

Leopardi and the Symbol of the Renaissance:
Poetry beyond the Measurement of the World

by
Morris Karp

Thesis

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Professor Massimo Riva, Advisor

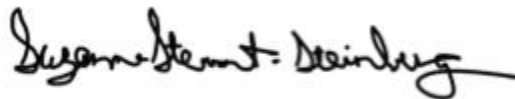
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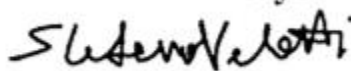
Professor Ronald L. Martinez, Reader

January 15th, 2021



Professor Suzanne Stewart Steinberg, Reader

January 15th, 2021



Professor Stefano Velotti, Reader

Approved by the Graduate Council

January 15th, 2021

Andrew G. Campbell, Dean of the Graduate School

CURRICULUM VITAE

EDUCATION

- Brown University, Department of Italian Studies
Ph.D. 2021
Leopardi and the Symbol of the Renaissance: Poetry beyond Measurement
Primary advisor: Professor Massimo Riva (Brown). Dissertation committee: Professor Ronald L. Martinez (Brown); Professor Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg (Brown); Professor Stefano Velotti (La Sapienza).
- Università di Roma Tor Vergata, Department of Philosophy
Ph.D. 2015
The Abstract and the Unknown: Four Essays on the Evolution of Hayek's Thought
Supervisor: Professor Stefano Semplici.
- Centrostudi Giornalismo e Comunicazione/Agenda del Giornalista
M.A. in Communication Management 2013
- Università di Roma La Sapienza, Department of Philosophy
M.A. in Philosophy and Theoretical-Critical Studies 2010
The Nature of Man and Poetry in the Writings of Leopardi
Supervisors: Professor Stefano Velotti, Professor Paolo Vinci.
- Università di Roma La Sapienza, Department of Political Economy
B.A. in Political Economy 2006
Value-Theory in the Works of Karl Marx and Piero Sraffa
Supervisor: Professor Fernando Vianello.

PUBLICATIONS

Articles:

“The Dialectic Servant Mistress: Brief History of a Metaphor from Renaissance Music to Enlightenment Politics”, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, under review.

“Dante’s Coins. Images and Concepts of Money as Justice in the Three Kingdoms”, *Dante Studies*, under review.

“The Conversation on the Renaissance at the Gabinetto Vieusseux”, *Atti della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, accepted, forthcoming.

“Il mistero della mente umana’: teoria e storia nel pensiero di Sraffa”, *Il Pensiero Economico Italiano* (peer reviewed), Vol. 28, No. 2, 2020, [165-183].

“Evoluzione della conoscenza e bene comune nel pensiero di Hayek”, *Fogli di Filosofia* (peer reviewed), Vol. 5, 2014 [155-174].

“Il metro de ‘Il risorgimento’”, *Leussein* (peer reviewed), Vol. 2 No. 3, 2012, [137-145].

“Leopardi e lo stoicismo”, *Filosofia Italiana* (peer reviewed), Luglio 2011, (<http://www.filosofiaitaliana.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Karp-Leopardi-e-lo-stoicismo.pdf>).

Lexicographical entries:

“Conformabilità” in *Lessico Leopardiano 2016*, Sapienza Editrice, Roma, 2016 [25-28].

Reviews:

Tommaso Campanella, “Lettere”, Olschki, 2010, *Filosofia Italiana*, Gennaio 2011, (<http://www.filosofiaitaliana.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Tommaso-Campanella-Lettere-Olschki-2010.pdf>).

Interviews:

“Lo Zibaldone ritrovato in una bottiglia”, intervista a Franco D’Intino, *Filosofia Italiana*, Ottobre 2014, (http://www.filosofiaitaliana.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/INTERVISTA-DIntino_KARP.pdf).

“Reading the Decameron in the COVID-19 Era,” an interview with Brown University faculty members Ronald Martinez and Massimo Riva by Morris Karp and Francesca Zambon, *The Humanities in Practice*, May 2020 (<https://blogs.brown.edu/humanities/archives/485>).

Translations:

Vito Teti, “What Can ‘Remaining’ Mean Today?”, translated by Morris Karp and Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, *The Humanities in Practice*, May 2020 (<https://blogs.brown.edu/humanities/archives/374>).

Vito Teti, “Coronavirus, That Place We All Call Home: Staying in Necessity and Responsibility” translated by Morris Karp and Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, *The Humanities in Practice*, May 2020 (<https://blogs.brown.edu/humanities/archives/383>).

FELLOWSHIPS

Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women Graduate Fellowship
2019-20

Cogut Institute for the Humanities Graduate Fellowship
2018-19

Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa - Visiting student
2017-18 (Supervisor: Professor Michele Ciliberto)

Scuola di Roma dell'Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici Fellowship
Fall 2012

GRANTS AND AWARDS

Brown Conference Travel Grant	2019
Brown Doctorate Research Travel Grant	2019
Brown International Travel Grant	2019
Joukowsky Summer Research Award	2019
Brown Doctoral Research Travel Grant	2018
Brown International Travel Grant	2018
Joukowsky Summer Research Award	2018
Brown International Travel Grant	2017
Joukowsky Summer Research Award	2017
Joukowsky Summer Research Award	2016
Brown International Travel Grant	2015

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Courses Taught

Intensive Elementary Italian	Spring 2020
Intermediate Italian - Brown University	Fall 2016
Elementary Italian 2 - Brown University	Spring 2016
Elementary Italian 1 - Brown University	

Teaching Assistantships

From Hypernovel to Paranoid (Un)Fiction	Fall 2020
---	-----------

Workshops Taught

Science and Reality: Mathematics, Physics and Economics - La Sapienza University Spring 2013

