizia necessaria a conoscerne il pregio, pure non vi sentono altro che tedio; perché non si aspettano da loro alcuna utilità.) Cf. Leopardi, *Moral Tales*, 118.

[23] Seneca, *Moral Essays*, trans. J. W. Basore (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2:280-81.

[24] For a discussion of this thesis, cf. my article, Silvia Stoyanova, "Uomo vero," in *La Prospettiva antropologica nel pensiero e nella poesia di Giacomo Leopardi*, ed. Chiara Gaiardoni, Atti del XII Convegno Internazionale di studi leopardiani (Florence: Olschki, 2010).

Leopardi's "methodical" approach to reading and his "criticism of those who pass non-systematically from one piece of reading to another, obtaining as a result only nausea and disgust," are likewise reminiscent of Seneca's recommendations to Lucilius on how to read.[25] Seneca advises people to carefully select and to thoroughly digest their readings, so as to "derive ideas which shall win firm hold in [one's] mind," since this practice "fortifies" the self against adversities.[26] On the other hand, the dissipation of the mind in aimless, appetitive reading seems kept in check by an accompanying feeling of nauseating tedium. In the same vein, Leopardi writes in *Parini* that if pastime reading is only a habit of consumption, not complemented by activities that contribute to the creation of books such as study and writing, the capacity to experience the pleasure of reading is correspondingly limited: "E quanto a coloro che se bene bastantemente instrutti di quell'erudizione che oggi è parte, si può dire, necessaria di civiltà, non fanno professione alcuna di studi né di scrivere, e leggono solo per passatempo, ben sai che non sono atti a godere più che tanto della bontà dei libri[...]" (And as for those who, although sufficiently instructed in that erudition which today we might call a necessary part of culture, do not profess to be scholars or writers, and read only as a pastime, you well know that they are not capable of enjoying more than a fraction of the excellence of books).[27]

Elsewhere, Leopardi extends the consequence of this observation to all habitual activities we do at leisure, which he believes should become exercises to cultivate the individual's productive agency: "Un altr'abito bisogna ancora contrarre e massimamente nella fanciullezza. Quello cioè di applicare le dette assuefazioni alla pratica, quello di metterle a frutto, e di farle servire all'esecuzione di cose proprie" (There is a further habit that we are also bound to contract, especially in childhood, namely, that of applying these habits to practice, putting them to good use, and making them serve the execution of our own projects; *Zib.*, 1542). The habit of practice cannot become "attitudine" (aptitude) without consistently applying purposeful attention: "fissare la mente a tirar profitto coll'opera propria da quelle assuefazioni" (so fixing the mind that it can derive profit through its own work from those habits), "attendere e [...] riflettere alle minuzie" (attending

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[25] "Leopardi, infatti, alla maniera di Seneca critica coloro i quali passano asistematicamente da una lettura all'altra, ricavandone, come effetto, soltanto nausea e disgusto profondo e già nel suo giovanile piano di studio, si mostrava molto metodico; [...]" cf. Novella Primo, *Leopardi lettore e traduttore* (Leonforte: Insula, 2008), 14. The translation is mine.

[26] Seneca, "On Discursiveness of Reading," *Epistles*, trans. R. Gummere (Edinburgh: Harvard University Press, 1996), 7-9.

[27] Leopardi, *Moral Tales*, 117-18.

to minutiae and reflecting on them; *Zib.*, 1543). This instrumental focusing of the mind on phenomena hones the cognitive faculties of attention and reflection, thereby advancing the development of scientific thought: "L'attendere e il riflettere non è altro che il *fissare* la mente o il pensiero, il fermarlo ec. Abito che produce la scienza, l'invenzione, l'uomo riflessivo" (Attention and reflection are none other than *fixing* one's mind or thought, bringing it to a halt, etc. A habit that gives rise to science, invention, a thoughtful man; *Zib.*, 1421). However, Leopardi's further observations on reading for study suggest that this exercise of fixing the mind could just as well undermine its very faculty of attention.

Although Leopardi believes that generally studies "gli studi *soddisfanno* più di qualunque altro piacere, e ne dura più il gusto, e l'appetito" *(satisfy* more than any other pleasure, and the taste for [them], and the appetite, etc., last longer; *Zib.*, 1574), in a letter to his mentor Pietro Giordani he also laments the harmful effects of his habit of study because it "fissa la mente e la ritiene immobile" (fixes and immobilizes the mind).[28] Yet, the young Leopardi does not find Giordani's suggestions to alternate study with leisure to be doable because leisure entertainment lacks the power to hold his attention and to elicit the pleasure of immersion: "And I see quite well that to be able to continue with my studies it is necessary to interrupt them from time to time and lend myself a bit to the so-called worldly things, but in order to be able to do this I want a world that entices me and smiles at me."[29] The purposeful application of attention develops the mind's aptitude to harness new stimuli, conferring the pleasure of exercising one's agency, but at the expense of its receptiveness to being affected spontaneously by phenomena. What is more, when the close purposeful attention that students and scholars apply to their readings becomes intensely focused, it actually obstructs their cognitive capacity:

> To what I have said elsewhere about the impossibility of doing a thing well if it is done with too much care, one can add what Alfieri says in his Life about the *mad attention* he paid to all the minutiae in his first readings and studies of the Classics, and what we experience, e.g., in the study of languages. Where you may note that at the beginning, on account of the extreme attention you pay to every last detail, when reading in a specific

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[28] Leopardi, letter to Pietro Giordani from August 8, 1817 in *Tutte le poesie*, 1149. The translation is mine.

[29] "Veggo ben io che per poter continuare gli studi bisogna interromperli tratto tratto e darsi un poco a quelle cose che chiamano mondane, ma per far questo io voglio un mondo che m'alletti e mi sorrida [...]." Leopardi, letter to Pietro Giordani from April 30, 1817, Ibid., 1141. The translation is mine.

language, the writers always prove to be (more or less) difficult. (*Zib.*, 1260)[30]

Leopardi suggests that the novice learners of a foreign language struggle to grasp the meaning of a text mainly because of their extreme mode of attention, rather than because of their level of linguistic competence, since "Così non si trova piacere, nè facilità, nella semplice lettura, anche in nostra lingua, quando si legge con troppo studio. ec." (we do not find pleasure or ease in the simple act of reading, even in our own language, when we read too studiously; *Zib.*, 1262). In fact, he explicitly indicates the reader's studious frame of mind as the true cause of cognitive impediment: "e durando la prima [l'intenzione di studioso], solamente per sua cagione, ed anche senza veruna difficoltà reale, si trovano sempre intoppi, che altri non troverà nelle stesse circostanze, e colla stessa perizia, ma con diversa intenzione2 (so long as that first phase endures, and solely on account of it, and even without any real difficulty, obstacles are always to be found, that another person will not find in the same circumstances, and possessing the same skill, but having a different frame of mind; *Zib.*, 1261-62). The learning process could then be resumed either through a temporary detachment from the object of study, after the students "[hanno] intralasciato per qualche tempo lo studio di quella lingua" (have neglected the study of that language) or by transforming their intentionality—when they "solamente pigliando a leggere qualche cosa in detta lingua non con animo di studio o di esercizio, ma solo di passare il tempo, o divertirvi, o in qualunque modo con intenzione alquanto, più o meno, rilasciata" (simply started reading something in the language not for the purpose of study or exercise, but merely to pass the time, or to [be] amuse[d], or in some way or other in a frame of mind that is to a greater or lesser degree relaxed; *Zib.*, 1261). This relaxed or released intentionality arrives spontaneously when we believe we have mastered the foreign language, and so "leggiamo non più come scolari, ma disinvoltamente e come semplici lettori" (we no longer read as students, but casually and just as readers; *Zib.*, 1261). It may be, continues Leopardi, that the actual difficulties are greater than when we were paying studious attention, however they do not hinder our reading

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[30] "A quello che altrove ho detto circa l'impossibilità di far bene quello che si fa con troppa cura, si può aggiungere quello che dice l'Alfieri nella sua Vita della *matta attenzione* ch'egli poneva a tutte le minuzie nelle sue prime letture e studi de' Classici: e quello che ci avviene p. e. nello studio delle lingue. Nel quale osservate che da principio per la somma attenzione che ponete a ogni menoma cosa, leggendo in quella tal lingua, vi riescono gli scrittori sempre (più o meno) difficili."

comprehension because "non ci fanno gran caso" (we do not attach any great importance to them; *Zib.*, 1261).

In a number of reflections in his *Zibaldone*, Leopardi observes that the extreme care and intention (terms which he tends to use synonymously or to the same effect) with which we engage in activity are counterproductive to our objective of performing this activity successfully: "Non solo, [...] si fa male quello che si fa con troppa cura, ma se la cura è veramente estrema, non si può assolutamente fare, e per giungere a fare bisogna rimettere alquanto della cura, e della *intenzione* di farlo" (not only do we do badly what we do with too much care, but if such care is really excessive, the thing absolutely cannot be done, and in order to succeed in doing something we must set aside our care somewhat, and our *intention* to do it; *Zib.* 1554). In all kinds of physical and mental actions, our excessive "intenzion d'animo" (zeal) and "cura" (care) (*Zib.*, 90); "proposito" (intention) and "scopo" (purpose) (*Zib.*, 91); "desiderio, premura, attenzione e studio di riuscire" (desire, haste, concern, and ambition; *Zib.*, 461); "cura" (care) and "intenzione" (intention) (*Zib.*, 1554); our "[porre] cura e intenzion d'animo" (trying too hard, and concentrating too much; *Zib.*, 1572), etc. prevent us from attaining our ends. Pleasure, thus, is not the only state that cannot be brought about intentionally—all of our objectives are subject to the same self-subversive principle of intentionality when it is exclusively directed to the end result of the activity. Regardless of whether we are reading for pleasure or for study, and independently of the text's actual difficulty, when our attention turns into instrumental intention to master it, our objective of comprehension is promptly foiled:

> If you start reading some book, even a very easy one, or listen to the clearest speech in the world, with excessive attention, and an exaggerated concentration of mind, not only does the easy become difficult for you, not only are you amazed and surprised and grieved at an unexpected difficulty, not only do you strive harder to understand than you would have with less attention, not only do you understand less, but, if your attention and the fear of not understanding or of letting something escape is really extreme, you will understand absolutely nothing, as if you hadn't read, and hadn't listened, and as if your mind were completely intent on another matter. For from too much comes nothing, and too much attention to a thing is the equivalent, in effect, of not paying attention, and of having another, completely different occupation, that is, attention itself. (*Zib.*, 2274-75)[31]

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[31] "Se tu prendi a leggere un libro qualunque, il più facile ancora, o ad ascoltare un discorso il più chiaro del mondo, con un'attenzione eccessiva, e con una smodata contenzione di mente; non solo ti si rende difficile il facile, non solo ti maravigli tu stesso e ti sorprendi e ti duoli di una difficoltà non aspettata, non solo tu stenti assai

The studious attention of the mind, intent on letting none of the reading escape it, rebounds from its target and paralyzes the cognitive process to the extent that the effort of attending to the text gets transferred to the act of attending, which thereby becomes effortful. In its extreme form, instrumental attention becomes caught in its own self-reflexive bind and is completely incapacitated.

Once again, Leopardi's recommendation for recovering the mind's faculties of receptiveness and attention is to abate its care-full effort of comprehension: "Nè tu potrai ottenere il tuo fine se non rilascerai, ed allenterai la tua mente, ponendola in uno stato *naturale*, e rimetterai, ed appianerai la tua cura d'intendere, la quale solo in tal caso sarà utile" (Nor will you be able to gain your purpose unless you relax, and slow down your mind, placing it in a *natural* state, and soothe and put aside your concern to understand, which only in that case will be useful; *Zib.*, 2275). Leopardi's solution to the cognitive impasse of studious attention and his choice of words recall those of Seneca in *On Tranquillity of Mind* cited above, where he advises individuals on how to restore the power of the studious mind, which has become tense from constant labour and thus has reverted to the dullness of the idle mind. In order for the mind to recover its vigour, writes Seneca, it "should be released and relaxed."[32] And although Seneca, like Giordani, suggests the antithetical method of interrupting mental activity with leisure, he is quick to add that the suspension of leisure should be employed in moderation, since "there is a great difference between slackening and removing your bond."[33] The reader's agency then has to gain emancipation from its "cura d'intendere" (concern to understand) (*Zib.*, 2275) the objects of its attention by releasing its concern to master them, rather than relinquish its care to understand by taking distance from them. Restoring the *natural* state of the reader's mind means to regain its given openness—the receptiveness which accounts for children never feeling "il vero tormento della noia, perchè ogni minima bagattella basta ad occuparli tutti interi" (the true torment of boredom, since even the slightest thing is sufficient to occupy them completely; *Zib.*, 176)—while exercising the

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più ad intendere, di quello che avresti fatto con minore attenzione, non solo tu capisci meno, ma se l'attenzione e il timore di non intendere e di lasciarsi sfuggire qualche cosa, è propriamente estremo, tu non intendi assolutamente nulla, come se tu non leggessi, e non ascoltassi, e come se la tua mente fosse del tutto intesa ad un'altro affare: perocchè dal troppo viene il nulla, e il troppo attendere ad una cosa equivale effettivamente al non attenderci, e all'avere un'altra occupazione tutta diversa, cioè la stessa attenzione."

[32] Seneca, *On Tranquility of Mind*, 280-81.

[33] Ibid.

faculty of the mature agency to be occupied for an extended period of time by applying purposeful attention. Studious readers, whose care to understand has grown into wearying concern to master the observed phenomena, are therefore invited to recuperate as a mode of intentionality those conditions of leisure and freedom of agency in which the scholarly pursuit of knowledge actually had its origins:

> The ancients used the words Σχολή, *ozio* [leisure], to describe the places, periods, etc., of study, and also the studies themselves (hence, without taking account of their origin, we still say *scuola* [school] and *scolare* for student, and the English say *scholar* for a man of letters, whose etymology would suggest an idle person) which for most of us is the only or main *activity*. (*Zib.*, 4520).[34]

Passing the Time and the Release from Instrumental Intentionality

> What is required is not the effort of working ourselves into a particular attitude, but the reverse: what is required is *the releasement of our free, everyday perspective*. Martin Heidegger, "Methodological Directive for the Interpretation of Becoming Bored."[35]

Leopardi's pastime readers can escape the boredom that ensues when they fail to experience immersion by shifting from the single-minded pursuit of pleasure to the open-ended pursuit of learning. Their narrowly instrumental frame of mind thus gets expanded by the broader telic intentionality of scholars who project a horizon of future benefit to their act of reading. The purposeful intentionality of scholars allows them to pay sustained attention and draw extensive pleasure from dwelling in the reading, while the exercise of concentrating the mind cultivates aptitude for reading comprehension and aesthetic appreciation. On the other hand, the same habits of studious attention and telic intentionality risk blocking the mind's receptiveness by ossifying into an instrumental intention to master the object of reading, thereby closing off the horizon of experience. The cognitive impasse of studious intentionality may be dispelled when the

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[34] "Σχολή *ozio* chiamavano gli antichi i luoghi, i tempi ec. degli studi, e gli studi medesimi (onde ancora diciamo, senza intendere all'origine, scuola, e scolare p. istudente, e gl'inglesi scholar p. letterato, che dall' etimologia sonerebbe ozioso), che p. gran parte di noi sono il solo o il maggior *negozio*."

[35] Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 91.

"animo di studio o di esercizio" (purpose of study or exercise; *Zib.*, 1261) and the "cura d'intendere" (care to understand) are set aside, restoring the mind to its "stato *naturale*" (*natural* state; *Zib.*, 2275). Although such a state cannot be purposefully attained, it appears to be our natural frame of mind, for it is a common everyday experience to read "disinvoltamente e come semplici lettori" (casually and just as readers), "solo [con animo] di passare il tempo, o divertirvi" (merely to pass the time, or to amuse yourself; *Zib.*, 1261).

Leopardi describes this common reader mindset almost verbatim as that of the pastime readers who read "per solo divertimento" (just for amusement) and "non [...] per altro fine che di passare il tempo" (for no other purpose than to pass the time; *Zib.*, 346). Indeed, reading to pass the time denotes the absorption in reading towards which pastime readers instrumentally aspire but fail to experience. Towards the end of his *Zibaldone*, Leopardi uses the expression "passare il tempo" (to pass the time) no longer synonymously with seeking amusement, but in order to divorce it from the self-subversive intention of being entertained: "In un trattenim., chi si vuol divertire, propongasi di passare il tempo. Chi vi cerca e vi aspetta il divertim., non vi trova che noia, e passa quel tempo assai male" (Someone who wants to enjoy himself at an entertainment should just think of passing the time. If he seeks and expects enjoyment, he will only be bored, and will pass that time pretty badly; *Zib.*, 4523). The proposition simply to pass the time entails adopting an intentionality of staying open to the process, without our care becoming an anxiety to master the experience, and consequently of suspending predetermined expectations that objectify both the activity for which we take time and our own act of engaging in it. The intentionality of passing the time and our fundamental disposition of care are central notions in Heidegger's metaphysical analysis of boredom, which offers another framework for probing further Leopardi's phenomena of pastime and studious reading.

For Heidegger, boredom has the function of attuning our Being to its authenticity as "releasement" from "self-will and objectifying thinking," from "purposive striving."[36] "The *telos* of our Being (care) is to be open,"[37] however, before we are able to experience our openness as our agency of care, we experience it as a burdensome void. Thus, during the first stage of Heidegger's three-tiered notion of boredom, we seek an occupation in which to pass the time while we are unexpectedly suspended en route to our

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[36] Cf. Michael Zimmermann, *Eclipse of the Self: The Development of Heidegger's Concept of Authenticity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986), 244, 254.
[37] Ibid., 97.

destination, for example at a small remote train station where our choice of
activities is limited. The activities by means of which we attempt to pass the
time "leave us empty" and "abandon us to ourselves," because we do not
actually engage in them—whether for their own sake or with a gainful
purpose.[38] Rather, we approach them with the intention to be occupied by
them so as not to be aware of the passing of time: "We are interested neither
in the object nor in the result of the activity, but in being occupied as such
and in this alone."[39] Just like in the case of Leopardi's pastime readers, our
interest in the object of activity is exclusively instrumental and driven by
the equally self-instrumental need to give direction to our agency. Still,
Heidegger considers this experience a relatively superficial form of
boredom and of inauthentic care, because we find ourselves suspended and
in need of occupation on account of accidental circumstances.

On the other hand, the compulsion to be occupied is not inauthentic in
itself. On the contrary, Heidegger writes that when we are "taken by things,"
"lost in them," "captivated by them," then "our activities and exploits
become immersed in something," which gives "our dealings with things a
certain manifoldness, direction, fullness."[40] The pleasure of being absorbed
in activities is due both to the definition that we gain in directing our
openness towards the objects of our care and to the activation of agency in
expanding its modalities of care. In their intention to pass the time,
Leopardi's pastime readers are interested however only in the pleasure of
having their agency validated by that of the text. Books leave them empty
because their desire to divert their self-awareness becomes renunciation of
agency and deprives them of the engaged receptiveness necessary to
become lost in a book. The feeling of boredom when things "abandon us to
ourselves," resisting our instrumental intentionality, thus alerts us to our
resignation of agency.

Heidegger's second stage of boredom is an evening of social entertainment
for which we have freely taken the time but, despite the fact that we pass
that time pleasantly occupied, we perceive it as boring in retrospect, when
we return to the work that we had interrupted. Just like Leopardi advises
pastime readers and partygoers to seek nothing more from their reading or
entertainment, we "seek nothing further at all from this invitation;" we are
not instrumentally intent on gaining pleasure but with rather casual
intentionality "went along just to spend the evening."[41] Moreover, our
immersion in the experience on offer was successful: we were "entirely

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[38] Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts*, 103.

[39] Ibid., 101.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., 119.

there, alongside and part of things."[42] Heidegger's explanation for our retroactively perceived boredom is that in the "casualness" with which we are "abandoning ourselves to whatever there is going on, an emptiness can form. This emptiness is a being left behind of our proper self."[43] Although not immediately, the feeling of emptiness returns because, as Jan Slaby explains, "the party is existentially irrelevant to us," "we have thrown ourselves, for a certain time, out of our existential track."[44] Heidegger believes that the pleasure of absorption in activity eventually and inevitably yields to boredom, because no object or activity can fulfil our potentiality for being at any one time: "even the most splendid event" is not "in a position to satisfy the resolute openness of our whole Dasein in such a way that we could rest our existence on such an occasion."[45] Boredom at this stage thus alerts us to our resignation of agency in the larger framework of our finite existence, thereby raising awareness of how we choose to pass the time. Contrary to our accidental suspension at the train station, "we have taken time for the evening" and "we take time from that time which is apportioned to us; from the time to which our whole Dasein is given over, from the time of whose scale, moreover, we are not all certain."[46]

Leopardi's deprecation of entertainment activities as boring because they "non hanno altro fine" (have no other purpose; *Zib.*, 4266), and therefore are very limited in their potential to stimulate our agency, intuits the cause that Heidegger gives for being bored with the party, namely its predetermined nature which we casually indulge while suspending our greater existential *telos*. In a similar way, scholars grow bored with the books that they used to enjoy, as they become irrelevant to their long-term, more extensive pursuits. This retroactive instrumentality is less objectifying than the pastime readers' instrumental compulsion to be occupied, because while enjoying the party and likewise during the scholars' pleasurable absorption in reading we are "taken by things" and exercise our agency. At the same time, it is a more profound form of boredom and of instrumental

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[42] Ibid., 121.

[43] Ibid., 119-20.

[44] Jan Slaby, "The Other Side of Existence: Heidegger on Boredom," in *Habitus in Habitat II: Other Sides of Cognition*, eds. Sabine Flach and Jan Söffner (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 110-12. This "track," adds Slaby, is our "care": "meaningful projections (of future possibilities) from a pre-given (factive) ground in the context of which entities stand out as presently mattering to us in specific ways." Ibid., note 11.

[45] Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts*, 119.

[46] Ibid., 123.

intentionality since it prompts us to account for our choices of passing the
time and to establish criteria for how we direct our care.

Heidegger's examples of being bored significantly refer to leisure
activities that appear to divert us from a more purposeful spending of our
limited resource of time: in the first situation, we have been forced by
circumstances to "squander [time] in vain in our fruitless waiting;"[47] and in
the second, we willingly take time for the evening, but "ultimately waste
[that] time."[48] The concern with accounting for our time, which emerges in
Heidegger's interpretation of boredom, exacerbates the telic, instrumental
mode of care which has to privilege some experiences and negate others,
despite our existential groundlessness, until care undergoes a dialectical
reversal into the "indifference enveloping beings as a whole" of the third
and final stage of boredom, where "beings that surround us offer us no
further possibility of acting."[49] In this total emptiness of meaning, of
intentionality devoid of objects and of a temporal horizon, our agency
recovers its openness and reaches a new awareness of its possibilities,
experiencing "the releasement of our free, everyday perspective."[50]

The pleasure of passing the time occupied in activity, the need to occupy
existence ("l'esistenza da occupare", *Zib.*, 618) and one's "forza vitale"
(vital force; *Zib.*, 2988), the ways in which we succeed or fail to do so at
different developmental stages of our existence, form a major thematic
constellation in Leopardi's analysis of human affects and especially of
boredom. In his observations, the pleasure of being occupied tends to
become less fulfilling with time, both in the course of the individual span of
existence (children vs. adults) and historically (ancients vs. moderns), when
our occupations lack an objective of some gravity to exercise our agency.[51]
In one of his last *Zibaldone* entries, written for a projected "Manuale di
filosofia pratica" (Handbook of Practical Philosophy) Leopardi extends his
demand for telic direction in activities to the need for a *telos* to our entire
lifespan:

> In the same way that pleasures bring no delight unless they have a purpose
> outside themselves […] the same is true of life, however full of pleasures it

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[47] Ibid., 120.

[48] Ibid., 129.

[49] Ibid., 138-39.

[50] Ibid., 91.

[51] For example, the ancients had many opportunities to occupy and to validate their
life force, i.e. "diversion, exercise, ends and rewards" (e di esercizio, e di fini, e di
premi; *Zib.*, 2583), whereas the modern adult of some spirit direly lacks such
stimulation (*Zib.*, 1649).

is, unless it has an overall purpose, etc. [...] I have never been able to understand what they can enjoy, how they can live, those carefree layabouts (old and mature as well) who go from pleasure to pleasure, from one amusement to another, without ever setting themselves a regular goal at which to aim, without ever saying, deciding, to themselves: what is the point of my life? (*Zib.*, 4518)[52]

At the same time, Leopardi's existential angst, which he voices dramatically in the *Canti*, would repeatedly dismantle his telic validation of human experience:

All life is idleness, at every human level,
if doing or getting with no worthy aim,
or that could never reach the goal
that it aspires to, can be seen as idle.

[...] È tutta,
In ogni umano stato, ozio la vita,
Se quell'oprar, quel procurar che a degno
Obbietto non intende, o che all'intento
Giunger mai non potria, ben si conviene
Ozioso nomar [...] (*Al conte Carlo Pepoli*, vv. 7-12)[53]

As our purposive striving intensifies into the experience of "immortal boredom" (noia immortale),[54] which then grows into the "black care" (negra cura)[55] of melancholy, and eventually reaches "the boundless vanity of all" (l'infinita vanità del tutto),[56] we undergo the releasement of our everyday intentionality of openness — at first generic in its comprehensive scope before individual objects resurge with renewed vigour into our horizon of care:

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[52] "Come i piaceri non dilettano se non hanno un fine fuori di essi, [...] così neanche la vita, p. piena che sia di piaceri, se non ha un fine in totale ec [...]. Io non ho potuto mai concepire che cosa possano godere, come possano viver quegli scioperati e spensierati che (anche maturi o vecchi) passano di godimento in godimento, di trastullo in trastullo, senza aversi mai posto uno scopo a cui mirare, abitualm., senza aver mai detto, fissato, tra se medesimi: a che mi servirà la mia vita?"

[53] Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans. Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), *To Count Carlo Pepoli*, vv. 8-11. The original Italian text of the *Canti* is quoted from Leopardi, *Tutte le poesie*.

[54] Ibid., v. 71 (v. 72).

[55] Ibid., v. 85.

[56] Ibid., *To Himself*, v. 16.

Wherever I look,
at the green banks, the sky
all of its pain,
all of its joy.
The shore, grove, and mountain
have come back to life.
The fountain is talking,
the sea speaks to me.

Ovunque il guardo mira,
Tutto un dolor mi spira,
Tutto un piacer mi dà.
Meco ritorna a vivere
La piaggia, il bosco, il monte:
Parla al mio core il fonte,
Meco favella il mar. (*Il Risorgimento*, vv. 94-100)[57]

Concluding Remarks

While recalling his youthful scholarly pursuits, Leopardi tells us how he was able to stay contentedly in the present for extended periods of time in a hopeful but calm frame of mind, patiently attending to his tasks—an experience which was never afflicted by boredom and which he ascribes to his young age:

The greatest happiness possible to man in this world is when he lives his life quietly with a calm and certain hope of a much better future, a hope that, because it is certain, and because the state in which he lives is good, does not make him restless or disturbed by impatience to enjoy this very beautiful imagined future. I myself enjoyed this divine state for several months at intervals when I was 16 and 17, finding myself quietly *occupied* in my studies with nothing else to disturb me, and with the calm and certain hope of a happy future. And I will never experience it again, because such a hope as this, which *alone can make man happy with the present*, can occur only in a youth of that age, or at least, of that experience. (*Zib.*, 76)[58]

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[57] Ibid., *The Reawakening*, vv. 93-100.

[58] "La somma felicità possibile dell'uomo in questo mondo, è quando egli vive quietamente nel suo stato con una speranza riposata e certa di un avvenire molto migliore, che per esser certa, e lo stato in cui vive, buono, non lo inquieti e non lo turbi coll'impazienza di goder di questo immaginato bellissimo futuro. Questo divino stato l'ho provato io di 16 e 17 anni per alcuni mesi ad intervalli, trovandomi quietamente *occupato* negli studi, senz'altri disturbi, e colla certa e tranquilla speranza di un lietissimo avvenire. E non lo proverò mai più, perchè questa tale

The young scholar has the power of purposeful attention and telic intentionality to draw a horizon of expectations, but does not yet experience the anxiety that time inflicts with its passing, compelling us to seek distractions or to occupy ourselves productively in order to ground our inherent openness. His mind stays focused on his studies while his attention is propelled by the vision of his future maturity and fruition. As Leopardi surmises, this "divine state" of his younger self is the grace of inexperience and reassuring conditions—a period of freedom from pressures and disturbances ("the state in which he lives is good"). With time, the agent will be challenged to gradually transform the transient conditions of fostering the care of patient expectation into intentionality that has been released from "[porre] troppa cura e intenzion d'animo" (trying too hard, and concentrating too much; *Zib.* 1572) to master experiences and to attain objectives. Towards the end of his *Zibaldone*, Leopardi recalls another happy state, this time of his mature self who experiences the freedom from instrumental intentionality during the creative occupation of writing, in which he loses awareness of time's passing: "Felicità da me provata nel tempo del comporre, il miglior tempo ch'io abbia passato in mia vita, e nel quale mi contenterei di durare finch'io vivo. Passar le giornate senza accorgermene; parermi le ore cortissime, e maravigliarmi sovente io medesimo di tanta facilità di passarle. v. p. 4476" (Happiness felt by me at the time of composing, the best time I have ever spent in my life, and where I would be happy to stay as long as I live. To pass the days without noticing, the hours seeming so short, often wondering to myself how easily they pass. See p. 4477; *Zib.*, 4417-18); "Alla p. 4418. Anche qui, come in tante altre cose della nostra vita, *i mezzi vagliono più che i fini*" ([...] For p. 4418. Here also, as in so many other aspects of our life, *the means are worth more than the ends*; *Zib.*, 4476).

While he never loses sight of the ethical concerns that demand a teleological validation of our actions, Leopardi is rather appreciative of the intrinsic value of experience and especially of the creative process. Nothing attests better to his impassioned quest to pass the time meaningfully than the textual phenomenon of his *Zibaldone,* which allows the attentive reader to partake in the author's cultivation of a released mode of thinking and writing. The epistemic method that generated this voluminous collection of fragments is phenomenological—"the taking up of a certain attitude and practicing a certain attentive awareness to the things of the world as we live

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speranza che *sola può render l'uomo contento del presente*, non può più cadere se non in un giovane di quella tale età, o almeno, esperienza."

them rather than as we conceptualise or theorize them."[59] The *Zibaldone*'s occasional mode of composition, free from the formal constraints of authorial intention, builds coherence patiently, over more than a decade, continuously interrupting and reopening statements from different perspectives and at different levels of granularity, as indicated by the numerous marginal and interlinear additions in the manuscript and cross-references between the fragments. It is a multi-dimensional text which can be entered from many different points that could lead on to many interlocking paths; at times, it constructs extensive syllogistic chains; at times, it offers flights of the imagination; at times, it slackens or becomes repetitive; at times, its density is evocative and illuminating; at times, it is just a series of reading notations or quotes. But for the most part, it compels the reader to dwell there.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"MEMORY," "REMEMBRANCE," AND "OBLIVION" IN LEOPARDI'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE AND POETRY

VINCENZO ALLEGRINI

1. Preface: Memory and Oblivion[1]

In his intellectual diary, known as *Zibaldone*, Giacomo Leopardi registered several notes on the working process of memory: he called it the "sole source of knowledge" ("l'unica fonte del sapere," *Zib.*, 1676), the object of all human cognitions and the essential condition of material and mental skills. Already in *Zib.*, 76,[2] however, memory is also described as an exhausted and ephemeral faculty, which needs to be continuously trained through habit, reflection, writing and poetry. "Does not memory," Filippo

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[1] For the quotations from the *Zibaldone* (*Zib.*, + ms. page) I make use of the English translation edited by Michael Ceasar and Franco D'Intino (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013) and the original Italian edited by Rolando Damiani (Milan: Mondadori, 1997). For the quotations from Leopardi's original works I make use of Giacomo Leopardi, *Poesie e prose*, eds. Rolando Damiani and Mario Andrea Rigoni, 2 vols. (Milan: Mondadori, 1988).

[2] "Civilization has introduced refined labors, etc., that consume and exhaust and extinguish human faculties such as memory, sight, strength in general, etc., labors that were not required by nature. And it has taken away those labors which conserve and improve the faculties, such as agriculture, hunting, etc., and primitive life, which were willed by nature and necessary for such a life." (*Zib.*, 76). "L'incivilimento ha posto in uso le fatiche fine ec. che consumano e logorano ed estinguono le facoltà uamane, come la memoria, la vista, le forze in genere ec. le quali non erano richieste dalla natura, e tolte quelle che le conservano e le accrescono, come quelle dell'agricoltore del cacciatore ec. e della vita primitiva, le quali erano volute dalla natura e rese necessarie alla detta vita." This is the first thought about memory in the *Zibaldone*.

Ottonieri asks rhetorically in the *Operette morali* (*Moral Tales*), "memory–
–the custodian of wisdom—keep wearing out and decreasing after youth has
passed?" And, he continues, "how many people, in their old age, mentally
regress to their childhood!"[3]

The anguish of losing memory was indeed the obsession that led the poet
to create his personal nmemonic technique and elaborate his own theory of
memory, as we shall see. But where did this anxiety come from? Firstly, it
originated from the unceasing tension between fragment and totality, that is
to say, between the ambition to an encyclopaedic knowledge and the keen
awareness of the weakness of each universalist pretension in the modern
age. The *Zibaldone* itself was the result of methodical writing—at least from
1821 to 1823—and could be regarded as an antidote against oblivion; an
attempt to keep memory alive, through the medium of the written word, in
a huge tangible storehouse of recollections. Yet, the argument is not so
simple and Leopardi soon had to deal with the growth, the fragmentation
and the shapelessness of his 'notebook'; hence the task of indexing the
diary, namely "to put some order into his unwieldy manuscript"[4] — a
project doomed to fail, if it is true that the compiling of the index
corresponded with the beginning of the *Zibaldone*'s end.[5] In other words,
according to the letter of 4 June 1819, the threat of forgetfulness looms over
any type of writing, including that of the *Zibaldone*: "I disegni mi
s'accumulano in testa, ma non posso appena raccorgli frettolosamente in
carta perché non mi cadano dalla memoria."[6] Again, seventeen years later,
just one year before his death, Leopardi surprisingly confirms: "Je n'ai
jamais fait d'ouvrage, j'ai fait seulement des essais en comptant toujours
préluder, mais ma carrière n'est pas allée loin."[7]

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[3] Giacomo Leopardi, *Operette Morali. Essays and Dialogues* (*OM*), trans. Giovanni
Cecchetti (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 301. "La memoria,
conservatrice della sapienza, non si va sempre logorando e scemando dalla
giovanezza in giù? quanti nella vecchiaia tornano fanciulli di mente!"

[4] Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino, "Introduction," in Leopardi, *Zibaldone*,
xxxviii.

[5] The index was compiled in Florence between July and October 1827. From then
on Leopardi will write only 240 additional pages.

[6] Giacomo Leopardi, *Epistolario* (*E*), eds. Franco Brioschi and Patrizia Landi (Turin:
Bollati Boringhieri, 1998), 1:310 (4 June 1819, to Pietro Giordani). "Plans
accumulate in my head, but I can barely jot them down hastily as not to forget them."
I make use of the translation by Prue Shaw, *The Letters of Giacomo Leopardi. 1817-
1837* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

[7] Leopardi, *E*, 2:2073 (June 1836, to Charles Lebreton). "I have never produced
works, I have only made attempts, reckoning always that they were a starting-point,
but my career went no further."

In addition to this, the need to preserve memory is also connected with some external and socio-cultural reasons, above all the explosion of the modern printing industry (the so-called second printing revolution).[8] If it is an undeniable fact that printing encouraged both the definition of a literary canon and the birth of a shared cultural system, at the same time it is also true that this system seemed to implode exactly between the second half of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. Indeed, the latest innovations in typography allowed a wide variety of books to be printed: an enormous, "immense tide" (immenso fiume) in which—as the poet said—it was so easy to be engulfed by a "continuous and general shipwreck" (naufragio continuo e comune).[9] The books (and the author himself) had thus become an ephemeral product destined to oblivion:

> The destiny of books today is like that of those insects called ephemerals (*éphemères*): certain species live a few hours, some one night, others 3 or 4 days; but it always only a matter of days. In truth, we of today are travelers and pilgrims on the earth: our time is truly short: we are here for one day: the morning in flower, the evening faded, or dried up. (*Zib.*, 4270)[10]

This passage was written in April 1827, close in time to the indexing, and we need to look back at Leopardi's earlier thoughts. Clearly, oblivion is not only a matter of being forgotten in future centuries; it also encompasses the idea of losing knowledge (paradoxically caused by an information overload).[11] So, in *Zib.*, 1767 the course of the human mind is figuratively defined as "motion of heavy bodies" (moto de' gravi) or "accelerated motion" (moto accelerato), which recalls the utterly crucial metaphorics of fall—think of the fleeting appearance of Silvia and Nerina. From this point of view, it is revealing to read *Zib.*, 1176-79, wherein the decadence of human memory is related to the topic of "excess" (il troppo) as "father to nothing" (padre del nulla). In particular, Leopardi notes that

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[8] On this point, cf. Fabio A. Camilletti, *Leopardi's Nymphs. Grace, Melancholy, and the Uncanny* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), 31-34; Franco D'Intino, *L'immagine della voce. Leopardi, Platone e il libro morale* (Venice: Marsilio, 2009), 209-54.

[9] Leopardi, *OM*, 231.

[10] "La sorte dei libri oggi, è come quella degl'insetti chiamati efimeri (*éphémères*): alcune specie vivono poche ore, alcune una notte, altre 3 o 4 giorni; ma sempre si tratta di giorni. Noi siamo veramente oggidì passeggeri e pellegrini sulla terra: veramente caduchi: esseri di un giorno: la mattina in fiore, la sera appassiti, o secchi: soggetti anche a sopravvivere alla propria fama, e più longevi che la memoria di noi." Unless otherwise specified, the emphasis is by the author.

[11] On this, cf. Silvana Acanfora, "La memoria di Leopardi," in *I libri di Leopardi* (Naples: Elio de Rosa Editore, 2000), 162.

the extraordinary power and "delicacy" (delicatezza) of the organs "renders them more liable to wear out and more liable to break down" (li rende e più facili a consumarsi, e più facili a guastarsi) and, therefore, inferior "in capacity to less delicate and imperfect organs" ("inferiori di facoltà agli organi i meno delicati, e i più imperfetti," *Zib.*, 1176-79). Then, even an exceptional memory, intellect, and imagination could become "entirely or very nearly useless" ("o del tutto o quasi inutili," *Zib.,* 1176) since "seeing too much, conceiving too much" (il troppo vedere, il troppo concepire) makes minds (ingegni) "sterile and fruitless" ("sterili e infruttuosi," *Zib.,* 1178). This was, for instance, Tasso's or Pascal's destiny, both "subjected to a kind of madness" (soggetto a una specie di pazzia), but on a more general level "we have often seen men who were prodigies of memory when young become marvels of forgetfulness when old, or before. See Cancellieri, *Degli uomini di gran memoria* etc." (*Zib.,* 1177).[12] As is well known, Cancellieri's dissertation was the first printed book (1815) mentioning the name of young Giacomo Leopardi, who was praised as a prodigious talent:[13] a detail that should not be neglected, as the reference to the Roman erudite could reveal a projection of the author's own anxiety. It is probably not coincidental, in fact, that this work is quoted once again in *Zib.,* 3203, where Leopardi proposes the example of Hemiogenes, the Greek rhetorician who

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[12] "Si sono spesso veduti uomini che erano portenti di memoria da giovani, divenir maraviglie di dimenticanza da vecchi, o ancor prima. V. il Cancellieri, Degli uomini di gran memoria ec." Cf. Francesco Cancellieri, *Dissertazione intorno agli uomini dotati di gran memoria* (Rome: Francesco Bourlie, 1815).

[13] Cf. Cancellieri, *Dissertazione*, 88. At first Leopardi was enthusiastic about the mention (cf. Leopardi, *E*, 1:11 12, 15 April 1815 to Francesco Cancellieri), but he probably changed his mind after the publication of the disparaging review by Giuseppe Compagnoni, on which cf. Novella Bellucci, *Giacomo Leopardi e i contemporanei. Testimonianze dall'Italia e dall'Europa in vita e in morte del poeta* (Florence: Ponte alle Grazie, 1996), 80 81. In any case, the author met Cancellieri in Rome and he deemed him to be "un fiume di ciarle, il più noioso e disperante uomo della terra; parla di cose assurdamente frivole col massimo interesse, di cose somme colla maggior freddezza possibile; ti affoga di complimenti e di lodi altissime, e ti fa gli uni e l'altre in modo così gelato e con tale indifferenza, che a sentirlo, pare che l'esser uomo straordinario sia la cosa più ordinaria del mondo" (A stream of gossip, the most boring and exasperating man on earth; he talks of absurdly frivolous things with the greatest interest, of supreme things in the chilliest way possible; he smothers you with compliments and extravagant praise, and he does it in a way so icy and with such indifference, that to hear him it seems as if being an extraordinary man is the most ordinary thing in the world). Leopardi, *E*, 1:337, 25 November, 1822, to Carlo Leopardi.

suddenly forgot everything he knew at the age of twenty-five (and note that, quite symptomatically, Giacomo also wrote this when he was twenty-five).

2. The "Secret of Aiding Memory"

Contrary to the traditional *ars memoriae*,[14] Leopardi based his 'artificial memory' upon the use of words rather than mental images. As we can see in *Zib.*, 1103, he understood the close relationship that exists between memory and language, or better still, between memory and signs:

> For it is certain that man's memory is utterly powerless (as are thought and the intellect) without the aid of signs to fix his ideas and recollections [...]. And the earliest recollections are the most intense and enduring we have. Yet they begin just at the point at which the child has already acquired an adequate language, or with those first ideas which we conceived along with their signs and which we were able to fix with words. Just as my first memory is of some musk pears I saw, and heard being named at the same time. (*Zib.*, 1103)[15]

In this domain of language the author found evidence of the materiality of human thought and understanding:[16] "Everything in our minds and faculties is material. The intellect could do nothing without speech, because the word is almost the body of the most abstract idea" (*Zib.*, 1657).[17] The mnestic process is entirely similar; "our memory," in effect, "do[es] not retain, do[es] not conceive of anything at all, except by turning everything

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[14] On art of memory cf., among others, Lina Bolzoni, *The Gallery of Memory: Literary and Iconographic Models in the Age of the Printing* Press, trans. Jeremy Parzen (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2001); Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Bodley Head, 2014).

[15] "Essendo certo che la memoria dell'uomo è impotentissima (come il pensiero e l'intelletto) senza l'aiuto de' segni che fissino le sue idee, e reminiscenze [...]. E le più antiche reminiscenze sono in noi le più vive e durevoli. Ma elle cominciano giusto da quel punto dove il fanciullo ha già acquistato un linguaggio sufficiente, ovvero da quelle prime idee, che noi concepimmo unitamente ai loro segni, e che noi potemmo fissare colle parole. Come la prima mia ricordanza è di alcune pere moscadelle che io vedeva, e sentiva nominare al tempo stesso."

[16] The same concept is already expressed in *Zib.*, 601.

[17] "Tutto è materiale nella nostra mente e facoltà. L'intelletto non potrebbe niente senza la favella, perchè la parola è quasi il corpo dell'idea la più astratta."

into matter, in whatever way, and by attaching itself as far as possible to matter" (*Zib.*, 1657).[18] The same notion is restated a hundred pages later:

> For memory to be able to remember, the object to be remembered must be in some way or other determinate [...]. Someone who wishes to remember anything must in some way define the idea in his mind, and this is what we do all the time without even thinking about it. Words define, verses define. Now, this is precisely the property of matter: the fact that its boundaries are certain and known, and that it never lacks limits in any direction, nor circumscription. The secret to aiding memory boils down to materializing things or ideas as much as possible. (*Zib.*, 1764-5)[19]

We should not be deceived by the passage above: verses "define" in the sense that they fix transient thoughts in words, giving them concrete materiality and corporeality.[20] The author's statement thus has nothing to do with his poetics of the *vago* (vague) and *indefinito* (indefinite). From this it follows that even the phenomenon of involuntary memory happens not only as a result of the simultaneous action of the senses, but also as a consequence of the repetition of verses, particularly just before falling asleep:

> Several times I have found myself going to bed thinking of a few lines or words that I had repeated frequently during the day or in the previous hour or two, or even with a few bars of a melody on my mind, only to fall asleep thinking or dreaming of something quite different and then wake up still repeating the same words or verses to myself or with the same tune in my imagination. It seems as though when the soul goes to sleep it puts aside that set of thoughts and images, just as we leave our clothes in a convenient place near at hand so that we can put them on again as soon as we wake up. And this, too, without the involvement of the will (*Zib.*, 184).[21]

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[18] "La nostra memoria, tutte le nostre facoltà mentali, non possono, non ritengono, non concepiscono esattamente nulla, se non riducendo ogni cosa a materia, in qualunque modo, ed attaccandosi sempre alla materia quanto è possibile."

[19] "La memoria per potersi ricordare ha bisogno che l'oggetto della ricordanza sia in qualche maniera determinato [...]. Chi vuol ricordarsi di qualunque cosa bisogna che ne determini in qualche modo l'idea nella sua mente; e questo è ciò che facciamo tutto giorno senza pensarvi. Le parole determinano, i versi determinano. Or questa è appunto la proprietà della materia: l'avere i suoi confini certi e conosciuti, e il non mancar mai di termini per ogni verso, e di circoscrizione. Tutto il secreto per aiutar la memoria, si riduce a materializzare le cose e le idee quanto più si possa."

[20] In relation to "the usefulness of verse for remembering things by heart," cf. also *Zib.*, 1689-90.

