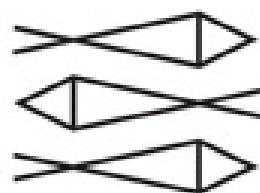


CANTI

GIACOMO LEOPARDI

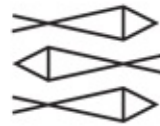
TRANSLATED AND
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JONATHAN GALASSI





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INTRODUCTION

POET OF PROBLEMS

Leopardi's *Canti*, one of the most influential works of the nineteenth century and one of the great achievements in Italian poetry, is not a conventional collection of poems. A mere forty-one compositions make up the Book of Life and Thought of Italy's first modern poet—a series of beginnings, of constantly evolving experiments in style and thematics, obsessively reworked and reorganized over a lifetime. They include both the most public and the most personal work of a writer who also spent his enormous if not inexhaustible energies on countless other literary endeavors: classical translations, philological studies, and the editing of texts and anthologies; philosophical dialogues and social criticism; and the enormous notebook of ideas and impressions, the *Zibaldone*,¹ which is the seedbed of all of Leopardi's work.

Among the *canti* are the first truly modern lyrics, the wellspring of everything that follows in the European poetic tradition. But they are not merely evocations of private suffering and grief, for the poet “not only had feelings to sing about but things to say,” as one critic has put it.² The *canti* posit and explicate and, at their greatest, embody Leopardi's ideas and beliefs about human life. For all their beauty, for all their dedication to *vaghezza*, to the grace and

mystery of indeterminacy, they are always crystallizations in poetic form of Leopardi's thought, unlike anything that preceded or followed them.³ They are exemplars of *pensiero poetante*, thinking in poetry, as Martin Heidegger has called it, and they proved inspirational for some of the nineteenth century's deepest, most radical thinkers, among them Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.⁴

Leopardi's complex structuring of the *Canti* has been ably dissected and theorized,⁵ but to us the book reads like a compendium of disparate undertakings. Beyond the poet's celebrated idylls, with which any reader new to his work should begin, there are public poems (the canzoni and epistles on history and politics); sentimental "novellas"; harsh philosophical satires; and translations and imitations; and the shifts in tone and material at times feel drastic. The book's title altered, too, from the aulic, Petrarchan *Canzoni* of 1824 to the more anthologistic *Versi* of 1826, to, finally, the musical, open *Canti*, or "Songs" of the 1831 and 1835 editions, this original and magisterial new name indicative of Leopardi's expanded confidence in and willingness to assert the significance of his project.⁶ His book was, as he himself pointed out, a "reliquary" in which he "deposited" what he had felt and thought; it was his version of Petrarch's *canzoniere*, or "songbook," in which he gave significant form to his deepest preoccupations and convictions, where his ideas devolved out of abstract thought back into concrete if not "unpremeditated" art.⁷

A classicist by education and mental inclination, Leopardi was severely critical of a world that had added to the comforts of religion—which he rejected as a young man—an equally credulous and self-deluding new faith in the

ability of scientific knowledge to ameliorate the essentially tragic nature of life. He grew up in the small, backward town of Recanati in the papal Marche, in a household of ultramontane reactionary Catholic nobles. His father had amassed a great library stocked not only with the church fathers but with all of Greek and Latin literature, which he read and studied so intently and voraciously that by the time he was fifteen there was nothing more for his tutors to teach him and he had seriously compromised his health. Instead of leading him to holy orders, as his parents had hoped, his studies exposed him to illicit Greek sensuality and stoicism. He yearned for love, and for liberation from the clutches of his family, for the place in the great world that his great brilliance seemed to promise him; and indeed his philological and literary work earned him widespread fame at a young age. Yet he was always financially dependent on his parents—a benevolent but uncomprehending and rigidly conventional father and a withholding, judgmental mother (maternal imagery in Leopardi's poetry is usually negative)—and he never really won full emancipation from them. His sallies forth—to Rome, to Bologna, to Florence and Pisa—habitually ended in defeat, in a return to Recanati. He learned that he was unsuited for worldly life, just as he found that his amorous forays met with the indifference or disdain of the women with whom he became infatuated, his poor health and unprepossessing appearance no doubt contributing substantially to his sense of isolation and hopelessness. It was only in his last years, when he joined forces with a young Neapolitan, Antonio Ranieri, that he managed to establish an independent life in Naples.