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Introduction

1. Contents

1.1 This dissertation focuses on Leopardi's interpretation and symbolism of the Renaissance. In the following pages, Leopardi's poetic and philosophical meditation on the Renaissance will be understood as an eminent aspect of his writings, one that involves his elaboration on the tension between universal and particular, in connection with the historical context of the Risorgimento. In the most abstract terms, we can consider the creation of the modern nation-state as one of the temporary equilibria in the tension between universal and particular that always crosses the political community. One of the salient features of the specific equilibrium which the nation-state represents is that, in it, this tension becomes historically explicit, that is to say it becomes recognizable as a tension. The public sphere is the space where the tension between universal and particular is explicitly exposed, discussed or imposed, so that it takes form and receives its specific configuration. Through the centuries the empty space which the public sphere is, has been carved out by the tension between universal and particular: the discussion upon its manifold aspects — from the Italian debates on vernacular literature to Pico's and Luther's theses, from Machiavelli's *Discourses* to Galileo's *Assayer* and Milton's *Areopagitica* — makes the public sphere possible, and thus the modern nation state. The explicitness which characterizes the

tension between particular and universal in the building of the nation-state is one of the most essential features of modernity. This aspect, which prepares and accompanies the diffusion of various technologies of mediation, happens through a deep change in the possibilities and the uses of language. Words that could not be spoken before now become speakable, ancient words become inaudible. How could it be otherwise, if the source of the tension between universal and particular resides in language? As a poet and a philosopher Leopardi belongs to a generation which lived in the wake of the Risorgimento, the process that led to the creation of the nation-state in Italy. The specific configuration of the universal-particular dyad which — on manifold levels — appears in Leopardi's writings, and is the specific object of this work, can be considered in relation to this historical aspect, both as a reflection of the historical conditions in which Leopardi's meditation developed and as Leopardi's intervention on them. The thematic inquiry on the presence of the Renaissance in Leopardi's writings can serve as key to this structural aspect. From this standpoint, the symbol of the Renaissance appears as a point of convergence, a knot, of the three fundamental dimensions of Leopardi's thought — history, philosophy and poetry.

1.2 Compared to other nation building processes, among the specificities of the Italian Risorgimento is the peculiar influence that poets had in it. Religious controversies played a major role in the English Revolution, while philosophical debates were crucial both for French Revolution — with the philosophy of the Enlightenment — and for the creation of the German state — which was largely prepared by the philosophy of Romanticism. The ideological trigger of the Risorgimento was essentially in the hands of a small number of poets. The final section of

Alfieri's 1789 treatise *Of the Prince and literature* — titled *Exhortation to liberate Italy* — can be regarded in every respect as the manifesto of Risorgimento.¹ Even more, with the creation of a national tragic theater, Alfieri opened a literary space for the elaboration of the political problem of the Risorgimento. After him, Foscolo followed this political program with his poems and his novel *Jacopo Ortis*. Also, as well as Manzoni, he was directly involved in the experience of the Napoleonic Kingdom of northern Italy which, for a moment after Napoleon's fall, seemed to offer a concrete chance of independence for Italy.

When Leopardi entered the Italian public scene, the endeavors of Alfieri and Foscolo were beginning to bear their fruits, and the Risorgimento was gradually evolving from a poetic ideal into a debated issue in the developing public sphere. In this context, the historiographical aspect assumed an increasing relevance. Since Alfieri's *Exhortation*, the discourse of Risorgimento was articulated along two fundamental guidelines: the struggle against despotism — which would soon take the form of a struggle for independence — and against the oblivion of classical civilization and its return retrieval during the Renaissance. These two ideological elements were not simply juxtaposed, but rather interdependent: reclamation of the classical past was meant to preserve the possibility of liberty, which the struggle against despotism sought to actualize. For this very reason, the historiographical debate became a crucial moment in the ideological

¹ The beginning of the section reads: «Ma tra quante schiave contrade nell'Europa rimiro, nessuna al nuovo cospetto delle lettere potrebbe più facilmente, a parer mio, assumere un nuovo aspetto politico, che la nostra Italia. Non so se l'esservi io nato di ciò mi lusinga; ma ragionando coi fatti, codesta penisola è pur quella che da prima conquistava quasi tutto il rimanente del mondo ancora conosciuto, e che, conquistando, libera nondimeno ad un tempo rimaneva, esempio unico nelle storie. Ed era pure la stessa Italia, quella che, più secoli dopo, tutto il rimanente d'Europa illuminava colle lettere e scienze, ricovrate, a dir vero, di Grecia, ma ben altrimenti oltre i monti trasmesse da quelle che d'oltremare ricevute si fossero. Ed è pur dessa, che il rimanente d'Europa reingentiliva dappoi con tutte le divine belle arti, più assai riprocreate da lei, che imitate.» V. Alfieri, *Del Principe e delle Lettere*, Firenze, Barbera, 1859, p.294-5.

elaboration of the Risorgimento, since it articulated at the same time an image of the past and of the future. As Benedict Anderson has shown, the construction of the *biography of the nation* created an image of the community which foregrounded the birth of the nation-state; yet, the way in which the historiographical debate articulated the image of the past reflected the different political orientations which competed in the construction of the nation.

1.3 Chapter I, “*The conversation on the Renaissance at the Gabinetto Vieusseux,*” argues that the interpretation of the Renaissance was a crucial moment in the historiographical debate that contributed to laying the groundwork for the Risorgimento. Different interpretations of the Renaissance — of its origins and of its positive and negative aspects — corresponded to different expectations regarding Italy’s future. The word *risorgimento* was used at the time to indicate the period of Italian history between the rise of the communes in the 11th century and the invasions of the peninsula in the sixteenth century. The category of *risorgimento*, taken in this sense, was at the center of a historiographical debate which contributed to developing the modern notion of Renaissance. This debate focused on the Renaissance as the last expression of the Italian civilization before foreign invasion and the loss of independence. At the same time, the fact that the Italian peninsula had been able to regain its splendor for a second time after the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, made it possible to think of a new rebirth to come. The Renaissance thus became the symbol of a political program, uniting in a word both the past and the future of Italy: *risorgimento*.