[21] "Più volte m'è accaduto di addormentarmi con alcuni versi o parole in bocca, ch'io avrò ripetute spesso dentro la giornata, o dentro qualche ora prima del sonno, o vero

Perhaps it is because of this that the *Esercizi di memoria* (*Memory Exercises*) have a precise rhythmic structure (and at first they were misinterpreted as unintelligible lines).[22] Actually, they are cryptic notes whereby the author created a system of verbal associations to be later used above all as a reminder for further and more elaborate writing.[23] For instance, in *Exercise* number four, the shortest one, Leopardi wrote: "Eclissi, armonia, ermafrodita, arcadi, tessali. Leonora-sogno-lontano. sventure. crepuscolo. nulla. pianto nella maggiore allegrezza."[24] As Besomi pointed out,[25] the first sentence is certainly connected with the *Dialogo della Terra e della Luna* (*Dialogue Between the Earth and the Moon*). More specifically, the *armonia* turns out to be the unreal "delightful music, which the heavenly bodies make with their movement"[26] (but Earth and Moon can not hear it), and the *eclissi* too is mentioned by planet Earth: "Actually, the only thing I know about the influence I have on you is that every once in a while I take away the light of the sun from you, and I take away your own light from my self."[27] If *Ermafrodita, arcadi, tessali* seems to be the outline of two of the many improper questions asked by the "dense and slow" Earth ("Are you male or female? In ancient times people were not quire sure. Is it true that the Arcadians came into the world before you?"),[28] it is clear that *Leonora-sogno-lontano. sventure. crepuscolo* is a 'draft' of the *Dialogo di*

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coll'aria di qualche cantilena in mente; dormire pensando o sognando tutt'altro, e risvegliarmi ripetendo fra me gli stessi versi o parole, o colla stess'aria nella fantasia. Pare che l'anima nell'addormentarsi deponga i suoi pensieri e immagini d'allora, come deponiamo i vestimenti, in un luogo alla mano e vicinissimo, affine di ripigliarli, subito svegliata. E questo pure senza operazione della volontà."

[22] Cf. Manfredi Porena, *Versi inediti e incomprensibili*, in *Scritti leopardiani* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1959), 283-94.

[23] However, some of these associations are unrelated to literary works and connected with specific circumstances of the author's life (e.g. his first trip to Rome or the contents of a letter).

[24] Giacomo Leopardi, *Esercizi di memoria*, in *Poesie e prose*, eds. Rolando Damiani and Mario Andrea Rigoni (Milan: Mondadori, 1988), 2:1249: "Eclipse, harmony, hermaphrodite, arcadians, tessalians. Leonora-dream-far away. misfortunes. twilight. nothingness. crying in the greater joy." The translation is mine.

[25] Cf. Ottavio Besomi, Introduction, in Giacomo Leopardi, *Operette Morali* (Milan: Mondadori, 1979), xxiv-xxv.

[26] Leopardi, *OM*, 115. "Suono piacevolissimo che fanno i corpi celesti coi loro moti."

[27] Leopardi, *OM*, 123. "Di cotesti effetti veramente io non so altro se non che di tanto in tanto io levo a te la luce del sole, e a me la tua."

[28] Leopardi, *OM*, 121. "Sei tu femmina o maschio? perché anticamente ne fu varia opinione. È vero o no che gli Arcadi vennero al mondo prima di te?"

Torquato Tasso e del suo genio familiare (*Dialogue Between Torquato Tasso and His Familiar Spirit*). A twilight atmosphere underlies the entire *operetta*, in which Leopardi touches on, among others, the theme of difference between dream (or the ideal beloved woman) and reality (or the real beloved woman). "If only I could see my Leonora!" (Oh potess'io rivedere la mia Leonora!) exclaims Tasso almost at the beginning:

> Each time she comes to my mind, I feel a quivering of joy going through me from head to foot, and there is no nerve or vein in me that is not shaken. Sometimes as I think about her, certain images and certain emotions are rekindled in me, and for that short period of time, I feel I am the very same Torquato I was before I gained experience of evils and of men and whom now I so often mourn as dead.[29]

The Spirit replies with a question: "Which of these two things do you judge to be sweeter: to see your beloved or to think about her?"—then the poet responds: "I don't know. It's certain that when she was near me, she looked like a woman; from far away (lontano) she looked, and she looks, like a goddess."[30] Further on Tasso declares:

> TASSO. In spite of all this, I'm dying from the desire to see her and to talk her again.
> SPIRIT. All right then; tonight I'll bring her to you in a dream [...]
> TASSO. Some consolation! A dream instead of the truth![31]

The dialogue then ends with the approach of the dream: "SPIRIT. Now I'll leave you, for I see that you're getting sleepy, and I'll go to prepare that beautiful dream I promised you."[32] Concerning *nulla* (nothingness) and *pianto nella maggiore allegrezza* (crying in the greater joy) it might be said

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[29] Leopardi, *OM*, 167. "Ogni volta che ella mi torna alla mente, mi nasce un brivido di gioia, che dalla cima del capo mi si stende fino all'ultima punta de' piedi; e non resta in me nervo né vena che non sia scossa. Talora, pensando a lei, mi si ravvivano nell'animo certe immagini e certi affetti, tali, che per quel poco tempo, mi pare di essere ancora quello stesso Torquato che fui prima di aver fatto esperienza delle sciagure e degli uomini, e che era io piango tante volte per morto."

[30] "GENIO. Quale delle due cose stimi che sia più dolce: vedere la donna amata, o pensarne? TASSO. Non so. Certo che quando mi era presente, ella mi pareva una donna; lontana, mi pareva e mi pare una dea."

[31] Leopardi, *OM*, 169. "TASSO. Con tutto questo, io mi muoio dal desiderio di rivederla, e di riparlarle. GENIO. Via, questa notte in sogno io te la condurrò davanti [...] TASSO. Gran conforto: un sogno in cambio del vero."

[32] Leopardi, *OM*, 181. "Io ti lascio; che veggo che il sonno ti viene entrando; e me ne vo ad apparecchiare il bel sogno che ti ho promesso."

that for Leopardi Tasso represented the first poet of modernity or, more precisely, the first one who experienced "the drowning feeling that results from the certainty and vivid sense of the *nothingness* of all things" (*Zib.*, 140)[33]:

> Miserable Torquato! Your sweet song
> couldn't console you, couldn't melt the ice
> that the hatred and foul jealousy
> of men and tyrants locked your spirit in,
> that was so warm. Love,
> the last illusion of our life,
> deserted you. *Nothingness to you*
> *seemed an actual, substantial shadow*
> *and the world a desert* [...].[34]

These verses shed light on how Leopardi interpreted Tasso's poetry and understood his experience as mirroring his own, namely as an intimate philosophical inquiry into the nothingness and meaninglessness of existence. Besides, the last sentence of the memory exercise probably refers to an autobiographical memory and alludes to the contrasting feelings that overwhelmed the poet during his visit to Torquato Tasso's tomb—the only pleasant recollection he had of his stay in Rome (November 1822 - April 23):

> On Friday the 15th of February 1823 I went to visit Tasso's tomb, and I wept there. This is the first and only *pleasure* I have experienced in Rome [...] You understand the host of feelings that arise from contemplating the contrast between Tasso's greatness and the unpretentiousness of his tomb [...]. One feels a sad and angry consolation thinking that this lack of ostentation is still sufficient to interest and inspire posterity.[35]

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[33] My emphasis. "Affogamento che nasce dalla certezza e dal sentimento vivo della nullità di tutte le cose."

[34] Giacomo Leopardi, *Ad Angelo Mai. Quand'ebbe trovato i libri di Cicerone* Della Repubblica, in *Canti* (*C*), vv. 124-130; my emphasis. Unless otherwise stated, for the quotations from the *Canti* I make use of the English translation by Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010). "Oh misero Torquato! il dolce canto / non valse a consolarti o a sciorre il gelo / onde l'alma t'avean, ch'era sì calda, / cinta l'odio e l'immondo / livor private e de' tiranni. Amore, / amor, di nostra vita ultimo inganno, / t'abbandonava. Ombra reale e salda / ti parve il nulla, e il mondo / inabitata piaggia."

[35] Leopardi, *E*, 1:653-54 (20 February 1823, to Carlo Leopardi). "Venerdì 15 febbraio 1823 fui a visitare il sepolcro del Tasso e ci piansi. Questo è il primo e l'unico *piacere* che ho provato in Roma [...]. Tu comprendi la gran folla di affetti

In any case, Leopardi used preparatory sketches not only for his published works, but even for his private and secret notes of the *Zibaldone*, the '*non-book*' of Memory. This is evident in the tiny file cards and slips of paper—preserved among the Naples manuscripts—containing lists of references, excerpts, key words, and page numbers crossed out once the author had used them. Although this method, most likely suggested by Joseph Anton Vogel, had a specific antecedent in the so called *ars excerpendi*,[36] it is possible to say, along with Gensini, that Leopardi "should have found in some way the key to the art of memory" (doveva avere per qualche filo ritrovato il bandolo dell'arte della memoria).[37] As D'Intino recognized, however, we should also bear in mind that "it was not so much the ancient *ars memoriae*, [...] which was useful for oral communication, but, rather, a more modern derivation, connected to the world of writing and printing."[38]

3. Leopardi's Theory of Memory and Remembrance

The core of Leopardi's theory of memory is constructed between the summer and the autumn of 1821, specifically in the *Zibaldone*. Understanding memory as an intellectual faculty founded on attention, habit (both in the sense of *assuefazione*[39] and *abitudine*), imitation, and repetition, the poet

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che nasce dal considerare il contrasto fra la grandezza del Tasso e l'umiltà della sua sepoltura [...]. Si sente una trista e fremebonda consolazione pensando che questa povertà è sufficiente ad interessar e animar la posterità."

[36] On this point, cf. Lucia Marinelli, '*Ars memoriae* e *Ars excerpendi*: le alternative del ricordare', in *I libri di Leopardi* (Naples: De Rosa, 2000), 131-58; Alberto Cevolini, *De arte excerpendi. Imparare a dimenticare nella modernità* (Florence: Olschki, 2006). Among Leopardi's sources see Cancellieri, *Dissertazione*, 107-13.

[37] Stefano Gensini, *Linguistica leopardiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984), 169. The translation is mine.

[38] Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino, Introduction, in Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, xvii. In this context it is significant that one of the cards contains both the expression "artificial memory" ("memoria artifiziale," with a link to *Zib.*, 2047) and the ancient Greek transliteration of the opening lines of the *Gerusalemme Liberata* (*Jerusalem Delivered*) by Tasso.

[39] On assuefazione, cf. Guglielmo Tini, *Dalla prima alla seconda natura. Leopardi tra abbondanza di vita e assuefazione* (Poggibonsi: Lalli, 1994); Franco Brioschi, "La forza dell'assuefazione," in *"Lo Zibaldone." Cento anno dopo. Composizione, edizioni, temi*, Atti del X Convegno Internazionale di Studi Leopardiani, Recanati-Portorecanati 14-19 settembre 1998 (Florence: Olschki, 2001), 737 50; Andrea Malagamba, "Assuefazione/Assuefabilità," in *Lessico Leopardiano 2014*, eds.

employed as his main philosophical source Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* known through the mediation of Francesco Soave, who translated the abridgement by John Wynne.[40] Locke stressed the essential role of attention and repetition in fixing ideas, even though the "deepest and most lasting impressions" in our memory are accompanied by "*Pleasure* or *Pain,*" "the great Business of the Senses."[41] Nevertheless, this last aspect—conserved by Wynne[42]—was omitted by Soave, who synthetically wrote:

> Two ways can be used to fix ideas in the memory in a more efficient way; the first one is to think about them attentively, the second one is to think about them frequently. Therefore, one soon forgets the ideas that occurred to us only once, and were never again recalled, as we know happens to those who lose their sight in childhood and became incapable of evoking the notion of colours.[43]

Thus the ideas not often repeated in the mind are soon lost, "without the least glimpse remaining of them"[44]: "come avviene alle antiche iscrizioni, che il tempo va consumando, la loro impressione né più né meno cancellasi a poco a poco, finché orma più non ne resta."[45] Moreover, Soave introduced

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Novella Bellucci, Franco D'Intino, and Stefano Gensini (Rome: Sapienza Editrice, 2014), 29-36.

[40] Francesco Soave, *Saggio filosofico di Gio. Locke su l'umano intelletto, compendiato dal Dr. Winne, tradotto, e commentato* (Venice, 1801). In Leopardi's library, the French version *Essai philosophique concernent l'Entendement humain traduit de l'anglais par Pierre Costet* was also present (Amsterdam, 1723). On Leopardi and Locke, see Bortolo Martinelli, *Leopardi tra Leibniz e Locke. Alla ricerca di un orientamento e di un fondamento* (Rome: Carocci, 2003).

[41] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1979, 150.

[42] Cf. John Wynne, *An Abridgement of Mr. Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: 1700), 32.

[43] Soave, *Saggio filosofico*, 112. "Due mezzi molto vagliono a fissare vie maggiormente le idee nella memoria; il primo è di pensarvi attentamente, il secondo di pensarvi spesso. Quindi presto si dimentican le idee, che si sono avute una volta sola, e che più non si rinnovano come veggiamo accadere a chi ha perduto la vista nella fanciullezza, che non può più de' colori formar idea." All the translations of this work are mine.

[44] Locke, *An Essay*, 151.

[45] Soave, *Saggio filosofico*, 112. "Their impressions gradually vanish, until traces no longer remain: exactly as happens to those ancient inscriptions which are erased by time."

Locke's distinction between active and passive memory,[46] which Leopardi will later articulate in voluntary and involuntary attention:

> Memory is often active, because it often sets itself strongly to work to dig up, so to speak, some hidden ideas; but it is often passive as well, because ideas that were no longer present either arise by themselves or they are ripped out of their hidden abodes by violent passions.[47]

At the end of the chapter, the translator also added some interesting pages of comment regarding the function of habit (*abitudine*) and sensations, focusing particularly on Condillac and Bonnet (in all probability Leopardi did not directly read Condillac's *Treatise on the Sensations*, but the principle of *liaison des idées* and its connection with memory was widespread, argued by Soave himself[48] and, in a certain sense, might have inspired Leopardi's concept of concomitant ideas, so important in his aesthetics and poetics).[49] Soave further elaborates:

> I recognize that I have seen the same object other times before, because I find, so to speak, its image duplicated in myself, since I see it combined with two different series of ideas: one is that of the images I created in my mind from the objects, the other is that of the ideas which have been awakened [...] These are the foundations of my reminiscences: the *double image* that I associate with the object, or more precisely, the idea of the object that I perceive beyond its current representation; and the power that it has to evoke not only its own idea, but also the ones of other objects that once were present with it, but that no longer are.[50]

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[46] Cf., in particular, Locke, *An Essay*, 152-53.

[47] Soave, *Saggio filosofico*, 113. "La memoria sovente è attiva, perché sovente ella s'adopra gagliardamente a dissotterrare, dirò così, certe idee che parevan sepolte; ma spesso ancora è meramente passiva, perché l'idee che non s'avevano più presenti, o si risvegliano da se medesime, o sono strappate a forza dalle nascoste loro sedi per la violenza di qualche passione."

[48] Cf., *ibid.*, 121-23.

[49] Cf. *Zib.*, 1234-36; 1701-6; 3952-53. On commonalities and differences between Leopardi and Condillac see Alessandra Aloisi, *Desiderio e assuefazione. Studio sul pensiero di Leopardi* (Pisa: ETS, 2014), 111-12; Fabiana Cacciapuoti, *Dentro lo Zibaldone. Il tempo circolare della scrittura di Leopardi* (Rome: Donzelli, 2010), 13-15, 89-96.

[50] Soave, *Saggio filosofico*, 117 (emphasis added). "Io conosco di aver veduto lo stesso oggetto altre volte, perché ne trovo in me duplicata, per così dire, l'immagine, perché unita la veggo a due serie diverse d'idee, l'una delle rappresentazioni, che mi son fatte dagli oggetti [...] l'altra delle idee, che mi si risvegliano degli oggetti [...]. Questa *doppia immagine*, che io ho dell'oggetto, o per parlare più precisamente questa idea, che io in me sento di lui oltre alla sua rappresentazione attuale, questa

As Martinelli puts it,[51] this passage may evoke the well-known entry of November 1828:

> To a sensitive and imaginative man, who lives, as I have done for so long, continually feeling and imagining, the world and its objects are in a certain respect *double*. With his eyes he will see a tower, a landscape; with his ears he will hear the sound of a bell; and at the same time with his imagination he will see another tower, another landscape, he will hear another sound. The whole beauty and pleasure of things lies in this second kind of objects. Sad is that life (and yet life is generally so) which sees, hears, feels only simple objects, only those objects perceived by the eyes, the ears, and the other senses (*Zib.*, 4418).[52]

It is worth noting that Leopardi claims to derive all the mind's faculties from the operation of habit:

> I believe that memory is nothing else but a habit (*abitudine*) contracted or to be contracted by organs, etc. A baby unable to contract a habit does not have memory [...] And note that not only does it not have memory because only on a few occasions could it have received some impression or other and gotten used to recalling it mentally, but it expressly lacks the faculty of memory. For no one remembers events from infancy, however much the impressions from that time may be the most intense of all. (*Zib.*, 1255)[53]

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forza che egli ha di eccitarmi oltre all'immagine di se stesso anche l'idea di altri oggetti, che insieme con lui mi sono stati presenti una volta, ma nol sono attualmente [...]: sono i fondamenti della mia reminiscenza."

[51] Cf. Martinelli, *Leopardi tra Leibniz e Locke*, 209.

[52] Emphasis added. "All'uomo sensibile e immaginoso, che viva, come io sono vissuto gran tempo, sentendo di continuo ed immaginando, il mondo e gli oggetti sono in certo modo doppi. Egli vedrà cogli occhi una torre, una campagna; udrà cogli orecchi un suono d'una campana; e nel tempo stesso coll'immaginazione vedrà un'altra torre, un'altra campagna, udrà un altro suono. In questo secondo genere di obbietti sta tutto il bello e il piacevole delle cose. Trista quella vita (ed è pur tale la vita comunemente) che non vede, non ode, non sente se non che oggetti semplici, quelli soli di cui gli occhi, gli orecchi e gli altri sentimenti ricevono la sensazione."

[53] "Io credo che la memoria non sia altro che un'abitudine contratta o da contrarsi da organi ec. Il bambino che non può aver contratto abitudine, non ha memoria [...] E notate. Non solo non ha memoria, perchè poche volte ha potuto ricevere questa o quella impressione, ed assuefarsi a richiamarla colla mente. Ma manca formalmente della facoltà della memoria, giacchè nessuno si ricorda delle cose dell'infanzia, quantunque le impressioni d'allora sieno più vive che mai." Those "impressions" (*impressioni*) as we will see, are remembrances (*ricordanze* or *rimembranze*) more than memories (*memorie*).

The faculty of remembering, therefore, almost wholly consists of "becoming habituated to our habituation" ("l'assuefazione ad assuefarsi" *Zib.,* 1523) "by means of a sequence of reminiscences which form the particular habituation for that specific impression" ("mediante successive reminiscenze, che formano l'assuefazione particolare a quella tale impressione" *Zib.,* 1524); it is "anything other than the virtue of imitation, for each reminiscence is effectively an imitation that memory, that is, the organs proper to memory make of past sensations (repeating them, refitting them, and virtually counterfeiting them)."[54] Upon initial review, special attention should be given to the terms "refitting" (*rifacendole*) and "counterfeiting" (*contraffacendole*), the latter preceded and, so to say, mitigated by the adverb "virtually" (*quasi*), but reiterated in the succeeding thought:

> The attribute of memory is not strictly speaking to recall, which is impossible, it being a question of things placed outside it and its power, but of counterfeiting, representing, imitating, which does not depend on things but on habituation to things and their impressions [...] And memories [*ricordanze*] are not instances of recall but imitations or repetitions of sensations, by means of habituation [...]. This observation greatly illuminates the nature of memory, which many quite impossibly have seen as consisting of a power to depict or receive stable impressions of each sensation or image, etc., whereas, in fact, an impression is not stable, nor can it be. And see in this regard what I have said elsewhere about the visible images of things, which, without either will or study on the part of memory, present themselves to us in the evening, when we shut our eyes, etc. (*Zib.,* 1383-84)[55]

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[54] *Zib.,* 1383: "Non è quasi altro che virtù imitativa, giacchè ciascuna reminiscenza è quasi un'imitazione che la memoria, cioè gli organi suoi propri, fanno delle sensazioni passate, (ripetendole, rifacendole, e quasi contraffacendole)."

[55] "La proprietà della memoria non è propriamente di richiamare, il che è impossibile, trattandosi di cose poste fuori di lei e della sua forza, ma di contraffare, rappresentare, imitare, il che non dipende dalle cose, ma dall'assuefazione alle cose e impressioni loro [...] E le ricordanze non sono richiami, ma imitazioni, o ripetizioni delle sensazioni, mediante l'assuefazione [...] Questa osservazione rischiara assai la natura della memoria, che molti impossibilm. hanno fatto consistere in una forza di dipingere, o ricevere le impressioni *stabili* di ciascuna sensazione o immagine ec. laddove l'impressione non è stabile, nè può. E v. in tal proposito quello che altrove ho detto delle immagini visibili delle cose, che senza volontà nè studio della memoria, ci si presentano la sera, chiudendo gli occhi ec."

This entry enables us to observe the latent contraposition between memory and remembrance,[56] which Leopardi regarded as a 'counterfeit' representation of the past, a pale afterimage of a precarious past sensation: "a recollection, a repetition, a reechoing, or reflection of the old image" ("una ricordanza, una ripetizione, una ripercussione o riflesso della immagine antica" *Zib.*, 515). A remembrance is something that is missing, or rather, no longer exists—since it is no longer the same thing it was before—and yet it unwittingly occurs and re-emerges: "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," as Wordsworth put it.[57] So, while memory has a conservative-reproductive function, remembrance has a creative-productive power: the former draws from voluntary attention, reflection, repetition, and uniformity; the latter derives from involuntary attention, sensation, singularity, and surprise. From this angle, it seems that they should be considered as two intrinsically different kinds of mental faculties, a memory-habit and a creative memory-imagination (or remembrance). It is then revelatory that in the above-quoted thought Leopardi used the term "ricordanza" (recollection)[58] instead of "memoria" (memory). The point is that the longest lasting remembrances—the so-called "immagini antiche" (old images)—are not eternally embedded in memory, preserved through repetition and re-evoked when needed; on the contrary, they are somewhat

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[56] On this aspect see Aloisi, *Desiderio e assuefazione*, 116-23. Confirming this hypothesis, I believe that the distinction between memory and remembrance could be grasped from the index itself, where Leopardi created two separate items (*'memorie'* and *'rimembranze'*), which have no common reference. Furthermore, as many as 23 of the 33 entries indexed under *'memorie'* are also indexed under *'Assuefazione. Assuefabilità e conformabilità dell'uomo'* (Habituation. Man's capacity to become habituated and conformability), whereas none of those indexed under *'rimembranze'* is in the same list.

[57] William Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, in William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Michael Mason (London: Longman, 2013), 62.

[58] Cf. Antonio Prete, *Il pensiero poetante. Saggio su Leopardi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2006), 40: "Ricordanza. La desinenza, cara al poeta, fa riposare insieme nel significante della lettera, il ricordo e il ricordare, la cosa immaginata e il movimento che riporta la cosa dal fondo cancellato o turbato alla superficie dell'immaginazione attuale, e la rende produttiva di altre immagini." (*Ricordanza*. The ending, dear to the poet, lets the remembering and the remembered, the object imagined and the movement which brings it back from the erased or turbid bottom to the surface of the present imagination rest together in the signifier, and it allows the individual image to give life to other images). The translation is mine.

like oneiric visions[59] formed through the experience of extraordinariness, which is irreconcilable with habit and attentive reiteration. All these themes are intertwined in the 4 August 1821 entry:

> It is an error to distinguish the memory from the intellect, as if it occupied a separate region of our brain. Memory is simply the faculty the intellect has of habituating itself to conceptions [...] And so necessary is it to the intellect that, without it, it is not capable of any *action* [...] But this faculty, no matter how deeply inherent it is in the intellect, and which is often barely distinguishable from the faculty of conceiving and of reasoning, is, however, different. It may drastically fade, etc., but the faculty of conceiving, etc., not fade or be lost, etc. (*Zib.*, 1453-54)[60]

Here again, reflections about memory involve those about habit, assuefaction, intellect, and oblivion ("It may drastically fade"). Furthermore, in the final part of this thought the author develops the theme, already hinted at in *Zib.*, 184-185, of involuntary memory and its mechanism:

> In any case, the faculty of habituation, which is what memory consists of, is in many respects independent of the will, like other habituations which are material and outside the mind, etc. This may be seen both from thousands of other things, and because very often a sensation experienced in the present recalls to the memory another experienced in the past, without the will contributing, or even having the time to contribute to the recalling of it. Thus a song reminds us of, e.g., what we were doing on another occasion when we heard the same song, etc. Thus Alfieri, at the beginning of his *Life*, notes one of his recollections that is relevant to this point, etc. (*Zib.*, 1454-55).[61]

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[59] On this similarity between remembrance and dreams, cf., for instance, Antonio Prete, *Finitudine e infinito. Su Leopardi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1998), 28.

[60] "Malamente si distingue la memoria dall'intelletto, quasi avesse una regione a parte nel nostro cervello. La memoria non è altro che una facoltà che l'intelletto ha di assuefarsi alle concezioni [...] Ed è tanto necessaria all'intelletto, ch'egli senza di essa, non è capace di verun'a*zione* [...]. Bensì questa facoltà, che quantunque inerentissima all'intelletto, e spesso appena distinguibile dalla facoltà di concepire e di ragionare, è però diversa, può sommamente illanguidirsi ec. senza che quella di concepire ec. s'illanguidisca nè si perda ec."

[61] "Del resto la facoltà di assuefazione in che consiste la memoria è indipendente in molte parti dalla volontà, come altre assuefazioni materiali e fuor della mente ec. Il che si vede sì per mille altre cose, sì perchè spessissimo una sensazione provata presentemente, ce ne richiama alla memoria un'altra provata per l'addietro, senza che la volontà contribuisca, o abbia pure il tempo di contribuire a richiamarla. Così un canto ci richiama p.e. quello che noi facevamo altra volta udendo quello stesso canto ec. Così l'Alfieri nel principio della sua Vita, osserva una sua rimembranza che fa al proposito ec."

The reference to Alfieri's *Vita* is particularly meaningful. Leopardi was thinking of the second chapter entitled *Reminiscenze dell'infanzia* (*Reminiscences of Infancy*):

> I have preserved no recollections of that stupid infantile vegetation, except of a parental uncle, who used, when I was three or fours old [sic], to make me stand on a large old chest, and give me sugar-plums. But I hardly remember anything about him but his square-toed shoes. Many years after his death, when this fashion had disappeared, I saw a pair of dragoon's boots with square toes; it was the first pair I had seen since my infancy, and they brought back the recollection of my uncle, with all the sensations I felt when I stood on the old trunks and received the caresses and sugar-plums, and I recalled to my imagination vividly all his movements and habits, even the exquisite taste of the sugar-plums. I have let my pen run at random in this nonsense, as it may not be entirely useless to those who speculate on the mechanism of our ideas, and the affinity of thoughts with sensations.[62]

If Alfieri emphasises the role of taste in describing the unconscious reawakening of childhood memories and traces of the past buried in the depths of mind, Leopardi sees a connection between the pleasure derived from the sound—the "song" ("canto") of *Zib.*, 1455, for example—and those derived from the senses of taste and smell:

> The pleasure we derive from sound does not come under the category of the beautiful, but is like that of taste or smell, etc [...]. But sound is unique in producing an effect that in itself is much more spiritual than food, colors, or tangible objects. And yet observe that smells, although to a much lesser extent, have a similar ability to awaken our imagination, etc. Hence the very spirituality of sound is a physical effect on our sensory organs and does not require the attention of the soul, because sound draws the soul directly to itself, and this is what moves us, even when our soul barely notices it. (*Zib.*, 157-58)[63]

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[62] Vittorio Alfieri, *The Autobiography of Vittorio Alfieri, the Tragic Poet: Born at Asti, 1749 Died at Florence, 1803*, trans. C. Edwards Lester (New York: Paine and Burgess, 1845), 21.

[63] "Il piacere che ci dà il suono non va sotto la categoria del bello, ma è come quello del gusto dell'odorato ec [...]. Ma la particolarità del suono è di produrre per se stesso un effetto più spirituale dei cibi dei colori degli oggetti tastabili ec. E tuttavia osservate che gli odori, in grado bensì molto più piccolo, ma pure hanno una simile proprietà, risvegliando l'immaginaz. ec. Laonde quello stesso spirituale del suono è un effetto fisico di quella sensazione de' nostri organi, e infatti non ha bisogno dell'attenzione dell'anima, perchè il suono immediatamente la tira a se, e la commozione vien tutta da lui, quando anche l'anima appena ci avverta."

Sounds, odours, and tastes serve as a trigger for memory, with an intuition that might anticipate Proust's concept of involuntary memory, as has already been argued.[64] More generally, even though "there is no memory without attention" ("non v'è memoria senz'attenzione," *Zib.,* 1733), it is possible to distinguish not only between voluntary and involuntary memory, but also between voluntary ("spiritual," "spirituale") and involuntary ("material," "materiale") attention: "you only become capable of the first through the habituation to (and hence the faculty of) paying attention," whereas "the second kind consists of instances of attention that derive from the strength and intensity of sensations whose impression forces the soul" (*Zib.,* 1734).[65] Again, if the spiritual attention works on *applied* minds" ("ingegni *applicati*"), the material one works on the "susceptible and imaginative spirits" ("gli spiriti suscettibili, e immaginosi") "not habituated to paying careful attention" ("[che] non abbiano l'assuefazione di molto attendere," *Zib.,* 1734). Hence the two kinds of attention refer to opposing conceptual categories and faculties: on the one hand, habit, attention and reflection, on the other, imagination, sensation and impression. It thus seems plausible to suggest that memory can be conceived as the result of an operation of the intellect. Remembrance, by contrast, should be understood as the product of a particular state of mind. Still, remembrance is a liminal state and, as it were, a 'shift' in an intermediate stage between memory and imagination; its temporality is suspended, like a momentary forgetfulness of the reality of time. And this is the time of poetry (and pleasure) *par excellence*, because "whatever awakens a host of memories (*rimembranze*) for us, where thought grows uncertain, is always pleasurable. The images of poets, words that are called poetic, etc., do this" (*Zib.,* 1777).[66] This state is evidently very dissimilar to the idea of *memory-habit*; as Aloisi convincingly points out,[67] rather than by habit or attention, remembrances are generated by distraction, intended as excess and dispersion of attention or as *divertimento* (from the Latin *devertere*, 'to turn elsewhere'). This interpretation might appear extravagant, if it were not supported by quite a number of reflections in the *Zibaldone*, such as *Zib.,* 2390 or *Zib.,* 3950, where the author engages with the "multiplicity" (*moltiplicità*), "facility"

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[64] Cf., for instance, Luigi Blasucci, *I titoli dei «Canti» e altri studi leopardiani* (Venice: Marsilio, 2011), 210.

[65] "Della prima non si diventa capaci se non coll'assuefazione (e quindi facoltà) di attendere [...] Della seconda specie sono quelle attenzioni che derivano da forza e vivacità delle sensazioni, le quali colla loro impressione costringono l'anima."

[66] "Quello che ci desta una folla di rimembranze dove il pensiero si confonda, è sempre piacevole. Ciò fanno le immagini de' poeti, le parole dette poetiche ec."

[67] Cf. Aloisi, *Desiderio e assuefazione*, 111.

(*facilità*), "rapidity" (*rapidità*), "force" (*forza*), and continuous sweep of attention typical of children and "people who are distracted, not very reflective" (Gli uomini distratti, poco riflessivi): "the multiplicity of things to which they pay attention, [...] is called distraction" ("la moltiplicità delle loro attenzioni [...] si chiama distrazione," *Zib.*, 3950)—or "painless alienation of the mind" (non travagliosa alienazione di mente), to borrow Amelio's words, the solitary philosopher protagonist of *Elogio degli uccelli* (*In Praise of Birds*).[68]

4. Remembrance, Pleasure, and Poetry

Leopardi insists on the inextricability of remembrance and poetry at various stages of his *oeuvre*. For the author "remembering is the essential and principal constituent of poetic feeling": "the present, whatever it may be, cannot be poetic; and the poetic, in one way or another, always consists in the distant, the indefinite, the vague" (*Zib.*, 4426)[69]. So, the present is the time that shatters the "vain pleasure of illusions" (il piacer vano delle illusioni), which is "the most solid pleasure in this life" ("il più solido piacere di questa vita," *Zib.*, 51). Indeed, on closer inspection, the present moment— that "is by its own nature petty and insipid" (è piccolo e insipido per natura)[70]—appears to be nothing in itself: "it could be said of everyone that the present means nothing, that every man lacks a present" ("si può dire che il presente sia nullo per tutti, e che ogni uomo manchi del presente," *Zib.*, 277). Consequently, the more "distant and less habitual" (lontana, e meno abituale) a remembrance is,

> The more it elevates, stirs, sweetly saddens, delights the soul, and leaves a more vivid, energetic, profound, perceptible, and *fruitful* impression, because, being more distant, it is more subject to illusion, while because it is not habitual, either individually or of its kind, it will be *exempt from the influence of habituation* that weakens every sensation [...] What is certain, however, is that should such distant memories, as sweet as they are separated from our present life and of kind contrasting with our habitual sensations,

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[68] Leopardi, *OM*, 361. Here it is perhaps useful to note that for the poet remembrance is neither sterile abstraction nor pure *rêverie*, but an alternative instrument of knowledge.

[69] "La rimembranza è essenziale e principale nel sentimento poetico, non per altro, se non perchè il presente, qual ch'egli sia, non può esser poetico; e il poetico, in uno o in altro modo, si trova sempre consistere nel lontano, nell'indefinito, nel vago."

[70] Leopardi, *OM*, 235.

inspire poetry etc., they can only inspire melancholic poetry, as is natural, having to do with what is lost. (*Zib.*, 1860-61; my emphasis)[71]

Therefore, inspiring an ephemeral and melancholic pleasure, each remembrance coexists with the phenomenon of its dissolution, namely with the clear perception of the corrosive effect of time: "But the illusion fails, and time returns us"[72] (Ma l'illusione manca e ci riporta il tempo),[73] as Montale writes in *I limoni* (*The Lemons*). The poem *Le Ricordanze* is probably the most impressive representation of that flow of memories and possibilities, which are nullified when the mind regains awareness of the present time and irrevocability of time lost:

> Shimmering stars of the Bear, I never thought
> that I'd be back again to see you shine
> over my father's garden,
> and talk with you from the windows
> of this house I lived in as a child,
> where I saw my happiness come to an end.[74]

The wonder felt by the poet is not so much the consequence of his return to Recanati and to the physical spaces of the "house"—the windows, the garden, the dark and ancient rooms, the loggia, the painted walls and the fountain, "at the same time physical *loci* and *loci memoriae*"[75]—but of the recurrence of the "capacity to be seduced" ("capacità di esser sedotto," *Zib.*, 17) by the world and, thus, to "rivedere nuovamente il mondo nel suo

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[71] "Tanto più innalza, stringe, addolora dolcemente, diletta l'anima, e fa più viva, energica, profonda, sensibile, e *fruttuosa* impressione, perch'essendo più lontana, è più sottoposta all'illusione; e non essendo abituale nè essa individualmente, nè nel suo genere, va esente dall'influenza dell'assuefazione che indebolisce ogni sensazione [...]. Certo è però che tali lontane rimembranze, quante dolci, tanto separate dalla nostra vita presente, e di genere contrario a quelle delle nostre sensazioni abituali, ispirando della poesia ec. non ponno ispirare che poesia malinconica, come è naturale, trattandosi di ciò che si è perduto."

[72] Eugenio Montale, *I limoni*, v. 37, in *Collected Poems 1920-1954*, trans. Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998), 10.

[73] Eugenio Montale, *Ossi di seppia, I limoni*, in *Tutte le poesie*, ed. Giorgio Zampa (Milan: Mondadori, 1984), 12.

[74] Leopardi, *C, Le Ricordanze*, vv. 1-6. "Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa, io non credea / tornare ancor per uso a contemplarvi / sul paterno giardino scintillanti, / e ragionar con voi dalle finestre / di questo albergo ove abitai fanciullo, / e delle gioie mie vidi la fine."

[75] Camilletti, *Leopardi's Nymphs*, 112.

incanto mitico."[76] In other words, the emphasis is on the return to a lost poetic sensibility, already described in *Il Risorgimento* (*The Reawakening*), where the poet compares the disappearance of inspiration with the inability to capture the light of those stars[77] that will shine again in the opening lines of *Le Ricordanze*.

In a circular manner,[78] the poem does not only begin with the twinkle of the stars—a metaphor of a return—but it also ends with the feeble shaft of light, the "sad light of the stars" ("mesto [...] delle stelle il raggio," v. 143) reflecting on Nerina's window: a motif that emphasizes an absence, or better yet displays something that remains even in absence. *Le Ricordanze* are entirely informed by a continuous dialectic between dissolution ("to disappear") and permanence ("to remain"), as we have already seen in the *incipit*, where the initial light is destined to fade soon, precisely in v. 6: "where I saw my happiness come to an end" (in the original language the verse sounds "e delle gioie mie vidi la fine," with a significant passage from the imperfect tense—the durative "tense of fascination"[79]—to the past tense).

In addition to this circular motion of thoughts and recollections, which reflects the idea of re-evocation and re-turn, it is worth pointing out that the succession of memories is often reliant on the action of the senses: hearing (vv. 12-13: "listening to the song / of the frog" [ed ascoltando il canto della rana]; vv. 17-19: "and I heard voices, / under my father's roof, and the servants / peaceably work," [e sotto al patrio tetto / sonavan voci alterne, e le tranquille / opre de' servi]) sight (v. 12: "watching the sky" [mirando il cielo]; v. 20: "the sight of that far sea," [la vista di quel lontano mar]) and smell (in synaesthesia, vv. 15–17: "while the perfumed avenues / and the cypresses there in the grove / whispered in the wind," [sussurrando al vento / i viali odorati, ed i cipressi / là nella selva]). Moreover, the syntagmas "tender (*dolci*) dreams" (v. 20) and "bitter (*acerba*) memory" (v. 171) both metaphorically call into question the semantic field of taste, while the

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[76]Alberto Folin, *Leopardi e l'imperfetto nulla* (Venice: Marsilio, 2001), 61. "Come back to see the world in its mythical enthralment." The translation is mine.

[77] "The moon had died out / With the stars in the sky" (Leopardi, *C*, *Il Risorgimento*, vv. 23-24).

[78] Again, in regard to symmetrical and circular correspondences, note that the verb *tornare* (to be / come back to) is used both at the beginning and at the end (vv. 1-2 and vv. 162-65).

[79] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse. Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin, 1990), 217. On these aspects, cf. Claudio Colaiacomo, "Conquista del tempo e testo nelle «Ricordanze» di Leopardi," *Critica del testo* 1, no. 1 (1998): 291-343.

expression "sitting on the grass" ("seduto in verde zolla," v. 10) provides us with a tactile sensation. Abandonment to the senses and the very act of remembering both serve to evoke the pleasure of illusion. It has already been stated, however, that the nullifying action of the present immediately follows an excess of *memory-imagination* which transfigures a time past, mythical due to its distance. Already on 16 October 1820 Leopardi significantly noted in the *Zibaldone* that:

> Memories of childhood and early adolescence, the delights of that age now irreparably lost, the flowering of hopes, imagined joys, flight of fancy about future prosperity, action, life, glory, pleasure, all vanished. (*Zib.,* 278)[30]

Muñiz Muñiz effectively defines Leopardi's theory of remembrance as a snake biting its tail,[31] highlighting how the idea of childhood as receptacle of memories has in itself the seed of its demythologization: recollection also has to go through a process of analysis that ends up uncovering its self-conscious and ephemeral character. So, in *Le Ricordanze* it is the poet himself who reveals the delusion:

> There's nothing here I see or feel
> but that some image doesn't live in me again,
> some sweet memory come to light.
> Sweet in itself; but knowledge of the present
> replaces it with pain, and a vain desire
> for the past, however sad, and the wish
> to say: I was.[32]

The adjective "vain" ("van") brings out the feeling of emptiness that remains after the conclusion of the experience of remembrance; for this reason, the *canto* represents at the same time the culmination and the collapse of Leopardi's poetics of memory, and it should not come as a

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[30] "Le rimembranze della fanciullezza e della prima adolescenza, dei godimenti di quell'età perduti irreparabilmente, delle speranze fiorite, delle immaginazioni ridenti, dei disegni aerei di prosperità futura, di azioni, di vita, di gloria, di piacere, tutto svanito."

[31] Cf. M. De Las Nieves Muñiz Muñiz, *Topografia dell'assenza. (Per una teoria della ricordanza leopardiana)*, in *Le città di Giacomo Leopardi*, Atti del VII Convegno Internazionale di Studi Leopardiani, Recanati 16-19 novembre 1987 (Florence: Olschki, 1991), 321.

[32] Leopardi, *C, Le Ricordanze*, vv. 55-61: "[...] Qui non è cosa / ch'io vegga o senta, onde un'immagin dentro / non torni, e un dolce rimembrar non sorga. / Dolce per se; ma con dolor sottentra / il pensier del presente, un van desio / del passato, ancor tristo, e il dire: io fui."

surprise that the poem, exactly as *A Silvia* (*To Silvia*), ends with the image of fall (*caduta*)—first and foremost of Nerina: "have you fallen perhaps / from out my thoughts?"[83] ("caduta forse / dal mio pensier sei tu?"), but also of the Self, the lyrical 'I': "the flower of my poor days / which fell so soon"[84] ("il fiore / de' miei poveri dì, che sì per tempo / cadeva"). The rapid movement of the images—and of Nerina too, who is an ephemeral image as well—thus corresponds to that of the fall. If this is true, the poetics of *Le Ricordanze* denies a fixation of the past unless it is captured in an instant (which is transient by definition). Paradoxically, in the case of Silvia and Nerina, it is exactly their nature as "*figure sparenti*" (disappearing figures), to put it in De Sanctis' words,[85] which grants them their permanence in poetry, in the short-lived instant of an apparition (Nerina is an epiphany in absence, or even better an epiphany of absence). Still, if the sense of loss is pivotal in any reflection about memory, the task of poetry is to fix and preserve the faded images of the mind, marked by caducity. For this to happen, the poet should elevate "what remains from this dissipation to a state of sacredness, of a *reliquia* (relic)—the "*reliquia* itself being *what is left*, a fragment or part that can be remembered and venerated, but which belonged to a previous 'whole' that has perished."[86] The poetics of remembrance preserves—just as relics do—the images of the past in the only way possible for Leopardi: by briefly re-evoking and poetically portraying them. As D'Intino remarks, poetry becomes a sacred space—one might say a secular 'hierophany'—"capace di annullare l'idea di morte e di caducità,"[87] and, in this sense, the book of *Canti* could be seen as the depository where the scattered fragments of the past find fixed shape and rational order:

> One of the greatest fruits that I hope for and expect from my verses is that they will warm my old age with the heat of my youth. It is to savor them when I reach that age and to experience something that remains of my past feelings, placed there so it might be kept and last through time, as though in

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[83] Leopardi, *C, Le Ricordanze*, vv. 137-38. Only for this quotation and the next, I make use of the translation by John Humphreys (Naples: Scalabrini, 1962).

[84] Leopardi, *C, Le Ricordanze*, vv. 111-12.

[85] Cf. Francesco De Sanctis, *La Nerina di Giacomo Leopardi*, in *Opere di Francesco De Sanctis, Leopardi*, ed. Carlo Muscetta, (Turin: Einaudi, 1960), 517-32.

[86] Paola Cori, "Augenblick: A Reading of Leopardi's «Le Ricordanze»," *Rivista internazionale di studi leopardiani* 9 (2013): 36.

[87] Franco D'Intino, "I misteri di Silvia. Motivo persefoneo e mistica eleusina in Leopardi," *Filologia e critica* 19, no. 2 (1994): 254. "Capable of defeating the idea of death and caducity." The translation is mine.

store. It is to move myself as I reread them, as often happens to me, and more
so than when I read poems by other people. (Pisa, 15 April 1828.) Over and
above the remembering, it is to reflect on who I was, and to compare myself
with myself. And finally, it is the pleasure of enjoying and appreciating
one's own work, and of contemplating with contentment the beauties and
the qualities of a child of one's own, with no other satisfaction than that of
having made something beautiful in this world, whether or not it is
recognized as such by others. (*Zib.*, 4302)[55]

5. Epilogue. Chorus of Mummies in Frederick Ruysch's Study: The Pleasure of Oblivion?

We find a good example of the topics discussed so far (from memory to
oblivion and from the instant / the relic to death) in the *Coro di morti nello
studio di Federico Ruysch* (*Chorus of Mummies in Frederick Ruysch's
Study*), the lyric opening the *Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue
mummie* (*Dialogue Between Frederick Ruysch and His Mummies*).
Significantly, except for *Al conte Carlo Pepoli* (*To Count Carlo Pepoli*)—
which is but a melancholic farewell to poetry—the *Chorus* is the only poem
written by Leopardi during a poetic silence that lasted five years (1823-
1828). Here the poet, who looks at life from the paradoxical point of view
of death, from which our existence seems to be nothing more than a remote
and bitter point,[89] adopts an alienating perspective:

> Alone in the world, eternal, toward whom does move
> Every created thing,
> In you, Death, finds rest
> Our naked nature;
> Not joyous, but secure
> From ancient suffering. Profound
> Night in our confused mind

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[55] "Uno de' maggiori frutti che io mi propongo e spero da' miei versi, è che essi
riscaldino la mia vecchiezza col calore della mia gioventù; è di assaporarli in quella
età, e provar qualche reliquia de' miei sentimenti passati, messa quivi entro, per
conservarla e darle durata, quasi in deposito; è di commuover me stesso in rileggerli,
come spesso mi accade, e meglio che in leggere poesie d'altri: (Pisa. 15. Apr. 1828.)
oltre la rimembranza, il riflettere sopra quello ch'io fui, e paragonarmi meco
medesimo; e in fine il piacere che si prova in gustare e apprezzare i propri lavori, e
contemplare da se compiacendosene, le bellezze e i pregi di un figliuolo proprio,
non con altra soddisfazione, che di aver fatta una cosa bella al mondo; sia essa o non
sia conosciuta per tale da altrui."
[89] Cf. Antonella Del Gatto, *Quel punto acerbo. Temporalità e conoscenza metaforica
in Leopardi* (Florence: Olschki, 2012).