Leopardi's first, adolescent writings were works of

classical philology, scientific inquiry, and obligatory religiosity, but by the age of twenty, after apprenticing himself to his calling by way of translation and imitation, first of Horace and other canonical Latin writers and then, significantly, of the “prohibited” Greeks,⁸ he began to embark on original work of several kinds. His social ideas found voice in exhortatory canzoni, public poems in which he called on the Italians to reclaim their culture’s forgotten greatness and liberate themselves from the political oppression of the post-Napoleonic Restoration. (This made him a forefather of the Risorgimento and to other national liberation movements of the nineteenth century.) At the same time, he was inscribing into the *Zibaldone* copious profound and original reflections on his broad and deep studies in all branches of knowledge, which would remain unread until they were finally published at the very end of the century. And, more or less simultaneously, in the poems he called his idylls, he was writing about his own anguish in an entirely direct and new poetry that was to become the basis for his enduring international reputation.

Here is what is arguably the first of the idylls, written when the poet was barely twenty-one:

To the Moon

O graceful moon, I can remember, now
the year has turned, how, filled with anguish,
I came here to this hill to gaze at you,
and you were hanging then above those woods
the way you do now, lighting everything.
But your face was cloudy,
swimming in my eyes, thanks to the tears
that filled them, for my life

was torment, and it is, it doesn't change,
beloved moon of mine.
And yet it helps me, thinking back, reliving
the time of my unhappiness.
Oh in youth, when hope has a long road ahead
and the way of memory is short,
how sweet it is remembering what happened,
though it was sad, and though the pain endures!

Everything that will follow in two centuries of Western lyric poetry is here: a new self-consciousness of the writer's alienation from life, with the constant companionship of pain and the consolation of the power of memory—all evoked with unmediated directness and haunting expressive beauty. This is the Leopardi we think we know, the voice of suffering self-knowledge and lovely torment. But it is important to understand that the different modes of Leopardi's poetry, the lyric and the didactic, the pastoral and the historic, the metaphoric and the argumentative, derive from the same vision, express the same spirit in diverse ways. Even Leopardi's most articulated political exhortations are studded with classically inspired similes and lyric interludes that illustrate his ideas poetically; while the poems we read as pure lyrics likewise need to be seen as embodiments of his ideas, with the didacticism largely though not entirely suppressed.

The rhetoric of the early canzoni derives from a received, elevated style that had dominated Italian verse since the Renaissance; the verse epistle to Carlo Pepoli and the "Palinodia," too, exhibit what the idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce called the argumentative "non-poetry" that also finds its way into Leopardi's testament, "La ginestra," which many have seen as the great poem of Italian national

identity. But the mind that was analyzing and deriding the headlong liberal belief in unending self-improvement and societal betterment—

... having failed to make a single
person on earth happy, they abandoned man
and tried to find a universal bliss;
and having found it easily,
out of many wretched and unhappy persons
made a joyful, happy race:

is the same mind that is preoccupied in his intimate lyrics with his—and our—inability to achieve serenity. “Each creature born will be / simply unhappy, in whatever era ... by universal law”: our natural mere unhappiness, about which nothing can be done, is the subject and stuff of his most personal lyrics, a distillation of a vision of life conditioned by Greek philosophy and confirmed by personal experience of the omnipresence of pain, offset only by the power of illusions to conceal it from us for a time. Leopardi’s ultimate cast of mind, then, is disabused and, at its darkest, utterly hopeless. The trajectory from his best-known idyll, “L’infinito,” to its mirrorpoem, “A se stesso,” is the trajectory from a stunned contemplation of the mysterious “sea of being”—which arouses an amorous desire to lose oneself in existence—to disgusted resignation and withdrawal from life. It runs the gamut, one might say, from an overpowering urge to fuse with overbrimming “immensity,” to a bitter leave-taking of the emptiness of “all”—one, as in a Möbius strip, the obverse of the other. And it makes him, in spite of himself, one of the major figures of European romanticism.