1.4 Only rarely, however, did such interest for the Renaissance take the form of accurate and scrupulous historical inquiry. The absence of this kind of historiography was acutely perceived as a problem by Foscolo and Capponi already in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, but it was only after the third decade of the century that Italian intellectuals began to apply themselves to this kind of research². In the first half of the century, when Leopardi was writing, the debate on the Renaissance was mainly the matter of *philosophical histories*, a literary genre that flourished all across Europe — but especially in Italy, France, Germany, and Britain — starting with Vico's *Scienza Nuova*. By the interpretation of historical facts through philosophical principles, this kind of histories became a powerful weapon for the diffusion and the popularization of ideas. From Voltaire to Marx, the entire Age of Revolutions found in this literary genre a fundamental instrument for the involvement of intellectual elites into the political struggle. Following this use, Leopardi's philosophical meditation largely developed in the form of a philosophical history, although one of a peculiar kind, which stands in sharp contrast against the teleological leanings that were common to both the idealist and positivist philosophical histories of the time. Chapter II, "*That which Happens only Once*", tackles Leopardi's notion of the unicity of historical events in order to clarify the methodological conception that frames the distinctive interpretation of the Renaissance in his philosophical history.

1.5 Following the path traced by Alfieri and Foscolo, Leopardi came on stage as a poet in Italy with the publication of three patriotic poems: *To Italy*, *On Dante's Funerary Monument*, and *Ad Angelo Mai*. In these three poems Leopardi already sketched out his philosophical history, based

² Cf. BENEDETTO CROCE, *La storiografia in Italia, dai cominciamenti del secolo decimonono ai giorni nostri*, «La Critica. Rivista di Letteratura, Storia e Filosofia diretta da B. Croce», 13, 1915, pp. 1-20.

on the contraposition between imagination and reason, and developed an “ideology of the Renaissance” which appears fully developed in the *Canzone ad Angelo Mai* (1820). Chapter III, “*Two Emblems of the Renaissance*”, argues that the two central stanzas of this poem, featuring the portraits of Columbus and Ariosto, can be read as a philosophical-historical interpretation of the Renaissance. The fundamental character of Leopardi’s interpretation is dialectical: in Columbus’s image Leopardi outlines the rationalistic aspect of the Renaissance, understood as the age in which quantitative reason fulfills the mathematical measurement of the world; with his portrait of Ariosto, Leopardi interprets the Renaissance as the age of the return of the arts, of the return of antiquity and the rebirth of poetic imagination. Yet, the chapter also shows how, in light of his *Theory of Pleasure* — the psychology on which Leopardi’s philosophical understanding of history is based — reason and imagination are mutually incompatible: poetry is the expression of the living individuality, for which the universality of reason represents a deadly threat. The “ideology of the Renaissance” presented in *Ad Angelo Mai* appears therefore flawed by an inner inconsistency, which can be read as one of the factors determining the instability of Leopardi’s meditation in the following years.

1.6 The highly condensed interpretation of the Renaissance which Leopardi offers in *Ad Angelo Mai* leaves many questions unanswered regarding his geographical and chronological understanding of the Renaissance. Collecting together a wide number of references to the Renaissance scattered among his writings, Chapter IV “*A Map of the Renaissance*” tries to trace the spatial and temporal boundaries of the Renaissance according to Leopardi. In drawing this map, a third dimension besides space and time proves to be fundamental: the linguistic

dimension. The transition from the universality of Latin to the particularism of the vernacular languages is, for Leopardi, the foundational event which inaugurates the Renaissance, enhancing both the development of the sciences and the return of the arts. Leopardi sees the possibility of holding together these two dimensions — the rise of quantitative reason and the return of imagination — as the unfulfilled promise of the Renaissance: hence the involution of modernity in the two divergent, yet complementary, directions of rationalism and spiritualism.

1.7 The map of the Renaissance drawn in Chapter IV stresses aspects of compatibility between reason and imagination that seem to contradict the stark opposition between the two outlined in Chapter III. Chapter V, “From *philosopher of society* to *metaphysician*” shows how this internal contradiction in Leopardi's interpretation of the Renaissance is central to the development of his thought in the crucial years 1820-23. In particular, chapter V shows how during these years Leopardi reframed his Theory of Pleasure into the larger scope of a theory of habituation (*assuefazione*). In this reframing, the absolute opposition between imagination and reason which characterizes Leopardi's early thought turns into a historical opposition. Leopardi himself interprets the development of his thought as a transformation from a *philosophy of society* to *metaphysics*. A symptom of this transformation is Leopardi's change of attitude towards the encyclopedic tendencies of his time: the fulfillment of knowledge represented by the encyclopedia — regarded earlier by Leopardi as a deadly threat to imagination — became now an indispensable instrument for poetry.

Chapter VI, “A hypothesis” tackles the new interpretation of Columbus which Leopardi introduces in the *Dialogue of Christopher Columbus and Pierre Gutierrez* (1824). The dialogue

also bears a new interpretation of the Renaissance as a whole, shifting the focus from the measurement of the world — as in the *Canzone Ad Angelo Mai* — to Columbus’s return from his epoch-making journey. Merging together the dialectical aspects proposed in *Ad Angelo Mai*, the *Dialogue of Christopher Columbus and Pierre Gutierrez* outlines the idea of a return of the imagination beyond the fulfillment of the world’s measurement. Columbus becomes an emblem of Leopardi’s poetry, which can be understood against the backdrop of his engagement with metaphysics.

1.8 Chapter VII, “*The Metaphysics of Conformability*” outlines Leopardi’s attempts to dismantle the Leibnitian-Wolffian metaphysics of perfection and to develop an alternative coherent set of metaphysical propositions in the years 1823-1825. Relying on the systematic structure of several philosophical treatises which Leopardi studied during his education, this chapter shows how Leopardi makes several attempts to disarticulate the fundamental elements of the metaphysics he had found in those manuals, namely the notions of antecedent ideas, perfection and human perfectibility. Translating the Leibnitian notion of *perfection* as an intensive quantity into the concept of conformability leads Leopardi to formulate a fundamental thesis: the opposition between life and existence, which he calls *the conclusion of metaphysics*.