Obscures our grave thought;
Towards hope, desire, the shriveled spirit
Feels its strength wane;
Thus from affliction and from fear is freed
And the empty slow years
Unbored whiles away.
We lived; and as the confused memory (confusa ricordanza)
Of a frightening ghost
And of a sweating dream
Wanders in the soul of infants,
So in us remembrance lingers
Of our lives: but far from fear
Is our remembering. What were we?
What was the bitter point called life?
Stupendous mystery is today
Life to our minds, and such
As to the minds of the living
Unknown death appears. As when living
From death it fled, now flees
From vital flame
Our naked nature
Not joyous but secure;
For to be happy
Is denied to mortals and denied the dead by Fate.[90]

The lines describe an atmosphere of surreal suspension, through the alternation of terms belonging to the semantic area of terror—linked to the confused remembrance of life ("from affliction and from fear;" "frightening ghost;" "a sweating dream")—and others connected with the idea of a metaphysical relief, namely a release from human passions and a sort of

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[90] Leopardi, *OM*, 272-73; emphasis added. "Sola nel mondo eterna, a cui si volve / Ogni creata cosa, / In te, morte, si posa / Nostra ignuda natura; / Lieta no, ma sicura / Dall'antico dolor. Profonda notte / Nella confusa mente / Il pensier grave oscura; / Alla speme, al desio, l'arido spirto / Lena mancar si sente: / Cosí d'affanne e di temenza è sciolto, / E l'età vote e lente / Senza tedio consuma. / Vivemmo: e qual di paurosa larva, / E di sudate sogno, / A lattante fanciullo erra nell'alma / Confusa ricordanza: / Tal memoria n'avanza / Del viver nostro: ma da tema è lunge / Il rimembrar. Che fummo? / Che fu quel punto acerbo / Che di vita ebbe nome? / Cosa arcana e stupenda / Oggi è la vita al pensier nostro, e tale / Qual de' vivi al pensiero / L'ignota morte appar. Come da morte / Vivendo rifuggia, cosí rifugge / Dalla fiamma vitale / Nostra ignuda natura / Lieta no ma sicura; / Però ch'esser beato / Nega ai mortali e nega a' morti il fato."

stillness due to a state of torpor and semi-oblivion.[91] From this standpoint, life is reduced to a mere nominal essence, and yet it remains a faint, shadowy, and in a certain sense vague remembrance. It is not properly a pleasure, but at least a recollection "far from fear," without the "vain desire / for the past, however sad, and the wish / to say: I was."[92] In short, the *Chorus* does not focus on the pleasure of remembering, but rather on a calm oblivion; it shows the daydream of a remembrance taken to its extreme and transformed into distraction and long-lasting detachment from life's afflictions: "contemplazione del male da un rifugio inespugnabile."[93] These considerations call to mind the note on page 4074 of the *Zibaldone*, written just three months before the *Chorus*, in which Leopardi equates pleasure with a condition of abandonment and obliviousness to life (and this is exactly the unlimited insensibility of the mummies):

> Pleasure is none other than an abandonment and forgetfulness of life, and a kind of sleep and death. Pleasure is rather the privation or the depression of feeling than a feeling as such and still less an intense feeling. It is like an imitation of insensibility and of death, the drawing as near as possible to a state contrary to life and to the privation of it. (*Zib.*, 4074)[94]

This idea, however, had deeper roots, if already on September 1821 delight is assimilated to the carelessness of a dream: "a certain torpor in mind and body, which is sometimes caused by the approach of sleep, is very pleasurable. Sleep itself is not pleasurable except inasmuch as it is torpor, forgetting, respite from desires, fears, hopes, passions of every kind" (*Zib.*, 1779).[95] The boundaries between the pleasure of remembrance and forgetfulness are therefore more labile than they might seem at a first glance.

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[91] Cf. Lucio Felici, L'Olimpo abbandonato. Leopardi tra "favole antiche" e "disperati affetti" (Venice: Marsilio, 2005), 164.

[92] Leopardi, *C, Le Ricordanze*, vv. 59-61.

[93] Cf. Giacomo Leopardi, *Operette Morali*, ed. Cesare Galimberti (Naples: Guida, 1998), 300n13. "Contemplation of evil from a secure refuge." The translation is mine.

[94] "Il piacere non è che un abbandono e un oblio della vita, e una specie di sonno e di morte. Il piacere è piuttosto una privazione o una depressione di sentimento che un sentimento, e molto meno un sentimento vivo. Egli è quasi un'imitazione della insensibilità e della morte, un accostarsi più che si possa allo stato contrario alla vita ed alla privazione di essa."

[95] "Un certo torpore dell'animo e del corpo che è cagionato talvolta dall'avvicinamento del sonno, è piacevolissimo. Il sonno stesso non è piacevole se non in quanto è torpore, dimenticanza, riposo dai desiderii, dai timori, dalle speranze, e dalle passioni d'ogni sorta."

Oblivion does not only have a dysphoric value, it is not merely nullification and loss caused by the agency of time, but in some cases it could also be a hypothetical remedy against what Leopardi calls the ills of modern philosophy: "there is no other remedy for the ills of modern philosophy than forgetting, and material pasture for the illusions to feed on" (*Zib.*, 337).[96] In addition to remembrance, oblivion itself can rekindle imagination and illusion.

In conclusion, both remembrance and oblivion are necessary for poetic creation: the former because it attempts to recall the past and to deny time, to capture eternity within an instant; the latter because it offers respite from pain and from the knowledge of truth, which seems vital as "la filosofia ci ha fatto conoscer tanto che quella dimenticanza di noi stessi ch'era facile una volta, ora è impossibile. ● la immaginazione tornerà in vigore, e le illusioni riprenderanno corpo e sostanza in una vita energica e mobile [...] o questo mondo diverrà un serraglio di disperati, e forse anche un deserto."[97] Inevitably, illusions per se, that are as necessary as they are ephemeral, cannot last: in the end failure seems to prevail, but perhaps this does not really matter.

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[96] "Ai mali della filosofia presente, non c'è altro rimedio che la dimenticanza, e un pascolo materiale alle illusioni."

[97] Giacomo Leopardi, *Appendice alle Operette Morali. Frammento sul suicidio* (*Appendix to the Operette Morali. Fragment on suicide*), in *Poesie e prose*, 2:272. "Philosophy has allowed us to know so much that the self-forgetting that once was easy has now become impossible. Either imagination will be effective again, illusions will regain concreteness and substance within a vigorous and vivid life [...] or this world will become an enclosure for the hopeless, and perhaps even a desert." I make use of the translation by F. A. Camilletti, cf. his *Classicism and Romanticism in Italian Literature: Leopardi's Discourse on Romantic Poetry* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013), 218-19.

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PART VI

ON PHILOSOPHY AND THE SCIENCES

Chapter Fourteen

The End(s):
Teleology and Materialism in Leopardi

Mark Epstein

Teleology is not a topic often discussed in literary theory or criticism, or even in a more encompassing context that would include all the arts. The reasons for my choice are numerous and complex, but I will list some of those that I find most important.

Teleological issues cross the boundaries between the natural, formal and human sciences often on questions that regard foundations and definition. For instance, the boundary between the physical/natural sciences devoted to inanimate matter and those devoted to living organisms (the "life sciences") is intimately tied to teleological problems and contradictions. In the area of philosophical reflection teleology is intimately bound to problems related to free will, determinism, individual choice and so forth. In the areas of the human and social sciences teleology is closely tied to issues regarding intentionality, responsibility, forms of social interaction, aggregation, institutionalization, democracy and so forth, therefore affecting a very wide array of disciplines from psychology to sociology, politics to anthropology, jurisprudence to architecture and urban studies. Relations between teleology on the one hand and language and labor in their historically evolving forms (which have almost from the very beginnings also implied forms of social coexistence and the economic and institutional forms for 'organizing' or 'directing' them) are especially relevant for the social and human sciences in this context (most particularly in the Marxian tradition).

More specifically as regards this essay, in relation to the study of literature and the arts, it is intimately bound with issues of "utility" (work vs. play, what "utility" is derived from literature and the arts, etc.), values and ideology (how and in what forms are values transmitted, reflected upon, raised to topics of reflection and self-awareness), and consequently also ethics and 'politics' in their broadest meaning. At an even more specific level of detail, thinking about teleological issues can help us in terms of

thinking about everything from literary genres to individual works. For instance when our study of genre moves beyond formalistic considerations (which certainly doesn't mean excluding them, or not resorting to them and building on them when hermeneutically, critically and philologically appropriate) to a more encompassing both material(ist) and functional one, one can see that there are two literary genres that are very specifically and closely tied to issues of teleological positing: the utopia (related to broader social, political, cultural, self-organizational goals for the species that reach all the way to the most abstract values in the realm of ethics) on the one hand, and on the other the fairy-tale, as a fictional portrayal of the satisfaction of short-term, immediate, functional goals (albeit mostly presented in a fantastic, functionally exaggerated, form), almost complementary to the utopia in the 'immediacy' of its goals. Materialist utopias of a kind similar to the "Land of Cokaygne" would lie somewhere in between. Lukács discusses the extreme longevity of the tragedy in Western European culture as tied to historical moments where "social being" in its constructive element is striving for more inclusive, shared, and progressive goals, but is practically blocked and constrained by the sedimented and ossified forms of power from the past. In other words, a form of "teleology obstructed" in art.[1]

Even more specifically within the realm of literary studies, teleology is bound up with questions about and reflections on authorial intent. This in turn raises the extremely complex issues of the relationship between natural (human) languages and teleology and intent: from J.L. Austin's "doing things" with words, to Ludwig Wittgenstein's "language games," to even more complex issues in the philosophy of language regarding the individual construction/acquisition of meaning, the relationship between meaning and reference (the differences between intra- and extra-linguistic reference, the historicity, temporality and genetic processes involved in referential acts, etc.). Within the realm(s) of literary criticism and philosophy the 'schools' of hermeneutics, reader reception, and phenomenology attempt to deal with the issue of intent and purpose, at least to a degree; on the other hand those that tend to see the work less as a product, especially not of an individual specific human, such as various trends in Structuralism, New Criticism, Formalism (Russian and otherwise), or semiotics, favor an examination of texts according to 'internal' rules, premised on the fiction of their being not only self-contained, but often ca. 'eradicated' objects. Both tendencies are significant to the extent that they deal with, or, instead, intentionally omit,

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[1] György Lukács, *Prolegomeni all'ontologia dell'essere sociale* (Milan: Guerini, 1990), 222-23.

teleological issues.[2]

This essay is therefore part of a much broader research I am pursuing at the intersection of philosophy, the humanities and the sciences, one which more specifically will focus on issues at the intersection of teleology and the philosophy of language.

The reasons I chose Leopardi as an especially interesting author to examine within this 'field of relations' (involving teleological issues) are also many and somewhat complex.

First of all, historically Leopardi's life and work are situated in the transitional period between the end of the Enlightenment and the beginning of the sedimentation of one set of ideological and legitimating practices and developments, namely what is loosely termed "Romanticism," which are coextensive with the institutional establishment and rule of capitalist social relations. He was also active in a country and a culture where "Romanticism" established itself slowly and relatively late compared to other major European cultures and countries (England, Germany, France), and where the enduring influence of "classicist" norms was relatively strong. And Leopardi is particularly keen and well-equipped to explore the contradictions and tensions during this transitional period.

Moreover, Leopardi's intellectual biography is that of someone who went from a very strict, disciplinarian, religious upbringing all the way to the other end of the philosophical spectrum so to speak, to elaborate his own very original, specifically anti-anthropocentric form of materialism. So at the individual level he was extremely well prepared to examine the tensions between the spectrum of idealisms generated by "Romanticism" and the various forms of empiricism, materialism, mechanistic and otherwise, produced by figures of the late Enlightenment and various scientists from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

His works are those not only of probably the greatest lyrical poet in the Italian language, a very original and insightful writer of prose, dialogues and essays quite particularly, but also of someone who is increasingly coming to be recognized as a very original thinker, and therefore philosopher, albeit an intentionally a-systematic one, by an ever-increasing number of contemporary critics. His works therefore often explore areas that are common to literature, poetry, philosophy and science, and/or, use these different perspectives to gain a more in depth understanding of our

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[2] Cf. Mark Epstein, "Nomenclature, Terminology and Language," *Bionomina*, 5 (2012): 1-56, for issues regarding the relationship between reference and meaning, and for the prevalence of methodologies, schools, trends, that focus almost exclusively on 'internal' (formal) relations (i.e. within a 'closed' system), rather than interactional and relational ones.

shared world, universe and lives.

The fact that due to his precocious learning and erudition, Leopardi also was an outstanding philologist, means that his insights into the histories of literature, the arts, and mythology are all the more penetrating as they combine these analytical powers with the great imagination of his poetic side.

Examining Leopardi's reflections on teleology, and more inclusively on "ends," also in the sense of conclusions of a temporally finite/limited being or process, reveals some of the very distinctive characteristics of Leopardi's reflections and works, whether poetic, philosophical, dialogical or essayistic.

The model of the "organism" and therefore indirectly of particular kinds of teleology, has been very influential in the areas of aesthetics and literary criticism, especially since Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Kant's definition of artistic activity as "purposiveness without a purpose" clearly relates to these ca. 'contained' and partially 'self-regulating' specificities of living organisms. On the one hand the "organism" is a way of highlighting relative autonomy and self-contained features, in other words also relative 'isolation' from an environment. In others, by emphasizing the *Gestalt*-like characteristics of the parts-whole relationship, it does deal with the issue of ends or goals, with teleology, but in a manner that is limited to this self-contained, holistic, relationship (i.e. it takes into account almost only the 'internal' and self-regulating features of the organism, not all those features that interact with its 'outside' or environment: the senses, etc.). Theories that relate art and literature to games and play, Schiller's being a famous and influential example,[3] are in some ways analogical to the "organism" model, in that they isolate the "goals" (and values) at 'play' within the 'system' (game, play, etc.) from possible ties to functional satisfaction and realization in the inclusive context of 'reality/nature' (hence also the theoretically functional nexus between 'game-theory' and the modeling of systems ↔ systems theory).

In the physical and natural sciences issues of teleology have often been at the center of very heated debates, especially because certain ways of interpreting teleological issues have been (often correctly) seen as ways of (mostly covertly) (re)introducing theological solutions and ways of thinking into the sciences. This has especially been the case historically in the unfolding of the various debates about evolution in the biological sciences. Explaining the behavior of living organisms without resorting to concepts that essentially admit, allow or explicitly express teleological (or teleonomical,

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[3] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (London: Penguin Books, 2016).

which is a way for the biological sciences to somewhat admit teleological issues and problems) dynamics seems however to be impossible. The degree to which we define "teleological" behavior as conscious is obviously one of the main issues at stake. I would contend that even very "simple" or "primitive" unicellular organisms exhibit behaviors that are driven by internal impulses, or "goal-driven" behavior, though this may not be conscious in the sense we give to the term when describing the behaviors of 'higher' mammals or human beings for instance. An amoeba searching for food, a unicellular organism that needs to move to waters with a higher or lower saline content, bacteria using chemical signals to communicate and changing their behaviors accordingly, the examples are literally endless: these are all "goal-oriented" behaviors. And none of them can be explained simply on the basis of the laws of physics and chemistry that we apply to inanimate matter and its aggregates. This obviously doesn't mean the laws at the more fundamental levels (physics, chemistry) don't apply at the 'higher', or at least 'more complex' levels of the biological sciences, but that they are only a foundation, on top of which more specific laws and behaviors of the biological sciences apply. So finite, living, organisms are also "teleological" organisms, though they might not be "conscious," depending on our definition of that term. The greater the complexity of the organism, and mostly the greater its 'social' nature, and the more its teleological activity becomes conscious and complex, as in the 'higher' primates, mammals, marine mammals, etc. Readers may ask why this might be relevant to a discussion of Leopardi, but I will try to show that in his reflections on inanimate nature, on "Nature" as a more inclusive concept, and on living organisms, these issues were indeed relevant for Leopardi, at whatever level of elaboration.

The discussion of purposive activities as they relate to the nexus of (an understanding of) the causality ↔ finalism/teleology (goal-positing) relationship is also essential to an understanding of the historicity and social nature of human "cultures" and their relationship to their "natural" foundations. And this aspect of teleology is, in its turn, quite fundamental in understanding Leopardi's reflections on the power of the 'ancient', of primordial and 'classical' origins/beginnings, vs. the status of the civilization contemporary to him. It is also fundamental in understanding the spectrum of human activities (and professions), and how scientific and practical labor relates to other, more 'socializing', ideological, or value-oriented forms of behavior and activity.

Finally, and most important in the case of Leopardi specifically, is the relation of teleological activities to the realization/achievement of pleasure/satisfaction, and therefore the many and complex relationships to

his *teoria del piacere* (theory of pleasure).

The English word 'end' opens onto the same duality of meaning as the Italian word *fine* (from which the English, mostly philosophical, word 'finalism').

But I do not intend this to be the first move in an etymological 'Spiel' and pseudo-philosophical gambit in the Heideggerian vein. But I do intend to underscore how important the concept of 'finitude' is in being able to somewhat intelligently talk about "teleology," in other words: aims, goals, purposes and purposive activity. In the case of Leopardi specifically I believe it is both a crucial lynchpin and cross-over point in his being increasingly considered a poet-philosopher or philosopher-poet. And clearly it also relates to his perhaps most famous, and most brilliantly concise lyric, *L'Infinito* (*The Infinite*).

Examining Leopardi's reflections and many questions on teleology in the context of his materialism is an incisive way to examine relations between some of his key concerns: the *teoria del piacere*, his reflections on *noia* (boredom/ennui), his curiosity about our 'cosmic' or 'universal' context, and the manner in which his materialist Enlightenment foundation, as well as most of his conceptual tools, allow him to look at what were becoming Romantic *topoi* from completely different perspectives and with different conclusions (for instance all the incredibly various forms of 'Romantic longing' which can be understood (Caspar David Friedrich's beach scenes with a lone observer gazing at the horizon being one of the classical examples), as simply the projections of purposive drives and goals, whose limits, definitions, and grounds have been removed or rendered vague and opaque, *L'Infinito* being a model of this overturning and debunking).

Privileging issues related to teleology also allows for a framework in which scientific questions about purposes, everyday questions about goals, and philosophical (for some theological) questions about ultimate ends can be investigated in their interactions and mutual influences: and Leopardi's own questioning, which touches indirectly upon biological teleology, on the purposes that motivate us in our everyday lives and the plausibility of many philosophical (and theological) 'answers' encourages such an approach. Together with such (pre)Romantic definitions of artistic activity as Kant's "purposiveness without a purpose," a poetic autotelism that Leopardi will be intrigued by, and the very utilitarian overarching goals of progress and 'productivism', Leopardi's queries work within a field that brings the philosophical foundations for the new mode of production partially laid out by the *ideologues* into stark tensions and contradictions with later (pre)Romantic modes of thought, typically produced earlier in countries like England and Germany that both did not undergo a revolution, and in the

case of England pioneered many of the economic, industrial and social arrangements that would characterize this new mode of production. So teleological questioning, while it mostly remains on a rather abstract and generic level in Leopardi's reflections, and his musings related to actual work and labor (with the very interesting exception of reading) and their relation to teleological activity are fairly minimal, I believe can be read as extending across the faultlines between the materialistic earlier 'foundations' of a new world view and the emerging legitimation crisis (or crises) of the newer justification regimes of the emerging ruling classes. In this sense (although I think philosophically quite misleading and erroneous) one can probably partially agree with those critics who see some analogies between Leopardi and later forms of (proto)existentialist thought: but only in this sense of a legitimation-crisis being indirectly addressed by a more overarching questioning of the "natural order." Where early Romanticism (especially in England and Germany) tends to pioneer forms of 'naturalization' for the emerging order, Leopardi's reflections on nature do exactly the opposite: they highlight the profound contradictions of the natural order, in ways that often reflect back on the social constructs superimposed on it.

The issue of "teleology," specifically in its historical connections to religious and theological discourses has been a central one for the history of the natural sciences, and therefore today tends to arouse controversy if used in many biological and other fields related to the natural sciences. My intention is however to try and ground and circumscribe reflections about "teleology" in a materialist philosophical foundation and a 'scientific' discourse, where the measure of 'scientific' is (or should be!) largely based on the criteria established within that science and the translatability of its results into the criteria of other sciences. I am therefore explicitly distancing myself from those philosophies of science which believe in the absolute reducibility of the events and phenomena examined by one science into the terms of a more 'foundational' one. For instance that all biological phenomena are reducible to chemical ones, and all chemical ones are reducible to physical ones, etc. While there is indeed the need for a groundedness in more foundational sciences, clearly the behavior of a primate is not explainable in merely chemical or physical terms, just as the behavior of organic molecules in chemistry cannot be exclusively explained on the basis of the physics of its component parts, but rather on relational derivations.

More specifically "teleology" lies at the crossroads, or the transitional area, between what have traditionally been called "inanimate matter" vs. "living organisms" (I will not get into the controversy about viruses, or those

about abiogenesis—i.e. the origin of life—because they are beyond the purview of this essay). The behavior of living organisms is guided by drives, impulses, etc. that have to obey the laws of physics, but are not directly explainable by them: one can then debate in cases regarding specific organisms or their groupings how "conscious" these are.

So already the motility, reproduction, being outfitted with a genetic code, etc. of the simplest unicellular organisms are based on chemical and physical laws, but are not explainable purely on their basis. As we move to pluricellular organisms, and along the ever more complex histories and chains of evolution, complex organisms develop an increasing number of characteristics we cannot find in inanimate matter. Motility, reproduction, ingestion and excretion of other matter and organisms, respiration, the development of an increasing number of increasingly complex senses (touch, taste, hearing, vision, etc. to echolocation, etc. etc.) are all venues for interaction and 'behaviors' made possible by organs whose interactions with the environment are not explainable solely on the basis of the more foundational underlying sciences. This does not mean these 'behaviors' necessarily violate any laws in the other fields, it means they constructively make use of them in ways that are advantageous to these individual organisms (there are extremely few convincing "reductionist" (exclusively physicalist or chemical) explanations of these behaviors, if any, available in the wider scientific debates today). Again the functioning of all these is explainable in terms of chemical and physical laws but is not reducible to them. We have not even yet agreed on definite and unequivocal answers for abiogenesis, whether due to a logic of entropy, negentropy, driven by energetic or morphological characteristics etc. etc. so these lines of 'logical explanation' are even more immensely distant from being close to explaining much more complex steps in the history of evolution. But what biology can confirm is that by developing specific features such as motility, the senses, etc. organisms can relate to their environment in ever more complex ways, and ones that are increasingly less 'passive'...

Daniel Dennett, a philosopher in the analytic school (and together with Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens considered one of the "Four Horsemen of the New Atheism") who has written extensively on issues pertaining to biology, the cognitive sciences, free will and other such issues from a determinist and often materialist point of view, has reflected on these developments to propose a contextual definition of "freedom," in *Freedom Evolves*.[4] In other words once an organism is able

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[4] Daniel Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (New York: Viking, 2003), especially 143ff. and 162ff. Cf. also *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Boston:

to move of its own accord, it has added a degree of 'freedom' not available to inanimate matter, most forms of vegetable life, etc. Once an organism develops senses such as sight, it reaches a completely different level of awareness of its environment and consequently abilities to interact with it. Obviously with the development of consciousness and purposive behavior these levels of relative "freedom" with respect to the environment increase even further. And, partially as a function of developing forms of consciousness, organisms have different and greater or lesser networks of teleological 'positing' depending on the "freedoms" their organic body and being provides them relative to 'their' environment. While materialistically speaking there is only one and the same environment for all organisms living in it, the degree of perception, appraisal for planning, and effective interaction with said environment depends to a significant degree on the individual and species-specific bodily make-up of each organism.

Where Dennett's notions of the evolving and 'contextual' nature of "freedoms" is I think especially useful for analyzing the transition between the inorganic and organic levels of a materialist analysis,[5] I think Lukács' late reflections in *The Ontology of Social Being*[6] are especially useful in

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MIT Press, 1984), and *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) by the same author.

[5] Dennett is actually better known in philosophical circles, and those concerned with debates about evolution, determinism and free will, and the relation between our material/biological foundations and the socio-historical construction and transmission of human cultures, for proposing a variety of views that either advocate or are close to advocating views close to a strict reductionism and determinism of "human culture" by these underlying factors. His whole theory of "memes" (which in his construct are basically a cultural analogue of what "genes" are to biology) and his defense of sociobiology (and Edward O. Wilson, etc.), where memes sort of survive and compete as if they were in a situation of competition and "survival of the fittest" in a cultural context that mimics the biological/evolutionary one I find utterly devoid of plausibility from its very foundation, since cultural constructs are subject to social and historical pressures (primarily class-based societies) that are completely different from those of the natural environment and the diversity of living organisms. So my use of his descriptions is limited to the sphere of "freedoms" as related to the transition from the inanimate to the animate worlds. Moreover, as far as broader positions regarding evolution and biological thought in general, I find the general positions of Stephen J. Gould and Richard Lewontin much more persuasive and empirically grounded than Dennett's speculations, as well as more careful and respectful of the *differentia specifica* of human cultural constructs.

[6] György Lukács, *Ontologia dell'essere sociale* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1981), and *Prolegomeni all'ontologia dell'essere sociale* (Milan: Guerini, 1990), 39ff. on the relationship between "species-being" and the 'recession of natural barriers'; xix, 188ff, and 222ff. on the nexus between teleological positing and causality. I am

addressing the relationship(s) between the organic level and the social (human) level in a materialist analysis. And they are even more fruitful within this level of "social being" itself. Lukács uses the term "ontology" but is actually very critical of Heidegger's philosophy and "ontology" and instead explicitly situates himself closer to the (somewhat idiosyncratic) neo-Kantian Nicolai Hartmann in the construction of his, in essence materialist, ontology. He holds fast to the need of basing each 'ontological' level on its appropriate foundation, so the organic is founded on the inorganic, and the social (human) on the organic. None of these levels is reducible to its foundation, but each level would not be able to continue or exist without this more basic, but also more essential, and ca. 'independent' foundation. One could also note that when reconstructing cosmological and evolutionary history, the more 'fundamental' level (for instance the inorganic with respect to the organic), I think is viewed basically consensually as the level that existed/developed prior to the others, and is therefore more 'primitive' from a historical/genetic point of view.

What Lukács stresses is that social being is fundamentally dependent on teleological activity, in this case most specifically that connected to labor (and language). And teleological activity needs to rely on the knowledge of actual causal relationships to put its own projects and goals into action and being. Sebastiano Timpanaro, though unaware of these late works of Lukács, also defines "freedom" as the ability to 'subordinate means to ends', i.e. for purposive, teleological, activity. This is a significantly different definition of "freedom" from the one we are used to, derived from (neo)liberal thought, i.e. ca. the *negative* absence of coercion or constraints (one which however is typically abstract and ideal, and which (neo)liberalism can virtually never point to as realized in actual concrete reality (hence the frequent tendencies in (neo)liberal philosophies to rely on legalistic and juridical analogies (for instance the idea of the "contract," which, again, is historically virtually never *uncoerced or unconstrained*)). So teleology is premised on the understanding and use of causal relationships as its foundation, although the way it interconnects these causal processes, still completely dependent on causal logic, is usually not found independent of human (or another biological organism capable of

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providing the bibliographical reference to the Italian editions because they are relatively complete (in fact to the best of my knowledge the *Prolegomena* has never even been translated into English), whereas all existing English language editions only provide portions of Lukács' late work. The German language edition and the Hungarian are also much more faithful reflections of the author's actual work.

teleological positing) agency/activity.[7] The increasing "degrees of freedom" (to use Dennett's expression) are therefore always founded on/rooted in given material properties and previous genetic histories, on causal processes and nexuses, but relative to these they can open onto areas where margins of possibility exist thanks to the fact that new constructs have been created by agents, using knowledge of the laws of causation, but constructs that would not have existed without this agency at the level of living organisms (rather than as a direct result of the application of physical or chemical 'laws').

Where Lukács' analysis is historically somewhat dated, and scientifically somewhat antiquated is in the areas of animal behavior, and our understanding of how sophisticated some of the social behavior, and some of the teleological activity of a number of animal species can be. But where Lukács, like Marx, Labriola, Timpanaro, and a number of other materialists in the Marxian tradition (including Nicola Badaloni for instance) is absolutely correct, is on the marmer in which our ca. "human social" ("artificial" in Labriola's words) foundation is simply superimposed on the material, natural, organic, foundation below, and in no way can do without it. So it is a question of stratification, superimposition, and simultaneous use, not of the later foundation, the "human social," making the other unnecessary, irrelevant, etc. And it is this intermediate area of "humanized nature" (Nicola Badaloni),[8] which has grown astronomically during human history, which has enormously increased the scope of "possibility" ("freedom") and therefore of the spectrum of options for further teleological activity compared to a past dominated by the organic foundation. This is

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[7] Sebastiano Timpanaro seems to have been unaware of the work of the late Lukács judging from the published works I am aware of. But some of his reflections are very close indeed to those of the Hungarian philosopher. Cf. Sebastiano Timpanaro, *On Materialism* (London: NLB, 1975), 101 ff, where he is discussing the work of Friederich Engels and the relationship between causality, teleology and 'free will', including how they relate to ethical issues, in the chapter "Engels, Materialism and 'Free Will'." Cf. also *On Materialism*, 34, for reflections that are very close to those of Lukács on the stratification of levels of material being: "By materialism we understand above all acknowledgment of the priority of nature over "mind," or if you like, of the physical level over the biological level, and the biological level over the socio-economic and cultural level; both in the sense of chronological priority (the very long time which supervened before life appeared on earth, and between the origin of life and the origin of man), and in the sense of conditioning which nature still exercises on man and will continue to exercise at least for the foreseeable future."

[8] Cf. Nicola Badaloni, *Il marxismo come storicismo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975), and *Per il comunismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1972).

something that Marx called the "arretramento delle barriere naturali" (recession, or pushing back, of natural barriers). It is a tendency in human history which Leopardi hardly acknowledges, and when he does so virtually only negatively.[9] It is I think one of the main reasons for the contrasting

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[9] Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. M. Caesar et al., trans. K. Baldwin et al. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 2900. From now on I will use the abbreviation *Zib.*, when quoting from this source. Numbers in square brackets [55] refer to the pages in the original manuscript. I sometimes quote from the original Italian text, to provide the reader with Leopardi's original formulations, especially when the author's choice of words is significant: that edition is *Zibaldone di pensieri*, ed. Giuseppe Pacella (Milan: Garzanti, 1991). Leopardi in fact underscores: "the supreme conformability and organization of man, which renders him the most mutable and hence the most corruptible of all earthly creatures, also as a consequence renders him the most prone to unhappiness, even though it does not in itself render him naturally unhappy, that is, it renders him the most capable, and more so than any other creature, of diverging from his natural state, and hence from his own perfection, and hence from his own happiness. Because this same human conformability is more than any other open and prone to losing its original state, use, operations, applications, and the like. So that only with difficulty may man in fact preserve himself in his natural and original state, and therefore in fact only with difficulty does he save himself from unhappiness. Given these considerations, and given indeed the supreme conformability and organization of man, metaphysically considered with respect to true and metaphysical perfection, we can say that man is the most imperfect of earthly creatures, even as regards nature, inasmuch as the only thing that is natural in him is a greater disposition than in any other creature to lose his natural state and perfection" (*Zib.*, 2902). This is consistent and in keeping with Leopardi's overarching idea that the progressive distancing from natural origins (which is in fact equivalent in most respects, only seen negatively, and from a partially disanthropomorphizing point of view, to the "pushing back of the natural barriers" which Marx and the other materialist thinkers I mentioned instead saw mostly positively, in an emancipatory light, that helped create an intermediate "zone of possibility" for the human species); I don't think this philosophical position (of the materialist ontologies mentioned above) is at all equivalent (and certainly not necessarily so) to that of the (neo)liberal pseudo-progressivism, commodification at any cost, that of the "secol superbo e sciocco" (proud and foolish century) and the "magnifiche sorti e progressive" (magnificent and progressive destiny) though certainly elements of the 'left', particularly in the (neo)stalinist and social-democratic 'productivist' traditions could be included in this criticism). One of the areas for future study in Leopardi's works which I think would be particularly promising is that of the relations between his ideas regarding "conformability" (*conformabilità*) and "habituation" (*assuefazione*), which tend to provide a fairly strict framework related to his "teoria del piacere" and his closely connected reflections on "noia," regarding the majority of the issues that concern the extremely broad area of the genesis and assemblage of cultural constructs, social and political

appraisals and critiques of Leopardi in Italian criticism, especially on the

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institutions, and other elements that contribute to the not strictly economical aspects of "modes of production" through history.

Alessandra Aloisi, *Desiderio e assuefazione: studio sul pensiero di Leopardi* (Pisa: ETS, 2014) is in some ways a promising beginning in this direction. While her philosophical framework and bearings exhibit the significant influence of French post-modern thinkers like Gilles Deleuze, as well as psychoanalytic influences (I think not always constructively) overall her work shows a good command of and openness to a much wider philosophical canon. There are some areas I would introduce greater distinctions to: her examination of "desiderio" [desire] does not sufficiently underscore the extent this (especially in its 'infinite' extensions) is something particularly human, whereas animals generally tend to be able to exhibit "satiation," and are not just limited by lack of imagination, or because they engage in the (equally serial, and *not* satiated, infinite) pursuit of satisfaction directed at real, not imaginary, goals, 16 ff. This of course also has to do with the extent human "desire" is metamorphosed due to the 'recession of natural barriers' i.e. is historically contextual. Moreover "desire" is very much a passive, organism-based way of viewing the issue of the connection between pleasure, satisfaction and teleological positing. Prioritizing the teleological instead highlights the constructed, active and social aspects of 'realization'. Second, unlike Aloisi I very much believe Leopardi's materialism is *both* ontological and gnoseological, and I think there are many passages in *Zibaldone* to prove it (several of which I have quoted in this essay). Aloisi believes Leopardi's materialism is essentially gnoseological only, 134 ff. She believes Leopardi's philosophical position is founded on a view of 'conformability' that is ca. intermediate between 'spiritualism' and 'materialism' (mostly because Leopardi moves with equal ease up and down the Chain of Being), a view which I think exaggerates the role of 'conformability' within Leopardi's thought as a whole, 139 ff. Her use of Bergson, Ravaisson, claims that Leopardi believed all matter, via language, became 'thinking matter' (147 ff.), instead of explaining/presenting the genetic sequence of experience, language acquisition, linguistic acculturation, which leads to forms of acquired knowledge *about* matter that are *not innate* (which is really what Leopardi is suggesting in the quotes provided by Aloisi), etc., are ones I don't think are defensible, philologically or otherwise. More promising are perhaps her reflections on Leopardi's use of animal societies as comparative/contrastive models to heuristically aid in the understanding of the opposition of "società larga" ('wide', ca. open, unrestricted, society) and "società stretta" (narrow, restricted, society), 168 ff. But although alternative to Hobbes and Rousseau, it is not clear that they really come to terms either with the complexity of animal societies, or with the socio-historical nature of human class societies. Personally I find the opposition of 'società larga' and 'società stretta' as indicative of Leopardi's limited ability to work through the very broad and complex set of problems that the later ideas around the recession of natural barriers at least gives a (social, historical and material) path for. Leopardi's is a restricted and restricting opposition that already includes its own value-judgments.

"Left." But as Timpanaro has uniquely emphasized many times, it is also the great virtue of his disanthropomorphizing materialism.

Leopardi's reflections on ends are closely tied to his "teoria del piacere," and that in its turn is very closely tied to his reflections on the relation between individuals (be it human or other animals and organisms) and their purposes and pleasures and the overall or overarching "purpose," if there is one, of nature. Leopardi talks both about the "design" of nature (i.e. something more along the lines of an architectural plan) and of its possible "purposes." And it is specifically in this area that some philologists and critics, most specifically Sebastiano Timpanaro in his debates with Sergio Solmi, have emphasized the transition between an earlier Leopardi's more benign view of nature and its foundations for human kind, and the later Leopardi who views nature as an overarching entity in a more adversarial light, basically somewhat of an enemy, the "natura matrigna." And it is in the transition between these two somewhat opposed views that Leopardi comes to formulate a number of observations that we, with our "senno di poi," (hindsight) can consider as compatible with some of the observations and assessments that Charles Darwin and the evolutionary biology derived from his thought would later make.

Purposive activity in both humans and organisms is overwhelmingly tied in Leopardi to the search for happiness. The transition from a more benign assessment of nature to one that considers her as more malignant or at least malingering, is tied specifically to reflections on the extent to which nature facilitates the achievement of pleasure and also of why organisms were designed to seek it in the first place. This is also where the importance of the relationship between the two meanings of end or *fine* come into play. Because I think one could argue philosophically that "goals" are precisely something we can/could associate with finite organisms or creatures. They are related to "needs" that are organism-specific, or in the case of the human species one could argue, ca. 'sublimated' and translated onto a cultural, abstracted, and socialized level, but nonetheless derived from finite needs and considerations. Once one applies the term "end" to something as intrinsically unbounded, and especially to a significant degree unknown by the species, both in its full temporal and material extent and boundaries, as "nature," in other words something that embodies many meanings of the word "in-finite," the term "end" sounds very anthropomorphic, anthropocentric. If we take the scientific logic and discourse against the theologically derived trends/objectives of a theologically based teleology, then the universe and "nature" are essentially a complex of processes, which have regularities and outcomes (hence the use of terms like "laws"), but none of these processes have conscious ends, aims or purposes.

Finiteness is then the crucial factor in both enabling the posing of, the imagining of, and the planned realization of conscious goals. Because such goals only make sense as 'returns' for the interests and desires of finite organisms. All the more so if these organisms have a long and complex, historical, social history, as then many of these goals are indirect and abstract, and presuppose and imply all manner of complex social interactions. The border between what one could call stimuli or drives in organisms about whom we are uncertain whether to ascribe "consciousness," but who already exhibit forms of internal organization and coordination for forms of interaction with the environment that are not reducible to chemical and physical laws, and more conscious teleological planning is of course wide, ambiguous and controversial, but I think it should not prevent us from examining the issue of teleology as fundamental to scientific explanations in various fields of biology. This crucial link between finiteness and "goals" is clearly also seen by Leopardi, as I will show in my analysis of *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* [*Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia*] below. But Leopardi also uses the term "infinite" when discussing his materialism and describing the boundaries between matter and nothingness, and how as humans essentially even our cognitive processes, imagination, and idealizations always have to start from material(ist) foundations, however much we may then construct and expand the realm(s) of possibilities starting from that point of departure. In the context of a discussion of the greater degree of vitality present in human cultures in ancient times, and which were therefore closer to their natural origins, and continuing with reflections on death, immortality vs. mortality, Leopardi writes:

> But even if we supposed the spirit to be absolutely simple and without parts, it does not follow that it cannot perish. Do we know the nature of such an entity that we are able to pronounce it immortal or mortal? Is there just one way of dying, that is to say, by dissolving? In matter there is no other way, and we therefore know only that way; but by the same token we do not know another way of being except that of matter. If a thing can exist in a manner that is wholly unknown and inconceivable to us, it can also perish in a manner wholly unknown and inconceivable to man. If I can say it can perish, rather than it does perish, it's because I cannot, just as one cannot humanly say the opposite, it does not perish, that is it cannot perish because matter perishes in a different way, and it cannot perish the way matter does. I say it can perish because such a way of perishing is no more difficult or improbable than such a way of being (one, as I say, that is inconceivable to man), or such a death than such an existence. Both are equally beyond our reach which does not extend one iota beyond matter.

I would go even further, and say that, if simplicity is a necessary source of immortality, not even matter can perish. If matter is composed, it will be composed of elements that are not composed. [...] If you never get to the point where they have no more parts, and are not matter (which will certainly never happen), you will likewise never get matter to perish, either. Because even if it were reduced to the very tiniest parts, one of these tiny particles could be said to be as remote from nothingness as all of matter, or as any other existing thing; in other words between it and nothingness a gap extends, and an *infinite space*, for there is no way of getting from existence to nothingness, as from nothingness to existence, by degrees, but only by a leap, an *infinite leap* [My italics]. [...] So that even in this regard a substance presumed to be entirely simple and immaterial cannot contain more immortality, that is, immutability and incorruptibility, than do the sources of matter, which are no mere supposition but must really and necessarily exist. (*Zib.*, 629-33, 9 February 1821)[10]

I would argue that while Leopardi here correctly argues there is an "infinite leap" between material existence and nothingness, the "infinite," in its cosmic, symbolic and non (the moon being the most classic example), associations, is also his way of highlighting the divide between inanimate and animate/living nature, which he compares and opposes as the infinite and the finite, therefore underscoring the "leap" between the two realms of existence, one which the natural sciences have instead been trying to come to terms with more and more as forms of existence on a continuum, where the 'leap' between animate and non is being progressively 'reduced.'

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[10] I have intentionally attempted to reproduce extended passages from the *Zibaldone* in order to allow readers to appreciate Leopardi's reflections in context. However in order to minimize duplication, and not extend the length of the essay inordinately, I will only provide the Italian original in limited instances, when the concepts, metaphors, and language used are particularly important, or where the Italian provides nuances unavailable in English. In this case I am providing the Italian for the passage in which I emphasized some phrases: "Perchè questa, ancorchè ridotta a menomissime parti, una di queste minime particelle, è si può dir tanto lontana dal nulla, quanto tutta la materia o qualunque altra cosa esistente, cioè tra essa e il nulla, ci corre un divario, e uno spazio infinito: chè dall'esistenza nel nulla, come dal nulla nell'esistenza, non si può andar mica per gradi, ma solamente per salto, e salto infinito." *Zibaldone*, Pacella, 631. Leopardi is indirectly invoking the adage 'natura non facit saltus' whose more widespread influence dates to the works of Leibniz. In a section I omit, Leopardi gives his own formulation to the law of conservation of mass/matter, and his acquaintance with Lavoisier is well established. It is also premised on a tradition of 'horror vacui', though Leopardi's treatment is matter of fact, and shows not much 'horror'.

Leopardi also does not believe either simplicity or complexity are guarantees of either perfection or happiness:

> Unless in the aforesaid order of earthly things, when we consider the perfection of each species in a comparative fashion, that is, considering one in relation to another, unless, I repeat, we imagine a double scale, or a partly ascending and partly descending scale. And at the lowest end of the first scale we put beings that are wholly unorganized, or more unorganized than all the others. Then climb up to the top and place the more organized beings, until we arrive at those that occupy the midpoint in organization, sensitivity, and conformability. And treat these latter as the highest degree of the scale, that is, of perfection comparatively considered, as those that perhaps by nature are the most disposed to obtain their own particular and relative happiness, and to retain it. From these descending ever further down past the beings that are more organized, sensitive, and able to conform, so as to put at the last and lowest degree of the scale man, the most organized, sensitive, and able to conform of all earthly creatures. Arguing in this fashion, and doubling or unfolding the scale, we would find that man truly is at the furthest limit not of perfection (as would seem to be the case if we were to make just one scale or a simple and straight one) but of imperfection, and still lower than the furthest end of the other part of the scale. Since from the comparative imperfection of beings placed at that point no unhappiness follows for them, whereas for man the unhappiness is very great.

And

> No imperfection, not even with respect to man, can strictly speaking be found in nature. Man is not imperfect either in nature, or as regards nature. Indeed in nature and as regards nature he is, if you will, the most perfect of creatures. But in nature and as regards nature he is more than all other creatures open to becoming imperfect, and this precisely because of his supreme natural perfection, like those most refined and perfect machines or devices which, in order for them to be such, are intricately tooled, and hence most delicate, and on account of their supreme delicacy more easily break down than others, and lose their essence and use.[11]

As one can see Leopardi essentially uses the idea of the Great Chain of Being (*scala naturae*), but while on the one hand from the point of view of

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[11] *Zib.*, 2900 ff. These distinctions also extend down the scale of being (to vegetables and 'below'): cf. *Zib.*, 3378, among others, where Leopardi shows how the 'lower' you go on the scale and the more living beings are limited only to 'being', whereas at the higher levels they are increasingly able to access 'potential being' or other 'possibilities of being' (i.e. once again those opened for humans by the recession of natural barriers).

'nature', i.e. of a comparison of living organisms and their complexity, he essentially agrees with the model provided by the Great Chain, on the other he places human beings on the lowest rung of any possible scale. This is because he divides and duplicates the scale, with one scale representing rankings according to "organization [complexity], sensitivity and conformability" and the other according to the possibility of achieving and retaining happiness. It is according to the latter scale that human beings rank lowest, lower than all other living beings, and it is precisely because Leopardi tends to overwhelmingly reduce human teleological activity and goals realized to 'happiness'. He is therefore in several ways simplifying and abstracting actual teleological processes and positing. By judging the "recession of natural barriers" mostly negatively, as being the principle cause for increasing layers of 'humanized nature' lying between human beings in their later historical contexts and 'nature', as compared to the situation of ca. 'original', more 'primitive', and ancient cultures, Leopardi is essentially equating this "recession" as a distancing, a 'loss of contact/touch' with humanity's natural origins and genesis. Ultimately Leopardi will equate this ever greater divorce and distancing also with pride, an *avant-la-lettre* form of alienation, and the loss of the capacity to accept and come to terms with our animal origins, and therefore also essential aspects of our "inner nature." He equates this distancing with a loss of groundedness and foundation, and therefore also a not fully self-aware and cognizant 'loss of acceptance of our finiteness' (of course Leopardi, if one were only to use the 'measure' of logical consistency, tends not to reflect on the fact that it is this same finiteness in a natural context that also allows for those (few? Rare?) experiences of various forms of happiness, whether via the senses or culturally mediated/sublimated norms). In fact, the "recession of natural barriers" makes the diversity and scope of possible goals ever greater and ever less bounded, thus potentially infinite, but of course "infinite" goals in 'finite' beings is a recipe for disaster. This very variety therefore, to some degree stimulates the non-finite, unbounded nature of desire, of hunger for happiness even more. So while the roots of teleological activity are finite, the drive for realizing them seems to be boundless and tied not only to 'being alive' (the impulse for happiness), but to the less and less 'bounded' possibilities available to socialized, acculturated, historical human beings.

> Happiness can be wholly defined and said to consist in contentment with one's own state. For any degree of well-being, however great, by which the living being was not satisfied would not be happiness, nor would it be true *well*-being; and, vice versa, any degree of good, however small, by which the living being was satisfied would be a state that was perfectly fitting to

that being's nature, and a state that was happy. Now contentment with one's
own way of being is incompatible with self-love, as I have demonstrated
[→Z 4191 92]; for the living being always of necessity desires a better state,
a greater degree of good. That is why happiness is impossible in nature, and
by its own nature. (*Zib.*, 4477, 30 March 1829)[12]

While it is true that in this late entry from the *Zibaldone* Leopardi does
refer to "living beings," he much more frequently contrasts human
insatiable (ca. 'bad infinity') desire, to the animal capacity for satiation,
contentment and satisfaction with their state (cf. my analysis of *Canto
notturno* below).[13]

This is the very idiosyncratic and limited area in which Leopardi does
acknowledge that a human "artificial ground" is indeed superimposed on a
"natural ground," as in the traditions from Marx, Engels, Labriola and
Lukács (his discussion of social being) to Timpanaro mentioned above, and
that humans do indeed enjoy a much greater degree of "relative freedom"
in Dennett's sense of the term, as I discuss in an earlier section of this essay.
And I would argue this is another important way in which the two meanings
of "end" become ever more closely fused in Leopardi's thought.