* * *

The poems of the *Canti* fall into several periods, which are presented in roughly chronological order in the book. In the early, “extravagant,” radical canzoni (1817–23),⁹ Leopardi explores political, historical, and philosophical subjects, using the received rhetoric of public poetry with great virtuosity, suppleness, and concision. He also makes his first experiments in creating a poetic “character” for himself: in the song of the poet Simonides that brings alive the last part of the first canzone, “All’Italia,” the young Leopardi impersonates the great bard of ancient Greece in a bid to speak as the public voice of emergent Italy—a declaration of ambition and intentions that amounts to an *ars poetica*. Likewise, in the “Ultimo canto di Saffo,” he portrays the “unloved lover,” the unbeautiful, undesired singer of human pain that will become his other principal persona. These dramatic monologues are cousins of “Alla luna” and “L’infinito,” lyric “poems” in our modern, delimited sense of the word. And these two kinds of composition, public canzone and intimate idyll, set him on the course of alternating voices that will be fundamental to his ever-evolving approach to poetic creation.

From the very start Leopardi is formally revolutionary, gradually revising and relaxing the rules of his genre. In the early elegies and especially in the idylls (1819–21), many of them written contemporaneously with the canzoni and inspired by Hellenistic pastoral, we find the first instances of the private, ur-modern Leopardi, evoking a solitary character at odds with his native setting, in a kind of alienated antipastoral, in fact. The great odes of the Pisa-

Recanati period (1828–30), composed after a long hiatus during which he was preoccupied with the satirical dialogues that became the *Operette morali*, represent a complex, mature return to the lyric impulse of the first idylls, but in a darker, more despairing, more memory-obsessed key; indeed, in later masterworks such as “A Silvia” and the “Canto notturno,” the poet makes the canzone form an instrument entirely his own, in which rhyme is used originally and sparingly to overwhelmingly powerful effect.

In the poems written in Florence and Bologna (1831–35) during the poet’s thirties, in the throes of his one intense attempted love affair, Leopardi oscillates between an austere beautiful, almost abstract idiosyncratic Platonism and a novelistic sentimentality (in “Consalvo,” in particular) that, while popular in Leopardi’s time, is vexing to us today. (It is notable that most of Leopardi’s poetic activity in his last years, when he had more or less withdrawn from society and given up on love, was largely devoted to the political satire of the *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia*, a long and caustic poem about Bourbon Naples that is not part of the *Canti*, and the social criticism of the “Palinodia.”) Finally, in the last great Neapolitan poems of 1836, “La ginestra” and “Il tramonto della luna,” written as his health was failing, he offers a resigned vision of human life devoid of illusions, considered from above and afar, by moonlight.

* * *

So many of the greatest moments in Leopardi’s poetry take place under the aegis of the moon. Unabashed, obsessive

repetition of theme, imagery, and trope are characteristic of his work, as if he is saying, over and over, “*This* is what matters; this is what I’m talking—and talking—about.” Except for the poet’s own persona, the figures in his poems are not individuals, by and large, but represent existential categories; as his sympathetic English biographer, Iris Origo, wrote, the women of Leopardi’s poetry are really only vehicles for his emotions.¹⁰ Indeed, the moon is the poet’s most constant interlocutor, the only feminine presence in his lyrics, apart from safely dead figures like Virginia and Silvia and Nerina, with whom he can calmly converse, though he, or his stand-in the wandering shepherd, does all the talking. (Harold Bloom calls the moon “a trope of male self-negation” for Leopardi, as for Keats and Lawrence.) In “Bruto minore,” “Alla luna,” “La vita solitaria,” and the “Canto notturno,” the speaker addresses the moon directly (as he talks to the Big Dipper in “Le ricordanze”); in fourteen of the forty-one canti, in fact, the poem transpires under moonlight. Moonlight, then, *is* the medium of Leopardi’s preferred mode of thought, a representation of the cool, removed contemplation that his most serene poetry achieves, and in which the poet is perhaps most wholly himself. In the countervailing mode, embodied by the heat of midday, life is at a standstill, and, as in “L’infinito” and “Le ricordanze,” the self is shipwrecked, virtually overwhelmed by conflicting forces. Under the moon, by contrast, the “potent fire” of day has passed, the unendurable pressures of being are relaxed, and half-light allows for a certain indeterminacy and openness to illusion. The poet can observe celestial and earthly activity at a remove, almost as on Keats’s urn (in Leopardi’s

late “sepulchral” odes “Sopra un basso rilievo antico sepolcrale” and “Sopra il ritratto di una bella donna,” moonlight is reified as stone, carrying this motif into the tomblike realm of art). Moonlight is half-life, the realm of memory, of aftermath, a silent, death-haunted eternity.