1.9 Focusing on the years 1825-1828, chapter VIII, “*The return*”, addresses Leopardi’s ethical and aesthetic assessment of the results provided by his metaphysical inquiry. This chapter shows how Leopardi’s confrontation with Stoicism and Neoplatonism can be understood as a progressive step towards an ethical posture which allows the survival of “friendship,” the only

community which makes poetry possible. Such an ethical position, in turn, can be understood through Leopardi's late conception of grace, which can be considered as the experience of truth as memory. The poetic fragment *Angelica* condenses in a few verses Leopardi's position at the end of his journey through metaphysics, and paves the way for Leopardi's return to poetry with his 1828 poem *The renaissance*.

2. Methodology

2.1 Across the four thousand five hundred and twenty six pages of the *Zibaldone* the word "symbol" occurs only three times. The first time — following the Greek usage — Leopardi employs it for «creed»³; the second, it appears in the context of an aesthetic discussion on fearfulness and pleasantness in the «ideas, images, symbols and conceptions»⁴ of the ancient divinities; the third, it occurs in a passage where Leopardi recalls the ancient use of drawing a serpent on walls as «a symbol of eternity»⁵. Such a remarkable parsimony appears quite surprising considering the importance of the concept of symbol for the Aesthetic of the Romantic era.⁶ Rarity, however, is hardly less significant than abundance. Among the entries of the index Leopardi prepared for the *Zibaldone* in 1827, the entry «Symbol» redirects to «Mythologies», where one can read «Mythologies. Symbols, etc. Their origin and reason». The last reference

³ Zib. 340

⁴ Zib. 3639

⁵ Zib. 4298

⁶ Cf. Nicholas Halmi, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol*, Oxford University Press, 2007.

listed in this section is introduced by a brief explanatory note which reads «Difference between ancient and modern mythologies». In the corresponding passage, Leopardi writes:

The inventors of the first mythologies (individuals or people) did not look for darkness in everything, even where there was light. On the contrary, they sought light in darkness; they wanted to explain, not to mystify and discover; they tended to describe in tangible ways those things that do not fall within the realm of the senses, and to explain in their own way as best they could, those things that man cannot understand, or which they were still not able to understand. The inventors of the last mythologies, the Platonists, and especially the men of the early centuries of our era, most certainly sought darkness in light; they sought to explain tangible and intelligible things in unintelligible and intangible ways; they took pleasure in darkness; they explained clear and evident things with mysteries and secrets.

Reading this passage requires a sudden chronological reorientation. Following the entry in the index, one would expect a passage on the use of symbols among Leopardi's contemporaries.

Speaking of the moderns, instead, Leopardi is referring to the «Platonists, and especially the men of the early centuries of our era.» The indication leaves us uncertain whether Leopardi speaks here of the Neoplatonists, of the Christians, or, as it would seem most proper, of the gnostic attempt to elaborate on philosophical notions in terms of a complex symbolical cosmogony; yet, whether or not this passage was meant to criticize Romantic aesthetics, from it we can get a sense of what Leopardi's stance towards Romantic symbolism could have been.

2.2 What distances the most Leopardi from Romanticism is precisely this refusal to immerse poetry into "darkness," to blur the lines of reality and create beauty from the indistinct.

Leopardi's poetry has a luminous nature. Light can be auroral, meridian, vespertine, lunar or sidereal in his verses, but it is never absent. Because of this luminosity, Leopardi's poems are, if not impenetrable, at least well shielded against symbolic readings, which would dispel their grace without gaining much in exchange.

2.3 Nevertheless, Leopardi had a deep interest in the symbols of antiquity and was an eager reader of Volney's *Ruins* and of Dupuis's *Abrégé de l'origine de tous les Cultes*. In these two books, written towards the end of the eighteenth century, Volney and Dupuis tried to understand the symbols of ancient mythologies by stripping them of every spiritualistic interpretation: they wanted to uncover the reference to natural and historical events, of which, for them, the true meaning of myths consisted. Following this thread, it seems possible to read Leopardi's passage on the «Difference between ancient and modern mythologies» in a way which goes beyond a mere refusal of symbolism; what if Leopardi was pointing here in the direction of a kind of symbolism which avoided the darkness of the «modern mythologies», in order to reach the luminous symbolism of the ancients once more? What if he was in search of a symbolism which did not refer to some intangible spiritual meaning, but to the intelligible concreteness of the historical events?

2.4 This dissertation is concerned with the “symbol” and not just with the “metaphor” of the Renaissance in Leopardi; indeed, the word “symbol” seems more suited for stressing the historical — not just textual — dimension of the question here proposed. The term “metaphor” is usually employed in a technical sense, in order to understand certain rhetorical aspects of a literary text's construction. The interpretation of a metaphor addresses the logic of the literary text, and is not necessarily concerned with its historical dimension; it derives its validity not from the historical circumstances in which the metaphor is used, but rather from its consistency with the inner logic of a certain literary text. The word “symbol” on the contrary is generally taken in the broader sense of an expressive function which gathers several meanings under a certain

signifier, and is recognizable by a community. A characteristic of the symbol, taken in this broad sense, is that it affects the actions of the members of a certain community: its nature is not simply theoretical, it is not merely a form of knowledge, but it is also practical, it has a certain effect regarding human behaviors. In this sense we refer for instance to religious and political symbols, or to the more prosaic status symbols of our market-society. Because of this relationship with the historically-given community that understands the symbol, and whose behaviors are affected by its presence, the interpretation of a symbol has to take into account its historical circumstances.