As the realization of goals therefore becomes increasingly complex, and
often increasingly postponed and/or delayed in temporal and historical
terms (ca. "delayed gratification"), it also becomes increasingly less finite,
i.e. 'concludable', in those same temporal and historical terms. So ever more
delayed, abstracted and postponed forms of gratification, and therefore
goal-positing become more prevalent in human societies:

I'm talking about that hope placed in posterity, that looking, that setting as
the goal of our actions, desires, and hopes the praise, etc., of those who will
come after us. To start with, man desires the pleasure of glory in his own
life, that is to say, in the eyes of his own contemporaries. Once he has
obtained it, even if it is perfect and supreme, and once he has realized that
what he thought to be pleasure not only is inferior to hope (even when the
glory was in effect greater than the hope) but is not pleasure, and found that
he is not only dissatisfied but feels as if he had obtained nothing, and as if
his goal were yet to be attained (that is, pleasure, which has not in fact been

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[12] While Leopardi does refer to "living beings," in many other passages and works
he contrasts the 'bad infinity' of human desire to the capacity of animals and many
other living organisms to be satisfied with their state. "Self-love" seems to also be
something more characteristic of humans.
[13] Crucially this capacity to expand desire to infinite dimensions and in infinite
directions is associated with the imagination, a quality animals exhibit to a lesser or
non-existent degree. Cf. *Zib.*, 167.

obtained, because it is never other than future, and is never present): then his soul, *erigens se* [raising itself] almost above this life, *posteritatem respicit* [gazes at posterity], as if after death *tum denique victurus sit* [then at last it might be alive], that is to say, might attain its goal, the essential complement of life, which is happiness, namely, pleasure, not yet obtained, and already too obviously not obtainable by him in this life; then the hope for pleasure, no longer having a place to settle, or an object to aim at within the bounds of this life, finally passes beyond, and settles on future generations, and man hopes for them, and after death, the pleasure that he sees always fleeing and always withdrawing, and that cannot be, or hope to be, gained or won in this life. Man is brought to this pass because, just as the goal of life is happiness, and happiness cannot be obtained here below, yet on the other hand a thing cannot help tending toward its necessary goal, and would fail if it lacked hope entirely, so hope, no longer finding any home in this life, finally finds a place beyond it, through the illusion of posterity. Indeed, this is an illusion that is more common in great men, because, while others, who know less about things or reason less and are less logical, and have countless partial disillusionments and disappointments, still continue to hope within the bounds of their life, great men are, on the contrary, firmly persuaded, and very quickly, that is, after only a few experiences, and despair of any actual and real pleasure in this life; and yet needing a goal, and hence the hope of attaining it, and spurred also by their souls to noble deeds, they place their goal, and hope, beyond existence, and feed on this last illusion. Although after death either we will not be capable of any happiness or it will be completely different from what might come from our descendants, still, even if we were then as capable of enjoying our fame among future generations as we are now of enjoying our fame among our contemporaries, that fame (if the same circumstances with regard to our soul and to pleasure persist) would seem to us, as our present fame does, completely insipid, and empty, and unable to satisfy or procure any other than future pleasure; I mean an actual, present pleasure. (20 March 1821) Apply these thoughts to the hope of future happiness in another world. (*Zib.*, 827-29)[14]

As an early critic of the 'disembodied mind', Leopardi actually believes the human mind is a source of imperfection, and not only of unhappiness but also of human arrogance, arrogance of a species compared to the rest of nature, but also one manifested in historical terms when 'humanity' believes it is constantly moving 'higher' or 'progressing' when compared to the past. Since the 'mind' is also the main source of the human species' ability to engage in the "recession of natural barriers," once again Leopardi views it

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[14] Note how Leopardi concludes this note with a note to himself relating the ever more 'infinite' postponement, abstraction and delaying of the goals of teleological activity beyond "hope" to metaphysical, spiritualist, religious and irrational speculation on the parts of human beings.

from a contrarian, disanthropomorphizing vantage point:

> The perfectibility of man is held to be beyond doubt. In other words, he can perfect himself; he can perfect the work of nature. Consider the material system of the world, as much in the smallest as in the largest things, as much in the organization of a tiny, scarcely visible creature as in the order of the stars, and you will find everywhere such skill, wisdom, and mastery that not only can there be no improvement to what nature has done, not only can nothing be added or taken away, or changed without damage, but even if we had the same power to do as nature has, there is no man whose intellect is so subtle, profound, and sublime that he would be capable I do not say of carrying out but even of conceiving a plan so magisterial, so detailed, so tightly and neatly tied together, so perfect in every least part, as the one we see carried out by nature. So I say to man who claims to be perfectible, and to be able, even to have a duty, to perfect himself: perfect your body, your anatomy, the structure of your organs, or at least some part of it. If you cannot do this, at least imagine a design that is more perfect, more complete, right, appropriate, precise, exquisite than nature's own with respect to the organization, etc., of your body. Man bursts out laughing, and admits that not only is there nothing as perfect but that with all his learning, from the beginning of the world until now, he has not yet succeeded in understanding completely its true perfection, and every day reveals something else to admire, and increases his wonder. Now why, since you cannot improve on your body, or even comprehend the extent of its natural perfection, do you presume to perfect something as noble, abstruse, and complex as the mind? And how could nature, so perfect a teacher, so precise, fastidious, and thorough in everything else, and in your body in particular, have been so stupid, negligent, and at fault with the most important part of you, the part on which the use of that perfect body depended, and which was also to have such an influence on other forms of life? Why has it left you with so much work to do on the part that should concern it most, after having left you with nothing more to do to the one that mattered less, and was subordinate to the first? Above all, how can you presume to perfect, not just your mind but also the whole vast order of the other things on earth, insofar as it is strictly related and connected to, and dependent on, the developments and state of being of your own species? (*Zib.*, 371-73, 2 December 1820)

This passage seems to be critical both of human pretensions to perfection and perfectibility, but also, albeit less obviously, to begin opening the door to a transition towards a more negative view of nature: namely if the natural order is indeed so perfect, and if it would indeed be so difficult to find ways of improving the human species as far as its body and material/biological organization of its organism is concerned, how come the 'mind' seems to be, comparatively, so imperfect and lacking? I think here the mind as the principal locus and agent of "recession" is seen less as a locus of

'possibility', both a product and a generator of socio-historical transformation (and adaptability), but, because of its being so imbricated with these contradictory potentials, more as somehow being a 'defective' organ within the wider framework of a nature that is still considered to be relatively 'perfect'. The mind is, in other words, a generator of 'bad', i.e. ca. 'unrealizable', 'infinity' as ca. 'lack of finiteness'.

A misuse of the mind compounds this 'bad' infinity, as it tends to engage in serial analysis, division, and is no longer able to reconstruct nature, life, organisms, holistically, on the basis of systems of, mostly internal, relations. Two crucial, well-known, passages from the *Zibaldone*, both concerned with teleological issues, emphasize the dangers of "analysis" as opposed to Leopardi's rather specific views of possible syntheses:

> Whoever examines the nature of things using pure reason, and without the help of the imagination or feeling, or without affording either of them any scope, which is the procedure adopted by many Germans in philosophy, that is to say, in metaphysics and politics, will certainly be capable of doing what the meaning of the word *to analyze* involves, that is, to resolve and undo nature, but they will never be able to recompose it, I mean they will never be able to draw great or general consequences from their observations and analysis, nor will they be able to reduce them and bring them to some great and general conclusion. And in so doing, for they do not cease to do so, they will fall into error, and this is indeed what occurs. I am prepared to accept that they manage, with their analysis, to divide up and resolve nature into its smallest and least elements, and that they succeed in knowing each of the parts of nature individually. But the whole of it, its end and the reciprocal relationship of these parts to one another, and of each of them to the whole, the purpose of this whole, and the true, profound intention of nature, what it has purposed, the cause, let us leave on one side for the moment the efficient cause, the final cause of its being, and of its being such as it is, the reason why it has arranged and formed its parts thus, the knowledge of which things is what the philosopher's objective must consist of, and on which, in short, all truly great and important general truths are based these things, I repeat, cannot be discovered and understood by anyone who analyzes and examines nature using reason alone. Nature thus analyzed differs not in the slightest from a corpse. Let us imagine for a minute that we were animals of a different species to our own, indeed of a different nature to the general nature of those animals we are familiar with, but that nonetheless we were furnished with understanding, as indeed we are. If, having never seen a man or any animal among those that actually exist, nor ever having had information about any of them, a dead human body were brought to us, and in dissecting it we came to know all of its smallest parts one by one, and in chemically decomposing it, we uncovered every last one of its elements: would we, in this way, be able to know, understand, discover or conceive of what the destiny, action, functions, virtues, forces, etc., of each part of this body were

in regard to themselves, to the other parts, and to the whole; what was the purpose and object of that disposition and particular order that we would note in those parts and observe indeed with our own eyes and handle with our own hands; what was the particular and the general and overall effect of this order and the whole of the body; what the purpose of it all was; what ultimately the life of man was; indeed, if that body had ever lived or had to have lived; or again, if we could not infer it from our own life, or if anyone could understand it without actually living, would we conceive of, would we be in any way able to derive, the idea of life from full, perfect, analytical, and elementary cognition of that dead body? Or shall we just say the idea of that living body? And would we understand what living man was, and what his outer and inner way of living was like? I believe all would say in response that we would understand none of these things; and that in wishing to speculate about them we would depart a thousand miles from the truth, and bet millions to one that never, not even by making a million conjectures, would we be able to grasp the truth; and that lastly, that it is extremely probable that having examined and come to know this dead body, we would stop at this knowledge and not even have a suspicion that it had ever been anything else, nor that it had ever been intended to be other than what we saw it to be, and would see it as such, nor would even the slightest speculation arise concerning its previous life or it as a living man.

Applying this analogy to my proposition, I would say that to discover and understand what living nature is, what its form, causes, and effects are, its tendencies and processes, purpose or purposes, intentions, the destinies of the life of nature and things; what the true destination of their being is, basically what the spirit of nature is, by means, so to speak, of mere knowledge of its body, and precise, minute, and *material* analysis of its parts, *even its moral parts*, one cannot, I repeat, with these methods alone, discover and understand, or even guess with any degree of success or even probability, all this. What we may affirm with certainty is that *nature, by which we mean the universe of things, is made up of, fashioned and ordered toward a poetic effect, or rather arranged and deliberately ordered to produce a general poetic effect, as well as other, particular effects, relating to the whole or to this part or that part* [my italics in preceding sentence]. Nothing poetic is to be found in its parts by separating them one from another, and by examining them one by one with the mere light of precise, geometric reason; nothing poetic in its means, in its forces and internal or external mechanisms, in its processes thus divided and considered separately; nothing poetic in nature decompounded, broken down, and as though cold, dead, bloodless, motionless, lying, so to speak, under the anatomist's knife, or fed into the chemical fire of a metaphysician who employs no other means, no other instrument, no other force or agent in his speculations, examinations, and inquiries, in his operations and, one might say, even experiments, than cold, pure reason. Pure, simple reason and mathematics have never been able, and will never be able, to discover anything poetic. Because everything that is poetic is felt rather than being

known or understood, or perhaps we should say, is known or understood in
being felt; nor indeed may it be known, discovered, or understood save by
being felt. But pure reason and mathematics have no sensorium whatsoever.
*It falls to the imagination and sensibility to discover and understand all
these things mentioned, and they are able to do this because we too, in whom
these faculties reside, are part of the same nature and universe which we are
examining* [my italics in the preceding sentence]. And these faculties of ours
alone are in harmony with what is poetic in nature, reason is not, and thus
they have much more ability and power to divine nature than reason does to
discover it. And since the ability to feel and hence to know the poetic falls
to the imagination and the heart alone, only they are able and permitted to
enter into and penetrate the great mysteries of life, the destinies, the general
and particular intentions of nature. They alone are able, least imperfectly, to
contemplate, know, embrace, to understand the entirety of nature, its way of
being and operating, of living, its general and great effects, its purposes. In
pronouncing and speculating on such matters they are the least prone to err,
and alone are capable at times of apprehending or at least approaching the
truth. They alone are able to conceive, create, form, perfect a philosophical,
metaphysical, political system that has the least possible falsehood about it,
or if nothing else, is as close as is possible to the truth, and as far as is
possible from what is absurd, improbable, or extravagant. Through them,
men agree with each other on matters of speculation and many abstract
points much more than they do through reason, contrary to what it would
seem ought to be the case. For it is certain that men, in speaking or
speculating by means of mere reason, for the most part tend to disagree to
an infinite degree, to diverge a thousand miles one from the other, and to
take and follow completely different routes; whereas in speaking through
feeling and imagination men, of even the most disparate classes, nations, and
centuries, very often and constantly agree with each other, as may be seen
in the many propositions (systems) and pure suppositions discovered or
formed by the imagination and heart and deriving from and authorized by
them alone, and founded only on them, which have always been and are still
admitted and held by all or by almost all nations at all times, and are held by
the totality of men even today, to be undisputed truths, and by wise men, if
nothing else, as more probable and more universally acceptable than any
other in respect of the relevant proposition. Which perhaps one will never
see having happened or happening with any hypothesis (general or
particular, i.e., constituting a system, or not, etc.) dictated by pure reason
and ratiocination. Finally, only the imagination and heart, and the passions
themselves, or reason in no other way than as a result of their effective
intervention, have discovered and taught and confirmed the greatest, most
general, most sublime, profound and fundamental, and most important
philosophical truths that we possess, and have revealed or declared the
greatest, highest, most intimate mysteries that are known, of nature and
things, as I have shown at length elsewhere [*Zib.*, 1650, 1833 39, 1848 60,

1975 78, 2132 34]. (22 August 1823)[15]

> To confirm what I have said above, note that the profoundest of all
> philosophers, the most penetrating investigators of the truth, and those most
> capable of taking things in at a glance, were expressly remarkable and
> singular also for their imaginative faculty and heart, were distinguished by
> a decidedly poetic bent and genius, and gave egregious proof of this either
> in their writings or through the actions or sufferings of life that proceed from
> imagination and sensibility, or by all these things together. Of the ancients,
> Plato, the profoundest, most wide-ranging and sublime of all ancient
> philosophers, who ardently desired to conceive of a system that would
> embrace all existence and make sense of all nature, was, in his style,
> inventions, etc., a poet in this sense, as everyone knows. See Fabricis under
> "Plato." Of the moderns, Descartes, Pascal, who at the end of his life almost
> went mad as a result of the force of his imagination; Rousseau, Madame de
> Staël, etc. (23 August, having heard of the death of Pope Pius VII which was
> on 20th of this month, 1823). (*Zib.*, 3238-45)[16]

These notes are not only fundamental for an understanding of Leopardi's
approach to philosophy and poetry, but also to nature and natural organisms.
His target is "analysis" devoid of a sense of context and reality, analysis as
a form of abstract and mechanical thinking, which is one of the many
reasons it cannot be attuned to the 'poetic' aspects of nature. His polemic
has many aspects in common with Goethe's poetic and holistic polemics
against the 'torturing' procedures Newton had engaged in 'against' nature
to come up with his (physical) theory of the diffraction of light. Goethe
expressed these, and the resulting theory of colors and theory of optics in
Zur Farbenlehre (1810), by far his most monumental work, and his most
ambitious in the field of scientific research (and the one with the most
extensive section devoted to a previous history of the field, which is indeed

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[15] I am once again providing the Italian original for those passages I emphasized. "Si
può con certezza affermare che la natura, e vogliamo dire l'università delle cose, è
composta, conformata, e ordinata ad un effetto poetico, o vogliamo dire disposta e
destinatamente ordinata a produrre un effetto poetico generale; ad altri ancora
particolari; relativam. al tutto, o a queste o quella parte." [3241] and "Spetta all'
immaginazione e alla sensibilità scoprire e l'intendere tutte le sopraddette cose; ed
elle il possono perocchè noi ne' quali risiedono esse facoltà siamo pur parte di questa
natura e di questa università ch'esaminiamo: e queste facoltà nostre sono esse sole
in armonia col poetico ch'è nella natura [...]" [3242], *Zibaldone*, Pacella.

[16] I have reproduced the quote in its entirety both to help readers, but also to avoid
the tendency to editorialize (selection) all authors have when trying to present a point
of view, and thus to present Leopardi 'unchopped'.

partially a history of science).[17] While a considerable number of scholars has correctly tied these reflections to those on the topic of an *ultrafilosofia*[18] (ca. a 'beyond-philosophy', ultraphilosophy), as the notes I just quoted make very clear, most especially the sentence I italicized "*It falls to the imagination and sensibility to discover and understand all these things mentioned, and they are able to do this because we too, in whom these faculties reside, are part of the same nature and universe which we are examining,*" Leopardi is actually proposing and emphasizing a materialist theory of the imagination. One internal corroboration comes from the fact that the same polemic against analysis is used in the notes 630-33 I quoted above, whose target is precisely a *metaphysical, spiritualist* understanding of 'immortality' which refuses to understand that even our imagination is founded on, premised on, developed from material(ist) premises.[19] We are inevitably part of and *within* nature, *within* a material universe. As has been noted Leopardi uses the term *ultrafilosofia* only once, and very early on in his reflections. One would think scholars might have deduced something from this fact. Instead there is a common perception that Leopardi's attack on the excesses of mechanical, analytical, reason, but divorced from materialism precisely, are equivalent to wholesale attacks on rationalism, and are therefore close to contemporary strands of irrationalist thought that have been particularly influential in/on postmodernism (the Nietzsche-Heidegger line and its French derivatives and variations most particularly). This is essentially the interpretation given by Daniela Bini, when she writes:

> The *ultrafilosofia* can succeed only insofar as it transforms itself into a creative, fictional activity that will enact the poetical renunciation of nature and of memory. When reality is known as a senseless, meaningless void, when the philosophical mind finds before itself the nothingness of existence, the only resort left to man is to create his own meanings, that is, to know and understand through his creative faculty. After all, man alone knows the world subjectively. The pretense of objective knowledge is an illusion, for nobody can ever cease to be at once both the knowing subject and the object of one's own analysis. Man has therefore always created his own meanings. He is the poet-philosopher, author of his own reality. This *ultrafilosofia*,

[17] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours* (Boston: MIT Press, 1970). I have briefly examined some of the tradition Goethe influenced in Mark Epstein, "Nomenclature, Terminology and Language," 43-45.

[18] Cf. *Zib.*, 115, 7 June 1820. For the Italian, cf. *Zibaldone*, ed. Giuseppe Pacella, 127.

[19] There are many notes in *Zibaldone* targeting what he considers the vacuity of religious, spiritualist and metaphysical thought. One pertinent example among many is *Zib.*, 4207-9.

therefore, is nothing but Leopardi's arrival at the conscious statement of a state of affair [sic!] that has always existed. In his theoretical development it will correspond to his last poetical project   a project that is born out of nihilism, or better yet, out of an "ontology of nothingness". In this phase, in fact, nature and remembrances   the sources of Leopardi's early poetry will lose their power. [...].

Contemporary criticism of Leopardi has pointed out the modernity of his intuitions, placing them in line with the thought of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Musil, and even anticipating some of the "new dialogue of man with nature undertaken by modern physicists". The philosopher Emanuele Severino identifies the acme and the end of Western thought with Leopardi. Nature is only becoming, thus a coming from nothing and a return to nothing. So is man.[20]

On the humorous side (and more in tune with Leopardi's ironic, Lucianesque comments on much academic philosophy) I would encourage readers to search for Alfonso Berardinelli's several essays on Severino and the 'consistency' of so-called 'Italian thought'.[21] On a more serious note, just to begin with the notes 630-33 I quoted above, Leopardi, when targeting metaphysical, spiritualist, abstract speculation, does so precisely by also targeting the "infinite leap" between the material world and nothingness, the nihilism into whose fashionable hordes Bini seems to so eagerly want to draft Leopardi. Notes 3238-45, far from "a renunciation of nature and memory" are the exact opposite: they are an impassioned plea regarding the extent to which we are inescapably bound to, rooted in, founded on nature (matter) and, as part of our temporal/historical lives as living organisms, memory (even/also in the sense of *ricordanza*). In fact this argument against the limitations of mechanical, analytical, reason, is premised on our being *internal* to nature as a 'system', and therefore having access to certain forms of understanding of nature and other living organisms precisely on the basis of shared material and physiological characteristics, of sensation, feelings, empathy, etc. etc. that can only occur because of this 'interiority'. There is no Archimedean, completely 'external', foundation or point of view which a, divorced (alienated), analytical reason could rely on. The point Leopardi

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[20] Daniela Bini, "Giacomo Leopardi's *Ultrafilosofia*," *Italica* 74: 52-66, 1997. Cf. also in fairly similar vein Aloisi, 152.

[21] Cf. for instance, "Contro Severino, l'iperfilosofo," *Il foglio* (12 October 2015), https://www.ilfoglio.it/cultura/2015/10/12/news/contro-severino-liperfilosofo-88451/; and "La risposta al vuoto pneumatico del pensiero? L'inesistente Italian Thought," *Il foglio* (July 24 2016), https://www.ilfoglio.it/cultura/2016/07/24/news/la-risposta-al-vuoto-pneumatico-del-pensiero-linesistente-italian-thought-98634/.

is making is close to what in contemporary philosophy (of the non irrationalist variety) is called the problem of *qualia*: for instance, since I just mentioned Goethe, the problem of our subjective experience of colors. But this could apply to all our 'internal' experiences: sensations, thought, 'mind' (vs. brain), imagination, and so forth. We can communicate with other humans *about* those experiences, but it is materially impossible (at least to this point in time) for us to directly share or communicate those 'internal' experiences themselves. But the very fact that communication is possible and successful is a 'proof' that we do indeed share a common material world. As I argued above, I think it is definitely not happenstance that the term *ultra filoso fia* never recurs after that early mention: I would argue that, quite consistently with his deepening materialism, and with his relational philosophy that never fetishized either "systems" or "absolutes" as values in themselves, what Leopardi gradually constructs in *Zibaldone* could much more aptly be named an *infrafiloso fia* (infraphilosophy), as it expounds on the material grounds, presuppositions and context on which all rational thought must inevitably base itself.[22]

I would argue that not only is placing Leopardi in the camp of nihilism and a wholesale rejection of rationalism (especially when it is closely tied to and founded on materialism, as in Leopardi's case) an absurdity from a philological standpoint for those familiar with Leopardi's works and the *Zibaldone* in its entirety, but this assimilation/homogeneization/conformization of Leopardi to existentialist and proto-existentialist thinkers (Schopenhauer, Dostoevskij, Nietzsche, all the way to Heidegger and his many *nipotini* (i.e. grandchildren, Severino being one of the innumerable legion)) is a very well-worn critical hypothesis that De Sanctis[23] and others already engaged in, but, one would have thought/hoped, had been definitely shown to be untenable by the great works of Walter Binni, Sebastiano Timpanaro and, at least partially, Cesare Luporini. But the deification of a Nazi ideologue like Martin Heidegger in our present circumstances is only one of countless proofs of the incredibly reactionary times, also from a cultural point of view, we live in: they are

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[22] Leopardi's *operetta* (which Patrick Creagh translates as "essay") *Dialogue of the Earth and the Moon* (*Dialogo della terra e della luna*), is centered precisely around this need for a shared material context and experience, which the earth and the moon in this dialogue do *not* share, except in the realm of existence's negatives, pain and suffering. The moon, and therefore the 'cosmic other' is also shown to be a preferred locus for the projection of our speculations, prejudices and ultimately errors. Giacomo Leopardi, *The Moral Essays*, trans. Patrick Creagh. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 70-76.

[23] Cf. Francesco De Sanctis, *Schopenhauer e Leopardi e altri saggi leopardiani* (Como: Ibis, 2001).

indications of an all out assault on reason, but especially on materialism as the only possible/viable foundation for reason. In writing this I certainly don't mean to imply that either rationalism or materialism are by any means the equivalents of Cartesianism, empiricism, pragmatism, instrumental thought or utilitarianism, which are ultimately the philosophical trends most closely associated with (neo)liberalism and the reduction of the natural and human worlds (including human 'inner' nature) to commodification. A number of different scholars have plausibly argued, but I personally feel closest, as far as the basics are concerned, to Timpanaro's interpretation,[24] that over time Leopardi's views of nature changed (ultimately arriving at a position one could loosely qualify as that of the "natura matrigna" [nature as stepmother]): but this point of arrival is certainly nothing close to his "renouncing" nature.[25] Rather he increasingly saw the restrictions and bonds

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[24] Sebastiano Timpanaro's criticism is, both philologically, philosophically (in its receptivity to Leopardi's sources and cultural background), and in its rigor and unwillingness to compromise with the (dominant, but ever changing and fleeting) fashions of the academic/critical universe (cf. *Dialogo della Moda e della Morte* [*Dialogue between Fashion and Death*]), a touchstone in Leopardi criticism that, I personally believe, has never been equaled, or even approximated, in the decades that have elapsed since his death. One of the few critics who has had the courage to recognize this legacy, and continue at least partially in its path, is Corrado Pestelli. Cf. Corrado Pestelli, *L'universo leopardiano di Sebastiano Timpanaro* (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2013), with an excellent introduction by Marino Biondi. As often happens in cases like these, his work has mostly been rewarded by silence (on the part of the academic, critical, editorial 'powers that be', as albeit on a very different political and cultural path, is the case for Alfonso Berardinelli).

[25] Cf. Sebastiano Timpanaro's correspondence with Sergio Solmi in Sergio Solmi, *Studi leopardiani. Note su autori classici italiani e stranieri* (Milan: Adelphi, 1987), 207-28, especially 207-19 (in particular 219). Solmi just does not provide the philological evidence for the coexistence of the two views and their relative weight throughout Leopardi's career. That is apart from the fact that Solmi basically admits a) that he is not nearly as well informed as Timpanaro on the context of nineteenth-century thought and thinkers that influenced Leopardi, and b) the same goes for the area of Leopardi's own philological research, and for instance on the issue of an alleged 'stoicism' vs. the thought of Theophrastus: Timpanaro clearly seems to not only have the evidence but the logically correct way of interpreting it. The one area which Timpanaro concedes (and I confess I do not have a sufficient in depth knowledge to pronounce an original and very informed view on the issue) is that the second, "natura matrigna," view of nature evolves more from the influence of certain kinds of 'titanism', from fatalism, from Alfieri's influence, than out of his first, more benign view of nature. This would logically also seem to make sense, since the first 'benign' view was developed more in the context of reflections on the role of culture and the passing of history in distancing humans and their culture from nature,

that tie us to nature as not always beneficent (as he had especially in earlier periods, contrasting the strength of historical periods, cultures and civilizations that lay close to origins and nature to the weakness and corruption of later and present ones), but rather most often, if not always, as causes of unhappiness (especially in human beings). This also led him to question the overarching "purpose" of nature, in fact basically conceding there did not seem to be one. These gradual, if not always smoothly continuous, changes in his perspective, go hand in hand with his increasing skepticism regarding the role of illusions in providing partial happiness and a respite from "noia." And it is significant that his very early coinage of *ultrafilosofia* occurs in a passage where he is specifically contrasting (ca. academic, analytic) philosophy with the potential (positive) role of illusions. Both these points regarding changes in his points of view on nature and illusions are quite well established in the scholarship so I will not rehash them here.

Leopardi's polemics against analytical reason are instead much more plausibly comparable with the criticism lodged against the dominant gnoseological, logicist and neopositivist trends in philosophy by György Lukács and Nicolai Hartmann,[26] with similar criticism found in Sebastiano Timpanaro[27] and also at least partially in Timpanaro's friend, historian and

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whereas the latter is more closely involved with issues of hedonism, and the possible reasons/purposes there could be for accepting/rejecting our being 'produced', alive, by nature in the first place. One aspect of this fatalism can be seen for instance on the reflections on Pompeii in *La ginestra* (*The Broom*).

[26] György Lukács, *Ontologia dell'essere sociale*; and Nicolai Hartmann, *New Ways of Ontology* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975); *Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1966); *Der Aufbau der Realen Welt. Grundriss der Allgemeinen Kategorienlehre* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1964); *Das Problem des Geistigen Seins: Untersuchmgen zur Grundlegung der Geschichtsphilosophie und der Geisteswissenschaften* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1962); *Teleologisches Denken* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1951). One should note that Lukács in this last phase of his thought explicitly acknowledges his debt to Hartmann, who was a Neokantian of sorts, but whose philosophy evolved to have strong materialist leanings, and that Lukács himself moved from a fairly idealist phase of his thought earlier in his life, to the strong materialist turn we witness in the *Ontology*, a significant component of which is dedicated to the importance of teleology in labor, and its impact on social being. Both Hartmann and Lukács, the latter to an even greater degree (also for political reasons) strongly criticized Heidegger's 'ontologisms' and opposed their ontologies, much closer to and in dialogue with non-dogmatic scientific thinking, to Heidegger's.

[27] Sebastiano Timpanaro, *On Materialism*; for instance his criticism of epistemologism and methodologism, pp. 36 ff.

philosopher of science, Ludovico Geymonat (directed at empirio-criticism and partially neopositivism),[28] or, an example actually even closer to Leopardi, Pasolini's criticisms of his friend Alberto Moravia's views on language, and a philosophical outlook that shared many components with (French) rationalism.[29]

This materialist, 'internal', view of the characteristics of life and living organisms also has specifically to do with teleological issues. In fact it is teleological positing, most especially in the case of the human species where the 'mind', and the socio-historically transmitted characteristics of material culture are so important (compared to other species), that is really the key to understanding those living organisms, their "inner nature," and all those purposive interrelations with drives, feelings, appetites, sensory experiences, and the 'internal' awareness of thought/mind, however much we may concede that it is based on, generated and supported by what physiologically is the "brain."

The connection between reflections on teleology, and holistic, 'poetic' thinking can also be found in Kant's quite distinctive, and more self-contradictory, reflections on these subjects.

I will start by listing several quotes from Kant, the first in which he defines the end of reason as not relative, but absolute, i.e. an 'end in itself' (or based on autotelism): "The ground of this principle is: *Reason exists as an end in itself* [*Zweck an sich selbst*]."[30] He then proceeds to define human beings, as rational creatures, as ends in themselves: "The human being is indeed unholy enough, but the "humanity" (*Menschheit*) in his person must be holy (*heilig*) to him. In all of creation everything one wants and over which one has any power can also be used *merely as a means*; only the human being, and with him every rational creature, is a "purpose in itself" (*Zweck an sich selbst*). For by virtue of the autonomy of his freedom he is the subject of the moral law, which is holy."[31] Kant then proceeds to specify the peculiar characteristics of this rational animal, the human being, even further:

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[28] Cf. Giulia Santi, "Ludovico Geymonat's Materialism: Leopardi, Lenin, Timpanaro," in *Annali d'italianistica* 29 (2011): 459-76, esp. 463.

[29] Cf. Mark Epstein, "Pasolini: lingua, razionalismo e materialismo," in "Alberto Moravia e Pier Paolo Pasolini. Intellettuali, scrittori, amici," ed. Alberto Granese, special issue, *Rivista Sinestesie* 11 (2013): 59-71.

[30] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 46.

[31] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 112.

Now in this world of ours there is only one kind of beings with a causality that is teleological, i.e., directed to purposes, but also so constituted that the law in terms of which these beings must determine their purposes is presented by these very beings as unconditioned and independent of conditions in nature, and yet necessary in itself. That being is man, but man considered as noumenon. Man is the only natural being [*das einzige Naturwesen*] in whom we can nonetheless cognize, as part of his own constitution, a supersensible ability [*Vermögen*, power].[32]

Kant then proceeds to also explain the special characteristics of the work of art or the "beautiful" natural object on the basis of a special kind of purposefulness:

We do call objects, states of mind, or acts purposive even if their possibility does not necessarily presuppose the presentation of a purpose; we do this merely because we can explain and grasp them only if we assume that they are based on a causality [that operates] according to purposes, i.e., on a will that would have so arranged them in accordance with the presentation of a certain rule. Hence there can be purposiveness without a purpose, insofar as we do not posit the causes of this form in a will, and yet can grasp the explanation of its possibility only by deriving it from a will.[33]

This is what Kant describes as the "subjective purposiveness" (or "subjective finality") of the object, in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*. He then proceeds to define nature's "objective purposiveness," in his *Critique of Teleological Judgment*, and there he distinguishes between an 'external' and an 'internal' objective purposiveness: the former can be described in terms of external "utility" while the latter can be described in terms of internal "perfection." In the former case we are dealing with the utility, external, of something for something else. In the latter case the purposiveness of an object seen as its own purpose is internal, and in this case one is dealing with a relationship of "perfection": the parts and the whole of one and the same thing. According to Kant this kind of "perfection," is typical of living organisms, or what at the time were called "organized beings." Kant thus defines an organized being: "an organized product of nature is one in which everything is a purpose and reciprocally also a means."[34] In other words one can speak of an organism "when all its parts, through their own causality, produce one another as regards both their

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[32] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 323.
[33] *Ibid.*, 220.
[34] *Ibid.*, 255.

form and combination, and that in this way they produce a whole."[35]
Expressed even slightly differently, the organism is "a *self-organizing*
being" and is endowed with "a *formative force*" (*bildende Kraft*). Kant
continues:

> An organized being is not a mere machine. For a machine has only *motive*
> force. But an organized being has within it *formative* force, and a formative
> force that this being imparts to the kinds of matter that lack it (thereby
> organizing them). This force is therefore a formative force that propagates
> itself a force that a mere ability [of one thing] to move [another], i.e.,
> mechanism, cannot explain.[36]

As we can see from the above there are some analogies in the
teleological definitions Kant provides of the work of art/beautiful object and
the "perfection" of the organism. In both cases they are not defined by
exterior or utilitarian purposes. And in both cases the idea of form plays a
very important role, though in the definition of the "subjective purposiveness"
of the work of art, the idea of form is tacit/implicit, namely the idea that we
think it is the result of "purposiveness without a purpose," i.e. no
immediately evident exterior or utilitarian purpose, makes us think (this is
what Kant imputes to us) that it is the product of a will. But the very
important difference is precisely that the work of art/beautiful object is a
product, whereas the organism, "self-organizing being," is instead
characterized by agency, and an agency that propagates itself and influences
objects that lack these "formative" and "self-organizing" qualities.[37] It
would seem that perhaps what Kant is trying to get at in the rather abstract
philosophical terminology he resorts to, is that organisms, unlike existence
at the other more fundamental levels (physical and chemical, both
inorganic), act according to impulses with regards to their environments
which are not wholly reducible to the 'laws' at those more fundamental
levels. What is common to all the teleological definitions Kant provides,
from that defining rationality, to those defining human beings and rational
creatures and their being subject to the "moral law," to defining the work of
art, and finally to defining organisms, is that they are all in one way or
another characterized by autotelism (in the case of the work of art the

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[35] *Ibid.*, 252.

[36] *Ibid.*, 253.

[37] Lukács, *Prolegomena*, 302 ff., points out the importance of this Kantian definition
of the organism as ca. analogous to 'purposiveness without a purpose', and then
proceeds to underscore how the passage to the level of "social being" occurs
principally thanks to the teleological positing involved in (human, historical) labor.

absence of any clearly identifiable external purpose, for a specific agent). For Kant being "subject to a moral law" is fundamental for his system of ethics, as he can therefore support his thesis that human beings can therefore base their lives in the "autonomy of freedom." Autotelism in other words also seems to be the tell-tale sign, formally, within Kant's system, of the intent to 'isolate' human beings' ontological/material characteristics from those of other organisms, using idealist, spiritualist and "value-oriented" criteria/arguments. In this sense Kant's focus on the 'disinterested' foundation of ethics in the categorical imperative, and the idealist bent of his autotelic definitions, are the flip side of the utilitarianism, of the "magnifiche sorti e progressive," of which Kant's philosophy can in various ways be seen as a forerunner (i.e. the enlightened individualist subject component).

So where Dennett and at the higher levels Lukács provide the materialist and historical context for the development of "degrees of freedom" (i.e. detachment/possibility/scope of teleological positing) from the inanimate to the organic to the social levels of being, Kant essentially uses the end-result, the achieved construction of human forms of culture and rationality, as a strict demarcation from other living beings (he does allow for a somewhat inclusive "border area" by including other "rational creatures" along with humans in his definition). Humans impose a "law" on themselves and are "detached" from nature. But one of many possible views on the issues that arise in the fields of morality and ethics, is that these "laws" are essentially social, internalized, forms of 'self-regulation' at the cultural, anthropological, political, social, teleological level (and that they do therefore have explorable forms of genetic history and derivation, regardless of the 'force' or 'disinterestedness' with which one wants to defend their 'higher' claims and application).[38] Clearly for Leopardi this would be both an anthropocentric and a decontextualized, fetishized, form of 'special pleading' for the case of humanity; while on the other hand (neo)Kantians and advocates of other materialist traditions could, basically correctly, argue that Leopardi's reflections on ethical issues (i.e. those outside the scope of his hedonism) are barely developed.[39]

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[38] Davide Tarizzo, *Life. A Modern Invention* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), explores the interconnections between Kant's reflections on the autonomous will and its relations to a "Self," and Darwin's reflections on "Life" as engaged in by biological "Selves." It is a biopolitically oriented investigation, which partially builds on works by Michel Foucault in the same general area.

[39] I should probably qualify this statement about Leopardi's reflections on ethical issues. Leopardi, I think again due to his original materialist perspective, is way ahead of his time in areas that today might be included in bioethics, animal rights,

Where Kant comes closest to Leopardi is in defining the organism, and specifically in opposing his definitions to mechanistic definitions. Here he therefore also avoids the types of analytic reasoning Leopardi criticizes so mercilessly, and he approximates the "poetic" definition Leopardi invokes in *Zib.*, 3238-45. I believe this is precisely one area in which Leopardi's reflections constitute and immense advance over mechanistic forms of materialism and rationalism that have often been dominant in the French tradition (Descartes and La Mettrie just to mention a couple of classic examples). And in some ways one could say that Leopardi does, especially in his later views on nature, see the conflict between organisms and the more encompassing "system" (or network of relations) of nature as one between 'autotelisms' of different levels and different ranges, though in the case of 'cosmic nature' he is obviously questioning whether there is any teleological positing of any kind occurring, rather than just the perpetuation of a system of 'internal relations'.

Where Kant's idealism contrasts fairly strongly with Leopardi's materialism is where Kant underscores the fact that human beings are/consider themselves (the "law" which governs their teleological activity) "unconditioned and independent of the conditions of nature." This argument is connected both to humans being rational organisms (hence acquiring autotelism via rationality), but also to the manner in which they consider their "humanity" to be "holy," as subject to moral laws, and therefore driven by idealistic, not materialist forms of causality. Leopardi's extremely trenchant critique of anthropocentrism, and the fact that discussions of "moral laws" or ethical motives is virtually absent from his hedonistic "teoria del piacere," and that he is constructing an ever more self-

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the incredibly arrogant sense of entitlement the human species (of course especially in its ruling class elements, but not only) has developed over history (especially as it has moved away from more 'primitive', more 'symbiotic', stages) towards the rest of living nature, and its right to exploit and dominate it (the religious doctrines of the "soul" pertaining exclusively to humans and not to animals being of course one central technique for 'legitimation' cf. the *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia* (*The War of the Mice and the Crabs*) for Leopardi's acerbic satire, and undermining of human, and theological, pretensions in this area). In this sense there are parts of his thought that are indeed precursors of, intelligent, 'ecocriticism'. However we must also remember that in *La ginestra* Leopardi calls for human solidarity and unity in the face of the destructive power of nature, because in his age there was still no inkling of the devastating effects human abuse of nature on the planet would have almost two centuries later. But Leopardi's reflections on the border areas between ethics, politics, and social theory, areas that are among the most important historically as regards ethical issues, are indeed not frequent or very elaborate (they are mostly indirect, as in his satires on institutions and historical figures).

aware network of materialist reflections and principles, puts him almost at the opposite end of the spectrum from Kant's idealistic reflections (which are consonant with his theory of the "categorical imperative" in ethics). I would therefore argue that the interesting areas to explore are 'humanity' and 'rationality', partially shared and partially contested. As we have seen above, the 'mind' and its products, together with 'labor', are the main agents behind the "recession of natural barriers," which Leopardi sees to a large extent as enabling human 'corruptibility' and separation from natural origins, and the derived anthropomorphic delusions of 'superiority' with respect to the rest of nature, while other materialist ontologies (notably many in the Marxian tradition) see it as enabling emancipation and extending the realm of 'possibilities'. So the differences are not so much a matter of describing and acknowledging the causes (which Leopardi basically shares, though at a much lesser level of detail and complexity, with the others), as in the areas of evaluation (mostly negative for Leopardi, mostly positive for the others) and the direction at which one looks at this increasing mediation/separation: prospective and 'future-oriented' (i.e. mostly teleological) in the Marxian materialist ontologies, genetic, 'foundationally-oriented' and retrospective in Leopardi (in this one could perhaps see the influence of his expertise in philology). Both are compatible with materialist philosophies and outlooks, and to the degree they are made explicit, both are compatible with a 'scientific' (which does not mean a reductionist or a [neo]positivist) outlook.

However the very late Leopardi, most famously in *La ginestra*, calls for human solidarity in the face of nature's uncaring dominion. Marx called human beings a "species-being" (*Gattungswesen*), something which distinguished them from other animal species. And Kant, as we saw above, sees a special distinctive ("supersensible") ability in human beings which seems closely bound to "rationality." So in this area of "humanity," albeit qualified in different manners, and in Leopardi limited mostly to a very late period in his reflections, there does appear to be some partially shared ground between the different traditions and the three thinkers (Kant, Leopardi, Marx).

Leopardi's disanthropomorphizing materialism also means he is intrinsically more skeptical of philosophical solutions based in idealism, or on the veneration of detached, isolated, fetishized, abstracted goals, all of which themselves had origins and contexts.

> A thing is the more perfect the better its attributes are ordered to suit its end. This obviously relative perfection can be measured, and compared *even to perfection of other kinds*. But how can the greater or lesser perfection of the various ends be measured? How can the various ends be measured? What

absolute logic, what comparative norm exists independently of anything at all, to judge this end to be more perfect or better than that one, outside of one and the same system of ends? (For within one and the same system, subordinated ends can be compared; they are not really ends, however, but means, and parts, and they too are attributes of the system.) How then can one judge absolutely the greater or lesser abstract perfection of things? And how can an absolute good or evil, an absolute goodness or beauty, or their contraries, exist? (*Zib.*, 1355, 20 July 1821)[40]

And

The question of the highest good has been quite improperly called the question of ends. Man's end is well known and certain to anyone who puts the question to himself. It is to achieve perfect pleasure, by which I do not mean perfect in itself, and therefore it does not matter whether it is the highest pleasure or not, but perfect for that person, a pleasure that brings complete personal happiness. This is our end, as everyone knows, although it can never be known of what nature this perfect pleasure is or might be, as no one has ever experienced it. And as a consequence it can never be known what human happiness is or might be. The question may be, and is, raised as to whether man can obtain perfect pleasure through virtue, bodily delight, or other such things, or which of them might give him the most pleasure, or, in short, where man might or should obtain the perfect pleasure he desires, and which is his end. But this is a question about means, not ends. The end is certain, the means is unknown, and the reason for this ignorance is clear. The reason, I maintain, is that the means of achieving this end, which no one has ever achieved, does not or do not in fact exist anywhere, and that, as a consequence, the highest good, which could or should give us the perfect pleasure that we are seeking, is not to be found. It is imaginary, as is this

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[40] In other words 'subordinate' ends are 'internal' to a system, and therefore analogous to those internal to something like an organism a "self-organized" being. Which would again tend to lead us to the 'self-contained' solution of autotelism. This note occurs in the context of reflections about more or less 'corrupted' philosophies (in other words also connected to the enduring strand of the polemic against 'analytic' formalistic philosophies and in favor of 'poetic' [holistic, 'synthetic'] ones), which are also premised on the idea of 'corruption' over time (history). In this case the figure of Socrates had been contrasted positively with that of "modern philosophy." Cf. also *Zib.*, 1356 where he contrasts Socrates to Locke and Leibniz. An interesting opposition since we know more recent scholarship has shown various areas in which Leopardi is indebted to Locke and Leibniz. But given Leopardi's predilection for dialogue and the dialogical, one can I think hypothesize that this is, in addition to Socrates' historical position, an important additional element for the evaluation. Cf. the importance of the dialogical element in the *Canto notturno*.

perfect pleasure itself, so far as its nature is concerned. And in the end, man knows and will always know what to desire, but never what to seek, in other words what means, what thing can satisfy his desire, give him perfect pleasure, in other words what is the highest good, from which his happiness should spring. (*Zib.*, 4228, Recanati, 28 Nov. 1826)

Leopardi therefore manages both to show the extreme difficulty, if not impossibility, of adjudicating among ends, prioritizing and hierarchizing them, so long as one remains within philosophical systems premised on abstraction and divorced from genetic questions about origins.[41] In fact in the first quote (*Zib.*, 1355), when discussing subordinate ends within one and the same system, Leopardi essentially approximates Kant's discussion of the organism (and to a lesser extent the work of art), i.e. of aesthetic and teleological purposiveness, in which 'internal' ends also constitute means for other elements in the system. When comparing ends as ca. "values," i.e. in a more evaluative perspective (as for instance from ethical points of view), one which is also more abstract, and tends more towards absolutes, Leopardi's notes show how difficult such procedures can/will be. And of course the history of philosophy has shown these are extremely thorny issues to resolve regardless. The second longer quote also debunks the issues of "virtue" vs. "hedonism" by subsuming the search for virtuous conduct as categorizable as a form of search for pleasure, therefore hedonism.