For Leopardi, poetry was an intermittent mode of expression, albeit the highest one, the ultimate distillation, the *summum* of his work, one might say.¹¹ It was not, however, a constant practice the way it was for many of the major poets of his time, such as, say, Wordsworth, possibly his nearest contemporary in our language, though Eamon Grennan, himself an intrepid Leopardi translator, makes a good case for Coleridge’s “mixture of the lyrical and meditative manner” as most congruent with the Italian’s in certain respects. Grennan goes on to imagine a “translation committee” for Leopardi that would include “Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, Arnold, James Thomson—who translated some of Leopardi’s prose and whose own poems show Leopardi’s influence—Sam Johnson, Sam Beckett, and Wallace Stevens.”¹² D. S. Carne-Ross, more plausibly, has suggested the Milton of *Lycidas* or *Samson Agonistes* as an appropriately daunting model for anyone foolhardy enough to attempt versions of this maddeningly various, inventive, sinuously decisive poetry. In fact, there have been many tries at translating Leopardi into English, and few successes. Nicolas Perella quotes the critic G. Singh to the effect that the best translations seem to be paraphrases in prose that aspire to be poetry, adding, “We can only wince in recalling that Leopardi spoke harshly of paraphrases.”¹³ In approaching Leopardi, the hapless translator is often confronted with impenetrably perfect,

sonorous expressiveness; in the end, the best he can manage is likely a close approximation of the poem's literal thrust, which, if he is faithful and lucky, attains a modest aptness in his own language.

In tone and style, Leopardi is a precursor of our modernists, who a hundred years later brought chaste, nude elision to an overstuffed, overly familiar Edwardian language. At its most successful, his grave, meditative voice attains an air of spare finality, of “unstrained dignity,” as Perella puts it, in which each word feels entirely inevitable, the most surprising and efficient possible use of his instrument. Leopardi's diction may appear “contorted” to us, as Patrick Creagh has said; the willful remoteness of his style is no doubt related to his reaction against the “progressive” fashion of his moment.¹⁴ In any case, Perella notes, his “recourse to words of an archaic or quasi-archaic nature and to unusual syntactical forms” has the effect of raising “the ‘reality’ of his subject matter into a sphere where myth and memory reign.” Like John Heath-Stubbs, who associates his classicism with “the passionate paganism of Hölderlin,”¹⁵ Carne-Ross asserts that Leopardi's work at its height is closest in spirit and form to ancient Greek poetry, claiming that “Leopardi, a great Latinist in Latinate Italy, achieved in his best work a Greek ease and fluidity,”¹⁶ and reminding us that the *Zibaldone* shows his deep familiarity with the Greek language and his “sensitivity to its slightest nuances.” In his hands, Italian verse gradually attained a radical new freedom as he melded the rigidly formal canzone with the unrhymed hendecasyllable to produce a poetic instrument that attained the impersonal authority of the choruses of Greek tragedy,¹⁷

moving “from I to we,” as Michel Orcel puts it, “from *coeur* to *choeur*.”¹⁸

* * *

Leopardi thought of himself as a writer who never finished anything.¹⁹ His papers are full of sketches and outlines, often highly articulated, for discourses, operas, odes. This, too, is something truly modern about him. He is a poet of the industrial revolution who writes about railroads, printing presses, and California, all the while deploring his times and their comfortable, ill-conceived faith in progress and social “usefulness.” Like most poets, he felt that we are here “too late, / and in the evening of human life” and he yearned for an idealized, “naïve” pre-lapsarian world, before the arrival of degenerate, “sentimental” self-consciousness, the awareness of illusions that carried with it the loss of a primal integrity and happiness. In the *Zibaldone* he describes what he called the “philosophical conversion ... the passage from poetry to philosophy, from the ‘ancient’ to the modern condition,” in which the individual recapitulates the journey of the human spirit from a mythic wholeness and “ignorance” to alienated awareness.²⁰ For him, poetry represents, and seeks to recreate and hence to recuperate, man’s ancient oneness with the world, when

Nature, Queen and Goddess once, ordained
a life that wasn’t suffering
and guilt, but free and pure in the forests.

In some ways Leopardi resembles today’s antiglobalist; he