2.5 The interpretation of symbols is the subject of hermeneutics, a discipline that tends to problematize certain presuppositions of the historic-critical method regarding the nature of data, on the assumption that the parts can only be understood in their relationship with the whole.⁷ Every symbol, as far as it creates a meaning through a connection between different things, requires a hermeneutic in order to be properly understood. The hermeneutical act reads the symbol by producing a representation of the whole wherein different things are connected.⁸ Abandoning the idea that the whole can be represented by the sum of its parts, hermeneutics introduces an element of arbitrariness in understanding. The method does not guarantee the results, but on the contrary, only the results validate the method. Although the scientific method can be considered a sort of hermeneutics, whereas the hypothesis finds its truth in the experiment, the characteristic non-reproducibility of the hermeneutical method makes it

⁷ An overview on the argument can be found in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics, Routledge philosophy companions*, ed. by Jeff Malpas, Hans-Helmuth Gander, Routledge, London, 2014.

⁸ The hermeneutic of the symbol is in this sense a particular form of the hermeneutic circle, first outlined by Friederich Schleiermacher, and later developed by Dilthey and Heidegger. For an overview on the argument cf. Wallace Martin, "The Hermeneutic Circle and the Art of Interpretation", *Comparative Literature* Vol. 24, No. 2 (Spring, 1972), pp. 97-117.

impossible to transform it into a technique.⁹ For this reason, symbolic hermeneutics appears as a hazardous instrument for the study of literary texts, often threatening the historicity of the text in a process where interpretation becomes an end in itself or, symmetrically, a pretext for the exposition of an ideological program.

2.6 Yet, the symbolic dimension cannot be eradicated from the text, since it belongs to the way in which language exists and operates. How can it be addressed, without merely reducing it to the combinatory study of the logical possibilities of a text? More than other disciplines, art history has developed a methodological framework to address this historical dimension of symbols. The reason probably is that in this discipline the hermeneutic of the symbol appears tightly connected with the conditions of its production: figures in works of art can express ideological or economic relationship to the world they come from; in the net of significations created by these ideological and material conditions, the artist can create an original configuration¹⁰. The argument of this dissertation can be properly grasped in terms of the three layers of interpretation that Ervin Panofsky — elaborating on Aby Warburg's idea of “critical iconology” — proposed in the introduction to his *Studies in Iconology*.

2.7 In the interpretation of symbols Panofsky distinguished between the interpretation: 1) of the primary or *material* subject matter; 2) of the secondary or *conventional* subject matter which is the concern of *iconography*, studying a recurring meaning that can be found in several works of

⁹ Cf. the collective volume *Hermeneutics and Science*, ed. by Marta Fehér, Olga Kiss, and Laszlo Ropolyi, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1999.

¹⁰ Cf. M. BAXANDALL, *Patterns of Intentions*, Yale University Press. New Heaven, 1985.

art or literary sources; 3) of the tertiary or *intrinsic* meaning or content which is the concern of *iconology*, studying a meaning that is specific to a certain work of art or to a certain artist.¹¹ It is important to stress that all the three layers of signification which Panofsky distinguishes have a historical dimension. At either the iconographic or at the iconological level, the interpretation does not simply aim at establishing a possible meaning, according to an analogical criterion; rather both these levels of interpretation aim at understanding the conferral of meaning to a figure as an historical event.

2.8 Translating this methodological framework into the literary dimension, I address in the following pages the symbol of the Renaissance in Leopardi at the “material”, “iconographic” and “iconological” level, in order to show: 1) that across Leopardi’s writings it is possible to find the guidelines of an interpretation of the Renaissance as a historical formation 2) that, following the symbolism which was conventional in his time, Leopardi reads the Renaissance as a symbol of Italy’s future 3) that Leopardi elevates this conventional symbolism to a meaning which is at the same time more intimate and more inclusive, interpreting the Renaissance as a poetic image of the struggle between reason and poetry.

2.9 Adapting Panofsky’s ideas on the interpretation of visual symbols to the figural use of the notion of Renaissance in Leopardi and his contemporaries, the argument of my dissertation can be considered from this point of view as well. In correspondence with the iconographic level, which studies the conventional use of symbols, Chapter I offers an account of the

¹¹ ERVIN PANOFSKY, *Studies in Iconology. Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, Oxford University Press, 1939, pp. 3-17.

historiographical debate on the interpretation of the Renaissance in the *Gabinetto Vieusseux*.

Such a debate, in its material aspect, consisted of different interpretations of the Renaissance, its origins, and its positive and negative elements. Reconstructing the conversation on the Renaissance at the *Gabinetto Vieusseux* makes clear that the symbolic use of the Renaissance was conventional at that time in Italy. The Renaissance was conventionally understood as a symbol of the Italian independence. Such a symbol was employed by intellectuals coming from different ideological backgrounds. The symbolic charge of the term made this convergence of different meanings possible.

2.10 After outlining Leopardi's methodological conception of history in Chapter II, Chapters III and IV address the thematic presence of the Renaissance in Leopardi's writings; following Leopardi's scattered references to the Renaissance, it is possible to find a discourse where the symbolism of Renaissance appears according to the conventions of the time. Chapter III, in particular, focuses on the interpretation of the Renaissance as the unresolved dialectic between world-measuring reason and the return of imagination, which Leopardi outlines through the two emblems of Columbus and Ariosto in his 1820 poem *Ad Angelo Mai*. Chapter IV will extract a wide number of passages from the *Zibaldone*, in order to draw a chronologic, geographic and linguistic map of the Renaissance according to Leopardi's interpretation. Confronting the emblematic representation drafted in Chapter III and the cartographic interpretation of Chapter IV, several discrepancies will emerge regarding the understanding of the relationship between reason and imagination. Such discrepancies will lead Chapter V to consider the transformation that Leopardi's meditation underwent in 1820-1824.