The human difficulties in actually achieving pleasure(s) and attaining the appropriate ends in the appropriate manner is related to Leopardi's "teoria del piacere," and therefore also to the issue of "noia," which is in many ways the antithesis of pleasure. Leopardi uses one of the activities he is most familiar with, reading, as a concrete example:

> Monotony is unbearable. But a great and possibly the best remedy for this malady is to have a purpose. When a person proposes a purpose to himself either for action or indeed for inaction, he will find delight in things that are not delightful, even in things that are unpleasant, almost indeed in boredom itself. As far as delightful things are concerned, uniformity and duration will not detract from their pleasure for someone who directs them toward a goal. I do not believe there is any other more capital, universal, and intimate reason that studying is for scholars an exception to the general rule, in that studying continuously hardly ever diminishes its delight. Every day you see

[41] In some ways Leopardi here anticipates Galvano della Volpe's criticism of "indeterminate abstraction." Cf. Galvano della Volpe, *Critique of Taste*, trans. Michael Caesar (London: Verso, 1991), and *Logic as a Positive Science* (London: NLB, 1980).

people who read for no other purpose than to pass the time really enjoying the first few pages of a book, and then being unable to reach the end without being bored, even when the book has all the means to delight as much in the rest as at the beginning. But constant delight without some aim inevitably results in boredom, which is why those people who read just for amusement tire of it so quickly, and cannot imagine how people do find so much entertainment in reading, and they are continuously searching for variety and hrch sickeningly from one book to another without enjoying any of them other than in passing. By contrast, the scholar always has a purpose, even when he reads for leisure and to pass the time. The same applies to all the other occupations that people become fond of, when they involve an interest and a goal that is more or less precise, more or less serious and important, and when their continuation, duration, and monotony never lead to boredom. (*Zib.*, 345-47, 22 November 1820)

As we can see here (where the topic is monotony rather than pleasure in a more abstract sense), Leopardi in essence gives an especially positive evaluation to teleological positing, because one's 'immersion' in the activity due to a goal or a series of goals one is pursuing, allows the process to continue (ca. indefinitely) in a pleasurable, non-monotonous, non-boring manner. Of course reading is a very special case, not only because of its biographical position for Leopardi the thinker and author, but also because of the amount of cultural/social content that is presupposed in the act of reading and absorption of linguistically transmitted human knowledge in the first place. But what is interesting is that the above passage does introduce a slight distinction between ca. more 'targeted' teleological activity (and one achieved via 'integrated/delayed' gratification, rather than 'instant gratification'), and the more general and abstract affirmation by Leopardi that ca. "the" end of all humans, and essentially all living organism is "happiness" (in other words his overarching hedonistic framework).

Leopardi then proceeds to differentiate between readers, this time not between the kinds of goals and teleological activities different readers pursue (immediate gratification vs. ca. 'integrated' gratification), but on the basis of their potential to imagine, to understand 'internally' (what German criticism, perhaps most famously in the person of critic Wilhelm Worringer, has historically called *Einfühlung*, which has some of the same connotations as "empathy," but with quite different implications contained in the etymological roots),[42] and therefore in the "superficial" cases are not able to reconstruct, re-present, and internalize those "truths" that instead the

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[42] Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997); original version, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (Munich: W. Fink, 2007).

"profound" readers are able to "feel," into their experiential, evaluative and emotional universe:

> Good poetry is equally intelligible to people with imagination and feeling and to those without. But despite this, the former enjoy it and the latter don't, and indeed they can't even understand how it could be enjoyed. First, because they are unable or disinclined to be moved or lifted out of themselves, etc., by the poet, and then because although they can understand the words they cannot understand the truth, the force of those feelings. Their hearts do not tell them that those passions, those effects, those moral phenomena, etc., which the poet describes really are like that. And so the words of the poet, although clear and easily understood, do not convey to them the same meaning, the same truth that they convey to others, and while understanding the words, they do not understand the poet. It is as well to remember that this also happens with philosophical, profound, metaphysical, psychological writing, etc., so that you will not be surprised at the very different, and often contradictory, effects it can have on different individuals, and classes, and hence the very different impressions they form of it. Because, take a text of this kind, filled with truths and composed with all the clarity of expression that it could ever possibly possess. The words say the same thing to the profound man and to the superficial one. They understand equally the material meaning of the writing, and thus they know perfectly well what the author wants to say. But this does not mean that they understand the text, as is commonly believed. Because the superficial man, who does not know how to put himself in the same state of mind as that in which the author was, in short the man who is more or less incapable of thinking as deeply as the author, understands materially what he reads on the page, but he does not see the relationship between those words and the truth, he does not feel that this is how things are and, by not discerning the field that the author made visible, does not recognize the links and connections that the author saw and from which he deduced those consequences, etc., that for him, and people like him, are incontrovertible. For superficial readers, these are not truths. They will see the same things, but they will not know or feel that they are connected in any way, with the consequences that the author draws from them, and will not see the interchangeable relation of the parts of a syllogism (for all human knowledge is a syllogism). In short, they will understand precisely every word but will not grasp the truth of what the words say, a truth that exists in reality, and will be understood by others. So they will not have the mental strength to be able to doubt, and to feel the reasonableness and the truth of doubt in relation to things that nature or habit suggests are certainties. It's not enough to understand a true proposition; it's necessary to feel its truth. There is a sense of truth, as there is of passion, feeling, beauty, etc., a sense of the true as well as the beautiful. Someone who understands but does not feel that truth, understands what that truth means but does not understand that it is truth, because he does not experience its sense, that is, its *inner persuasion* [my italics]. The ranks of such people

should include the majority of modern apologists for religion, men with no heart, with no emotion, with no deep or fine feeling for nature, in other words, with no experience of the truth, like those readers of poetry who lack any experience of passion, enthusiasm, emotion, etc. These apologists, even assuming that they have a perfect understanding of the meaning of the profound philosophers whom they combat, do not understand the truth that is contained in them, and after clear and detailed consideration declare as false what you know and feel to be true, and vice versa. Besides, to understand philosophers and almost any writer, it is necessary, as in understanding the poets, to have sufficient powers of imagination and feeling and sufficient capacity for reflection to be able to put yourself in the author's shoes, with the same point of view and in the same situation in which he found himself when considering the things he is writing about. Otherwise, you will never find him sufficiently clear, however much he may in fact be. This is just as true when you find yourself persuaded by and in agreement with the author, as in the opposite case. I know that with this method, I have never found Staël's works obscure or at any rate unintelligible, while everyone says they are very obscure. (*Zib.*, 347-49, 22 Nov. 1820)

This ca. "qualitative" differentiation between readers, which seems mostly premised on functional abilities and natural gifts (i.e. the capacity to imagine, etc.) is actually implicitly also based on exposure to kinds of knowledge and experience, and it is one of the fairly rare instances in which Leopardi explicitly distinguishes humans on the basis of "class" as well as individuality,[43] though it would be tough to argue that in this case he was not referring at least as much to "classes" divided by 'natural' talents as by socio-historical circumstances (i.e. exposure and access to the 'means of acculturation'). What is however very important is that this kind of "inner persuasion" is premised on an understanding of reality, and Leopardi specifically targets the apologists for religious arguments as among those least capable of this "profound," imaginative and inner, persuasion: in other words it is tied to the argument for the need of a materialistically grounded and 'internal' *infraphilosophy* (cf. *Zib.*, 3238-45), which analytical thinkers miss on the mechanistic side, while religious thinkers miss it on the dogmatic, metaphysical, idealistic (one could add irrationalistic) side, that of decontextualized abstract speculation, also often engaged in by other kinds of academic philosophers. Here 'materialism' for Leopardi is basically antithetical to, unimaginative, literalism.

As Leopardi moves to his more "cosmic pessimist" phase, he increasingly bases this deepening of his disanthropomorphizing materialism on the

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[43] But cf. *Zib.*, 3244 (above), for one of the other, infrequent, exceptions.

disjunction between the teleological positing of living organisms and what is becoming the ever more apparent, but also ever more disheartening, 'lack of goals' or lack of any form of support for the goals of individual organisms, at the level of 'overarching' nature and its existence:

We need to distinguish between the end or aim of nature in general and that of human nature, the end of universal existence and that of human existence, or rather, the natural end of man and that of his existence. The natural end of man and every living being, in every moment of being aware of their existence, is not and cannot be other than happiness, and so pleasure, their own pleasure; and that is also the only end of a living being, as far as the sum total of his life, action, and thought is concerned. But the end of his existence, or rather the end of nature in giving it to him and in modifying it for him, as also in modifying the existence of other beings, and in fact the end of existence in general, and of the order and mode of being that things have both in themselves, and in their relation to other things, is certainly not happiness nor in any way the pleasure of living beings, not only because such happiness is impossible (Theory of pleasure), but also because although nature, in the modification of each animal and other things in relation to them, provided for and perhaps aimed to give some pleasures to these animals, these things are nothing compared to those in which the mode of being of each living being, and of other things with any relationship to them, cause them necessary and constant sorrow. So that both the amount and the intensity of pain in each animal's whole life is beyond compare to the amount and intensity of his pleasure. Therefore nature, existence does not have in any way as an end the pleasure or the happiness of animals; rather it is the opposite; but that does not mean that every animal has not *by its nature as its necessary, perpetual, and only end, its own pleasure, its own happiness, and that goes for each species as a whole as well as the universality of living beings. An evident and undeniable contradiction in the order of things and in the mode of their existence, a terrifying contradiction, but not for that reason any less true: a great mystery, which can never be explained, unless we deny (according to my system) every absolute truth and falsity, and abandon in a certain sense the very principle of our understanding, non potest idem simul esse et non esse [the same thing cannot be and not be at the same time]. Another contradiction, or another way of considering it, in this being of animals, necessarily and regularly according to their own nature and of universal nature, unhappy (being—unhappiness, contradictory things), has been set down by me elsewhere [Z 4099-100].*

After all, Volney's argument is equally valid against what he says is "le but immédiat et direct de la nature" ["the immediate and direct aim of nature"] (he probably means, I think, the nature of man), that is "la conservation de soi-même" ["self-preservation"] (expressly denying that "le bonheur" is "le but immédiat et direct de la nature" [that "happiness" is "the immediate and direct aim of nature"], but rather that it is "un objet de luxe, surajouté à l'objet *nécessaire et fondamental* de la conservation" ["an object

which is a luxury, additional to the *necessary and fundamental* object of preservation"]). Since, even allowing, which is certainly not the case, that their own preservation is the immediate and necessary object or aim of the nature of animals, it is certainly not the object of universal nature, nor of the nature of other animals in relation to each of them (which applies as well to what was said above). In fact the end of universal nature is the life of the universe, which consists equally in the production, preservation and destruction of its component parts, and therefore the destruction of every animal is part of the end of such a nature at least as much as its preservation, even more than its preservation, insofar as one sees that there are more of those things which conspire to destroy each animal than those which favor its preservation; insofar as naturally in the life of any animal its decline and wearing down or in other words its getting old (which begins in man even before he is thirty) occupies more space than all the other ages put together (see "Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese," and "Cantico del Gallo silvestre"), and that is the case speaking about the animal itself independently from anything happening to it from the outside; finally insofar as the period of preservation, that is the longevity, of the animal is nothing in relation to the eternity of its nonbeing, that is of the consequence and, as it were, the longevity of its destruction. Likewise a thousand things and a thousand animals that do not have in any way as their purpose the survival of this one animal, that have rather a completely natural tendency to destroy it, either for their own survival or for some other reason. And that goes for individuals and species. And the number of such individuals or species whether animal or not, who have a natural tendency to destroy any other species of animal or individual (like those who have a natural tendency to cause them the opposite of pleasure) is greater than the number who have a natural tendency to ensure their preservation (and likewise their pleasure).

After all, that the natural end of any animal is not directly and immediately its own preservation, that is for its own sake, has been demonstrated in the "Dialogo di un Fisico e un Metafisico." Man naturally and immediately loves only his own good, and his greatest good, and naturally and immediately avoids only his pain and his greatest pain: that is, what he judges as such. If men prefer life to everything else, and avoid death above all else, that is only because and insofar as they judge life to be their greatest good (either in itself, or insofar as without life no good can be enjoyed), and death their greatest pain. So the love of life, the care one takes to ensure one's own preservation, the hatred of and flight from death, the fear of it and of the dangers in meeting it, is not in man the effect of any direct natural tendency, but of a line of reasoning, a judgment formed by them right from the start, on which are founded this love and fear; and therefore they both have no other natural and innate principle than love of one's own good, which amounts to one's own happiness, and so pleasure, a principle from which derive in turn all the other feelings and actions of man. (And what I say about man is to be understood about all living beings.) This principle is not an idea, it is a natural tendency, it is innate. That judgment

is an idea, so cannot for that reason be innate. Though it is universal, and men and animals do it naturally, in which sense it can be called natural. But that does not prove that it is innate or correct. E.g., man believes and naturally judges that the sun goes from east to west, and that the earth does not move: all children, all men who first see this phenomenon of day and who think about it (unless they have already been forestalled by education) conceive such an idea, form such a judgment, and do so immediately, invariably, and are entirely persuaded of its truth. This judgment is therefore natural and universal, and yet it is neither innate (because it comes after the experience of the senses, and derives from it), nor true, because in fact the opposite is the case. And it is the same with a thousand other errors and illusions, a thousand false judgments, in physical matters, and still more in moral, natural, universal ones, which everyone invariably holds, and is entirely persuaded of their truth, yet their very naturalness and universal character does not at all prove that they are true or that they are innate. I conclude that the love for and care to ensure one's own preservation is not an unmediated quality, etc., in man, but derives from love for one's own happiness (which really is unmediated) and derives from it through an idea, a judgment (a false one), which when that fails or alters, then a man loses his love for his own survival, and converts it into self-hatred, making him flee life, and pursue death; which he never does and never can do, even for a moment when it is a matter of his own happiness, or pleasure on the one hand, and on the other his own unhappiness; even when he is raving mad; in which state he sometimes kills himself, but he never stops loving above all else and trying as well to procure what he judges is his happiness, his greatest happiness. (*Zib.*, 4128-32, 5-6 April 1825)[44]

There are several other ways, beyond the contrasting of human goals and those of nature as a whole, in which this passage is very important. Not only does Leopardi state categorically that achieving happiness for humans (and other living organisms) is impossible (something which he will do fairly frequently both in the *Zibaldone* and other works as he deepens his pessimistic view of nature), but he also states that the absolute quantity of pain experienced by humans and other organisms is much greater than happiness. While this sort of statement would be difficult to corroborate/falsify empirically simply because of the complexity of its variables, what is consonant with Leopardi's deepening materialism is his attempt to quantify the disparity.

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[44] Leopardi also discusses the way in which 'nature' has provided different organisms with specific organs and abilities to compete against other organisms, and how therefore these material characteristics and the relative 'organism-specific' goals are at odds with one another from the point of view of classes of organisms (but not necessarily that of 'nature'). Cf. *Zib.*, 4205.

Even more important is his insistence that the overarching goal of humans and other organisms is happiness and not "self-preservation" (his polemic against Volney), thus sidelining the term that is often used in very simplified (not to say partially incorrect) explanations of "Darwinism" (and this even if one takes the enormous variety of interpretations it has been given into account). From my point of view "happiness" can indeed by related to the 'feedback' that organisms' systems experience when achieving their goals (hunger, thirst, sexual drives, etc. all the way to the culturally mediated/sublimated ones we find in human cultures, and to a certain extent in the 'cultures' of the 'higher' mammals), i.e. it is an internal form of positive reinforcement, both when realizing 'physiological' goals, but also mediated socio-cultural ones. The logic of "preservation" makes more rational sense within certain kinds of biological discourse that have to do with evolutionary trends and advantages for survival, but here the discourse generally refers to large groups, sub-species, species, etc. and not the behavior of individual organisms. In fact even if we simply examine very common and well known behaviors among many living beings that procreate sexually, the battles among dominant males for procreation privileges are clearly, on an individual level, antithetical to the supposed goal of "individual self-preservation."

On the level of Leopardi's network of materialist reflections, which here he does exceptionally define as a "system," the following passage is extremely important to understand his materialist polemics against religion, idealism, and the fetishizing of absolutes (which could, from a certain philosophical standpoint, be viewed as "isolated goals," in other words goals that have been posited in the abstract, divorced from any means or path to get there): "unless we deny (according to my system) every absolute truth and falsity." It is in turn very closely related to this previous statement: "And how can an absolute good or evil, an absolute goodness or beauty, or their contraries, exist?" (*Zib.*, 1355). These are positions that to an extent anticipate, and are certainly consistent with, Galvano della Volpe's critique of indeterminate abstraction.

The above passage also uses the example of the geocentric cosmological point of view that most humans develop on the basis of empirical induction from their everyday experiences, as an example of an almost universal belief, one that is 'natural', but one that is also erroneous. I find it interesting not only because of its connection to Leopardi's education that led to the *Storia dell'astronomia* (*History of Astronomy*), but also because he resorts quite frequently to the cosmic analogy as an example of ca. 'human error' (based in anthropomorphization) vs. the 'cosmic truth' (a kind of 'exemplary' opposition that is fundamental to the *Canto notturno di un pastore errante*

dell'Asia for instance).[45] There seem to be some materialistically based tendencies of the human imagination at work here: the cosmos represents the outer borders of the empirically knowable, experienceable and definable. It is also the 'highest' area of the potentially knowable universe from our point of view. It is the least 'interiorizable' on the basis of our familiarity with organic life and its environment. And it also represents the outermost limits of our most powerful sense, sight. In other words these are the 'outer limits' of what we are "internal" to. Material(ist) limits.

Leopardi's intensifying pessimism now leads him to address the idea about "preservation" as well, but applied to the species and not the individual. But the fact that nature as 'system' functions as a complex of processes that are in no way anthropocentric, and could be seen by us humans (with our 'internal' and interested perspective) as even anti-human is even more starkly evident in this passage:

> Man (and likewise the other animals) is not born to enjoy life, but only to perpetuate life, to communicate it to others who come after him, in order to preserve it. Neither he himself, nor life, nor anything in this world is properly for him, on the contrary his entire being is for life.   A terrifying, but a true proposition and conclusion of all metaphysics. Existence is not for the existent being, does not have for its end the existent being, nor the good of the existent being; if there is any experience of good, that is purely by chance: the existent being is for existence, entirely for existence, this is its only real end. Existent beings exist so that existence exists, the individual existent being is born and exists so that existence continues and so that existence may be preserved through him and after him. All this is clear from seeing that the true and only end of nature is the preservation of the species, and not the preservation or the happiness of individuals; which happiness does not even exist at all in the world, not for individuals nor for the species. On the basis of this we have necessarily to arrive finally at the general, summary, supreme, and terrible conclusion mentioned above. (*Zib.*, 4169, Bologna, 11 March 1826)

Not only is the starkness of this vision compatible with a proto-Darwinian view of nature (though neither Darwin not certainly later biologists involved in the modern evolutionary synthesis would have probably called it an "end," nor would they have been concerned, generally speaking, about the fate of individuals), but it also grasps that this materialist foundation, and in some ways 'end-point' is also the end of metaphysics as

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[45] This analogy (geocentrism) is one of Leopardi's favorites and is fairly important in a number of his works: for instance in the *Operette morali* in *Il Copernico*, in the *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia*, many passages of the *Zibaldone*, etc.

a form of idealization of a cosmic order. The idea that existence of individual beings is "for life," is in several ways close to the views expressed by Davide Tarizzo.[46]

There are rare limited exceptions to Leopardi's pessimistic materialist trend, and I quote one in which he partially recuperates the idea of the "recession of natural barriers," albeit expressed in a very generic fashion: the rare instance of a very anthropocentric and very anthropomorphic point of view, in which human beings ca. 'correct' nature, the 'spoiled child' (implicitly humans are therefore the responsible adults). It is however, only an analogy. But I think this brief exception is the one that, classically, confirms the rule:

> Nature is like a child: with great care she toils to produce, and to guide her product to perfection; but as soon as she has done so, she sets about destroying it, working away at its dissolution. This is true of man, also of other animals, of vegetables, of every kind of thing. And man treats nature exactly like he treats a child: the means of preservation used by him to prolong the period of existence or of a certain state (either his own or of things which serve him in life) are almost like taking his work out of the hands of the child as soon as he has completed it, so that he does not immediately set about undoing it. (*Zib.*, 4421, 2 Dec. 1828)

So it is in this border area that the transitions between the poetic and the philosophical can become most fruitful, powerful, and retain the highest values for both types of endeavor. And I think this is precisely one of the reasons for Leopardi's enduring power in both fields, for his enormous ability to speak to contemporary humans on many issues. One should add that the type of philosophical and poetic questioning Leopardi often engages in is also an, implicitly, teleological activity. The critical methodology of hermeneutics operates precisely on the assumption that most texts are essentially "answers" and that therefore the critic's task is to find the appropriate question(s) which they attempt to answer. So both the questioning and dialogical nature of much of Leopardi's work, reflections and notes, partakes of this nature of being on a teleological path (his notes about the pleasures derived from reading when focused on pursuits other than pleasure and entertainment seem indirect confirmation in this regard). (Re)creating the bonds that tie ends and means is one of the most crucial methods by which we can reconstruct the meaning of events and activity, and albeit in a different, metamorphosed, and abstracted medium, this applies to language as well. Kant derived his famous definition of aesthetic

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[46] Cf. Davide Tarizzo, *Life. A Modern Invention.*

activity as "purposefulness without purpose" from biological organisms (their internal, holistic, architecture and system of inner relations). Leopardi's not infrequent analogies between poetry and nature, essentially rely on the same insight. Only in the later Leopardi is the "lack of purpose," or anti-hedonistic, or 'destructive' purpose, given increasing emphasis over the "purposefulness" of the whole.

And in both the *Operette* and many of the *Canti* it is precisely this contrast between purposefulness, caring and happiness, and lack of purpose, lack of care and unhappiness that is at the center of Leopardi's greatest reflections and lyrical moments.

The *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* can probably be considered Leopardi's poetic and philosophical summa, in condensed form. A summa of his previous published work and his outlook at the end of his life.[47] *Zibaldone* was never published during his lifetime and never intended for publication. *La ginestra* (or for some *Il tramonto della luna*) can be considered his final poem, but *La ginestra* does not really so much sum up much of his previous reflections and poetry as set some of his most central concerns (the overarching role of nature, its uncaring influence on human lives) in a specific historical (and geographical) setting: Vesuvius and the destruction of Pompeii, one in which the fatalistic implications apparently inherent in the genesis of his second, pessimistic, view of nature, are

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[47] Leopardi's works and reflections are extraordinary also because of his interest in science and attention to empirical detail, which are qualities that only enrich and complement his being a 'poet-philosopher', and in this sense invite comparisons to Goethe. György Lukács always greatly admired Goethe's 'realism' and his ability to capture the typical in his art. Goethe indeed became an almost 'model' figure in his reflections on realism, and in his work on aesthetics, for instance *Prolegomeni a un'estetica marxista*, (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1971) which examines aesthetics as the realm of the *particular*, as opposed to (and mediating between) the *universal* on the one hand and the *individual* on the other: in much of this work he examines the relationship between the *particular* and the *typical*. Goethe ultimately relied upon a close relation between the symbol and the typical, as for instance with his idea of "Urphänomen" ([ab]original phenomenon) concretely exemplified in his "Urpflanze" ([ab]original plant). Leopardi in much of his work, I would argue especially successfully in the *Canto notturno*, also manages to combine the heights of lyricism with a condensation into the 'typical'. Lukács's reflections (*Prolegomeni a un'estetica marxista*) were intentionally developed to move beyond both Kantian idealist aesthetics, with its excessive tendency to irrationalist intuitionism, and simple deterministic aesthetics, non-materialist aesthetics that tend to rely excessively on a mimicking of the universalist standards of the physical and natural sciences applied to human art, which are actually detrimental to understanding the, socio-historical, category of the typical (*Prolegomeni a un'estetica*, 127-28).

especially evident.[48]

On the formal level the *Canto notturno* opens with a series of questions, and it is presented as a dialogue between three main subjects: on the one hand the moon, 'high', inorganic, celestial nature to whom the shepherd attributes (at least potentially) superior learning and to a degree experience; on the other the shepherd himself, narrator/protagonist; and finally the flock of sheep, which is entrusted to him. But the shepherd explicitly presents these ideas about the moon's knowledge as, unsupported, hypotheses: which are therefore still open. On the other hand the shepherd engages in an (also silent or mute) dialogue with his flock (in both cases it is the shepherd who formulates the questions or suppositions, and then suggests or imagines the state of his interlocutors, what their real circumstances and experiences might be), an organic, albeit collective, interlocutor, therefore in some fashion a 'proto'-society, since on the one hand it is important to note its components are no longer wild, but domesticated, even though the shepherd doesn't question the flock as the object of his 'care', but rather because of its non-human, animal nature. Leopardi is of course also engaging in some indirect irony towards the figure of the religious shepherd/pastor, also given the nature and goals of his questioning (rather than preaching and guidance).[49]

In the *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* the framework is extremely important and often somewhat overlooked. The fact it is so intensely centered on dialogue and questioning, is one very important element. Leopardi in this manner consciously manages to 'suspend' belief as much as disbelief in the poetic fiction, thus rendering the directness and realism of the imaginary situation more powerful, and the border between poetic illusion and philosophical reflection more fluid. The shepherd is precisely "errante" in other words as in genres like the picaresque he is moving around without any very clear goal or purpose (in other words constantly on the verge of or actually having fallen victim of "error").[50] Moreover being a shepherd he is a figure of "care" towards his flock (but also an ironic debunking of the religious symbol/icon of the shepherd), but

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[48] Cf. Solmi, *Studi leopardiani*.

[49] An analogous form of ironic reversal against traditional religious thought can be found in *La ginestra*, vv. 87-97 and vv. 111-25.

[50] Cf. v. 139, "O forse erra dal vero." For the Italian text and English translation of the *Canto notturno*, cf. below. One should note that another one of Leopardi's works that focuses on the relationship between earth and moon, namely *The Dialogue of the Earth and the Moon*, especially a long section towards the end, is an ironic revelation of all the beliefs/prejudices/*errors* that humans (in this case especially in 'ancient' times) held about the moon.

one characterized and almost plagued by constant questioning and absence of more finite and concrete satisfactions (unlike his 'animal' flock for instance). On the other this very questioning is directed at the, *inanimate*, and specifically *cosmic* universe and its movements, where sometimes the emphasis is placed on the mystery of its (absence of) purpose, seemingly analogous to the picaresque nature of the shepherd's wanderings, sometimes instead on the *cyclical* nature of these movements, cycles that become an expression of repetition and boredom (*noia*), and fate, not of potential change and (re)generation, as for instance in Vico's theories of the "corsi e ricorsi."

The constant questioning of the moon (the poem starts with a sequence of four pressing questions,[51] in a crescendo of urgency and curiosity) and its meanderings centers on the idea of *purpose*, but precisely so as to to suspend judgment about finding and assigning such a concrete purpose[52]. Moreover

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[51] The constant and urgent questioning is one of the central features of the poem. After the initial verses, two questions in vv. 16-20 conclude the first stanza; in the middle of the third stanza this is followed by two existential questions centered on the issue of the (absent) purpose of life and/or of bringing offspring and beings into the world, to live (vv. 52-56); in the middle of the fourth stanza these are followed by a rapid succession of another four questions on the meaning of the existing universe and of the characteristics of one's own being and life (vv. 86-89); at the end of the fourth stanza the questioning focuses on the implications of Leopardi's "teoria del piacere" and the imagined, imputed and suggested (but not known for certain, as Leopardi emphasizes we are not really able to communicate with animals, the shepherd with this flock) satisfaction of animal life as contrasted to human lives plagued by boredom and the gnawing of conscious questioning. So numerically the sequence of questions is 4 2 2 4 1 (the conclusive question being in some sense about both the ability and the 'curse' of being able to question itself).

[52] In *Zib.*, 4399-4400 Leopardi refers to the project for this poem with the title *Canto notturno di un pastore dell'Asia centrale alla luna*, which therefore clearly relates this poem to a 'tryptich' of poems dedicated to the moon already in their titles, from the early *Alla luna*, to the late (perhaps even subsequent to the composition of *La ginestra*) *Il tramonto della luna*. The motif of the moon is obviously absolutely central to Leopardi, and among the many other places also recurs in the second of the *Odae adespotae*, the last strophe of the *Vita solitaria* and the sixth of *Bruto minore*. What is absolutely remarkable for an entity so absolutely central to his poetry, is that there is *no index entry* (!) for "moon" in the *Zibaldone*, although already in the very first entry, *Zib.*, 1, July or August 1817, we find the expression "Era la luna nel cortile" (The moon shone in the courtyard) in a poem. So both as dialogical partner, and symbolic telos, it is shrouded in silence.
Antonio Prete, "La luna leopardiana," in *Il demone dell'analogia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1986), 11-29, engages in some reflections that are somewhat more systematic and interconnected than in *Finitudine e infinito*, but the same tendency to make a very

these questions on the one hand initiate a form of dialogue with the moon, which brings this poem close to the format of the *Operette morali* (which is evident in the subject matter of the poem as well), on the other by emphasizing 'suspension' in the realm of the imagination, they tie a poem which is otherwise extremely distant from the formal characteristics of the lyric, precisely to lyric poetry and its motivations (also because nothing is perhaps so closely bound to the most intimate parts of the individual, of individual beings, as the connection between *telos* and value).[53] So it is the very important, yet very anthropocentric, type of questioning that is put in question, and, as it were, suspended.[54] More specifically Leopardi repeatedly

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large number of comparisons with a very large number of Romantic and post-Romantic figures and their poetry and reflections, is one I don't find critically or philologically persuasive. There are two areas Prete mentions and that I partially concur with, but I think would need significantly more extensive development: the first being the idea that the figure of the moon is in different ways often complementary to the narrator's/poet's interiority (and his need to explore and express it) in Leopardi's poetry, 17 ff. The second, but it is an area of generic agreement, is the extent to which the *Canto notturno* is also important philosophically, 20 ff. But for Prete its importance is assimilable to Romantic, and later Nietzschean reflections, which lead to one of the favorite 'threads' in Prete's discourse on Leopardi, namely the basic equivalence of 'infinity' and 'nothingness' in the Recanatese's work: a position I definitely disagree with: I instead believe 'infinity' is very much and fully material in Leopardi, and that it is the reason Leopardi mostly insists that one has to start with finite material elements ('provocations') to encourage our imaginations and reflections on it. There is also the crucial role the distinction between animate and inanimate nature plays, but inanimate nature is still very much material, even when it extends beyond the finite. Cf. *Zib.*, 629-33 among others. What Prete touches on, but I think does not really grasp its importance, is the frequency with which the figure of the moon is tied to that of the 'traveler' (of the human moving on a path, towards a destination, etc.), an expression frequently used being "viator" (which contains the Italian "via" [street, road, path]). To me this is yet another confirmation of the teleological aspect of Leopardi's reflections, as the human on a 'path' almost automatically leads to the question: "where?" "whereto?" In other words a question about goals and ends.

[53] In *Zib.*, 4399-4400, previously mentioned, Leopardi mentions how the ca. 'primitive' nature of the shepherd's expressions to the moon are characteristic of the original, enduring and ca. 'universal' appeal and nature of lyric poetry specifically. cf. Giacomo Leopardi, *Opere*, ed. Mario Fubini (Turin: UTET, 2013), 277. Leopardi had been reading an article in the *Journal des Savants* about a book written by a Baron Meyendorff regarding his experiences in Asia which described the shepherds' songs to the moon.

[54] One of several different and complex measures of this suspension of both disbelief and belief, underscoring Leopardi's dialogical, interrogative process and path, between philosophy and poetry, is the recurring use of "forse" throughout the poem:

relates the inorganic and cosmic entities (like the moon) to the unbounded and "infinite," almost completely unfettered by (short term) temporal limitations, which are instead defining of both the shepherd and the flock (albeit in different ways). This emphasis on the *infinite* is of course tied, but in rather complex ways, to his most famous lyrical poem. Because there, in *L'Infinito*, it was a question of imagination, and and an imaginary voyage and fusion undertaken from an affectively charged and localized, specifically vegetable, nature, the "ermo colle" and the "siepe," which significantly also reoccur and are tied to the moon in *Alla luna,* a poem whose composition critics believe is almost contemporary to *L'Infinito,* and a lyric that quite particularly emphasizes the poet's despondent emotional state.[55] In *Canto notturno*, instead, where the emphasis is on questioning and (imputed) dialogue, we find the moon in the position of observer, interlocutor, visible but mysterious marker of the boundaries of the finite and the imagination[56] (in fact the moon seems to trace not only the boundaries of a, materialist, not metaphysical, 'sublunar' world, but also invite the imagination into the reaches beyond the border it traces: we no longer are provided with an Empyrean, with an almost sacralized locus of the metaphysical, but a distant goal of 'higher knowledge' for the materialist imagination); it observes the *deserts* (probably meant to produce associations

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vv. 60, 62, 104, 133, 139, 141; in other words with a crescendo in the conclusion. The poem of course has many other dubitative forms ("non so") which accompany the questioning. One should note that where the human, finite, protagonist resorts to questions and "forse," the poem attributes a form of, material, distant, far removed, 'cosmic' (in some sense approximating a materialist 'all-knowingness') knowledge to the moon: expressed by the attribution of "certo" (vv. 69, 73, 98) as opposed to "forse," as well as contrasting the "conosci il tutto" (v. 99) of the moon, to the "conosco e sento" (v. 100) of the shepherd/narrator, a "sento" that underscores his lived, emotional, value-oriented, physically 'lived' finitude.

[55] Antonio Prete seems to dedicate a volume to the topic of the opposition of the 'finite' and the 'infinite', but, on closer inspection, it is a collection of brief pieces that 'lightly' touch on almost all of Leopardi's topics, wander from Italo Calvino to Kierkegaard to Paul Valéry, exhibiting the author's interest in exhibiting his own stylistic pirouettes, but ultimately one finds many 'toccate e fughe' towards topics and symbols in Leopardi, including many allusions to *L'Infinito*, but one is also left with few finite statements about Leopardi that one can say 'define' Prete's outlook or position. I would call it something like a "divagare virtuosistico" (virtuoso digressions), rather than an analysis of the 'finite' and the 'infinite' in Leopardi. Cf. Antonio Prete, *Finitudine e infinito. Su Leopardi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1998).

[56] Cf. "in suo giro lontano, al ciel *confina*" (v. 81) or, in *Il tramonto della luna*, "giunta al *confin* del cielo" (v. 9) (having reached the limits of the sky); my translation and italics.

with the idea of "steppes") of a faraway land, Asia, therefore once again somewhat mysterious, exotic, associated with the orient, deserts which we associate with the absence of all life (especially of vegetable organisms). In fact one of the many telling contrasts in il *Canto notturno* is that the moon is observing the deserts, the absence of life, from on high, while it is only really the shepherd who can catch brief, somewhat arbitrary glimpses of "life": following complex transformations and movements between and across the poems composed at the end of his life, these vegetable organisms will return in a central (and intentionally contrastive) role in *La ginestra o il fiore del deserto*. Here it is instead a question of very real cosmic infinites, which moreover are given some 'coloration' in our perception given the fact that the shepherd/observer is situated in the Asian deserts/steppes. In the *Canto notturno* we find the opposition of moon as a distant, solitary, and a nightly observer, to the shepherd who moves not just or so much himself but his flock, who does observe forms of life in close proximity (vv. 12-13: "greggia," "campo," "greggi," "fontane ed erbe"), plural and diverse forms of life contrasted to the "deserti" in verse 4. So on the one hand the poem emphasizes the parallels between the moon's and the shepherd's movements/travels/voyages, on the other their contrasts: they both rise (the verb "sorgere" vv. 3 and 11 is usually used for astrophysical bodies, water or, derivatively, historical movements, in Italian) but the shepherd moves during the day, the moon at night.

The contrast in the kinds of movements performed by the shepherd (and to a lesser degree the flock) on the one hand and the moon on the other are also very significant in contrasting their teleological paths and activities. While their motions are sometimes compared and shown to be analogous, in others they are at opposite ends: the moon is associated with cycles and never ending motion: "riandare i sempiterni calli" (v. 6), "corso immortale" (contrasted to "vagar mio breve") (v. 20), "giro lontano, al ciel confina;" (v. 81), "girando senza posa, / per tornare sempre là donde sonmosse;" (vv. 95-96), "eterni giri" (v. 101). In contrast the shepherd engages in errant motions, ones that follow the usual pattern for finite living beings, namely that they have a goal (or goals, but it/they are ephemeral and uncertain, and/or unachievable), but in this case the goal is ultimately only death, thus playing on the Italian homonymy of "il fine" (goal/end) vs. "la fine" (end/end of a temporal process/death): "dove la via, / dove il tanto affaticar fu volto: / abisso orrido, immenso," (vv. 33-35), and this is why he asks the moon what the goal is "ove tende" (v. 18), vv. 86-89 ("a che tante facelle? [...]"), "uso alcuno, alcun frutto/ indovinar non so" (vv. 97-98) while at others he imputes a 'higher' knowledge to the moon (the use of cosmic distances, projections, together with the metaphorical crescendo associated

with degrees of height/altitude (and human cultures overwhelmingly associate "height" with power, insight, control, etc.)) of what these goals are and what their worth is, significantly in the context of temporal processes (including the cyclical seasons) "e tu certo comprendi / il perchè delle cose, e vedi il *frutto*, / del mattin, della sera, / del tacito, infinito andar del tempo" (vv. 69-72, my italics: to underscore the association of cyclical time with infinity, Leopardi then continues describing the moon's knowledge of the seasons, not only of the parts of the day). Finally in verses 133-38 where the shepherd imagines he might be happier with wings, wandering the skies and counting stars, we can see how the shepherd's use of another organism, the bird, on the one hand might seem to bring him closer to the moon because of elevation, being in the sky, being higher, but on the other ("errar" is given an internal rhyme with "volar") his kind of motion is still that of the errant shepherd, and not that of the celestial body on its set course. This suspended motion between the two worlds is underscored by the shepherd addressing both the flock and the moon separately, in both cases asking the rhetorical question about whether he might be happier.

Moreover, the modes of address and the epithets used have undergone immense changes from *Alla luna*[57] to the *Canto notturno*. Whereas in the former we had adjectives associated with positive emotional feelings and attachment ("graziosa luna," v. 1; "diletta luna," v. 10) as well as an anthropomorphizing description ("alle mie luci il tuo volto apparia," vv. 7-8, which by using "luci" also stages a 'crossover' using the sense of sight between 'eyes' and 'light', moving between the human and the moon in the act of seeing), in the latter we find qualifications emphasizing distance and detachment from/absence of life: "silenziosa luna" (v. 2); "vergine luna" (v. 37); "intatta luna" (v. 57); "solinga, eterna peregrina" (v. 61); "giovinetta immortal" (v. 99); "candida luna" (v. 138). Silence, virginity and 'intactness' all exhibit a lack of interaction or communication with others (of life experience), and the "candida" resonates with some of the similar overtones of "vergine," "Eterna" and "immortal" obviously emphasize its antithetical ontological status to finite, living, organisms with (very) short life-spans. The moon is indeed, seen from the standpoint of human consciousness and imagination, from existentially 'comprehensible' temporal frames of reference, immortal. Time and history obviously also become humanized via memory, and in *Alla luna* we find "E pur mi giova la ricordanza" followed by "Oh come grato occorre / nel tempo giovami, quando ancor

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[57] Cf. Leopardi, *Opere*, 196-198, and Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans. Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010), 113.

lungo / la speme e breve ha la memoria il corso / il rimembrar delle passate cose" (vv. 10-15). In il *Canto notturno* we instead find an emphasis on forgetting as 'obliteration', i.e. death, in "il tutto obblia" (v. 36), or the positive, animal, characteristics of forgetting as a way of avoiding "noia," and/or the pricks of conscious questioning "ogni stento, ogni danno, / ogni estremo timor subito scordi; / ma più perchè giammai tedio non provi" (vv. 110-12).

The sequence of stanzas is also significant in terms of dealing with the issues of teleology and finiteness at its center. The first stanza is the questioning and initiation of the dialogue with the moon. The second is an allegorical description of the course of life seen as the journey of an old man; the journey itself is seen as a sequence of obstacles, reminiscent of the obstacles in fairy tales analyzed by Propp;[58] human life/the old man hurries at an ever increasing pace only to then drop suddenly into the abyss of death; it is also worth noting that (unlike the situation in Propp's fairy tales, but underscoring the contrast between living organisms and inanimate matter/existence) all of these obstacles are inanimate. This is a stark combination of a (negative) teleology (the man is hurrying as if to reach a goal, but it is never named) and finiteness (death): the merging of "il fine" and "la fine." The third stanza is a generic description of birth, and the subsequent actual stages of life for most human beings, but which significantly immediately joins birth and death, and shows how life is merely being constantly exposed to the risk of death, and ultimately being voted to that destiny; it concludes with more basic teleological questions, asking what life's purpose could possibly be given its travails and its outcome. Significantly the second and third stanza are both about human life, specifically its defining limits, but in reverse order: first death (the 'goal' we are ultimately never ready to face and almost unaware of) and then birth (being dumped into the world, a supreme act of arbitrariness against 'individual will'). Finally in the fourth and longest stanza we resume the shepherd's tacit dialogue with the moon, his questioning, and his imputing a knowledge and care to the moon about 'earthly' things and events which we clearly understand is merely hypothetical. After stating that he personally cannot perceive any purpose in either these earthly movements, or, so it is implied, the benefits of life, in the second part of the

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[58] Cf. *Zib.,* 90ff, where Leopardi describes the virtues of the 'magnanimous' ancients in their pursuit of glory, grand and epic goals with enormous steadfastness and resolve, where they often conceived of "fate" as an obstacle that instead of deterring them actually made their resolve even more resolute (Leopardi is obviously contrasting these 'original' times to the more corrupted and corruptible ones that followed).

stanza the shepherd engages in a tacit dialogue and hypothesizing with his flock, and the imputed benefits of its animal nature. In the final stanza, he continues his dialogue, questioning and hypothesizing, with both moon and flock, first imagining a possibly happier (and 'higher', more rapidly moving) existence as a flying organism, and then concludes with the bleaker hypothesis that has been the undercurrent of the whole poem, namely that being born into life is merely a condemnation to death.

Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia

Che fai tu, luna, in ciel? dimmi, **che fai,**
Silenziosa luna?
Sorgi la sera, e vai,
Contemplando i deserti; indi ti posi.
Ancor non sei tu paga   (5)
Di riandare i *sempiterni* calli?
Ancor non prendi a schivo, ancor sei vaga
Di mirar queste valli?
Somiglia alla tua vita
La vita del pastore.   (10)
Sorge in sul primo albore
Move la greggia oltre pel campo, e vede
Greggi, fontane ed erbe;
Poi stanco si riposa in su la sera:
Altro mai non ispera.   (15)
Dimmi, o luna: a che **vale**
Al pastor la sua vita,
La vostra vita a voi? dimmi: ove **tende**
Questo *vagar mio breve*,
Il tuo *corso immortale*?   (20)

Vecchierel bianco, infermo,
Mezzo vestito e scalzo,
Con gravissimo fascio in su le spalle,
Per montagna e per valle,
Per sassi acuti, ed alta rena, e fratte,   (25)
Al vento, alla tempesta, e quando avvampa
L'ora, e quando poi gela,
Corre via, corre, **anela,**
Varca torrenti e stagni,
Cade, risorge, e più e più s'affretta,   (30)
Senza posa o ristoro,
Lacero, sanguinoso; *infin* ch'arriva
Colà dove la via
E dove il tanto affaticar fu **volto:**

Abisso orrido, *immenso*,   (35)
Ov'ei precipitando, il tutto obblia.
Vergine luna, tale
È la *vita mortale*.

Nasce l'uomo a fatica,
Ed è *rischio di morte il nascimento*.   (40)
Prova pena e tormento
Per *prima cosa*; e in *sul principio stesso*
La madre e il genitore
Il prende a consolar dell'esser nato.
Poi che crescendo viene,   (45)
L'uno e l'altro il sostiene, e via pur sempre
Con atti e con parole
Studiasi fargli core,
E consolarlo dell'umano stato:
Altro ufficio più grato   (50)
Non si fa da parenti alla lor prole.
Ma **perchè** dare al sole,
Perchè reggere in vita
Chi poi di quella consolar convenga?
Se la vita è sventura,   (55)
Perchè da noi si dura?
Intatta luna, tale
È lo *stato mortale*.
Ma tu *mortal non sei*,
E forse del mio dir poco ti cale.   (60)

Pur tu, solinga, eterna peregrina,
Che sì pensosa sei, tu forse intendi,
Questo *viver terreno*,
Il patir nostro, il sospirar, che sia;
Che sia questo morir, questo supremo   (65)
Scolorar del sembiante,
E *perir dalla terra*, e venir meno
Ad ogni usata, amante compagnia.
E tu certo comprendi
Il **perchè delle cose**, e vedi il **frutto**   (70)
Del mattin, della sera,
Del tacito, *infinito* andar del tempo.
Tu sai, tu certo, a qual suo dolce amore
Rida la primavera,
A chi **giovi** l'ardore, e che **procacci**   (75)
Il verno co' suoi ghiacci.
Mille cose sai tu, mille discopri,
Che son celate al semplice pastore.

Spesso quand'io ti miro
Star così muta in sul deserto piano,   (80)
Che, in suo giro lontano, al ciel *confina*;
Ovver con la mia greggia
Seguirmi viaggiando a mano a mano;
E quando miro in cielo arder le stelle;
Dico fra me pensando: (85)
A che tante facelle?
Che fa l'aria *infinita*, e quel profondo
infinito seren? che vuol dir questa
Solitudine *immensa*? ed io che sono?
Così meco ragiono: e della stanza   (90)
Smisurata e superba,
E dell'*innumerabile* famiglia;
Poi di tanto adoprar, di tanti moti
D'ogni celeste, ogni terrena cosa,
Girando senza posa,   (95)
Per tornar sempre là donde son mosse;
Uso alcuno, alcun frutto
Indovinar non so. Ma tu per certo,
Giovinetta immortal, conosci il tutto.

Questo io conosco e sento[59],   (100)
Che degli eterni giri,
Che dell'esser mio frale,
Qualche bene o contento
Avrà fors'altri; a me la vita è male.

O greggia mia che posi, oh te beata,   (105)
Che la miseria tua, credo, non sai!
Quanta invidia ti porto!
Non sol perchè d'affanno
Quasi libera vai;
Ch'ogni stento, ogni danno,   (110)
Ogni estremo timor subito scordi;
Ma più perchè giammai tedio non provi.
Quando tu siedi all'ombra, sovra l'erbe,
Tu se' queta e contenta;
E gran parte dell'anno   (115)
Senza noia consumi in quello stato.
Ed io pur seggo sovra l'erbe, all'ombra,
E un fastidio m'ingombra
La mente, ed uno spron quasi mi punge
Sì che, sedendo, più che mai son lunge   (120)

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[59] Cf. *Zib.*, 3242, quoted above on the importance of "feeling."

Da trovar pace o loco.
E **pur nulla non bramo**,
E non ho *fino a qui* cagion di pianto.
Quel che tu **goda** o quanto,
Non so già dir; ma fortunata sei.   (125)
Ed io **godo** ancor poco,
O greggia mia, nè di ciò sol mi lagno.
Se tu parlar sapessi, io chiederei:
Dimmi: **perchè giacendo**
A bell'agio, ozioso,   (130)
S'appaga ogni animale;
Me, s'io giaccio in riposo, il tedio assale?

Forse s'avess'io l'ale
Da volar su le nubi,
E noverar le stelle ad una ad una,   (135)
O come il tuono errar di giogo in giogo,
Più felice sarei, dolce mia greggia,
Più felice sarei, candida luna.
O forse erra dal vero,
Mirando all'altrui sorte, il mio pensiero: (140)
Forse in qual forma, in quale
Stato che sia, dentro covile o cuna,
È funesto a chi nasce il dì natale.[60]

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[60] Giacomo Leopardi, *Opere*, 279-83. I have changed the font for expressions that have to do with teleology and valorization to bold; for expressions dealing with immortality and temporality I have used ***bold italics***; and for expressions dealing with the infinite and finite I have used *italics*. For the English translation cf. Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, 192-203. Text: *Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia* : What are you doing, moon, up in the sky? /What are you doing, tell me, silent moon? /You rise at night and go, / observing the deserts. Then you set. / Aren't you tired (5) / of plying the eternal byways? / Aren't you bored? Do you still want / to look down on these valleys? / The shepherd's life / is like your life (10). / He rises at first light / moves his flock across the fields, and sees/ sheep, springs and grass, / then, weary, rests at evening, / and hopes for nothing more (15). / Tell me, moon, what good / is the shepherd's life to him / or yours to you? / Tell me: where is it tending,/ my brief wandering, / your immortal journey? (20) // Little old white-haired man, / weak, half-naked, barefoot, / with an enormous burden on his back, / up mountain and down valley, / over sharp rocks, across deep sand and bracken, (25) / through wind and storm, / in hot and freezing weather, / runs on, running till he's out of breath, / crosses rivers, wades through swamps, / falls and climbs and rushes on (30) / ever faster, no rest or relief,/ battered, bloodied; till at last he comes / to where his way/ and his effort led him:/ terrible, immense abyss (35)/ into which he falls, forgetting everything. / This, O virgin moon, / is human life. // Man is born by labor, / and birth itself means risking death. (40) / The first thing he feels / is pain

The *Canto notturno* is, finally, above all centered around the fusion of the different meanings of "fine" ("il fine" vs. "la fine") or "end" in English. So one very important strand that runs through the poem is the opposition of inanimate nature, which is best exemplified by cosmic nature,

and torment, and from the start / mother and father / seek to comfort him for being born. / As he grows, (45)/ they nurture him, / and constantly by word and deed/ they seek to instill courage, / consoling him for being human. / Parents can do no more loving thing (50) / for their children. / But why bring to light, / why educate / someone we'll console for living later? / If live is misery, (55)/ why do we bear it? / This, unblemished moon, / is mortal nature. / But you're not mortal, / and what I say may matter little to you. (60) // Yet you, eternal solitary wanderer, / you who are so pensive, / understand this life on earth, perhaps, / what our suffering and sighing is, / what this death is, this last (65) / paling of the face, / and leaving earth behind, deserting / all familiar loving company. / And certainly you comprehend / the why of things, and see the usefulness (70) / of morning, evening, / and the silent, endless, pace of time. / Certainly you know for whose sweet love / spring smiles / who enjoys the heat, (75) / and what winter and its ice are for. / You know and understand a thousand things / that are hidden to a simple shepherd. / Often, when I watch you / standing still above the empty plain (80) / whose last horizon closes with the sky, / or moving with me step by step / as I wander with my flock, / or when I see the stars burn up in heaven, I ask myself: (85) / Why all these lights? / What does the endless air do, and that deep / eternal blue? What is the meaning of / this huge solitude? And what am I? / I ask myself: about this boundless, (90) / wondrous space/ and its numberless inhabitants, / and all these works and all this movement / of all heavenly and earthly things, / revolving without rest, (95) / only to return to where they started; / any purpose, any usefulness / I cannot see. But you, immortal maiden, / surely understand it all. / This I know and feel: (100) / that from the eternal motions, / from my fragile being, / others may derive / some good or gladness; life for me is wrong. // ● resting flock of mine, you blessed beings, (105) / who don't, I think, know your own misery! / How I envy you! / Not just because you move / as if nearly trouble-free / and soon forget each need, each pain, (110) / each deathly fear, / but more because you're never bored. / When you lie down in the shade, / on the grass, you're calm, content, / and so you spend the great part of the year (115) / and feel no boredom. / I sit on the grass, too, in the shade, / but an anxiousness invades my mind/ as if a thorn were pricking me, / so that sitting there I'm even further (120) / from finding peace or resting place./ Yet I want nothing, and thus far / I have no reason for complaint. / What you enjoy or how, / I can't say, but you're fortunate. (125) / I enjoy much less, ● flock of mine, / but it's not only this I mourn. / If you could speak, I'd ask you: / Tell me why it is / all animals are happy (130) / resting, at ease, while I, if I lie down, / am plagued with tediun? // Maybe if had wings / to fly above the clouds / and count the stars out one by one, (135) / or, like thunder, graze from peak to peak, / I'd be happier, my gentle flock, / happier, bright moon. / Or maybe my mind's straying from the truth, / imagining the destinies of others. (140) / Maybe in whatever form or state, / be it in stall or cradle, / the day we're born is cause for mourning.

specifically the moon, as well as by the desert on an 'earthly' level, which is also associated with lack of bounds and boundaries, both temporal ("eterna," "eterni," "immortale," "immortal," "sempiterni," "tu mortal non sei," "infinito andar del tempo,") and spatial ("infinita," "infinito," "immensa," "smisurata,") on the one hand, and organic life which is finite and brief ("vagar mio breve," "vita mortale," "Nasce [...] rischio di morte il nascimento," "principio stesso," "stato mortal," "viver terreno," "morir," "perir della terra"). The moon itself is importantly and symptomatically the 'tracer' of boundaries between the 'finite' and the 'infinite': "giro lontano, al ciel confina" (v. 81). The opposition is compounded by the shepherd's underscoring of his lack of knowledge as opposed to the 'high' and, we are meant to assume, unlimited, knowledge of the moon. The same goes for the 'literal' flights of the imagination when the shepherd imagines he might be happier as a bird, leaving bonds to earth behind, but even then Leopardi underscores the ties to finiteness ("E noverar le stelle ad una ad una, / o come il tuono errar di giogo in giogo," vv. 135-36). In other words strands centered around the meanings of "end" associated with finiteness, limits, boundedness and most conclusively, death.

On the other hand, the other principal strand that runs through the poem is that of "end" in the sense of purpose, which in its turn is associated with "why" questions on the one hand, and on the other with ideas related to satisfaction, happiness and value (valorization). Related to purpose are "che fai" (used twice in the poem's opening), "anela," "fu volto," "a che tante facelle?" "tende," "uso alcuno, alcun frutto," "qualche bene o contento/ avrà fors'altri;" related to satisfaction, valorization and happiness are "vale," "giovi," "procacci," "pur nulla non bramo," "goda," and "s'appaga;" and finally there are the many expressions of "why": "perchè" (vv. 52, 53, 56, 70 "perchè delle cose," 129).

Both the second and third stanzas focus on the constrictions and limitations of human life, but it is especially the second in its accelerated build-up to a point of "arrival" that centrally underscores the ambiguity and simultaneous presence of the two meanings of "end": "*infin* ch'arriva / colà dove la via/ e dove il tanto affaticar fu *volto*: / abisso orrido, immenso" (vv. 32-35, my italics). The use of "infin" exactly condenses and summarizes the merging of the two meanings of "end," which of course especially in this poem are also rendered metaphorically/visually as path, voyage, movement. The later *Il tramonto della luna* in many ways continues the themes of the *Canto*, and specifically also uses "fine" in this intentionally ambiguous manner: "vedova è insino al fine" (v. 66), at the conclusion of the poem, where given the context we would expect the feminine "alla fine." The sudden and unexpected conclusion, the "precipitando" (v. 36) which

condenses both the sense of hurrying, and the loss of any ground or foundation, and therefore the dropping into an abyss that is materially/spatially opposed to the 'elevation' of the moon and its knowledge (hence also the "tutto obblia" (v. 36)), literally obliterates all the 'forward-directed' energy and motion of teleological planning and purposive behavior, into an abyss characterized by negative affective valorization ("orrido"), but above all is also another version of material infinity, one characterized by, 'negative', depth ("immenso," also etymologically underscoring that the organism, and its capacity of applying its finite 'measure(s)' to things, i.e. measuring, has died). Where Leopardi brilliantly condenses the two meanings here, in the conclusion of the poem he will once again 'suspend' judgment about the meaning and value of the "lives" of living organisms, emphasizing the hypothetical and dubitative dimensions: "forse" (vv. 133, 139, 141) and "errar di giogo in giogo" (136) as well as "erra dal vero" (139), thus preserving the dialogical and questioning character of the work in its entirety.[61] He thus suspends the possible "sense(s) of an ending."[62] While in this conclusive stage of his life and reflections, Leopardi has gradually abandoned the idea of the positive, partially palliative role of "illusioni" (illusions), the *Canto notturno* is, I believe, another confirmation that dialogue, questioning, poetic-philosophical teleological positing, may often be a source of unhappiness, but they are also the beginnings of possible communication, possible interrelations, if initially only in the imagination.

The harshness of the desert will return in his final masterpiece, *La ginestra*. Almost certainly Leopardi's early scientific interest in astronomy (and the curiosity and imaginative pursuits it provoked) is an important factor in this 'cosmic', inanimate, part of Leopardi's work (and also an aid in avoiding the Romantic pitfalls of dealing with the topic). But as when

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[61] For quite an extensive and complex set of reasons, the *Canto notturno* seems to have had a strong influence on Pasolini's film *Uccellacci e uccellini* (1966). From the structure of the film, to the presence of the moon and the birds (Leopardi's imagining his being able to fly in vv. 133-38), to the emphasis on the dual meaning of "end," to the picaresque "errare," Pasolini seems to have been strongly influenced by this poem. Generally speaking the influence of Leopardi is much stronger, though in subterranean ways, on Pasolini's work, especially in the mid- to later part of his life and work, than is commonly acknowledged. This is also one reason why hardly any critics acknowledge the materialist elements in his thought. Cf. Mark Epstein, *"Uccellacci e uccellini*: Vie nuove verso il realismo," in *Pier Paolo Pasolini. Prospettive Americane* (Pesaro: Metauro, 2015), 255-78.

[62] Cf. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction, with a new Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

contrasting *L'Infinito* to the *Canto* and *Il tramonto della luna*, the positive aura and respite granted by imagination and "illusions" seems in the later poems to be much attenuated (there is the brief moment imagining he is a bird in the *Canto*) or disappear, it seems to empower the questioning, philosophical, mostly (but not exclusively) pessimistic and skeptical side even further.

This contrast between 'voyage/life', the searching for hope, goal(s), or happiness and the end coming without any of those is rendered very clearly and explicitly in *Il tramonto dell luna*. And both the nightly setting, and the comparison and in this case transposition of the cycle and peregrinations of the moon to the 'voyage' of human life is carried over from the *Canto* and in fact significantly amplified and enhanced, because this lyric is not really dialogical, and therefore the contrast of day and night cycles, and of ca. 'non-finite' non organismic matter and existence, vs. human life is more exclusive and stronger:

> [...] e vengon meno
> Le *lontane speranze*,   (25)
> Ove s'appoggia la *mortal natura*.
> Abbandonata, oscura
> Resta la vita. In lei porgendo il guardo,
> Cerca il *confuso viatore* invano
> Del cammin lungo che avanzar si sente   (30)
> *Meta o ragione*; e vede
> Che a se l'umana sede
> Esso a lei veramente è fatto estrano.
> [...]
> Voi, collinette e piagge,
> Caduto lo splendor che all'occidente
> Inargentava della notte il velo,
> Orfane ancor gran tempo
> Non resterete; che dall'altra parte   (55)
> Tosto vedrete il cielo
> Imbiancar novamente, e sorger l'alba
> Alla qual poscia seguitando il sole,
> E folgorando intorno
> Con sue fiamme possenti,
> Di lucidi torrenti
> Inonderà con voi gli *eterei campi*.
> Ma la *vita mortal*, poi che la bella
> Giovinezza sparì, non si colora
> D'altra luce giammai, né d'altra aurora   (65)
> Vedova è insino *al fine*; ed alla notte
> Che l'altre etadi oscura

Segno poser gli Dei la sepoltura.[63]

In this sequence we not only literally see "the lights go out" on the path of life, but how clearly the idea of a goal and hope is associated with light. And how the night/day cycle, which will continue to be enjoyed by inanimate nature, and indeed Leopardi insists repeatedly on the floods of light the sun will provide in consecutive verses, will not be enjoyed by human life, and how it is precisely the moon, which is a much clearer objective correlative of light pointing to itself contrasted to a surrounding darkness, one which human eyes can observe without fear of being blinded, which will set on human life, and how that already much more tenuous life in the course of a much more obscure journey is what will disappear: "la vita" had been qualified as "abbandonata, oscura"...! It should be noted also that in the concluding verses Leopardi refers to "al fine" which is actually a masculine, which seems, to intentionally fuse the feminine "la fine" with the masculine "il fine." Overall while the contrast of day and night is obviously already very important in the *Canto notturno* (cf. the title), the contrast of the play of light vs. dark, with day and light being associated with the continuation of life and time, of an at least 'relative' non-finiteness, and the dark being associated much more explicitly with death and finitude is a more central and highly developed theme in *Il tramonto della luna*. This is the reason for the rather paradoxical use of "tramonto" for the moon, in contrast with the expected new dawn of the sun for non-human and non-aging entities [organisms]: "collinette" and "piagge." The "collinetta" in some ways I think harping back to the "ermo colle" of *L'Infinito* and the "piagge" instead looking to those both desert, volcanic but also marine shores that we find in *La ginestra o il fiore del deserto*.

Having reached the end of the essay, let me conclude, not with a Romantic gazing from a "piaggia," but with one of the relatively rare

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[63] Giacomo Leopardi, *Opere*, 362-63, the italics are mine. For the English translation cf. *Canti*, 280-85. *The Setting of the Moon*: [...] and distant hopes, / that prop our mortal (25) / nature up, give way. / Life is forlorn, lightless. / Staring ahead, the wayward traveler / searches unavailingly / for goal or reason on the long (30) / road he senses lies ahead, / and sees that man's home truly has become / alien to him, and he to it. // [...] You, hills and shores, / the splendor past that turned / the veil of night to silver in the west, / will not stay orphaned long, / for in the opposite (55) / direction soon you'll see / the sky turn white again and dawn arise, / after which the sun, / flaming with potent fire / everywhere, (60) / will bathe you and the heavenly fields / in floods of brilliance. / But mortal life, once lovely youth / has gone, is never dyed / by other light or other dawns again. (65) / She remains a widow all the way. / And the Gods determined that the night / which hides our other times ends in the grave.

occasions in which Leopardi engages in a more everyday, a more 'common-sense' approach to the function of teleological positing in our lives, though one that that does not preemptively condemn, exclude, or select any type of 'higher' goal as one that might provide individual lives with a sense of direction, and hence purpose, but here too, he merges purpose with death, the "sense of an ending":

> "Manual of practical philosophy." "Memories of my life." In the same way that pleasures bring no delight unless they have a purpose outside themselves, as I have said elsewhere [→Z 4266 67, 4273 74], the same is true of life, however full of pleasures it is, unless it has an overall purpose, etc. You have to have a purpose in life in order to live happily. Literary glory, or wealth, or honors, a career in other words. I have never been able to understand what they can enjoy, how they can live, those carefree layabouts (old and mature as well) who go from pleasure to pleasure, from one amusement to another, without ever setting themselves a regular goal at which to aim, without ever saying, deciding, to themselves: what is the point of my life? I have never been able to imagine what life it is these people live, what death they expect. In any case, though such purposes have little value in themselves, much value is gained by the means, the occupations, the hope, imagining them as great goods by force of habit, thinking about them and getting them. Man can and needs to build goods for himself in this way. (*Zib.*, 4518, 31 May [1829].)

as well as, paradoxically, a remark from the beginnings of *Zibaldone*, on the relationship between time, history, ending(s) and truth:

> With the difference that where religious apologists draw the conclusion that states are established and preserved by truth and destroyed by error, I say that they are established and preserved by error and destroyed by truth. Truth is never part of the beginning but only of the end of human affairs. Time and experience have never been the destroyers of truth and introducers of falsehood, but destroyers of falsehood and teachers of truth. And anyone who sees things the other way around goes against what we know about the nature of human affairs. (*Zib.*, 332)[64]

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[64] Comments drafted while discussing Lamennais.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FROM NATURE TO MATTER: LEOPARDI'S ANTI-ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND INCHOATE PROTO-ECOLOGICAL THINKING

ROSSELLA DI ROSA

The present study investigates some pivotal concepts in Leopardi's thought, specifically his meditations on nature, human beings, and his materialistic view of the world, in order to observe clearly Leopardi's understanding of the problematic relationship between 'nature' and humanity, and his theorization of a 'material' view. Although such topics have received critical attention from scholars, both inside and outside Italy, I discuss these topics to emphasize how Leopardi casts doubt on the basic assumptions that have underpinned Western culture.[1] I argue that it is on account of the poet's engagement with certain themes—such as the supremacy of nature, the alleged superiority of human beings and their distance from nature, and the claim for a shared materiality of humans, non-humans as well as the outer world—that he establishes groundbreaking paradigms for a critique of anthropocentric culture. He also provides original theoretical frameworks, criteria, and terminologies to challenge the notion, held by some of the Enlightenment thinkers, of nature as inorganic and inert as well as the alleged superiority of humans. Specifically, my essay

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[1] Specifically, I am referring to Leopardi's exegesis of nature and matter of the last two decades. Among those studies, cf. Fabio A. Camilletti and Paola Cori, eds., *Ten Steps. Critical Inquiries on Leopardi* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015); Andréia Guerini and Cosetta Veronese, eds., *Appunti Leopardiani* 8, no. 2 (2014), http://www.appuntileopardiani.cce.ufsc.br/edition08/; Cosetta Veronese and Pamela Williams, eds., *The Atheism of Giacomo Leopardi* (Leicester: Troubador Publishing, 2013); Giulia Santi, *Sul materialismo leopardiano: tra pensiero poetante e poetare pensante* (Milan: Mimesis, 2011).

aims to analyse the poet's thought in light of the philosophical insights of Kate Soper, and of materialist thinkers such as Jane Bennett, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. Leopardi's complex conception of nature and matter will be examined in order to show that the poet actually "opens the way to contemporary thought" (to borrow a phrase from Emanuela Cervato) by dealing with fundamental issues that will become crucial for contemporary debates on ecology and materialist criticism.[2]

This study focuses mainly on Leopardi's *Zibaldone*, defined by Pietro Citati as "an enormous animal of paper and ink," which contains the poet's meditations on countless topics, written from 1817 to 1832.[3] Throughout the *Zibaldone,* Leopardi frames his understanding of nature as a problematic and multifaceted concept, as proven by several critical studies published in the last two centuries.[4] Before exploring Leopardi's conception of nature both from a theoretical and an ecological perspective, that is, before investigating how the poet conceives of nature philosophically and deals with themes that are at the forefront of ecocritical analysis, it is necessary to retrace some distinctive features of his meditation on nature.

From the nineteenth century to the present age, Leopardi scholarship has revolved around the poet's reflection on the 'system of nature', a notion that has been at the very heart of several studies, from the classical readings of Walter Binni, Sebastiano Timpanaro, and Cesare Luporini, to contemporary reception and interpretations of the poet's work. As Fabiana Cacciapuoti has pointed out, the *Zibaldone*'s principal aim is to investigate both non-human and human nature, or in other words, both the world as it is, and "l'ordine delle cose" (the order of things) as humanity perceives them.[5] This conception of the humanity-nature relationship is not new in the history of philosophy; it can be traced back to René Descartes, who "places humanity

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[2] Emanuela Cervato, "Ending the Ancient Covenant: Leopardi and Molecular Biology," in *Ten Steps,* 247.

[3] Citati incisively describes Leopardi's *Zibaldone* "un immenso animale di carta e inchiostro." In this work the poet reflects on a variety of topics, ranging from politics to history, from philosophy to metaphysics, linguistics, economics, and so forth. Pietro Citati, *Leopardi* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010), 154.

[4] Cf. Walter Binni, *Leopardi. Scritti 1934-2997,* (Florence: Il Ponte, 2014); Cesare Luporini, *Leopardi progressivo* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1980); Antonio Prete, *Il pensiero poetante: Saggio su Leopardi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1980).

[5] These two categories appear inextricably interrelated in Leopardi's thought. Cf. Fabiana Cacciapuoti, "Considerazioni sul 'sistema della natura' nello *Zibaldone*," in *Leopardi e lo spettacolo della natura: atti del convegno internazionale, Napoli 17-19 dicembre 1998,* ed. Vincenzo Placella (Naples: L'Orientale, 2000), 315.

outside the order of nature."[6] As Kate Soper clarifies, Descartes replaces the animistic conception of nature with a mechanistic view, where nature is treated as an "inorganic," "mathematical and hence objectively quantifiable" entity.[7]

But how does Leopardi conceive nature and how does he incorporate humanity into this conception? According to Sergio Solmi, studies of Leopardi have primarily focused on the transition from an initial concept of nature (inspired by Rousseau) as a "theological" and "benevolent" entity that obeys a causal order to the idea of nature as "a kind of blind and nonsensical divinity" whose principal aim is both to create and destroy the universe and which for this reason has been seen as inimical to human beings.[8] Solmi, on the contrary, argues for a different interpretation of Leopardi's understanding of nature. First, Solmi observes that these "two faces of nature" coexist in Leopardi's thought, as proved by coeval entries in *Zibaldone* that refer to both images of nature.[9] Second, Solmi resolves

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[6] Soper has observed that for Descartes, "the essential being of humanity lies in thinking, and mind can in principle, if not in practice, exist independently of body. Descartes, in effect, places humanity outside the order of nature, and can only account for its existence in terms of its separate creation by the deity." Cf. Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford-Cambridge Mass: Blackwell, 1995), 44.

[7] Ibid., 43.

[8] Solmi assesses the problem of nature in Leopardi by identifying a debate between two different positions: "Quella che dalla maggior parte degli esegeti si vuole iniziale, di una Natura teologica, provvidenziale, fondamentalmente benigna, ordinante le proprie cause ai relativi effetti, derivata da Rousseau; e l'altra successiva, di una natura matrigna, sorta di divinità cieca e insensata, indifferentemente creatrice e distruttrice, identificantesi con la deità del male, Arimane." (According to the majority of scholars, Leopardi initially conceives of a theological, providential, and essentially benevolent Nature that is responsible for ruling the world according to the logic of cause and effect, and which comes from Rousseau. Later, he depicts a cruel and hostile step-motherly nature, a kind of blind and purposeless divinity that creates or destroys with indifference, and which can be identified with the evil deity Arimanius). Sergio Solmi, *Studi e nuovi studi leopardiani* (Milan: Ricciardi, 1975), 81. All translations from Solmi are mine.

[9] Solmi identifies coeval entries in *Zibaldone* that refer to the different images of nature, see for example the entry of 6 August 1821, "And what is the natural law, which other animals (perfect subjects of nature) do not follow or cannot follow, being hindered by self-love itself?" or the entry of 20 August 1821: "Nature is the most benign mother of the whole, and also of the particular genera and species that are contained in it, but not of individuals." Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. Rolando Damiani (Milan: Mondadori, 1997), 1041, 1083. The number of pages for all quotations from *Zibaldone* refer to the Italian edition (from now on abbreviated

the apparent contradiction of the definition of nature by claiming that Leopardi is not ambiguously conceiving two different natures. Rather, Solmi contends that the term 'nature' has two different meanings. In one, nature refers to the principle of existence—"principio informatore dell'esistenza"—but, in the other, it connotes a cosmic machine (una macchina cosmica; Solmi 90-91). Solmi's contribution to Leopardi scholarship is invaluable: it helps scholars to go beyond the traditional idea of a change in Leopardi's conception of nature, as well as to resolve the impasse of nature as "mother" vs. "stepmother," which distinguishes part of Leopardi's exegesis of the *Canti*.

However, Solmi seems to devote little attention to human nature, which is a significant part of Leopardi's "sistema della natura" (system of nature), as Cacciapuoti has pointed out.[10] According to Leopardi, nature coincides first and foremost with "life" and "existence," as he argues in an entry dated 31 October 1823: "Quello che noi chiamiamo natura non è principalmente altro che l'esistenza, l'essere, la vita, sensitiva o non sensitiva, delle cose" (That which we call nature is principally none other than the existence, the state of being, the life, sensory or not, of things; *Zib.*, 2383).[11] Undoubtedly, human beings are part of such existence, thus their presence ought not to be neglected. Antonio Prete recognizes this vital bond between human and nonhuman nature when he argues that "la vita delle cose, la vita sensitiva o insensitiva, è la nostra vita stessa. A essa apparteniamo" (the life of things, both the sensitive and non-sensitive life, is our own life. To that we belong).[12] According to this perspective, Solmi's analysis of nature appears incomplete and cannot be reduced to a merely terminological dispute.[13]

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as *Zib.*), while the English quotations are from Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, eds. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

[10] As Cacciapuoti reminds us: "Il testo zibaldonico offre due linee interpretative della natura: la natura degli uomini; coincidente con l'istinto, naturalità e determinazione psichica; e la natura come entità" (*Zibaldone* offers two different interpretations of nature: the nature of men, which coincides with instinct, naturalness, and psychic determination; and nature as an entity). Fabiana Cacciapuoti, "Considerazioni sul 'sistema della natura' nello *Zibaldone*," 315.

[11] Luporini pointed out that for Leopardi nature is not synonymous with spontaneity and passions as for the Enlightenment *ideologues* and specifically for Rousseau, but instead indicates vitality, "valore autonomo vitale" (autonomous vital value). Cf. Cesare Luporini, *Leopardi progressivo*, 69-70.

[12] Antonio Prete, *Finitudine e infinito* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1998), 64. The translation is mine.

[13] Leopardi uses the term nature also when he refers to 'fate' or to a destructive force, as he does in *L'ultimo canto di Saffo* (*The Last Song of Sappho*) or in the *Dialogo*

Leopardi conceives nature in a polyvalent way: it alludes to "*physis,*
necessità, fato, sistema che dà mali e rimedi insieme, principio di
conservazione, di cui la morte è un passaggio, vita che genera la vita,
creaturalità che unisce tutti i viventi" (*physis* necessity, fate, a system that
causes pains and finds cures at the same time, a principle of conservation,
which includes death, life that engenders life, a community that brings
together all beings).[14] Such a complex and multifaceted definition of nature
reveals that Leopardi had developed an intricate theory of nature, which can
be analysed in light of Kate Soper's thought.

In *What is Nature?* Soper argues that nature can refer to "the object of
study of the natural and biological sciences;" to the different "modes of
being of the natural and the human;" as well as to the "environment and its
various non-human forms of life."[15] According to this perspective, she
identifies and distinguishes three different ways in which the term "nature"
can be deployed:

- as a metaphorical concept, which it mainly is in the argument of
  philosophy, 'nature' is the concept through which humanity thinks
  its difference and specificity. It is the concept of the non-human,
  even if […] the absoluteness of the humanity-nature demarcation has
  been disrupted, and our ideas about what falls to the side of nature
  have been continuously revised in the light of changing perceptions
  of what counts as 'human' […].

- as a realist concept, 'nature' refers to the structures, processes and
  causal powers that are constantly operative within the physical
  world, that provide the objects of study of the natural sciences, and
  condition the possible forms of human intervention in biology or
  interaction with the environment. It is the nature to whose laws we
  are always subject, even as we harness them to human purposes, and
  whose processes we can neither escape nor destroy.

- as a 'lay' or 'surface' concept, as it is in much everyday, literary and
  theoretical discourse, 'nature' is used in reference to ordinarily
  observable features of the world: the 'natural' as opposed to the
  urban or industrial environment ('landscape', 'wilderness',
  'countryside', 'rurality'), animals, domestic and wild, the physical
  body in space and raw materials. (Soper 155-56)

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della Natura e di un islandese (*Dialogue between Nature and an Icelander*)
respectively. Solmi, *Studi e nuovi studi leopardiani,* 90-91.

[14] Prete, *Finitudine e infinito,* 10. The translation is mine.

[15] Cf. Soper, *What is Nature,* 2.

Soper's tripartite distinction, quoted above in its entirety for purposes of clarity, helps me to shed light on Leopardi's treatment of nature in *Zibaldone*, and to study nature as a broad and polysemous category that includes the cosmos, the earth and its nonhuman beings, as well as human nature.

The "System of Nature" as a Universal Order

One way Leopardi understands nature is as the universal order of things. When following this model, the poet thinks nature is an autonomous entity characterized by its own internal laws and processes, much like in Soper's realist concept of nature. Indeed, in *Zibaldone* Leopardi refers to the natural order as "un cerchio di distruzione, e riproduzione, e di cangiamenti regolari e costanti quanto al tutto" (a cycle of destruction, reproduction, and regular and constant changes with respect to the whole), (*Zib.*, 1083). At first glance, it might seem that Leopardi is maintaining a mechanistic conception of nature, especially when he refers to the "system of nature" as a "macchina vastissima" (immense machine).[16] In 1823, however, Leopardi provides a description of nature opposed to this (Cartesian) mechanistic view, since he realizes that equating nature to a machine would lead him to consider the former a "corpo morto" (dead body), (*Zib.*, 2025). Hence, Leopardi abandons the image of nature-as-machine in favour of an animating entity, whose aim is the life of the universe:

> [...] the end of universal nature is the life of the universe, which consists equally in the production, preservation and destruction of its component parts, and therefore the destruction of every animal is part of the end of such

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[16] "In una macchina vastissima e composta d'infinite parti, per quanto sia bene e studiosamente fabbricata e congegnata, non possono non accadere dei disordini, massime in lungo spazio di tempo; disordini che non si possono imputare all'artefice, né all'artifizio; e ch'egli non poteva né prevedere distintamente né impedire. [...] Di questo genere sono quelli che noi chiamiamo inconvenienti accidentali nell'immenso e complicatissimo sistema della natura, e nella sua lunghissima durata." (In a machine that is very vast and composed of countless different parts, no matter how well and carefully crafted and assembled, breakdowns are bound to happen, especially over a long period of time, breakdowns that cannot be ascribed to the maker or the making and which the maker could not either clearly foresee or prevent. [...] Belonging to this kind of breakdowns are those we call accidental difficulties in the huge and very complicated system of nature, and over the long span of its duration.) *Zib.*, 781.

a nature at least as much as its preservation, even more than its preservation
[…].[17]

Nature therefore follows its own rules (even though they might remain unknown) and acts independently. With this image of nature elevated to a higher power, Leopardi not only acknowledges that nature exists independent of human beings, but he also challenges the anthropocentric foundations of Enlightenment culture by questioning humans' centrality in the cosmos.[18]

Although in Leopardi's works nature does not yet possess the contemporary, ecological connotation given to the term 'ecosystem', Leopardi alludes to a principle that will become one of the tenets of ecology when he refers to nature's autonomy. Such a principle aims at acknowledging nature's independence from human beings and at showing that humanity's superiority is unwarranted and presumptive. Leopardi reaches this conclusion through a well-known reflection in *Zibaldone*, where the poet discusses humanity's distance from nature as well as the human condition as one of endless unhappiness. The universe's life, Leopardi argues, results from dynamics of chaos and order, a vision that discloses how nature is ruled by "accidental" principles. This is why the universal order only responds to its own logic, and there are no other aims except its own preservation.[19] Nature therefore exists autonomously from humanity, as Leopardi argues in an entry dated April 1825:

> The whole of nature, and the eternal order of things is not aimed in any way
> at all at the happiness of sensitive beings and animals. In fact, it is quite the
> opposite. Nor is their own nature and the eternal order of their being aimed

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[17] "[…] il fine della natura universale è la vita dell'universo, la quale consiste ugualm. in produz. conservaz. e distruz. dei suoi componenti, e quindi la distruzione di ogni animale entra nel fine della detta natura almen tanto quanto la conservazione di esso, ma anche assai più che la conservazione […]" *Zib.*, 2684.

[18] The poet will also develop the theme of human presumption in his *Moral Tales*. Specifically, *Copernicus* is considered the highest point of Leopardi's anti-anthropocentrism. As Bini has pointed out, in the text the poet claims that "considering the whole universe as a function" of human beings, has made them "nature's most precious creature." Hence, "Copernicus' irony is the best representation of this absurd and yet universal belief." Daniela Bini, "Leopardi and French Materialism," in *Comparative Literature Studies* 20, no. 2 (1983): 158.

[19] Salvatore Natoli and Antonio Prete, *Dialogo su Leopardi: natura, poesia e filosofia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), 120-21. The translation is mine.

at it. Sensitive beings are naturally *suffrants* [suffering], part of the universe that is essentially *souffrante*.[20]

Here Leopardi offers a correction to what Bini calls the "anthropocentric fallacy," which entails "considering the universe as a function" of humanity and stands as the greatest and "most dangerous" error that human beings have committed.[21] Nature is fundamentally indifferent to human happiness, even though this indifference does not prevent humans from seeking such happiness in and through nature. Rather, it is a part of the human condition to desire a form of happiness that is ultimately unattainable. In the "teoria del piacere" (theory of pleasure), a complex meditation on happiness and pleasures, Leopardi proves that nature "has within itself the principle of existence," that it follows its own, necessary laws, and that nature does not exist as a perfect order.[22]

As Dario Berti argues for Leopardi nature "è un sistema che pullula di contraddizioni," a system full of intrinsic contradictions and is responsible both for defending and offending human and nonhuman species.[23] Nature's conflicting plan provides human and nonhuman animals with appetites and desires and, at the same time, prevents them from achieving such needs:

> What is the purpose, what is the real intention and true aim of nature? Does she want such a fruit to be eaten by animals or not to be eaten by them? If she does, why has she defended it so carefully with such a hard shell? If not, why has she given to some animals the instinct and appetite and perhaps also the need of finding and eating it [...] That nature herself is the only cause of

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[20] "La natura tutta, e l'ordine eterno delle cose non è in alcun modo diretto alla felicità degli esseri sensibili o degli animali. Esso vi è anzi contrario. Non vi è neppur diretta la natura loro propria e l'ordine eterno del loro essere. Gli enti sensibili sono per natura enti *souffrants*, una parte essenzialmente *souffrante* dell'universo." *Zib.*, 2687.

[21] Cf. Bini, "Leopardi and French Materialism," 163.

[22] Veronese observes that Leopardi draws inspiration directly from Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, but with a crucial difference. For d'Holbach human beings can achieve a form of happiness, "by proclaiming the supremacy of reason in the interpretation of Nature, the state of purpose of d'Holbach's *System of Nature* is to rid the world of superstition and religion, in order to create the premises for a better society." While for Leopardi reason can only lead to unhappiness since it destroys illusions and myths. Cf. Cosetta Veronese and Pamela Williams, *The Atheism of Giacomo Leopardi*, 47-50.

[23] Dario Berti, "La natura nella filosofia di Leopardi," *Dario Berti – Filosofia*, https://darioberti.com/2016/01/05/la-natura-nella-filosofia-di-leopardi-uninterpretazione. Accessed 23 October 2017.

both defense and offense of both harm and remedy? And which of the two is harm and which remedy from nature's point of view, no one knows.[24]

It is from passages like these that the idea of an inimical nature "persecutrice e nemica mortale di tutti gli individui" (persecutor and mortal enemy of all beings)—responsible for what some commentators define as a "cosmic pessimism"—originates.[25] In Soper's terms, this is the kind of nature that humanity "cannot escape nor destroy,"[26] which reappears as a mysterious and uncontrollable force in *Dialogue between Nature and an Icelander*.

A consequence of this cosmic pessimism or inescapability of nature is that Leopardi subverts the Cartesian idea according to which human beings can master and control nature through rationality (later adopted also by, *inter alia*, Hobbes and Spinoza). And in this subversion, Leopardi thereby does not consider humanity to be a superior species because of its rationality. The poet recognizes that with this Enlightenment concept of rationality and refusal of illusions humans greatly distanced themselves from nature. Indeed, this distancing is considered a major source of human unhappiness.[27]

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[24] "Qual è il fine, qual è il voler sincero e l'intenzione vera della natura? Vuol ella che il tal frutto sia mangiato dagli animali o non sia mangiato? Se sì, perché l'ha difeso con sì dura crosta e con tanta cura? Se no, perché ha dato a tali animali l'istinto e l'appetito e forse anche il bisogno di procacciarlo e mangiarselo? […] che essa medesima (la natura) è l'autrice unica delle difese e delle offese, del male e del rimedio? E qual delle due sia il male e quale il rimedio nel modo di vedere della natura, non si sa." *Zib.*, 2766.

[25] The poet's negative view of nature finds its apogee in the entry dated 11 April 1829: "Nature obliged by the law of destruction and reproduction, and in order to preserve the present state of the universe, is essentially, regularly, and perpetually the persecutor and mortal enemy of all beings of every kind and species that it brings to life; and it begins to persecute them from the very moment in which it has produced them. This, being a necessary consequence of the present order of things, does not give a great idea of intelligence of the being who is or was the author of such an order" (La natura per necessità della legge di distruzione, e per conservare lo stato attuale dell'universo, è essenzialm. regolarm. e perpetuam. persecutrice e nemica mortale di tutti gli individui d'ogni gen. e specie, ch'ella dà alla luce; e comincia a perseguitarli dal punto med. in cui gli ha prodotti. Ciò, essendo necessaria conseg. dell'ord. attuale delle cose, non dà una grande idea dell'intelletto di chi è e fu autore di tale ordine). *Zib.*, 3043.

[26] Cf. Soper, *What is Nature*, 156.

[27] Later on, Leopardi will prove that human beings' unhappiness is not caused by their distancing from nature, but is the consequence of an inner quality. Indeed, he will refer to it as 'the native unhappiness of man': "Quando l'uomo non ha

In order to guarantee human beings' preservation, nature not only endowed them with illusions but also with self-love. Nature "plants self-love in living beings arbitrarily,"[28] but self-love soon turns into selfishness when the individual enters in contact with others and desires to be the happiest among them.[29] As Natoli argues, humans would have satisfied their thirst for self-love if only they loved nature more than themselves, but that does not happen because they only attend to their own happiness. Thus, self-love becomes humans' only opportunity to be happy and, at the same time, the cause of their unhappiness.[30] It is self-love, in conjunction with the rejection of illusions, which pushes humans to act against nature and to consider their unhappiness not as a common condition of all living beings, but as a particularity of human existence. On the contrary, Leopardi shows in *Zibaldone* that both humans and animals can feel such unhappiness, so that this feature cannot be treated as a factor in favour of alleged human superiority. The difference between the species, for the poet, consists instead of "a greater or lesser faculty of *paying attention* and of *becoming habituated*" (*Zib.*, 987, emphasis in the original) to that feeling, which Leopardi defines as "conformability" (assuefazione).[31] It is according to this principle of conformability that Leopardi places all creatures on a "chain" (catena), thereby establishing his original taxonomy of living beings. Taking inspiration from Aristotle's "scale of nature," Leopardi posits all beings exist on a "double scale":

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sentimenti di alcun bene o male particolare, sente in generale l'infelicità nativa dell'uomo […]." *Zib.*, 3057-58.

[28] "[…] l'amor proprio sia una qualità posta da lei [natura] arbitrariamente nell'essere vivente." *Zib.*, 210.

[29] Self-love is a feature that all living beings have, human and nonhuman. However, the "unhappiness of the animal is always in direct proportion to the activity of its self-love, so it remains clear, both why man is naturally less happy that the other animals, and why, in proportion as he becomes civilized, and the activity of self-love gradually increases, he becomes more unhappy every day, necessarily, and as if by mathematical law" (l'infelicità dell'animale è sempre in ragion diretta all'attività del suo amor proprio, così resta chiaro, e perché l'uomo sia naturalmente meno felice degli altri animali, e perché a misura ch'egli s'incivilisce, il che accresce di mano in mano l'attività dell'amor proprio, egli divenga ogni giorno più infelice, necessariamente, e quasi per legge matematica). *Zib.*, 1604.

[30] Cf. Natoli and Prete, *Dialogo su Leopardi*, 139-40.

[31] "Ampliate questo pensiero, e mostrate la gradazione delle facoltà organiche *interiori*, nelle diverse specie di animali fino all'uomo; e come tutto consista in una maggiore o minor facoltà di *attendere*, e di *assuefarsi* […]." *Zib.*, 987.

[…] we imagine a double scale, or a partly ascending and partly descending scale. And at the lowest end of the first scale we put beings that are wholly unorganized, or more unorganized than all the others. Then climb up to the top and place the more organized beings, until we arrive at those that occupy the midpoint in organization, sensitivity, and conformability. And treat these latter as the highest degree of the scale, that is, of perfection comparatively considered, as those that perhaps by nature are the most disposed to obtain their own particular and relative happiness, and to retain it. From these descending ever further down past the beings that are more organized, sensitive, and able to conform, so as to put at the last and lowest degree of the scale man, the most organized, sensitive, and able to conform of all earthly creatures.[32]

As Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino clarify in a note to *Zibaldone*, this passage completely overturns Aristotle's "scale of nature." Leopardi does not consider human beings the most perfect being occupying the top of the scale. On the contrary, he places at this peak all living beings that are located at "the midpoint in organization, sensitivity and conformability." The justification of Leopardi's transformation lies in the assumption that all of these beings can experience a form of happiness for which they are naturally suited, and which is not a quality that is only limited to human beings. Prete argues persuasively that Leopardi's double scale "muddles the opinions of the Naturalists, who are debating on what has to be interpreted as 'more elevated' inside the order of the natural species" (la leopardiana "scala degli esseri" scompiglia le carte dei naturalisti che disputano su che cosa si debba intendere per "più elevato" nell'ordine delle specie naturali).[33] As a result, in acknowledging nonhumans' centrality, Leopardi successfully undermines human beings' power and significance, which originates from the classical ideal of Man as "the measure of all things" formulated first by Protagoras and later restated by Italian Renaissance thinkers.[34] Thus, Leopardi's "scale of beings" serves as a crucial piece of evidence for

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[32] "una doppia scala, ovvero una scala parte ascendente e parte discendente. E nella estremità inferiore della prima, porre gli esseri affatto o più di tutti gli altri inorganizzati. Indi salendo fino alla sommità, porre gli esseri più organizzati, fino a quelli che tengono il mezzo dell'organizzazione, della sensibilità, della conformabilità. E di questi farne il sommo grado della scala, cioè della perfezione comparativamente considerate, come quelli che forse sono per natura i più disposti a conseguire la propria particolare e relativa felicità, e conservarla. Da questi in poi sempre discendendo giù giù per gli esseri più organizzati sensibili e conformabili, porre nell'ultimo e più basso grado dell'altra parte della scala l'uomo, come il più organizzato, sensibile, e conformabile degli esseri terrestri." *Zib.*, 1829.

[33] Cf. Prete, *Finitudine*, 16.

[34] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 13.

proving the poet's anti-anthropocentric attitude, which will become a prerogative of ecological and posthuman thought.

Leopardi also refers to "nature" to indicate a condition, disposition, or inclination of human beings, and their relationship with the world outside themselves (like Soper's first definition of nature). There was a time, Leopardi argues, when humans were close to nature and felt part of its community. Nature was not contaminated by civilization and appeared as the living *physis* conceived by Greek poets, with its "sound of seasons, rhythm of life and death, breath of desire," (il suono delle stagioni, il ritmo del nascere e morire, il respiro del desiderio) in harmony with all living beings.[35] This nature, in its purest form and with its own voice, is what the ancients saw and heard, a sort of "harmonious circle that connects the physical elements with objects" (cerchio armonioso che unisci gli elementi fisici con gli oggetti).[36]

Ancients and "savages" had a special connection with this primitive nature because they could directly feel and experience it through the senses, and they could count on illusions and imagination to know the world; or as Tilgher puts it, they could believe in facts and events that were "erroneous" or could not be "proved by reason."[37] The ancients lived in a primitive society, or in what Leopardi (dialoguing with Rousseau) defines as a "stato di natura" (state of nature), where humanity lived in touch with their natural instincts. There, humans were happy because they ignored the ultimate meaning of their life, which is "the emptiness of all things" (la nullità di tutte le cose).[38] As Natoli argues, Leopardi refers here to an ancient or mythological past to present an idealization of nature. This allows Leopardi to criticise humanity's present condition and undermine the idea of the "progress" of his century, which is not linked to scientific discoveries but to human beings' "presumption to conquer nature, to bend it to their will"

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[35] Cf. Prete, *Finitudine*, 51.

[36] Ibid., 58.

[37] "[…] è essenziale credere a cose che dal punto di vista della ragione sono indimostrabili o errate." Adriano Tilgher, *La filosofia di Leopardi* (Rome: Edizioni di Religio, 1940), 31. The translation is mine. Leopardi also explains that illusions are "essential ingredients in the system of human nature, and given by nature to all men" (ingredienti essenziali del Sistema della natura umana, e date dalla natura a tutti quanti gli uomini); *Zib.*, 83. For this reason, as Luporini suggests, illusions are necessary to human beings to achieve their happiness. Cesare Luporini, *Leopardi progressivo*, 10.

[38] Emanuele Severino, *Il nulla e la poesia. Alla fine dell'età della tecnica: Leopardi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1990), 392.

(la pretesa che l'uomo ha di vincere la natura, di piegarla al suo incondizionato potere).[39]

The Myth of the State of Nature: Nature Inside and Outside Human Beings

Every culture has its own myths, and myths, as Jonathan Bate explains, "are necessary imaginings, exemplary stories which help our species to make sense of its place in the world."[40] Hence, one can also claim for Leopardi what Bate claims for Rousseau's "state of nature": either as a "heuristic model" or "a real lost condition," it "no longer exists and perhaps never did and probably never will."[41] Therefore, Leopardi's account of the primitives' relationship with nature is a powerful metaphor to refer to the present corruption of the world—produced by the rise of truth and the fall of illusions.