2.11 In Chapter VI, the new interpretation of Columbus that Leopardi advances in his 1824 *Dialogue between Pietro Gutierrez and Christopher Columbus*, leads to the “iconological” analysis of the “intrinsic” symbolism of the Renaissance in Leopardi’s writings. At this level, the image of Columbus’s return from his journey, made possible by the world’s measurement, becomes a poetic interpretation of the Renaissance, and also an image of Leopardi’s return to poetry beyond metaphysics. Such a distinctive use of the symbol of the Renaissance becomes manifest in the title of the 1828 canzonetta *The renaissance*, the first poem Leopardi wrote after devoting himself to metaphysical research for seven years. The iconological analysis is meant to clarify the title “*The renaissance*” in the light of a network of symbolic signifiers connected with Leopardi’s interpretation of the Renaissance as the age of the world’s measurement. For this reason Chapter VII discusses several aspects of Leopardi’s metaphysical research, and explains in particular its systematic form. In the interpretation I propose, metaphysics’s systematic closure allows Leopardi to reach the conclusion of his metaphysical research. Chapter VIII finally traces the path of Leopardi’s return from metaphysical research to poetry — following the lines of Leopardi’s meditation on suicide and grace — through the development of an ethical and aesthetic standpoint which makes the poetic re-comprehension of the measured world possible.

2.12 The different hermeneutical layers that this research addresses could have been studied separately, distinguishing between the problem of the interpretation of the Renaissance in Leopardi on the one hand, and the question of a symbolism of the rebirth in his writings on the other. The reasons for unifying these two subjects are mainly two: the first is that the specific

nature of Leopardi's symbolism follows his metaphysical meditation and thus refuses the conception of the symbol as a unity of universal and particular — an aspect that cannot be accounted for without taking into consideration the historical reference. The event of the Renaissance can be considered in this respect an intermediate degree of historical generalization between individual experiences of healing and recovery and the palingenetic moment in the cycle of the destruction and rebirth of Leopardi's late cosmology. The second and most important reason is that the juxtaposition between these two hermeneutical levels creates a specific poetic effect which is the very object of this dissertation.

2.13 The intertwining between the thematic (the interpretation of the Renaissance, both in Leopardi and his contemporaries) and the structural (Leopardi's intrinsic symbolism of the Renaissance) aspects of this dissertation, complicates a general difficulty that characterizes the study of Leopardi's texts: the transformation of Leopardi's thought through the years and the fragmentary state in which the *Zibaldone* presents his philosophical research make it difficult to discern the transitory and the permanent aspects of Leopardi's meditation. This problem involves the legitimacy of interpreting older fragments in the light of the more recent ones or vice versa. Broadly speaking, Leopardi's thought seems to have a cumulative character. Leopardi tends to incorporate older ideas into the larger framework which he progressively discloses, moving from the particular to the universal through successive stages of generalization. At times, however, Leopardi's reflection encounters a dead end, a path that he will later abandon. For this reason, the study of the *Zibaldone* requires both a synoptic and a diachronic reading, something which becomes extremely challenging for the purpose of an intelligible exposition.

2.14 In this dissertation I have tried to overcome this obstacle alternating and combining the two approaches outlined above. At the two extremes of this methodological spectrum are Chapter III and VI on the one hand, and Chapter IV and V on the other: in Chapter III, I focus on a single poem that Leopardi wrote in 1820, comparing it with coeval passages from the *Zibaldone* and reading it in light of his attempt to enter in contact with the cultural context he would finally encounter in Rome in 1821; similarly, Chapter VI is a reading of a single 1824 dialogue from Leopardi's *Operette Morali*; in Chapter IV instead, I take into account a large number of references to the Renaissance scattered across Leopardi's writings, covering almost the entirety of Leopardi's literary life; a similar wide scale is also adopted in Chapter V, in order to offer a view on the transformation of Leopardi's thought in 1821-1829; Chapters VII and VIII instead focus on more limited time spans, respectively 1821-1825 and 1825-1828.

2.15 The entire argument of this dissertation relies on the interpretation of a few words in Leopardi's writings: the word "Renaissance" (*risorgimento*) in the title of the poem that signals his return to poetry in 1828; the word "metaphysics" (*metafisica*) which he employs in several passages referring to his meditation; and the expression "conclusion of the entire metaphysics" (*conchiusione di tutta la metafisica*) with which he designates the thesis of the opposition between life and existence. I attribute an importance which can seem disproportionate to these three words: while I read the first (*risorgimento*) in light of the conventions of Leopardi's time, I take the other two ("*metafisica*" and "*conchiusione*") quite literally and seriously, according to the technical sense they have in the philosophical vocabulary. In doing so,

I rely on the assumption that Leopardi's choice of words is always carefully considered from three points of view at least: first, that of the poet, and second, that of the philologist; and finally from the point of view of the thinker, as a philosophical comparison between these two points of view on the one hand, and the observation of everyday life and the meditation on history on the other.

3. State of the art

3.1 Centered on the symbolic meaning of the Renaissance for the generation that lived in the wake of the Risorgimento, the "iconographic" level of this dissertation enters into the trend of the so-called "positive interpretations" of Leopardi. Such an interpretative trend reads Leopardi's writings in connection with the movement towards the Italian unification. The problem of such "positive interpretations" regards the dynamic of Leopardi's involvement in the political aspirations of his generation. As mentioned above, Leopardi made his debut on the literary scene with three poems that were highly ideologically committed to the patriotic cause. Soon, however, he abandoned political engagement, and his poetry turned towards a more intimate and more philosophical direction, showing a substantial disinterest towards contemporary events. This refusal of contemporaneity has often been read as a sign of Leopardi's disengagement from history¹². Although history is a predominant feature of Leopardi's thought and poetry, the dominant perception has long been that Leopardi was a poet and a thinker escaping from history.

¹² Leopardi's thought has been defined by Nietzsche as *super-historical* in the second of his *Untimely Meditation*. Later on, and for different reasons, Leopardi's thought has been considered as *anti-historicist*, in the context of the ideological debates of the sixties and the seventies in Italy, when Leopardi appeared as an interesting counterpoint for the revision or the criticism of Marx's historicism.