Thus, before the emergence of "cold" reason, the ancients could grasp the materiality and vitality of nature. Moderns, on the contrary, simultaneously witness both a gradual spiritualization and a gradual de-materialization of the world, provoked, in Mario Andrea Rigoni's words, by the "inabissamento della materialità della natura" (shipwreck of the materiality of nature). This "shipwreck" causes an irreconcilable fracture between spirit and matter, antiquity and modernity, reason and poetry, nature and humanity.[42] It is at this stage, for Severino, that the transition from "prima natura" (first nature, a primitive nature that is not yet corrupted by reason) to "seconda natura" (second nature, where nature is ruled by reason) occurs in Leopardi's thought.[43] Such division clearly appears in some entries of *Zibaldone* under the nature–reason dichotomy. It can be argued that Leopardi uses the term "nature" in this context in a way similar to Soper's "metaphorical" definition, that is, in order to establish a tidy separation between human and nonhuman worlds, and to indicate "everything which is not human and distinguished from the work of humanity."[44]

In *Zibaldone*, reason, although essential for analysing reality, is not sufficient to know the many dimensions of the world. As Giulia Santi

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[39] Cf. Natoli and Prete, *Dialogo su Leopardi*, 141. English translation is mine.

[40] Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 25.

[41] Ibid., 25.

[42] Mario Andrea Rigoni, *Il materialismo romantico di Leopardi* (Naples: La scuola di Pitagora, 2013), 10.

[43] Cf. Severino, *Il nulla e la poesia*, 214-17.

[44] Cf. Soper, *What is Nature*, 2.

observes, Leopardi realises that rationality is not able to perceive "il poetico del mondo" (the poetic of the world)[45] and this is why for the poet an "ultraphilosophy" is necessary: a form of thought that through "a complete and intimate knowledge of things, brings us close again to nature" (che conoscendo l'intiero e l'intimo delle cose, ci ravvicini alla natura; *Zib.*, 150).[46]

The search for possible ways of returning to nature, which is the main goal of Romantic poetry,[47] is important for ecocritical perspectivism. It is evident that Leopardi does not discuss human beings' reconnection to nature in ecocritical terms. However, his meditation can be studied from this standpoint. As Serenella Iovino points out, "ogni opera che mostra una caratterizzazione etica, implicita o esplicita, del rapporto tra umanità, o società e natura, ricade potenzialmente nell'indagine dell'*ecocriticism*" (every work that shows an explicit or implicit ethical characterization of the relationship between humanity or society and nature, can be considered the object of study of ecocriticism).[48] Leopardi problematises the relationship between humanity and nature, championing nature as an entity irreducible to humanity, and arguing that humanity cannot survive separated from it: "It is no more possible for man to live completely cut off from nature, which we are constantly drawing farther away from, than it is for a tree cut off at the root to bear flowers and fruit" (Tanto è possibile che l'uomo viva staccato affatto dalla natura, dalla quale sempre più ci andiamo allontanando, quanto che un albero tagliato dalla radice fiorisca e fruttifichi; *Zib.*, 240).

Not only does the poet envision the impossibility of survival on earth, if humans choose to live detached from nature, but he also observes human beings' tendency to push nature away from themselves, an action that for ecologists will inevitably affect nature's (as well as humans') existence. Although humanity's distance from nature is, in Leopardi, rooted in a mythical conception of nature (rather than in the detachment from the environment as for ecologists), it is worth emphasizing that the poet refers to imagination as a possible way to reconnect humanity with nature, as ecocritical philosophers also suggest.[49] For Leopardi only poets can,

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[45] Giulia Santi, *Sul materialismo leopardiano: tra pensiero poetante e poetare pensante* (Milan: Mimesis, 2011), 68.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Cf. Bate, The Song of the Earth, 48-49.

[48] Serenella Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria: una strategia di sopravvivenza* (Milan: Ambiente, 2006), 65. The translation is mine.

[49] Lawrence Buell reminds the readers that the "environmental connectedness requires acts of imagination;" in the same way, Iovino emphasizes that "lì si apre tutta la forza dell'immaginazione costruttiva che ci porta a cercare nuove vie, a

through their imagination, experience the vitality of nature in the corrupted times of modernity. Only they can reconnect to the natural world, through their senses, their pathos, and their imitation of the ancients, those same ancients who in his view did indeed grasp the "vitality" of the world.[50] This said, Leopardi's idea of nature possesses another important element, a materialistic one.

Shared Materiality in Human and Nonhuman

Leopardi's nature is both the totality of beings and their materiality. He envisions nature as a material *gran tout,* an idea that, as Antimo Negri observes, comes from D'Holbach, and is similar to Soper's third idea of nature[51] as "physical body in space and raw materials."[52] The poet was among the first Italian thinkers to recognise that nature appears as a realm of active matter, and consider the latter "la componente primaria della realtà" (the primary component of the whole reality).[53] In many entries of *Zibaldone* Leopardi finds processes of destruction and reproduction to be constitutive of nature. In the *operetta Frammento apocrifo di Stratone da Lampsaco* (*Apocryphal Fragment of Strato of Lampsacus*),[54] the poet acknowledges the existence of different forces that intersect with "universal matter," and that "continuously agitate it and move it in the most diverse manners" (la materia in universale […] ha in se per natura una o più forze sue proprie, che l'agitano e muovono in diversissime guise

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riconoscere nuovi valori, a sostenere che, solo se ci fermiamo a pensarlo e a coltivarlo, un altro paesaggio è possibile," (imagination leads human beings to find out new routes, to recognize new values, to claim that […] another environment is possible), cf. *Ecologia letteraria*, 70. The translation is mine. Cf. also Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World. Literature, Culture, and Environment in the US and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 17.

[50] Cf. Rigoni, *Il materialismo romantico di Leopardi*, 31.

[51] Cf. Soper, *What is Nature*, 156.

[52] Negri finds in D'Holbach the source for Leopardi's idea of nature as a combination of different materialities and quotes directly from the French author: "Ainsi la nature, dans sa signification la plus étendue, est le grand tout qui résulte de l'assemblage des différentes matières, de leurs différentes combinaisons, et des différent mouvements que nous voyons dans l'univers." Antimo Negri, *Leopardi e la scienza moderna. "Sott'altra luce che l'usata errando"* (Milan: Spirali, 1998), 134.

[53] Cf. Santi, *Sul materialismo leopardiano*, 145.

[54] Cf. Giacomo Leopardi, *Essays and Dialogues*, trans. Giovanni Cecchetti (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 383.

continuamente).[55] Gaspare Polizzi has observed that the vision of the universal dynamics of the cosmos in the *Fragment* underscores Leopardi's proximity with "the new chemical philosophy" (la nuova filosofia chimica). According to this chemical theory, there exists "a power that moves all organic and inorganic beings, in which the chemical, electrical and magnetic forces, together with gravity, converge" (un'unica forza che muove tutti gli esseri organici ed inorganici, nella quale convergerebbero le forze chimiche, elettriche e magnetiche, unite alla forza di attrazione universale).[56] Beyond Polizzi's taxonomy of forces involved, what is at stake here and what is crucial for my interpretation is that Leopardi offers an idea of nature that is based on a primary *material* force. And it is this material force which, repeatedly 'shaken', leads to the creation of new matter. Leopardi's *Fragment* offers a model for conceiving reality which is similar to materialist theories, that suggest that matter is not inert, but rather crisscrossed by forces, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue in *A Thousand Plateaus*. There, they question the stability of matter (either physical or conceptual), and instead propose its understanding as a set of patterned forces that has the power to affect and be affected by the surrounding world.[57] The French philosophers call the phenomena "territorialisation" and "re-territorialisation," as they destabilise matter's immobility and hierarchies to open new territories.[58] Matter is not a substance with a fixed form, it does not exist *per se* but continuously "becomes," thanks to a convergence of heterogeneous and ever-moving elements. Deleuze and Guattari's perception of "becoming—matter," recalls Leopardi's *stratonismo* (Strato's philosophy), specifically the presence of forces of production and reproduction, as well as the idea of a matter that incessantly engenders new materialities.

It is clear that both Leopardi's and Deleuze and Guattari's views are influenced by the pre-Socratic philosophy of Heraclitus and Democritus, but this does not prevent us from considering Leopardi as a forerunner of contemporary materialistic thought. Indeed, in conceiving human and nonhuman matter as non-fixed and unstable, as well as in acknowledging

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Cf. Gaspare Polizzi, *Io sono quella che tu fuggi: Leopardi e la natura* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2015), 10. The translation is mine.

[57] The philosophers argue that "flux is reality itself, or consistency," and suggest the flux as a suitable model to conceive the heterogeneity of matter, "as opposed to the stable, the eternal, the identical, the constant" organization of reality. Cf. Deleuze Gilles and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2011), 361.

[58] Cf. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 174.

the material status of both human and nonhuman beings, Leopardi pioneers the investigation of a material world, and can be considered among the first modern thinkers to adopt a materialistic vision of reality.[59] Leopardi's materialism implies neither the poet's rejection of the idea of a possible consolation in religion or providence, nor a simplistic and crude perception of reality. Sebastiano Timpanaro provides a lucid framework to contextualise the poet's position:

> By materialism we understand above all acknowledgment of the priority of nature over "mind," or if you like, of the physical level over the biological level, and the biological level over the socio-economic and cultural level; both in the sense of chronological priority (the very long time which supervened before life appeared on earth, and between the origin of life and the origin of man), and in the sense of conditioning which nature still exercises on man and will continue to exercise at least for the foreseeable future.[60]

For Timpanaro, nature influences human existence and, quoting from Antonio Labriola, he claims that humanity does not "cease to receive occasion and material" from nature.[61] For Daniela Bini, materialism becomes for Leopardi the essence of his ontology and of being in general: "matter has created everything, since everything is matter."[62] After verifying the intrinsic materiality of nature, he proves, in *Zibaldone* that such material conditions are not exclusive to the "system of nature," (sistema della natura) but are also characteristic of humans: "we do not know another way of being except that of matter" (non conosciamo altra maniera d'essere che quella della materia; *Zib.*, 499). Thus, humanity is in its substance matter and cannot think beyond matter, since "our mind is incapable not only of knowing but even of conceiving of anything beyond

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[59] "Leopardi fu il primo ed unico materialista in Italia." Rigoni, *Il materialismo romantico di Leopardi*, 16.

[60] Sebastiano Timpanaro, *On Materialism* (London: Humanities Press, 1975), 34.

[61] Ibid., 48.

[62] Cf. Bini, "Leopardi and French Materialism," 157. The influence of French materialists is also studied by Giulia Santi, who argues that "Leopardi si pone come erede intelligente di un materialismo antico, avendo saputo arricchirsi delle conquiste degli empiristi inglesi, del materialismo sensista, ma soprattutto della critica degli illuministi settecenteschi" (Leopardi sees himself as the sensible heir to the ancients' materialism, as he was able to appropriate the lesson of the English empiricists and their sensism, and most importantly, the critical attitude of the Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century). Cf. Giulia Santi, *Sul materialismo leopardiano*, 148. The translation is mine.

the bounds of matter" (la mente nostra non può non solamente conoscere, ma neppure concepire alcuna cosa oltre i limiti della materia; *Zib*., 484). Leopardi's materialism finds its apogee in "thinking matter" (materia pensante) a claim that, as Santi noted, finally reconciles "matter and thought" (materia e pensiero), two concepts which appeared incompatible to the young poet.[63]After 1821, Leopardi claims that "everything in our minds and faculties is material" (tutto è materiale nella nostra mente e facoltà), (*Zib*., 1159). This claim, in turn, provides evidence that matter thinks:

> It is a fact because we ourselves think; and we do not know, we are not aware of being, we are not capable of knowing, perceiving, anything but matter. It is a fact because we see that the modifications of thought depend entirely upon sensations, upon our physical state, and that our mind fully corresponds to the changes and variations in our body. It is a fact because we feel our thought corporeally. Each of us can feel that thought is not in our arm, or in our leg. Each of us feels that we think using a material part of ourselves, that is, the brain, in the same way as we can feel what we see with our eyes, and touch with our hands.[64]

Matter—even though it is organized in complex ways—"represents the essence of existence" (costituisce il vero substrato dell'esistenza) and fills in the abyss between mind and body, undermining the idea of the spiritualisation of the human soul as well as the supposed uniqueness of humans.[65] Leopardi challenges humanity's supremacy in recognising both human and nonhuman materiality. In so doing he delegitimises anthropocentrism, one of the goals of the theories of the New Materialism. And in fact, Jane Bennett argues, "if matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimised, but the status of the

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[63] In the *Dissertazioni filosofiche* (*Philosophical Dissertations*), Leopardi excluded the possibility that matter could think, while in *Zibaldone* he will argue the opposite. Cf. Santi, *Sul materialismo leopardiano*, 113.

[64] "Che la materia pensi, è un fatto. Un fatto, perché noi pensiamo; e noi non sappiamo, non conosciamo di essere, non possiamo conoscere, concepire, altro che materia. Un fatto, perché noi veggiamo che le modificazioni del pensiero dipendono totalm. Dalle sensazioni, dallo stato del nostro fisico; che l'anima nostro corrisponde in tutto alle varietà ed alle variazioni del nostro corpo. Un fatto, perché noi sentiamo corporalm. il pensiero: ciascuno di noi sente che il pensiero non è nel suo braccio, nella sua gamba; sente che egli pensa con una parte materiale di se, cioè col suo cervello, come egli sente di vedere co' suoi occhi, di toccare colle sue mani" (Zib., 2863).

[65] Cf. Santi, *Sul materialismo leopardiano*, 76.

shared materiality of all things is elevated."[66] Hence, even though human and nonhuman beings differ in their capacity of "conformability," (assuefazione) as has been said, Leopardi crucially emphasises that human and nonhumans share a material status.

Not only does Leopardi bring, as some contemporary materialist philosophers do, "the materiality of human beings and materiality of the world into the forefront of analysis," but he also takes part in the debate known as "the animal question," which confirms the poet's proximity to issues at the centre of Animal Studies and Literary Ecology.[67] Every being (and not only animals), is made up of a material substance and is part of the sentient world, as Leopardi reiterates in the famous episode of the suffering garden:

> Go into a garden of plants, grass, flowers. No matter how lovely it seems. Even in the mildest season of the year. You will not be able to look anywhere and not find suffering. That whole family of vegetation is in a state of *souffrance*, each in its own way to some degree. Here a rose is attacked by the sun, which has given it life; it withers, languishes, wilts. [...] That tree is infested by an ant colony [...] Here a branch is broken by the wind or by its own weight; there a gentle breeze is tearing a flower apart, and carries away a piece, a filament, a leaf, a living part of this or that plant, which has broken or been torn off [...] Certainly these plants live on; some because their infirmities are not fatal, others because even with fatal diseases, plants, and animals as well, can manage to live on a little while. The spectacle of such abundance of life when you first go into this garden lifts your spirits, and that is why you think it is a joyful place.[68]

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[66] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 13.

[67] I quote from Alaimo and Hekman, who analyse the shared materiality of human and nonhuman beings as one of the tenets of New Materialism. Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman, *Material Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 1.

[68] "Entrate in un giardino di piante, d'erbe, di fiori. Sia pur quanto volete ridente. Sia nella più mite stagione dell'anno. Voi non potete volger lo sguardo in nessuna parte che voi non vi troviate nel patimento. Tutta quella famiglia di vegetali è in istato di souffrance, qual individuo più, qual meno. Là quella rosa è offesa dal sole, che gli ha dato la vita; si corruga, langue, appassisce. [...] Quell'albero è infestato da un formicaio [...] Qua un ramicello è rotto dal vento e dal suo proprio peso; là un zeffiretto va stracciando un fiore, vola con un brano, un filamento, una foglia, una parte viva di questa e quella pianta, staccato e strappata via [...] Certamente queste piante vivono qualche poco di tempo. Lo spettacolo di tanta copia di vita all'entrare in questo giardino ci rallegra l'anima, e di qui è che questo ci pare essere un soggiorno di gioia." *Zib.*, 2736.

Beyond the apparent perfection of the natural order and its cycle of life, this *Zibaldone* entry reveals the conflicting sides of nature. On one side, the garden represents a beautiful, Edenic place, "a spectacle of such abundance of life" (lo spettacolo di tanta copia di vita), (*Zib.*, 2736), yet on the other nature is also the location of sufferance and sorrow, caught by the gazing I, who, like nature, is a suffering being. Loretta Marcon suggests that the garden appears in its "pleasant materiality" (materia piacevole) to those who see with "the heart and imagination," (gli occhi del cuore e dell'immaginazione) while it becomes an expression of "mere existence" (mera esistenza) to those who perceive it through "the eyes of sorrow (gli occhi del dolore)."[69] Leopardi's garden reveals that "the world is not like it seems" as well as that "life" and *souffrance* are not an exclusive prerogative of humans.[70] A crucial tenet of anthropocentrism is questioned here, where Leopardi extends the notion of an existence of *souffrance* to all species of the garden.

Cosetta Veronese argues that with the garden scene Leopardi "is unintentionally describing an epigenetic process of interaction between subject and environment" (senza accorgersene, sta descrivendo un processo epigenetico di interazione tra soggetto e ambiente) and proving, at the same time, that not only humans but also nonhumans can suffer.[71] Leopardi minimises the difference between human and nonhuman with respect to the perception of pain, inaugurating a "biocentric" position that invites to investigate the world from a different angle.[72] By reducing the distance between human and nonhuman, Leopardi overcomes the mechanistic model, placing "'the system of nature' closer to the 'system of humans'" ("il sistema della natura" al "sistema dell'uomo"), a fundamental tenet of posthumanist ontology.[73]

Some scholars think that it would be a mistake to completely assimilate Leopardi to Posthumanism. As Veronese has argued, Leopardi shows some indebtedness to Humanism in the garden scene, since he anthropomorphises

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[69] Loretta Marcon, "Uno sguardo sul giardino. In margine a *Zibaldone* 4175-4177," *Bollettino della Società Filosofica Italiana* 199 (2010): 28. The translation is mine.
[70] Pamela Williams, "Leopardi's Materialism and the Animal World," in *Essays in Italian Literature and History in Honour of Doug Thompson*, eds. George Talbot and Pamela Williams (Dublin: Four Court Press, 2002), 63.
[71] Cosetta Veronese, "Biocentrismo e postumanesimo in Giacomo Leopardi: proposte di lettura," in *Appunti Leopardiani*, 63.
[72] Ibid., 62, 64.
[73] Cf. Gaspare, Polizzi, *Scienza e filosofia della natura negli scritti leopardiani* (Rome: Carocci, 2003), 69. The translation is mine.

nature and transfers his feelings onto other living beings.[74] I would argue that the poet's use of an anthropomorphic nature (and of anthropomorphised animals in several *Operette* and poems) can work as a "dis-anthropocentric stratagem," as suggested by ecocritical and materialist thinkers. In other words, it represents a way "to reveal the similarities and symmetries existing between human and nonhuman."[75] In Leopardi one frequently finds that anthropomorphism is employed to reveal "isomorphism" as Bennett theorises.[76] One effect of this strategy is that it challenges the hierarchical division between human and nonhuman.[77] All beings, for Leopardi, share some peculiar features: they equally exist, suffer, have their own form of reason and, as discussed so far, consist of matter. These are all tenets of Leopardi's "anti-umanesimo critico"[78] (critical anti-humanism), a characteristic that distinguishes his meditations in *Zibaldone* and in the *Essays*, as well as in his poetic works.

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[74] Cf. Veronese, "Biocentrismo e postumanesimo," 63.

[75] Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), 8.

[76] Cf. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 99.

[77] Leopardi offers several examples of anthropomorphized nature and animals both in his early poems and in the *Operette morali*, where they are endowed with a voice, reason, or other human abilities, in order to prove that the difference between humans and nonhumans arises elsewhere, and not from the absence of reason and language. In the *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia* (*The War of the Mice and the Crabs*), Leopardi clarifies that nonhumans possess some human capacities but in different "gradations," anticipating Darwin's idea of *The Descent of Man*. In the *Zibaldone*, the poet provides several cases of animals' proximity to humanity. He argues that certain animals show their tendency to live in organized groups, such as ants, which "form one to move things about" (formano una [società] per trasportar pesi) or bees, which "have their own government" (hanno anche un governo), *Zib.*, 234. Furthermore, he shows how animals employ strategies and tactics to achieve their goals, like humans: horses form a "*wheel* [...] to defend themselves against common aggressors" (la ruota che fanno i cavalli [...] per difendersi da comuni aggressor; *Zib.*, 289), cranes "use some birds as sentinels or lookouts" when they have to migrate (le grù nei viaggi che fanno, della sentinella e svegliatrice che tengono), *Zib.*, 290, while monkeys form "chains" (la catena delle scimmie) to help all the members of the group to cross a river (*Zib.*, 290).

[78] Polizzi, *Io sono quella che tu fuggi*, 52.

Turning to Nature: Leopardi's Invitation to Posterity

Leopardi has been considered a liminal thinker or an "unstable figure," as Alessandro Carrera suggests, a poet always "in between."[79] His system of nature, as well as his materialism, and his anti-anthropocentric worldview confirm a critical stance *vis-à-vis* his predecessors. Overcoming his 'betweenness', he rightfully gained the designation of 'post-', dealing with issues that are today coterminous with the post-enlightenment debate and with post-human thought. This 'post-' not only echoes theories developed in the twentieth century, but also foreshadows Leopardi's reflections on the future of humanity and its destiny. In a passage of *Zibaldone* the poet addresses posterity by speculating on its role in the world and hoping for a return to nature:

> Something to talk about again in a hundred years. We do not have an example from the past of the progression of excessive civilization and an unrestrained violation of nature. But if we do not come back [to nature], our descendants will leave the example to their descendants, if they have any.[80]

A foreboding entry that contains both an invitation to return to a more 'natural' condition and a warning: that human unhappiness is produced by an "incivilimento smisurato," (excessive civilization) which will ultimately lead to the destruction of the earth. Leopardi's attention to the "system of nature" in all its facets as well as his derisive criticism of anthropocentrism are distinctive features of his proto-ecocritical consciousness. His appeal to a return to nature is only one of the many valuable 'memos' that Leopardi left to posterity. A message that, as the ecocritical and materialist thinkers will reiterate, reminds us that humanity is but a part of nature, neither detached nor superior.

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[79] "La questione è piuttosto che Leopardi, nel quadro della cultura europea dell'Ottocento, non è una figura stabile, ma un perenne capitolo di transizione. Lo possiamo collocare tra Hölderlin e Baudelaire, o tra Kierkegaard e Nietzsche, ma il suo luogo non sarà mai fisso, sarà sempre 'tra'." Alessandro Carrera, "Per Leopardi in America," *Giacomo Leopardi: poeta e filosofo*. Atti del convegno dell'istituto di cultura, 31 marzo - 1 aprile 1998 (Fiesole: Cadmo, 1999), xiv. The translation is mine.

[80] "A riparlarci di qui a cent'anni. Non abbiamo ancora esempio nelle passate età, dei progressi di un incivilimento smisurato, e di un snaturamento senza limiti. Ma se non torneremo indietro, i nostri discendenti lasceranno questo esempio ai loro posteri, se avranno posteri." *Zib.*, 240.

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Chapter Sixteen

Chemistry and Natural History in the Young Leopardi: A Comparison between the *Saggio di chimica naturale* and the *Compendio di storia naturale*

Valentina Sordoni

Introduction

The enormous bibliography on Giacomo Leopardi contains several studies devoted to the marked influence of scientific thinking found in the poet's works. In Italy, one can discuss this kind of critical approach in a more straightforward manner, because researchers can read Leopardi's writings in their original language, examples being the *Dissertazioni filosofiche* (*Philosophical Dissertations*; 1811-1812), the *Storia dell'Astronomia dalla sua origine fino all'anno MDCCCXI* (*Astronomy's History from its origin until year MDCCCXI*; 1813),[1] and the lists of youthful essays kept in Casa Leopardi and dated from 1808 to 1812. They devote significant space to the (natural) sciences, but have unfortunately not yet been translated into English. They are important for an understanding of Leopardi's approach to the world of science and how the young poet, still an adolescent, initially used scientific concepts learned from dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and volumes consulted in his father's library.

The careful work of critics has allowed us, over the years, to identify some of the scientific works studied by Leopardi in some detail, and

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[1] Giacomo Leopardi, *Dissertazioni filosofiche* (Padua: Antenore, 1995), and *Storia dell'astronomia dalla sua origine fino all'anno 1813,* in *Tutte le poesie e tutte le prose,* eds. Lucio Felici and Emanuele Trevi (Rome: Newton, 1998). Henceforth *TPTP*.

assemble the names of the natural philosophers who most influenced his poetic works: Nicolaus Copernicus, Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton, Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier, and Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, to quote only a few. These critical contributions help us to gain a deeper understanding of Leopardi's poetry and philosophy, and how it was enriched by that robust philosophical and scientific foundation.[2] I concentrate here on the relation between Leopardi and natural history during the studies undertaken in his youth. This contribution is not therefore to be perceived as exhausting the topic; rather, it proposes a first critical comparison between the *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale* (*Essay in Chemistry and Natural History*), and the index of the *Compendio di storia naturale composto per la maggior parte nell'anno 1812*, (*Outline of Natural History mostly composed in 1812*) the latter compiled by Leopardi in 1812, which are presented here for the first time translated into English, in addition to presenting one of the sources used.

The intent of my essay is therefore to present these documents, almost undoubtedly new to an English-speaking readership, while referring readers to possible future research where more in depth investigations are called for, and which, for obvious reasons, cannot be undertaken within the confines of a brief essay, one which is, moreover, of a more introductory nature. I will provide the most essential information regarding these texts to situate them within the framework of the young Leopardi's *Bildung*. For more in depth research regarding the *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale* I refer the readers to my latest work.[3]

The *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale*

In 1807 Monaldo Leopardi invited the Jesuit Don Sebastiano Sanchini, the tutor who was to teach Giacomo, Carlo, and Paolina Leopardi and who

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[2] In Italy scholarship has contributed important research in this regard, and the bibliography is quite ample. Here are some of the most representative works: Paolo Casini, "Leopardi apprendista: scienza e filosofia," in *Rivista di Filosofia* 89, no. 3 (December 1998): 417-44; Andrea Campana, *Leopardi e le metafore scientifiche* (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2008); Gaspare Polizzi, *Leopardi e "le ragioni della verità." Scienze e filosofia della natura negli scritti leopardiani* (Rome: Carocci, 2003); Gaspare Polizzi, *Galileo in Leopardi* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2007); Gaspare Polizzi, *"...Per le forze eterne della materia." Natura e scienza in Giacomo Leopardi* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2008); Gaspare Polizzi, *Io sono quella che tu fuggi. Leopardi e la Natura* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2015).

[3] Valentina Sordoni, *Il giovane Leopardi, la chimica e la storia naturale* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2018).

planned their studies until 1812, to his *palazzo* in Recanati. Monaldo himself also followed his children's education. Intending to make it less boring than the one he remembered receiving from the Jesuit Torres, and which he recalls with irony in his *Autobiografia*,[4] and following Jesuit pedagogical practice, he decided to divide their education into two semesters per year. At the end of this period of instruction, its conclusion was observed by means of a public examination held in Casa Leopardi.

In the course of the examination the three children were required to answer a series of questions on prepared subjects. For these occasions, Monaldo invited a select public of aristocrats and representatives of the clergy from Recanati and nearby villages, who were allowed to actively take part in the examinations by asking the Leopardi children their own questions. In all likelihood Sanchini prepared these exams and Monaldo then made copies of the texts and distributed them to his guests, who were thus able to follow the proceedings more attentively. Monaldo's intent in holding this public event was also to showcase his children's talents to the guests. These public examinations were held between 1808 and 1812.

The texts of these examinations held before 1812 may easily be consulted by researchers, as they were published in 1972 by Maria Corti as an appendix to her edited volume of youthful essays written by Giacomo Leopardi.[5] The original, print, copies of the essays published by Corti are to

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[4] Monaldo Leopardi, *Autobiografia di Monaldo Leopardi*, ed. Alessandro Avòli (Rome: Tipografia A. Befani, 1883), 7-9: *§. VII. Don Giuseppe Torres mio precettore; §. VIII. Cattivo metodo d'insegnare; §. IX. Mia avversione alla scuola.* Cf. also Valentina Sordoni, "'L'ottimo Torres fu l'assassino degli studî miei.' Monaldo, la *Ratio Studiorum* e l'*Autobiografia*," in *Il vecchio magnanimo e il giovane favoloso. Monaldo e Giacomo Leopardi nelle terre estensi*, ed. Diletta Biagini (Modena: Edizioni Terra e Identità, 2016), 81-93.

[5] Maria Corti, ed. *"Entro dipinta gabbia." Tutti gli scritti inediti, rari e editi 1809-1810 di Giacomo Leopardi* (Milan: Bompiani, 1972). In the index one can find the transcripts of all the indexes of all the public examinations from 1808, 1809, and 1810, while that referring to 1811 cannot be found at present. This is how the individual essays held during the aforementioned years were introduced: *"Dopo sei mesi di Studio, i tre FratelliLEOPARDIConte GIACOMO-TARDEGARDO di anni nove, Conte CARLO-ORAZIO di anni otto, Contessa PAOLINA di anni sette. Il dì 30 Gennaio 1808 si espongono a darne il seguente SAGGIO da essi offerto, e dedicato Al di loro amorosissimo zio CONTE D. ETTORE DECANO LEOPARDI Alle seguenti Questioni Grammaticali risponderanno a senso GIACOMO, e CARLO,"* (After six months of Study, the three LEOPARDI siblings, Count GIACOMO-TARDEGARDO nine years of age, Count CARLO-ORAZIO eight years of age, and Countess PAOLINA seven years of age. On the 30th of January 1808 they present themselves to provide the following ESSAY, offered by them,

this day preserved at Palazzo Leopardi, in Recanati. By consulting these documents we know that the first essay (test) was held on 30 January 1808: Giacomo and Carlo had to answer questions concerning grammar, while Paolina had to answer others pertaining to the Christian religion and ancient history. The second held on 3 February 1809, consisted of questions about rhetoric for Giacomo and Carlo, while Paolina was supposed to answer questions about the same topics as in the previous essay. The third examination, held on 8 February 1810 at 9 pm, has Giacomo and Carlo once again answering queries about rhetoric, but this time also about arithmetic and plane geometry, while Paolina has to answer questions about the natural sciences and history; the youngest sibling, Luigi, has to instead answer questions about the Christian religion.

This final exam marked the conclusion of Giacomo's studies with Sanchini, and it is extensively subdivided, as shown by the index of the relevant paper copy, which is composed of two parts.

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and dedicated To their most loving uncle COUNT D. ETTORE DECANO LEOPARDI. The following Grammatical Questions will be answered by GIACOMO and CARLO), 469. "*HOC DE ANNUO STUDIO IN HUMANIORIBUS LITTERIS SPECIMEN JACOBUS, ITEMQUE CAROLUS LEOPARDI FRATRES, necnon de suis laboribus PAOLINA SOROR PUBLICO CERTAMINE PROPONUNT, EORUMQUE AVIAE DULCISSIMAE VIRGINIAE D.D.D. Die 3 Februarii 1809.*" "*SAGGIO che degli studj da loro fatti nel decorso anno 1809. GIACOMO, CARLO, PAOLINA, E LUIGI LEOPARDI FRATELLI daranno pubblicamente il dì 8 Febbraio 1810. Alle ore 21,*" (ESSAY regarding the studies they undertook in the course of the past year, 1809, which GIACOMO, CARLO, PAOLINA AND LUIGI LEOPARDI, BROTHERS, will publicly present on February 8th 1810, at 9 pm), 472. "*DIVO FRANCISCO SALESIO PRAESULI GENEVAE CLARISSIMO HAERETICORUM PROPUGNATORI INSIGNI VITAE PERFETIONIS MAGISTRO HAUD ULLI SECUNDO TOTIUSQUE ECCLESIAE OPTIME MERITO UTI PERQUAM AMANTISSIMO PATRONO NEC NON VIGILI STUDIORUM EORUM AUSPICI AETERNO MONUMENTO DEVOTIONIS OBSEQUII ET AMORIS HOC DE CURIS ILLORUM SPECIMEM JACOBUS, CAROLUS, PAOLINA, AC ALOYSIUS LEOPARDI D.D.D. SEBASTIANO SANCHINIO PRAECEPTORE LAURETI MDCCCX. EX TYPOGRAPHIA ROSSI. DE LITTERIS HUMANIORIBUS JACOBUS, ET CAROLUS*" (To the divine Francesco Salesio, most illustrious bishop of Geneva, distinguished fighter against heretics, teacher of the perfect life, second to none, and supremely meritorious in the eyes of the entire Church as a very loving defender, but also as an attentive protector of their [the children's] studies, in eternal memory, as a sign of devotion and obsequiousness and love, Giacomo, Carlo, Paolina and Luigi Leopardi [offer] this essay, fruit of their studies, while Sebastiano Sanchini was their tutor, Loreto 1810. From the typography of Ilario Rossi. Giacomo and Carlo [test] their humanistic studies), 474.

The first part, also known as *Disputatio*, is a list of 30 questions formulated in Latin, dealing with ornithology, pneumatics, natural theology, physics, both general and particular, and thirty questions formulated in Italian about moral philosophy.[6]

The second part consists of the *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale* (henceforth *Saggio*), which I will present below.

Until now no critical studies have been published that examine both parts of the essay, the *Disputatio* and the *Saggio*; we will therefore not attempt any such in depth analysis here, also since, due to space constraints, this is not the appropriate venue.

At this point in time, two original printed copies of the 1812 essay are available, and they are both preserved at the Palazzo Leopardi. One of these contains handwritten notes by Monaldo, who had followed his offspring's public examinations very carefully, and taken notes regarding the guests' remarks.[7] The second copy, identical to the first, is devoid of handwritten notes, and is displayed in the *Giacomo dei libri* exhibit, which opened in 2012, at Palazzo Leopardi.[8]

In order to explain the *Saggio*'s complex editorial history, I will now return to Corti's publication. Corti's study focused only on Giacomo's youthful works, written between 1809 and 1810, and the same period of time was chosen when selecting the indices of the texts, in which the *Saggio*—the last examination held in the Leopardi residence on 20 July 1812, two years after the time-line chosen by Corti—does not appear.[9] Corti therefore omits the 1812 essay, and decides not to include it in the collection of public essays which she published in an appendix.[10]

The first person to publish the essay is Alessandro Avòli, who had read the index of the *Saggio* and mentioned it in his edited appendix to *Autobiografia di Monaldo Leopardi*, in 1883. In a long note, he transcribed the whole text of the *Saggio*,[11] but did not include any critical analysis.

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[6] For a more in depth examination, cf. Gaspare Polizzi and Valentina Sordoni, "Uno scritto dimenticato del giovane Leopardi: La *Disputatio* e il suo rapporto con le *Dissertazioni filosofiche*," in *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 4 (2009): 653-707.

[7] For a complete transcript of the 1812 essay, including Monaldo's annotations, cf: Sordoni, *Il giovane Leopardi*.

[8] Casa Leopardi, *Giacomo dei Libri. La Biblioteca Leopardi come spazio delle idee*, ed. Fabiana Cacciapuoti (Recanati: GiacomoGiacomo, 2012).

[9] Corti, *"Entro dipinta gabbia,"* 467-89.

[10] The possible reasons for Corti not publishing the *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale* are examined in greater detail in Sordoni, *Il giovane Leopardi*.

[11] Alessandro Avòli, Appendix, in *Autobiografia di Monaldo Leopardi*, ed. Alessandro Avòli (Rome: Tipografia A. Befani, 1883), 274-76.

Avòli's notes were recovered by Giuseppe Chiarini in the early 20th century, in his *Vita di Giacomo Leopardi*[12]; Chiarini briefly recalls that Leopardi had also studied chemistry and natural history, and had engaged in a public essay in these subjects at Casa Leopardi in 1812. Yet all traces of this *Saggio* were lost, neglected by critics during the 19th century. Mindful of this lacuna, Professor Marco Ciardi and I published a critical study[13] that was made possible thanks to the precious collaboration of the Leopardi family, who made the two original copies of the *Saggio* and the extraordinary Leopardi library available to us. With complete access, we were able to examine the primary documents and other volumes necessary for our work[14] on the chemical section. In another study published in Italy, I consider both parts of the *Saggio*.

In this essay, instead, I will limit my analysis of the *Saggio* to the part devoted to natural history, comparing it with the index of the *Compendio di storia naturale* which appeared in the same time period, and briefly discussing one of the sources used, so as to formulate some brief reflections on the poet's *Bildung*.

By way of introduction, and more generally, one can state that the *Saggio* and the *Compendio di storia naturale* represent the first notable "animal" presence in Leopardi's education, which will later resurface in more mature works, mostly with a philosophical acumen and metaphorical associations that are still absent at this early stage. Together with more common species that have often appeared in literary works since classical times, and which are also well represented in Leopardi's works, such as the bees, other less usual species make their appearance, such as beavers, which are also mentioned in the *Zibaldone*,[15] as well as ants, often mentioned by Leopardi, but also spiders, and mice, and finally birds, the poet's favourite animate beings.[16] At this stage these are still isolated occurrences, that are not yet the subject of deeper philosophical reflection; they do however, with

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[12] Giuseppe Chiarini, *Vita di Giacomo Leopardi* (Florence: Barbèra Editore, 1905).

[13] Marco Ciardi and Valentina Sordoni, "Un testo dimenticato: Giacomo Leopardi e il *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale* del 1812," *Intersezioni* 1 (2008): 57-58.

[14] I am thankful to Count Vanni and Countess Olimpia Leopardi for their kindness in allowing me to work in Giacomo Leopardi's library, to sig.ra Carmela Magri for her help in the same library during my studies and to Prof. Matteo Borrini.

[15] Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, eds. Michael Caesar and Franco d'Intino (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 3774-75, 3789-3803.

[16] On animal presences in Leopardi cf. Giacomo Leopardi, *Il gallo silvestre e altri animali*, ed. by Antonio Prete and Alessandra Aloisi (San Cesario di Lecce: Manni, 2010); Antonio Prete, *Il pensiero poetante. Saggio su Leopardi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2006), 62-177.

their presence in the *Saggio*, confirm their importance in capturing the poet's attention during his education, an attention that will only become much deeper and more extensive in his more mature works, including the *Zibaldone*.[17]

I will start by looking at the *Saggio*, which, let me explain right away, is simply the index of the subjects the young Giacomo would be tested on during his last public examination. This document should therefore not be confused with a treatise or a youthful dissertation, such as the *Dissertazioni filosofiche*, written around the same time.

The *Saggio* is divided into two parts, each composed of thirty questions, all in Italian: thirty about chemistry and thirty about natural history. Let us now analyse the natural history contents. The section on Natural History of the *Saggio* opens with a definition of the subject and provides details on how it will be subdivided in this specific text, following an approach that is analogous to that found in the *Dissertazioni filosofiche* and the *Storia dell'astronomia*. As in the case of these other youthful works in fact, the *Saggio* begins with a general definition of the subject being examined–natural history–following procedures that are typical of Jesuit treatise composition. It is followed by eight sections, devoted to insects, shells, birds, quadrupeds, fish, plants, rivers, and minerals.

The animal kingdom occupies the most extensive portion of the *Saggio*, and is comprised of five sections (*Entomography*,[18] *Zoophytography, Ornithography, Zoography* and *Icthyography*). Only one section is devoted to the vegetable kingdom, the sixth (*Phytology*), one to the mineral kingdom, the eighth (*Mineralogy*), and one to physical geography, the seventh section (*Hydrography*).

Each section has a variable number of subsections, some longer and more detailed than others. The shortest are those devoted to shells (*Zoophytography*) and fish (*Icthyography*) and the longest are the first, devoted to insects (*Entomography*), and the last, on minerals (*Mineralogy)*, both including thirteen points to be analysed: thirteen insects and thirteen chemical elements, compounds and rocks in the eighth. The manner in which the subjects are introduced varies within sections: some have a

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[17] Cf. Liana Cellerino, *L'io del topo. Pensieri e letture dell'ultimo Leopardi* (Rome: La Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1997).

[18] The actual Italian term used in the original is "Eutomatografia," which is taken from the English word "Eutomatography" used by Benjamin Martin in a text Leopardi could consult in Italian translation. Since the usual etymological roots for words referring to insects begin with "entom-," the error was probably introduced during the translation. In this essay I am using the more current English "Entomography," cf. footnote 52.

general introduction; others do not, but enter immediately into specific details. Let us examine them now:

Zoology - Entomography, on insects, first defined and then subdivided. Two lists of "insects" are given, followed by two others; the first comprises reptiles, worms, silkworms, ladybirds, moths, spiders, ants, and antlions. Some classification errors leap to the eye: reptiles and spiders are not insects. The second subsection contains flying insects (*Flying insects*), but catalogues fewer elements, avoids classification errors, and mentions wasps, bees, hornets, flies and mosquitoes.

Entomology is a branch of zoology that was in a state of relative confusion for a large portion of the modem age; a first notable contribution was made by Edward Wotton, who defines many species first grouped by Aristotle in his *Historia Animalium*, which included today's *Arachnids* and *Worms* without distinction, as "Entomata." We should therefore not be surprised by the appearance of spiders in Leopardi's essay: this 'mistake' is perfectly attuned to the results reached by those naturalists who were his contemporaries, and with the main source he resorted to, which I will discuss shortly. It will be Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck who will provide greater clarity by establishing the class of the Arachnids, along with many others, starting in 1800.

The second section (*Zoophytography*) is devoted to shells, in particular clams, snails, oysters, pearls, and nautilus shells. These are all species of molluscs, except for pearls, which are produced by oysters. This section also is a reflection of natural history's state of affairs in the 18th century, exhibiting many of the chaotic features that characterize it at this time. The species listed here are once more classified following Wotton, who defines those animals the Stagirite gathered into a group devoid of a precise scientific nomenclature as "Zoophytes." Zoophytes were considered by Peter Simon Pallas to be the link between the animal and vegetable worlds, and will represent one of several important naturalist examples deployed by the poet when, already around 1823, first in the *Zibaldone*, and then in 1824 in the *Dialogo della natura e di un'anima* (*Dialogue of Nature and a Soul*)[19] he will reflect on human happiness and the accompanying feelings of 'being alive', which makes the former impossible, unlike what occurs in zoophytes, which are less sensitive to life and therefore happier compared to human beings. This is how the poet expressed himself in *Zibaldone*:

> A species of living being with respect to another or others generally, etc., is that much happier, that is, that much less unhappy, that much more poorer

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[19] Giacomo Leopardi, *The Moral Essays*, Trans. Patrick Creagh. (New York: Columbia UP, 1983). Henceforth referred to as Creagh.

in positive unhappiness, to the extent that it feels its existence less than the other, that is, when it is less alive and the closer it is to genera which are not animal. (Therefore the species of polyps, zoophytes, etc., is the happiest of living beings).[20]

In other words he underscored the same views expressed in the *operetta* when the Soul addresses Nature:

Soul. Tell me, among the brute beasts you mentioned are there by chance any with less spark and feeling than men have? *Nature.* Starting with those that have something of the plant about them, all are in this respect to some degree inferior to man; who has more fullness of life, and abundance of feeling, than any other animal; because of all living creatures he is the most perfect.[21]

The third section (*Ornithography*) is devoted to birds. Six examples are given: ostrich, plover, heron, swallows, *Moscuccello* (fly-bird) and humming-bird. It is superfluous to dwell on the fascination the poet felt for these animals, which he will elevate to privileged symbols of the animate universe, soaring examples of an incisive allegorical 'other' in the later works.[22] Even before the *Passero solitario* (*The Solitary Thrush*), a reflection of the poet's secluded life, before the existential message entrusted to the philosopher Amelio, who contemplates birds in an *Elogio* that is almost a hymn to the happiness of animals "that by nature denote a special ability and disposition to experience enjoyment and gaiety"[23] and

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[20] "Una specie di viventi rispetto all'altra e all'altre generalm. ec., è tanto più felice, cioè tanto meno infelice, tanto più scarsa l'infelicità positiva, quanto meno dell'altra ella sente l'esistenza, cioè quanto men vive e più si accosta ai generi non animali. (Dunque la specie de' polipi zoofiti ec. è la più felice delle viventi)." *Zib.*, 3847-48, 7 November 1823.

[21] Leopardi, *Dialogue of Nature and a Soul*, in Creagh, *Moral Essays*, 68. *Dialogo della Natura e di un'Anima*, in *TPTP*, 515, "*Anima.* Dimmi: degli animali bruti, che tu menzionavi, è per avventura alcuno fornite di minore vitalità e sentimento che gli uomini? *Natura.* Cominciando da quelli che tengono della pianta, tutti sono in coteste, gli uni più, gli altri meno, inferiori all'uomo; il quale ha maggior copia di vita, e maggior sentimento, che niun altro animale; per essere di tutti i viventi il più perfetto."

[22] Cf. Paolo Paolini, "Gli animali nell'operaleopardiana," in *Leopardi e lo spettacolo della natura*, ed. Vincenzo Placella, Atti del Convegno internazionale Napoli 17- 19 dicembre 1998 (Naples: Napoli, 2001), 275-312.

[23] "[...] di natura meglio accomodati a godere e ad essere felici." Leopardi, *Elogio degli uccelli*, 164.

"abound exceedingly in the external life."[24] Even before the painful cry of the *Gallo silvestre* (*The Canticle of the Wild Cock*), in the period of adolescence we are considering, birds are the protagonists of moral fables in verse, such as *I Fringuelli* (*The Finches*) and *L'Ucello* (*The Bird*), both created by the poet following eighteenth-century models that were popular at the time, with a metaphorical dimension which is already more pronounced in the second composition, with its autobiographical overtones.

The fourth section (*Zoography*) classifies animals according to the number of their legs, listing quadrupeds first (*Quadrupeds*). All the animals included are mammals: elephant, beaver, hedgehog, porcupine, dog, weasel and muskrat. Those species that contemporary taxonomy classifies as 'mammals' were considered to be 'quadrupeds' up to the mid eighteenth century. It was apparently Mathurin-Jacques Brisson who suggested the substitution of terms to Carl von Linné (Linnaeus), a change that has endured to this date.

The fifth section (*Icthyography*) includes fish and concludes that part of the *Saggio* devoted to the animal kingdom. It also contains the highest number of classification errors. For example, whale, crocodile, narwhal and turtle are listed, but none of them is a fish: whales and narwhals are cetacean mammals; crocodiles and turtles are reptiles. In this case as well the errors can be tied to the studies in natural history of the period, and the source used, Noël-Antoine Pluche's *Lo spettacolo della natura* (*The Spectacle of Nature*), as I will explain shortly.[25]

The sixth section (*Phytology*) is reserved for the vegetable kingdom in its most varied expressions, from plants to fruits. The presence of vegetable nature, even though it is rarer than that of animals in Leopardi's works,[26] is certainly not extraneous to it: it is sufficient to simply recall the "fior gentile" (noble flower, Galassi)[27] to which the poet consigned the grievous and universal heritage of humanity's inexorable precariousness, the fruit of intense philosophical reflections. Or we could consider the imaginative play with the "siepe," (hedgerow, Galassi) both obstacle and foundation for a poetic *élan* charged with an intriguing lyrical power. The young siblings are asked to give definitions of seed, root and lymph, "juice," (sugo) as well as having to explain some vegetable physiological processes (the influence of

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[24] "[…] abbondano soprammodo della vita estrinseca." Ibid. 167.

[25] Noël-Anton Pluche, *Lo spettacolo della natura*, anonymous translation, 5th ed. (Venice: Francesco di Niccolò Pezzana, 1786).

[26] Cf. Giuseppe Farinelli, "Fiori e piante nell'opera leopardiana," in *Leopardi e lo spettacolo della natura*, ed. Vincenzo Placella, Atti del Convegno internazionale Napoli 17 19 dicembre 1998 (Naples: Napoli, 2001), 265-74.

[27] Leopardi, *La Ginestra, o il fiore del deserto*, v. 34, in *TPTP*, 1:42.

air on plants and their reproductive capabilities), a general treatment of leaves, flowers and fruit, to conclude with a list of exotic plants, whose presence has been denied by Giuseppe Farinelli,[28] and which would instead deserve some careful analysis, especially if compared with an equivalent incisiveness to be found in the *Compendio di storia naturale*: aloe, sugarcane, tea, cinnamon, coffee, and quinine.

The seventh section (*Hydrography*) is devoted to physical geography, with ample descriptions of rivers and the sea. The eighth section (*Mineralogy*) covers the mineral kingdom and opens with a description of mountains and the animals in them. Two extensive descriptions of fossils are given, generically defined as *pietre figurate* (*25. Stones in general and in particular; 26.* Impietrimenti *and* pietre figurate). This section is among the most interesting from the point of view of its contents, and certainly the most densely laced with important philosophical implications, both with regards to the contemporary scientific milieu, and with respect to the Catholic education Giacomo was receiving. At its centre we find the concept of "fossil," which in the eighteenth century referred to any object recovered from beneath the earth's surface. Before the birth of Geology as a science, naturalists and natural philosophers were attracted by so-called "pietre figurate," rocks and stones which were decorated with curious designs on their surface, which according to these naturalists only by chance reminded one of living forms: fish, leaves or starfish. The resemblance with other forms influenced the name given to these rocks, denying them any organic component, and therefore leading to their placement among minerals. According to Athanasius Kircher and Johann Joachim Becher they were

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[28] Farinelli, *Fiori e piante nell'opera leopardiana*: "Ho la ragionevole convinzione che il Leopardi, nel contemplare il creato, avesse due dimensioni: la prima vicina e la seconda lontana. La dimensione vicina era quella botanica, appunto fiori e piante, nominati il più delle volte con generica specificazione e solitamente investiti di una "cara" intimità e protetti con la medesima cura con cui si proteggono le cose dell'*entourage* domestico. E infatti non c'è quasi lessema botanico che indichi fiori e piante esotiche: ginestra, rosa e viola, cipresso, faggio, pino, salice, ecc.; e intorno siepe, bosco, erba, selva, che Leopardi vedeva da casa sua o che vedeva passeggiando in meditazione" (I am convinced that when Leopardi contemplates creation, he saw it in two different dimensions, one close and one far. The close dimension was the botanical one, which relates to flowers and plants, mentioned mostly in a generic way, and usually invested with a "dear" intimacy and protected with the same care with which one protects the domestic *environment*. And indeed there is almost no botanical term indicating exotic flowers and plants: pink and purple broom, cypress, beech, pine, willow, etc.; and around hedge, woods, grass, forest, which Leopardi used to see from his home or wandering in meditation), 269; translated by Mark Epstein.

"pranks of nature," for Voltaire actually the remains of meals consumed by pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land.

The scientific study of fossils, which begins to establish itself in the nineteenth century, led to a questioning of the earth's chronology, which at the time many researchers still identified with the biblical account spanning six thousand years. The growing realization that there was a much more remote past at the basis of human history, which was necessary to study, interpret and classify fossils, undermined faith in a presumed plan by a divine creator.

If the study of fossils, in particular that of the "pietre figurate," so suggestive and picturesque as to fascinate humans since medieval times, may have stimulated the poet's vivid imagination, we may instead suppose that the father's preoccupation may have been for the philosophical consequences of similar studies; and it certainly does not seem mere happenstance that Giacomo is using Noël-Antoine Pluche's *Lo spettacolo della natura* (cf. footnote 40) as his source, a work that fits the family's religious atmosphere well, rather than others, which would have been more modern from this point of view, and which were also present in the family's library, such as Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon's, *Histoire naturelle*. The French naturalist, who Leopardi will have read by 1821, had questioned the biblical chronology and proposed a much more prolonged geological history for the earth, giving rise to many polemics.

Of the metals to be examined, gold and silver are taken note of first, something which requires a description of one of their most important properties: ductility (*27. Metals in general and in particular; 28. Gold, Silver, and their ductility*). These are followed by iron, copper, tin, lead and mercury (*29. Iron, Copper, Tin, Lead, and Mercury*). The eighth section closes with a list of fossil substances to be described: sulphur, alum, clay, oil and naphtha (*30. Fossil substances, Sulphur, Alum, Clay, Oil and Naphtha*). These contents offer us a first idea of the subjects which Leopardi was required to learn in his study of natural history.

In order to deepen our analysis, it is perhaps best to also examine the index of another text devoted to natural history, written by Leopardi in the same year, 1812, the *Compendio di storia naturale*. As we shall see, there are many similarities between the two texts, although they exhibit considerable and unavoidable differences in some lexical choices: both analogies and differences must be analysed, for a more complete picture of the subjects studied, and also as a means to reflect on the sources Leopardi used in his youthful studies.

The *Compendio di storia naturale*: "We will speak of insects, shells and birds"[29]

The *Compendio di Storia naturale* (henceforth *Compendio*) is a still unpublished manuscript, housed among the private papers of the Leopardi family in Recanati. It is a 60-page exercise-book in which Giacomo himself listed the works he completed in 1812.[30] At this point in time there are no critical studies devoted to it.

The *Compendio* was mentioned for the first time in 1878 by Giuseppe Cugnoni;[31] however, he did not include it among the unedited texts he published, considering it of little importance. His mention of the *Compendio* was later noticed by Francesco De Sanctis who, in a volume quoting Cugnoni's work, reconfirmed the presence of the *Compendio*[32] among the documents belonging to the Leopardi family. However, Giuseppe Chiarini, who also stated that he had consulted the original copy of the index of Leopardi's early production in Recanati, did not report it,[33] perhaps also believing it not to be of great interest in reconstructing the poet's early works. A greater degree of attention was only accorded to the *Compendio* in 1981, when the geologist Giulio Antonio Venzo published some of its previously unpublished passages, but without any critical analysis.[34]

Two years later, in 1983, Sebastiano Timpanaro wrote a highly controversial article[35] about the Leopardi family, who he deemed were responsible for not publishing some of Giacomo's writings, in particular the *Dissertazioni filosofiche,* jealously held at Recanati, thus sparking a series of polemics regarding unpublished works, including the *Compendio*, although Timpanaro had not quoted it specifically in that piece.

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[29] Giulio Antonio Venzo, "Su l'inedito 'Compendio di Storia Naturale' di G. Leopardi quattordicenne," in *Atti dell'Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti* 163 (2001): 261-78. Originally published in *Natura Alpina* 28 (1981): 12-21.

[30] Giacomo Leopardi, "Indice delle produzioni di me Giacomo Leopardi dall'anno 1809 in poi," in Lucio Felici and Emanuele Trevi, 1038.

[31] Giuseppe Cugnoni, *Opere inedite di Giacomo Leopardi pubblicate sugli autografi recanatesi* (Halle: M. Niemeyer 1878), xl.

[32] Francesco De Sanctis, *Studio su Giacomo Leopardi* (Naples: A. Morano Editore, 1885), 4.

[33] Chiarini, *Vita di Giacomo Leopardi*, 36-40.

[34] Venzo, "Su l'inedito," 263-68.

[35] Sebastiano Timpanaro, "Come nel 1983 si può impedire la pubblicazione di importanti inediti leopardiani," *Il Ponte* 3-4 (1983): 340-45.

In this climate of fierce debate, the journalist Aurelio Andreoli wrote a long article, devoted precisely to the *Compendio*,[36] in which other hitherto unpublished passages of the manuscript were quoted and thus added to those already published by Venzo. Finally, in 2001, Venzo himself returned to the subject, publishing a more detailed report than his previous one,[37] which further enriched the literature on the youthful Leopardi's early essay. It is the last study devoted specifically to the poet's unpublished works, and no new sections of the text have been published since.

In the manuscript copy, the *Compendio* opens with a definition of Natural History written by Leopardi, not mentioned in the above index.[38]

The *Compendio* is composed of twelve treatises, subdivided into "headings," and subdivided into "sections" devoted to the three natural kingdoms: animal, vegetable and mineral. The animal kingdom occupies the largest part of the text and includes five treatises, the vegetable kingdom represents the sixth, and the mineral kingdom the last three.

In the *Compendio*, as in the *Saggio*, the perspective chosen to introduce the subjects varies within sections: some have a general introduction to the topic and go on to analyse them in detail; others immediately start with a particular viewpoint. Let us now examine the subjects of each treatise.

The first is devoted to insects (*First Treatise—Of Insects*) and is one of the most detailed. It contains a long list of insects, in the following order: worms, butterflies, silkworms, moths, spiders, tarantulas, wasps, bees, hornets, flies, ladybirds, mosquitoes, mole crickets, ants and antlions. They are mostly the same species quoted in the *Saggio*, with some minor additions: butterflies, tarantulas, and mole crickets. Reptiles do not appear. Compared to the *Saggio*, no distinction is made between flying and non-flying insects. However, in this section of the *Compendio* there are some definite errors of classification: spiders and tarantulas are not insects. These errors can be explained on the basis of what was already mentioned in regards to the *Saggio*, and the same explanation basically applies to those we will encounter below: in other words, they can be attributed to the source we already indicated above.[39]

The second treatise (*Treatise II. On Shells*) is very short, and only mentions clams, snails and pearls. They are the same examples as those analysed in the *Saggio*, except that nautilus shells and oysters are not included in the *Compendio*.

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[36] Aurelio Andreoli, "Storia della natura. Ovvero come un coccodrillo diventò un pesce," in *L'Unità*, (29 July 1983), 11.

[37] Venzo, "Su l'inedito."

[38] Ibid., 263.

[39] For a more in-depth treatment, cf. Sordoni, *Il giovane Leopardi*.

The third treatise (*Treatise III. Of Birds*) analyses some species of birds: plovers, herons, humming-birds, and ostriches. They are the same as those analysed in the *Saggio*, with the exception of swallows and humming-birds (*Moscuccello*), which do not appear in the *Compendio*.

The fourth treatise (*Treatise IV. Individual Treatise—Of Terrestrial Animals in particular*) describes some animal species, generically defined as *terrestrial*: dogs, weasels, hedgehogs and beavers. They are some of the Quadrupeds quoted in the fourth section of the *Saggio* (*Zoography*), with the exception of the elephant, hedgehog and mouse, all omitted in the *Compendio*.

The fifth treatise (*Treatise V. Of Fish*) only describes two species: crocodiles and narwhals which, as already mentioned, are not fish. These are the same examples as those quoted in the *Saggio*, in which whales and turtles also appeared.

The sixth treatise (*Treatise VI. Of Plants*) is also very detailed: the general introductory sections explain the constituent parts of plants, and later sections describe particular species, such as aloe, sugarcane, tea, cinnamon and coffee. Partly because of these contents, this treatise is very similar to the *Phytology* section of the *Saggio*: the subjects discussed are generally the same, and the vegetable species chosen are identical. However, the *Compendio* does not mention quinine.

The seventh treatise (*Treatise VII. Of Rivers*) is very short, and covers the origin, course and usefulness of rivers. The same subjects are presented in the *Hydrography* section of the *Saggio*.

The eighth treatise (*Treatise VIII. Of Mountains*) is also very short, concentrates on the usefulness of mountains and the animals which populate them. The subjects presented are the same as those in points 23 and 24 of *Mineralogy* in the *Saggio*.

The ninth treatise (*Treatise IX. Individual treatise. Of the Sea in general*), once again very short, describes the sea and some of its characteristics, and presents the same arguments as those in points 21 and 22 of the *Hydrography* section of the *Saggio*.

The tenth treatise (*Treatise X. Of Fossil substances or of Minerals that are not Plants or Metals*) analyses the same fossil substances: sulphur, oil, naphtha, alum and clay, as those included in point 30 of the *Mineralogy* section in the *Saggio*.

The eleventh treatise (*Treatise XI. Of Quarries, Precious Stones, and Ordinary Stones*) introduces the topic of stones, analyses calcareous, baritic, aluminous and siliceous mixtures, and ends with an explanation of *impietrimenti*. This treatise thus re-presents and amplifies the subjects already mentioned in points 25 and 26 of the *Saggio*.

The twelfth treatise (*Treatise XII. Of Mines, of Metals*) is also very detailed and supplies a long list of metals: platinum, gold, silver, copper, iron, tin, lead, zinc, mercury, antimony, manganese, nickel, bismuth, cobalt, arsenic, molybdenum and tungsten. These are also listed in points *27, 28,* and *29* of the *Saggio,* with substantial additions in the *Compendio,* where platinum, zinc, antimony, manganese, nickel, bismuth, cobalt, arsenic, molybdenum and tungsten appear, while they are absent from the *Saggio;* we shall return to them later.

Some initial comparisons can be made based on the lists in these texts. First, both open with a definition of Natural History, followed by the contents which, as noted, are almost exactly the same, apart from some differences due to additions or deletions of topics discussed in both texts.

Most of the animal, vegetable, and mineral species which Leopardi treats in the *Compendio,* like the natural environments he describes, are the same as those in the *Saggio,* and the order in which they are presented is also very similar or even in some cases identical - as, indeed, are the classification errors found in both. However, there are some important lexical differences. In the *Saggio,* Leopardi uses specialised nomenclature to define the textual sections, but not in the *Compendio,* where the sections are presented without recourse to lexical technicalities, and more common and everyday words are adopted instead. For example, the term *Zoophytography,* used in the *Saggio* to define the section on shells and molluscs, is replaced in the *Compendio* by the simpler term *Shells*; *Icthyography* in the *Saggio* defines the section on fish, whereas in the *Compendio* it is replaced by the more common *Fish.*

The choice of these terms in the *Saggio* (*Zoology, Entomography, Zoophytography, Ornithography, Zoography, Icthyography, Phytology, Hydrography, Mineralogy*) reveals an initial linguistic difference between the texts, a point whose importance is underscored when examining the sources used in their preparation.[40]

In order to arrive at some provisional synthetic conclusions, especially if one takes the strong similarities in content between the naturalistic section of the *Saggio* and the *Compendio* into account, one could hypothesize that the latter was written by the poet in preparation of the last public examination held on 20 July 1812, and organised by Monaldo at Palazzo Leopardi.

The preference that Giacomo expresses in the *Compendio* for simple words that are alien to the sophisticated technical jargon of the sciences as expressed in the *Saggio,* allows us to already perceive the profile of his

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[40] Ibid.

future position, one expressed frequently in *Zibaldone*, on the relationship between "termini" (terms) and "parole" (words), thus revealing the complex foundations of studies which are the basis of subsequent insights. Terms, so abstract, cold and rational, are scarcely suitable to poetry, whose nourishment lies in words:

> Words, as Beccaria observes (treatise on style), present not just the idea of the object they signify, but also accessory images, sometimes more and sometimes fewer. And it is the most precious gift of a language to have these words. Scientific words present the bare and circumscribed idea of an object, and that's why they are called terms, because they determine and define the thing from all sides. The richer in words a language is, the more suitable it is for literature and beauty, etc. etc., and the opposite is true when it is richer in terms, I mean when this richness of terms damages that of words because an abundance of both is not harmful.[41]

One could state, without forcing the issue too much, that this choice was anticipated by the preference, shown in adolescence, exhibited in substituting the "terms" in the *Compendio*, most likely chosen by his tutor in conformity with the source in the *Saggio*, with "words." That is how "Entomography" is transformed into the much more accessible "Of Insects," "Icthyography" into the more usual "Of Fish," and so on. It is difficult to see much poetic inspiration being sparked by the lexeme "Omithography" in the *Saggio*, while one can easily see the imagination being stirred by the word "Ucelli" in the *Compendio*, which is one of the words that will become charged with important poetic and philosophical significance in Leopardi's later works.[42]

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[41] "Le parole come osserva il Beccaria (trattato dello stile) non presentano la sola idea dell'oggetto significato, ma quando più quando meno immagini accessorie. Ed è pregio sommo della lingua l'aver di queste parole. Le voci scientifiche presentano la nuda e circoscritta idea di quel tale oggetto, e perciò si chiamano termini perché determinano e definiscono la cosa da tutte le parti. Quanto più una lingua abbonda di parole, tanto più è adatta alla letteratura e alla bellezza ec. ec. e per lo contrario quanto più abbonda di termini, dico quando questa abbondanza noccia a quella delle parole [...]." *Zib.*, 109-10. On the relationship between terms/words in Leopardian poetics as well as on the more general topic of Leopardian linguistics, cf. Stefano Gensini, *Linguistica leopardiana. Fondamenti e prospettive politico-culturali*, (Bologna: Società Editrice Il Mulino, 1984), and more specifically, regarding the question addressed here, we point to the third chapter, "La distinzione 'parole/termini' e la sostanza immaginativo- metaforica delle lingue," 103- 24.

[42] In fact, this leads one to recall this brief passage from *Zibaldone*: "Ho detto e ripeto che i termini in letteratura e massime in poesia faranno sempre pessimo e

These reflections, while brief, authorize one not to hurriedly disregard the poet's youthful works, which can instead shed light, also in a diacronic perspective, on his philosophical, scientific, and, why not, stylistic journey, opening up compact yet interesting critical perspectives.

Leopardi's Sources: "The Spectacle of Nature" by Noël-Antoine Pluche[43]

The differences noted above between the two texts on natural history call our attention to the complex question of Leopardi's sources, an issue that still has a lot to offer from a critical point of view.[44] In this section, I concentrate on the main source for the natural history part of the *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale* and the *Compendio di Storia naturale*: *Lo spettacolo della natura* by Noël-Antoine Pluche.

The Spectacle of Nature: An 18th-Century Bestseller

The Spectacle of Nature is an encyclopaedia of the kind of apologetic literature available in the eighteenth century and, as Sylviane Albertan-Coppola states, was indeed one of the most frequently read at the time.[45] The first edition was printed in Paris by Estienne in 1732-1750 and was immediately a huge success to the extent that, in France, it remained in print

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bruttissimo effetto" (I have said already, and will repeat here that in literature, and in poetry especially, terms will always have a very bad and ugly impact), *Zib.*, 1226.
[43] Noël-Antoine Pluche (Reims 1688 - Paris 1761) was a celebrated abbot who lived in France during the eighteenth century. He taught rhetoric at the College of Reims. His attitude to Jansenism influenced his future career: he officially rejected the *Unigenitus* Bull promulgated by Pope Clement XI and was forced to leave his post at the college in Laon, where he was working. He then became tutor to several aristocratic families, until he moved to Paris and began to write his most important work: *Le Spectacle de la nature*. This was followed by other works: the *Histoire du ciel considéré selon les idées des poètes, des philosophes, et de Moïse*, published in 1739 and, in 1751, *La Mécanique des langues et l'art de les enseigner*.
[44] For further discussion of this problem, cf. Alberto Frattini, Introduction to *Giacomo Leopardi. Il problema delle «fonti» alla radice della sua opera*, ed. Alberto Frattini (Rome: Coletti, 1990). As regards the opportunities that the *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale* offers for the study of Leopardian sources, cf. Sordoni, *Il giovane Leopardi*.
[45] Sylviane Albertan-Coppola, "L'apologétique catholique française à l'âge des Lumières," in *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 2 (1988): 155.

until 1888. It was quickly translated into English in 1735, into Italian and Dutch in 1737, into German in 1746 and into Spanish in 1752.

Pluche's objective was mainly educational as his work was aimed at young people, with the intent to stimulate their curiosity by showing them the marvels of nature which, from his teleological perspective, confirmed the existence of a God of all creation. The subjects treated in the encyclopaedia are various, ranging from Natural History to Physics, from Religion to Philosophy, and are treated in a somewhat disorderly fashion, without scientific rigour or a specialised lexicon when classifying animals, vegetables, and minerals. Pluche used various sources for his work, from the accounts of journeys to the *Memorie dell'Accademia delle Scienze* and other works, which he could consult easily, some quoted directly in the text, but often poorly updated.

The form he used to explain his subjects was dialogue: this rendered the structure of the text less rigid and more accessible to the vast public whom Pluche wished to reach. When preparing the *Dialogo filosofico sopra un moderno libro intitolato analisi delle idèe ad uso della gioventù*, in 1812, Leopardi will justify his choice of dialogue as the expository means of choice by citing, together with modern authors who chose it before him, arguing its great potential, precisely also Pluche; in this youthful phase one can find a number of modest Leopardian tributes to him:

> Very Serious Authors have employed Dialogue: among the Ancients Plato, Plutarch, Cicero, Fabius Quintilianus, Lucian of Samosata, S. Justin Philosopher and Martyr, S. Gregorious Magnus Pope, and among the moderns Addison, Regnault, Fontenelle, Courcillon de Dangeau, Fenelon, Pluche, Algarotti, Roberti, Muzzarelli, and many others all composed Dialogues.[46]

To facilitate understanding, Pluche inserted many tables with plentiful drawings, made by some of the best engravers of the times, including two women, Madelaine Basseporte and Louise-Madelaine Hortemels. The former was the artist who had supplied several tables for the *Encyclopédie*.[47]

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[46] "Gravissimi Scrittori han fatto uso del Dialogo: frà gli Antichi Platone, Plutarco, Marco Tullio Cicerone, Fabio Quintiliano, Luciano Samosatense, S. Giustino Filosofo, e Martire, S. Gregorio Magno Papa, e trà i moderni Addison, Regnault, Fontenelle, Courcillon di Dangeau, Fenelon, Pluche, Algarotti, Roberti, Muzzarelli, ed altri molti scrisser Dialoghi" (English translation by Mark Epstein). In Giacomo Leopardi, *Dialogo filosofico*, in *Tutte le poesie e tutte le prose*, eds. Lucio Felici e Emanuele Trevi, 734.

[47] Madelaine Pinault-Sørensen, "Les planches du Spectacle de la Nature de l'abbé Pluche," in *Écrire la nature au XVIII siècle. Autour de l'abbé Pluche*, edited by

In order to expand the range of his readers, Pluche chose four common characters, immediately understandable to the public, as his protagonists.[48] The first and most important was the Cavaliere del Broglio, on holiday at the home of his friend, the Count di Gionvalle, the second, a nature-lover. The third was a Prior, also passionately fond of natural history and the most well-informed about it: many of the dialogues are introduced by him. The last character was the Countess di Gionvalle, the Count's wife, a curious but rather naïve woman, a trait reflected in her remarks on nature.

Leopardi had a copy of the fifth Italian edition of *The Spectacle of Nature,* printed in Venice by Francesco di Niccolò Pezzana in 1786[49] and published anonymously in Italy, as a translation from the French edition.

The first to identify the work as one of the main sources of the *Compendio di storia naturale* was Giulio Antonio Venzo, who revealed the great similarities between the sections of Leopardi's text which he had published and excerpts from the French encyclopaedia most frequently referred to by Leopardi,[50] to the extent that he clearly demonstrated Giacomo's classification errors. Pluche himself had in fact recorded tarantulas as insects,[51] and crocodiles, whales, turtles, and narwhals as fish.[52]

However, Venzo focused only on the *Compendio di storia naturale,* and did not extend the use of this source to the composition of the section on Natural History in the *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale*, simply because he limited his attention to the *Compendio*, while neglecting the *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale*, preparations for which were quite likely the reason the *Compendio* was written in the first place.[53] As Pluche had not used such a specialised lexicon as Giacomo did in the *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale* (*Entomography, Zoophytography, Ornithography, Zoography, Icthyography, Phytology, Hydrography, Mineralogy*), we are led to believe that Leopardi must have used another source for this terminology. This new source, first viewed as such for Giacomo Leopardi, is Benjamin Martin's *Elementi delle scienze e delle arti letterarie*. Leopardi owned the Italian

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Françoise Gevrey, Julie Boch, and Jean-Louis Haquette (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2006), 142.

[48] Noël-Antoine, Pluche, "Prefax," in *Lo spettacolo della natura*, 1:ix.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Venzo, "Su l'inedito," 20.

[51] Pluche, *Lo spettacolo: Dialogo Quarto, I Ragni,* (Vol. I, Tome I).

[52] Ibid., *Lo spettacolo: Dialogo Quarto. I Pesci* (Vol. II, Tome II).

[53] For a more detailed treatment, cf. Sordoni, *Il giovane Leopardi*.

translation, published in Bassano in 1766.[54] This philosophical and scientific work, with Pluche's encyclopaedia, and the *Fondamenti della scienza chimico-fisica applicati alla formazione de' corpi ed ai fenomeni della natura Esposti in due Dizionarj Che comprendono il linguaggio nuovo e vecchio, vecchio e nuovo de' fisico-chimici Con Tavole apposite indicanti l'ordine d'un utile lettura*, Venezia, 1796,[55] were all sources used by Leopardi to prepare the *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale* and to write the *Compendio di storia naturale*.[56]

Conclusion

Analysing the indexes in the section on 'natural history' in the *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale* and the *Compendio di storia naturale* is important for a more precise analysis of Giacomo Leopardi's early studies in his father's library. The youth also found time for natural history, now enriched by the *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale*, which has been neglected for too long.[57]

The attention Leopardi showed toward the natural world, particularly the animal world, is clear-cut in many of his writings, in which animals are the focus of his poems and prose, from early attempts at poetry until the last, *Paralipomeni* (*The War of the Mice and the Crabs*). Many critical studies have already examined this particular aspect of Leopardi's enormous output, and the relative bibliography is equally rich,[58] but let me try to add a couple of points nonetheless. The poet's naturalist studies, exemplified by

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[54] Martin Benjamin, *Elementi delle scienze e delle arti letterarie* (Bassano: 1766). Cf.: Andrea Campana, ed., *Catalogo della biblioteca Leopardi in Recanati (1847-1899)* (Florence: Olschki, 2011).

[55] This edition of *Fondamenti* is published in Poli Giuseppe Saverio, *Elementi di Fisica sperimentale arricchiti d'illustrazioni di A. Fabris e di Vincenzo Dandolo e di due Dizionarii di nomenclatura chimica vecchia e nuova, nuova e vecchia per quest'ultimo.* (Venice: 1796). Leopardi had also: *Fondamenti della scienza chimico-fisica,* (Naples: 1802), in Campana, ed., *Catalogo*.

[56] To go into greater depth on this topic, cf. Sordoni, *Il giovane Leopardi*.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Cf. Matteo Pahırnbo "Elogio degli uccelli: riso e animali nelle *Operette morali*," in *Leopardi e lo spettacolo della natura*, ed. Vincenzo Placella (Naples: L'Orientale Editrice, 2001), 57-74; Paolo Paolini, "Gli animali nell'opera leopardiana," in *Leopardi e lo spettacolo della natura*, ed. Vincenzo Placella (Naples: L'Orientale Editrice, 2001), 275-311; Antonio Prete, "La traccia animale," in *Il pensiero poetante. Saggio su Leopardi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2006), 162-77; Giacomo Leopardi, *Il gallo Silvestre e altri animali*, eds. Antonio Prete and Alessandra Aloisi (San Cesario di Lecce: Manni, 2010).

the *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale* and the *Compendio di storia naturale*, represent the first contact with the study of the natural world, which presents itself in the phenomenic forms of animals, plants, and minerals, interpreted, following the orientation of the source, from a very anthropocentric point of view. In other words we are still very distant from a Nature that is indifferent to human fate, as presented in the *Dialogo della natura e di un Islandese* (*Dialogue of Nature and an Icelander*),[59] as well as from the denunciation of anthropocentrism in the preceding *Dialogo della Terra e della Luna* (*Dialogue between the Earth and the Moon*)[60] which, according to Emilio Russo,

> [...] represents a crucial turning point in the *Moral Essays*, precisely because it is the only one, in the first section, together with the *Dialogo di unFolletto e di uno Gnomo* (Dialogue of an Imp and a Gnome) which renounces the human perspective and relegates human beings to accessory and accidental elements of the universal machine, overturning the centrality that had been fixed by the fable of *Storia del genere umano* (History of the Human Race) and will be maintained in the other texts. The lack of any sense of care in the universal machine which Nature will confront the Icelander with, already finds all its premises here.[61]

When comparing the anthropocentric perspective discernible in Leopardi's approach to nature in his adolescent period to the later results of his poetics, it can be helpful to return to some of the contents of the texts analysed above. Zoophytes, for example, as we already noted, represent for Leopardi, between 1823 and 1824, the happiest animals, since they are the least endowed with vital feelings compared to human beings, who are instead the most unhappy for the opposite reason. The anthropocentric perspective absorbed as a youth seems not only to have been overturned philosophically, thanks to the contributions of modern science, now well known to the poet, but appears to be negated on the existential level as well

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[59] Giacomo Leopardi, *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*, in TPTP, 533-36. Creagh, *Moral Essays*, 98-104.

[60] Ibid., *Dialogo della Terra e della Luna*, 516-19. Creagh, *Moral Essays*, 70-6.

[61] "[...] rappresenta un testo di svolta nell'impianto delle *Operette*, proprio perché è l'unico, nella prima parte, insieme a *Folletto e Gnomo* [...] che abdica alla prospettiva umana e relega gli uomini ad elementi accessori e accidentali della macchina universale, rovesciando la centralità che era stata fissata dalla favola della *Storia del genere umano* e poi mantenuta negli altri testi. La noncuranza della macchina universale che la Natura rimanderà all'Islandese ha già qui tutte le sue premesse." English translation by Mark Epstein; cf. Emilio Russo, *Ridere del mondo. La lezione di Leopardi* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017), 127.

due to the diverging perceptive capabilities that distinguish human beings and animals. Zoophytes, which the eighteenth century systematically relegated to marginal positions, as shown by Leopardi's source, paradoxically become the happiest animals for Leopardi. An existential paradox that overturns the achievements of modern systematics, which had only started placing animals and human beings on a somewhat equal footing in 1735 with the publication of Linnaeus' *Systema naturae*, the first work in which human beings are included in the animal kingdom. This within a process of the secularisation of nature which will gradually remove the best characteristics that had, instead, been granted to humans by natural theology. Characteristics which Leopardi will not hesitate to disavow.

If his naturalist studies in adolescence offer the poet his first contacts with the study of the natural world, within the limits of a Catholic home education, the study of chemistry exemplified in the *Saggio* and the *Compendio* opens the youth's eyes onto the horizons of a chemistry that was starting to affirm itself epistemologically as a science, thanks to the contributions of Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier, who in 1789 in Paris published the *Traité élémentaire de chimie*, a fundamental text for the chemical research that was to follow.[62]

Lavoisier is the first to introduce a quantitative approach in the study of chemistry, symbolised by the scales, a key instrument of the *nouvelle chimie* and expressed in the law of conservation of mass which he formulated and simplified in this fashion: "in a chemical reaction nothing is created, nothing is destroyed, but everything is transformed," [63]where 'everything' is a synonym of 'matter'. How could one not recall Leopardi's turn to materialism, following the adolescent period we examined here, especially the affirmation of a radical materialism, now irreversible, as expressed in the *Frammento apocrifo di Stratone da Lampsaco (Apocryphal Fragment of Strato of Lampsacus)*: "We see that matter is never increased by even the slightest quantity, and not even its slightest part is ever lost, to the extent that matter is never exposed to death."[64] The study of Lavoisier's chemistry,

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[62]For a more detailed analysis, cf. Gaspare Polizzi, *"Per le forze eterne della materia." Natura e scienza in Giacomo Leopardi* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2008) and Valentina Sordoni, *Il giovane Leopardi.*

[63] Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier, *Traité élémentaire de chimie* (Paris: Cuchet, 1789), 1:45-47.

[64] Leopardi, *Apocryphal Fragment of Strato of Lampsacus*, Creagh, *Moral Essays*, 175. *Frammento apocrifo di Stratone da Lampsaco*, in *TPTP*, 578: "Ora noi veggiamo che la materia non si accresce mai di una eziandio menoma quantità, niuna anco menoma parte della materia si perde, in guisa che essa materia non è sottoposta a perire."

at this point well established in the scholarship, provides the poet with modern conceptual tools to approach a nature shorn bare of its qualitative and anthropocentric aspects, obvious obstacles to Leopardi's maturing shift towards materialism, and which therefore takes into account both the materialist high-points of *philosophes* such as Paul Enri Thiry d'Holbach and the contemporary discoveries of Lavoisier's new chemistry.

ESSAY OF CHEMISTRY AND NATURAL HISTORY THAT PUBLICLY THE TWO BROTHERS CARLO AND GIACOMO LEOPARDI EXPLAIN LORETO IN ILARIO ROSSI MDCCCXII[65]

CHEMISTRY

1. Give definition of Chemistry and explain its main parts.

Simple Substances

2. What are simple Substances.
3. Light, Caloric, Oxygen, Hydrogen.
4. Fire, and Combustion.
5. Aeriform Fluids; Gas, Vital Air.
6. Water, and Ice.
7. Affinity of aggregation, affinity of composition, double affinity, affinity of decomposition.[66]
8. Acids, and Oxides.

Mineral Kingdom

9. Salts, Stones, and Rocks.
10. Simple earthy substances, and Alkali.
11. Metals, and their properties.

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[65] *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale* (Loreto: Ilario Rossi, 1812). My translation.
[66] Affinity of two molecules or two homogeneous substances to produce a homogeneous compound; affinity of two or more simple substances of different nature to produce a new compound without change in their own components; affinity of two or more compounds as a total of their combined forces; affinity of two substances after decomposition or high degree of condensation of one of them.

Vegetable Kingdom

12. Vegetables, and Vegetation.
13. Vegetal Components.
14. Vegetal Fermentations: vinous, acetous and putrefactive.

Animal Kingdom

15. Animal Components.
16. Animals.
17. Respiration, Digestion, and Perspiration of animals.
18. Animal putrefactive Fermentation.

Meteorology

19. Division of Meteors.
20. Vapors, Clouds, and Fog.
21. Rain, and Snow.
22. Dew, and Hoarfrost.
23. Electric Fluid.
24. Electrical Spark.
25. Thunder, Lightning and Thunderbolt.
26. Storm, and its formation.
27. Earthquake, and its cause.
28. Events Aurora borealis.
29. Periodical, and variable Winds.
30. Hurricanes and Whirldwinds.

NATURAL HISTORY

1. Definition, and subdivision of Natural History.

Zoology
Entomography

2. Insects in general, and their assigned definition and division.
3. Insects in particular; Reptiles, Worms, Silkworms, Ladybirds, Moths, Spiders, Ants, and Ant Lions.
4. Flying insects: Wasps, Bees, Hornets, Flies, and Mosquitoes.

Zoophytography

5. *Shells in general, and in particular.*
6. *Clams, Snails, Oysters, Pearls, and Nautilus Shells.*

Ornithography

7. *Birds in general, and their main features.*
8. *Birds in particular; Ostrich, Plover, Heron.*
9. *Swallows, Moscuccello*[67] *and Humming-Bird.*

Zoography

10. *Quadrupeds: Elephant, and Beaver.*
11. *Hedgehog, and Porcupine.*
12. *Dog, Weasel, and Muskrat.*
13. *Fish and their fecundity.*
14. *Whale, Crocodile, Narwhal, and Turtle.*

Phytology

15. *Plants in general; Seed, Root, and Sap.*
16. *Flow of air in Plants, and their fecundity.*
17. *Leaves, Flowers, and Fruit.*
18. *Plants in particular: Aloe, Sugarcane, Tea, Cinnamon, Coffee, and Quinine.*[68]

Hydrography

19. *Rivers; origin, and course.*
20. *Usefulness of Rivers.*
21. *Sea, and its saltiness.*
22. *Marine Plants.*

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[67] In Italian *moscuccello* is the common name for the humming-bird family. The word cannot be translated directly into English, as it literally means "fly-bird" ("fly" in the sense of the *insect*).
[68] Quinine is a South American plant.

Mineralogy

23. Mountains, and their usefulness.
24. Animals living on mountains.
25. Stones in general, and in particular.
26. Fossils,[69] and Figurative Stones.[70]
27. Metals in general, and in particular.
28. Gold, Silver, and their ductility.
29. Iron, Copper, Tin, Lead, and Mercury.
30. Fossil substances, Sulphur,[71] Alum,[72] Clay,[73] Oil,[74] Naphtha.[75]

OUTLINE OF NATURAL HISTORY[76]

First Treatise—Of Insects
Item I. Of Insects in general.
Item Two Of Insects in particular.
§.I. Of Worms, § II. Of Butterflies, §. III. Of Moths §. IV. Of Silkworms, §. V. Of Spiders,
§. VI. Of Tarantulas, §. VII. Of Wasps, §. VIII. Of Bees, §. IX. Of Hornets, §. X. Of Flies, §. XI. Of Ladybirds, §. XII. Of Mosquitoes, §.XIII. Of Mole Crickets,[77] §. XIV. Of Ants, §. XV. Of Antlions.

Treatise II. Of Shells
Individual Treatise Of Shells in particular
§. I. Of Clams, §. II. Of Snails, §. III. Of Pearls.

Treatise III. Of Birds
Item I. Of Birds in general

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[69] Impietrimenti.

[70] Pietre figurate.

[71] Sulphur is a non-metallic solid, widespread in nature, both in its free state and combined with minerals and organic substances.

[72] Alum is a chemical mixture.

[73] Clay is a sedimentary rock formed by consolidation of marine or lacustrine sediments.

[74] Oil is a natural mixture of hydrocarbons deriving from the transformation of organic residues accumulated over the ages.

[75] Naphtha is a mixture of hydrocarbons obtained from crude oil.

[76] *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale* (Loreto: Ilario Rossi, 1812).

[77] Mole crickets are similar to crickets and are considered agricultural pests.

Treatise XI. Of Quarries, Precious Stones, and Ordinary Stones.
Item I. Of Stones in general
Item II. Of Stones in particular
§. I. Of calcareous mixtures, §. II. Of baritic mixtures, §.III. Of magnesium mixtures, §.IV. Of aluminous mixtures, §. V. Of siliceous mixtures, §. VI. Of Impietrimenti.

Treatise XII. Of Mines, of Metals
Item I. Of Metals in general
Item II. Of Metals in particular
§. I. Of Platinum, §. II. Of Gold, §. III. Of Silver, §. IV. Of Copper, and on Iron, §. V. Of Tin, of Lead, and of Zinc, §. VI. Of Mercury, §. VII. Of Antimony, of Manganese, and of Nickel, §. VIII. Of Bismuth, of Cobalt, and of Arsenic,[78] *§. IX. Of Molybdenum and of Tungsten.*

SAGGIO DI CHIMICA E STORIA NATURALE CHE PUBBLICAMENTE A DARE SI ESPONGONO I DUE FRATELLI CARLO E GIACOMO LEOPARDI LORETO PRESSO ILARIO ROSSI MDCCCXII.

CHIMICA

1. Data la definizione della Chimica dividesi nelle sue parti principali.

SOSTANZE SEMPLICI

2. Si assegna quali sieno le Sostanze semplici.
3. Luce, Calorico, Ossigeno, Idrogeno.
4. Fuoco, e Combustione.
5. Fluidi aeriformi; Gas, Aria vitale.
6. Acqua, e Ghiaccio.
7. Affinità di aggregazione, di composizione, per concorso, e disposta.
8. Acidi, e Ossidi.

REGNO MINERALE

9. Sali, Pietre, e Roccie.
10. Terre semplici, ed Alcali.
11. Metalli, e loro proprietà.

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[78] Arsenic is not a metal.

REGNO VEGETABILE

12. Vegetabili, e Vegetazione.
13. Materiali immediati de' Vegetabili.
14. Fermentazioni vegetabili: vinosa, acetosa, e putrida.

REGNO ANIMALE

15. Materiali immediati del regno Animale.
16. Animali.
17. Respirazione, Digestione, e Traspirazione degli animali.
18. Fermentazione putrida animale.

METEOROLOGIA

19. Divisione delle Meteore.
20. Vapori, Nuvole, e Nebbia.
21. Pioggia, e Neve.
22. Rugiada, e Brina.
23. Fluido elettrico.
24. Scintilla elettrica.
25. Tuono, Lampo, e Fulmine.
26. Tempesta, e sua formazione.
27. Tremuoto, e sua cagione.
28. Aurore boreali.
29. Venti periodici, e variabili.
30. Organi e Trombe.

STORIA NATURALE

1- Definizione, e divisione della Storia Naturale.

ZOOLOGIA

EUTOMATOGRAFIA

2- Parlasi degli Insetti in generale, e di questi se ne assegna la definizione,
e divisione.
3- Insetti in particolare; Rettili, Bruchi, Filugelli, Cocciniglie, Tignole,
Ragni, Formiche, e Mirmicoleone

4- Volatili: Vespe, Api, Calabroni, Mosche, e Zanzare.

ZOOFITOGRAFIA

5- Conchiglie in generale, ed in particolare.
6- Telline, Chiocciole, Ostriche, Perle, e Nautilo.

ORNITOGRAFIA

7- Uccelli in generale, e loro principali proprietà.
8- Uccelli in particolare; Struzzo, Piviere, Airone.
9- Rondini, Moscuccello e Colibrì.

ZOOGRAFIA

10- Quadrupedi: Elefante, e Castoro.
11- Porco riccio, e Porco spino.
12- Cane, Donnola, e Topo moscato.

ICTIOGRAFIA

13- Pesci e loro fecondità.
14- Balena, Coccodrillo, Narwal, Testuggine.

FITOLOGIA

15- Piante in generale; seme, radice, e sugo.
16- Influsso dell'aria nelle piante, e loro fecondità.
17- Foglie, Fiori, e Frutta.
18- Piante in particolare: Aloè, Zucchero, Thè, Carmella, Caffè, e Chinachina.

IDROGRAFIA

19- Fiumi; origine, e corso de' medesimi.
20- Utilità de' Fiumi.
21- Mare, e sua salsedine.
22- Piante marine.

MINERALOGIA

23- Montagne, e loro utilità.

24- Animali abitanti sulle montagne.

25- Pietre in generale, e in particolare.

26- Impietrimenti, e pietre figurate.

27- Metalli in generale, e in particolare.

28- ●ro, Argento, e loro duttilità.

29- Ferro, Rame, Stagno, Piombo, e Mercurio.

30- Fossili, Zolfo, Allume, Argilla, Petrolio e Nafta.

C●MPENDI● DI ST●RIA NATURALE

Trattato Primo—Degli Insetti

Capo I. Degl'insetti in generale

Capo Secondo Degl'insetti in particolare

§.I. Dei Bruchi, § II. Delle Farfalle, §. III. Delle Tignuole, §. IV Dei Filugelli, §. V. Dei Ragni,

§. VI. Della Tarantola, §. VII. Delle Vespe, §. VIII. Dell'Api, §. IX. Dei Calabroni, §. X. Delle Mosche, §. XI. Delle Cocciniglie, §. XII. Delle Zanzare, §.XIII. Delle Grillotalpe, §. XIV. Delle Formiche, §. XV. Del Mirmicoleone.

Trattato II. Delle Conchiglie

Capo Unico Delle Conchiglie in particolare

§. I. Delle Telline, §. II. Delle Chiocciole, §. III. Delle Perle.

Trattato III. Degli Ucelli

Capo I. Degli Ucelli in generale

Capo Secondo Degli Ucelli in particolare

§. I. Del Piviere, §. II. Dell'airone, §. III. Del Colibrì, §. IV. Dello struzzo.

Trattato IV.

Capo Unico—Degli animali terrestri in particolare

§. I. Del cane, §. II. Della donnola, §. III. Del porco spino, §. IV. Del Castoro.

Trattato V. De' pesci

Capo I. De' pesci in generale

Capo II De' pesci in particolare
§. I. Del coccodrillo, §. II. Del Narwal.

Trattato VI. Delle Piante
Capo Primo Delle Piante in generale
§. I. Del Seme, §. II. Della radice, §. III. Del Sugo, §. IV. Dell'influsso
dell'aria nelle piante, §. V. Della fecondità delle piante, §. VI. Delle foglie,
§. VII. Delle Frutta.
Capo Secondo Delle piante in particolare
§. I. Dell'alòe, §. II. Dello Zucchero, §. III. Del Thè, §. IV. Della cannella,
§. V. Del Caffè.

Trattato VII. De' Fiumi
Capo Unico- De' Fiumi in generale
§. I. Dell'origine, e del corso de' Fiumi, §. II. Delle Utilità de' Fiumi.

Trattato VIII. Delle Montagne
Capo Unico—Delle Montagne in generale
§. I. delle utilità delle montagne, §. II. Degli animali abitanti sulle
montagne.

Trattato IX. Capo Unico. Del mare in generale
§. I. Della salsedine del mare, §. II. De' pesci d'acqua salsa, §. III. Delle
piante marine.

Trattato X. De' Fossili o di quei Minerali che non appartengono nè alle
pietre nè ai metalli.
Capo Unico—De' Fossili in particolare
§. I. Dello Zolfo, §. II. Del Petrolio, e della Nafta, §. III. Degli allumi, §.
IV Dell'Argilla.

Trattato XI. Delle Cave, ossia delle pietre preziose, e ordinarie.
Capo I. Delle pietre in generale
Capo II. Delle pietre in particolare
§. I. Delle mescolanze calcaree, §. II. Delle mescolanze baritiche, §. III.
Delle mescolanze magnesiane, §. IV. Delle mescolanze alluminose, §. V.
Delle mescolanze silicee, §. VI. Degli Impietrimenti.

Trattato XII. Delle Miniere ossia de' Metalli
Capo I. De' Metalli in generale
Capo II. De' Metalli in particolare

§. I. Del platino, §. II. Dell'oro, §. III dell'Argento, §. IV. Del Rame, e del Ferro, §. V. Dello stagno, del piombo, e dello Zinco, §. VI. Del mercurio, §. VII. Dell'Antimonio, del Manganese, e del Nichel, §. VIII. Del Bismuto, del Cobalto, e dell'Arsenico, §. IX. Del Malibdeno e del tungsteno.

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