This perception, however, is at odds with the fact that, at the end of his life, Leopardi returned to vehemently express his political commitment, both with the satirical epic poem *Paralipomena to the Batrachomyomachia* and with his late poem *Wild Broom, or The Flower of the Desert*. His return to political commitment, however, is marked by a certain ambivalence, adding contradiction to contradiction: while in the satiric context of the *Batrachomyomachia* Leopardi widely indulges in ardent outbursts of nationalist rhetoric, the patriotic aspect is almost completely absent in the solemn meditation of *The Wild Broom*, where the political element takes on a strongly inclusive connotation.

3.2 Notwithstanding the complexity of this dynamic, the trend of “positive interpretations,” although never predominant, started immediately after Leopardi’s death. After Gioberti’s definition of the *Paralipomena* as a «terrible» but also «most fair» judgement on the revolutionary commotions of 1821-1831 in Italy¹³, it was De Sanctis that established the tradition of “positive interpretations” in his *Schopenhauer and Leopardi*¹⁴. De Sanctis’s philosophical dialogue compares Schopenhauer’s philosophy and Leopardi’s poetry, showing their analogies but also tracing a distinction: while Schopenhauer’s pessimism convinces the reader of the uselessness of every political change, while reading Leopardi one feels that had he survived until the ‘48 revolutions, he would have come on the barricades “to fight and to encourage”.¹⁵ An important element of this interpretation is that De Sanctis stresses the difference between the

¹³ Vincenzo Gioberti, *Il gesuita moderno*, vol. III, Bonamici, Losanna 1847, p. 484.

¹⁴ F. DE SANCTIS, *Opere*, (XXIII ed.) vol. V, Napoli, Morano, 1909, pp. 246-299.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 299.

content of Leopardi's thought and the effects of his poems. While, according to De Sanctis, in his thought Leopardi expresses a resolute condemnation of life, his poetry participates in the common destiny of the living. This rigid distinction and disjuncture between poetry and thought in Leopardi was the price to pay in order to immunize the most destructive aspects of Leopardi's writings, and incorporate his figure in the national canon. The resistance against the nihilistic aspects of Leopardi's thought — fundamentally the negation of every value of life and of the human being — was not limited to De Sanctis and influenced the later generation. The extent of this resistance can be illustrated by the limited appreciation of Leopardi by three figures — D'Annunzio, Croce and Gramsci — covering a wide spectrum of the Italian politics in the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁶ From a position similar to De Sanctis', Giovanni Gentile devoted a certain attention to Leopardi and his connection with the movement towards the Italian unification, substantially retaining De Sanctis's distinction between thought and poetry in Leopardi, but also partially acknowledging the philosophical character of his meditation¹⁷.

3.3 Cesare Luporini's *Progressive Leopardi*¹⁸, in the middle of the past century, had the particular merit of starting to reconstruct Leopardi's complex ideological itinerary, in order to stress the continuity of the meditation that brought him from the three great patriotic poems to

¹⁶ On D'Annunzio and Leopardi cf. i, vd. S. QUASIMODO, *Sulla poesia contemporanea*, «Fiera Letteraria», anno II, n° 26, Roma 26 giugno 1947; Croce's dismissive judgement on Leopardi as a philosopher can be read in B. CROCE, *Note sulla poesia straniera e italiana del secolo decimonono: XIX, Leopardi*, «La Critica. Rivista di Letteratura, Storia e Filosofia diretta da B. Croce», 20, 1922, pp.193-204; while refusing Croce's dismissal of Leopardi's thought (Quaderno 10 (XXXIII) § 48), Gramsci evaluates Leopardi's writings as a form of "caligraphism", which is the symptom of the detachment of the progressive elites from the people (Quaderno 15 (II) § 20).

¹⁷ G. GENTILE, *Introduzione a Leopardi*, in s.a., *Manzoni e Leopardi, Saggi critici*, 1928., pp. 85-112

¹⁸ C. LUPORINI, *Leopardi progressivo*, in *Filosofi vecchi e nuovi*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1947, pp. 183-? 279

the universal meditation of *The Wild Broom*. In doing so, Luporini also started to heal the chasm that De Sanctis had involuntarily opened between poetry and thought in Leopardi. To reconstruct Leopardi's ideological itinerary meant to provide reasons for those "effects" of Leopardi's poetry that could only appear paradoxical to De Sanctis. In the following decades, also in reference to the contemporary debates in the Italian left, the interest for Leopardi's ideological position continued to increase, as witnessed by the decennial polemic between Sebastiano Timpanaro and Umberto Carpi¹⁹. Although obscured by the curious attempt to rank Leopardi's degree of progressiveness, the lasting contribution provided by this polemic was the analysis of the relationship between Leopardi and the variegated ideological context of the *Gabinetto Viesseux*. At the end of the seventies the interest for Leopardi's ideological position started to decrease, and the trend of "positive" interpretations seemed to lose its vitality. In the following decades the major contributions to the understanding of Leopardi's thought mainly came from the less politically connoted study of his interest in a number of scientific disciplines like linguistics, biology, chemistry and astronomy, reading Leopardi against the backdrop of the scientific rather than political developments of his time²⁰.

¹⁹ Timpanaro's contribution on Leopardi can be read in S. TIMPANARO, *Classicismo e Illuminismo nell'Ottocento romantico*, Pisa, Nistri-Lischi, 1965, and *Antileopardiani e neomoderati nella sinistra italiana*, Belfagor, 30, nos. 2, 4; 31, nos. 1, 2 (1975-76), reprinted in *Antileopardiani e neomoderati nella sinistra italiana*, Pisa, ETS, 1982. Carpi's intervention instead can be found in U. CARPI, *Letteratura e società nella Toscana del Risorgimento*, Bari, de Donato, 1974, and *Il poeta e la politica: Belli, Leopardi, Montale*, NapoliLiguori, 1978.

²⁰ Cf. for instance S. GENSINI, *Linguistica leopardiana: fondamenti teorici e prospettive politico-culturali*, Bologna, Il mulino, 1984; G. POLIZZI, *Leopardi e "le ragioni della verità". Scienze e filosofia della natura negli scritti leopardiani*, Roma, Carocci, 2003; IDEM, *Io sono quella che tu fuggi. Leopardi e la Natura*, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2015; V. SORDONI, *Il giovane Leopardi, la chimica e la storia naturale*, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2018; G. MUSSARDO, G. POLIZZI, *L'infinita Scienza di Leopardi*, Scienza Express, 2019.

3.4 The “iconological” level of this dissertation, focused on the Renaissance as a symbol of the relationship between poetry and philosophy in Leopardi, positions itself within the controversial reassessment of the disciplinary status of Leopardi’s philosophy. As mentioned above, since De Sanctis’s dialogue *Schopenhauer and Leopardi*, the notion that Leopardi’s poetry contained something more than his thought, the idea that his poetry was superior to his philosophy, became a constant trademark of the interpretations of Leopardi. This reading made it possible to leave aside the most destructive aspects of Leopardi’s philosophy and to incorporate Leopardi in the national canon. At the same time, such a disjuncture between Leopardi’s poetry and thought allowed Croce to consider him a bad philosopher, or rather not a philosopher at all, and at the same time a great poet. The problem with the idea of the disjuncture between Leopardi’s poetry and philosophy, although never formulated explicitly, is that it assumes that Leopardi regarded his own philosophy from a superior standpoint, and that his true philosophy can only be found in his poetry. Such a point of view, although it remains implicit, necessarily presupposes some kind of ironic distancing of Leopardi from his philosophical meditation. And yet, this would not be consistent with the fact that Leopardi always claimed to have experienced through his own life — one would almost say *in his own body* — the truth of his philosophy. At the same time, the idea that Leopardi’s true philosophy is in his poetry implies the impossibility of understanding Leopardi’s thought in the universal terms of philosophy.

3.5 Since Gentile, however, this trend started to conflict with the opposite exigency of acknowledging a philosophical status to Leopardi’s meditation. Such an exigency was substantiated by Luporini’s contribution on Leopardi’s ideological connotation, and the tendency

to reevaluate Leopardi's philosophical contribution continued in Timpanaro and Carpi. The slow decline of neo-idealistic hegemony in the Italian culture after the 60s together with the abandonment of a more traditional conception of philosophy, facilitated Leopardi's inclusion in the Italian philosophical canon. In the last decades of the century, with his book *Il pensiero poetante*, Antonio Prete offered a fundamental contribution to this process by finally abandoning the reticence to characterize Leopardi as a philosopher, and most of all by studying the cognitive value of poetry in the *Zibaldone*.²¹ This dissertation can be understood as an attempt to complement Prete's analysis with the symmetrical aspect of the poetic function of metaphysics in Leopardi.

3.6 The hermeneutic of the symbol of the Renaissance elaborates on the symbolism of the rebirth in Leopardi's writings, an aspect which was first recognized by Franco D'Intino, in his article *I misteri di Silvia. Motivo persefoneo e mistica eleusina in Leopardi*, the central thesis of which was later incorporated in the wider scope of *La caduta e il ritorno. Cinque movimenti della lirica leopardiana*²². More recently, an important contribution to understanding the inner logic of the evolution of Leopardi's thought came from Alessandra Aloisi's *Desiderio e assuefazione. Studio sul pensiero di Leopardi*, on the concept of *habituation* in the *Zibaldone*²³; this dissertation strongly agrees with Aloisi's point of view in considering the *Theory of Assuefaction* as the

²¹ ANTONIO PRETE, *Il pensiero poetante*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1980.

²² F. D'Intino, *I misteri di Silvia. Motivo persefoneo e mistica eleusina in Leopardi*, «Filologia e Critica», xix, 11, 1994, pp. 211-271; idem, *La caduta e il ritorno. Cinque movimenti della lirica leopardiana*, Macerata, quodlibet, 2019.

²³ A. ALOISI, *Desiderio e assuefazione. Studio sul pensiero di Leopardi*, Pisa, ETS, 2014.

fundamental axis of the development of Leopardi's thought. Recently, Martina Piperno has published *Rebuilding Post-revolutionary Italy: Leopardi and Vico's New Science*, a much welcome book on Vico and Leopardi, which helps to understand Leopardi's philosophy in the specific context of Italian culture during the first decades of the eighteenth century, where Vico's rediscovery played a major role in preparing the terrain for the independence struggle²⁴. The emphasis that this dissertation puts on Leopardi's philosophical history can properly be understood within the framework of Piperno's reconstruction of the aspects of continuity and fracture between Vico and Leopardi.

4. Contribution to the field

4.1 The main purpose of this dissertation is to contribute towards resolving the fracture that the reception of Leopardi's writings has involuntarily opened between his thought and his poetry. Although the last decades have witnessed a tendency in this direction, some fundamental problems remain untouched. The questions this dissertation tries to answer can be summarized as follows: why does Leopardi devote the extraordinary intellectual effort of the years 1823-25 to philosophical investigations? Why did he stop writing poems for seven years, between 1821 and 1828? Is there a connection between his poetical silence and his withdrawal from political commitment? Why does he go back to poetry after seven years of poetical silence? These four questions, although never posed explicitly, have been implicitly answered in a biographical and psychoanalytical framework, or in terms of Leopardi's "ideological crisis", to the point that they

²⁴ M. PIPERNO, *Rebuilding Post-revolutionary Italy: Leopardi and Vico's New Science*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2018.

are no longer recognized as problematic. These questions however decide the relationship between poetry and philosophy in Leopardi, so that the implicit answers dominate the way we read him. This dissertation tries to answer these questions in terms of Leopardi's poetry and philosophy, through the hermeneutic of the symbol of the Renaissance.

4.2 The central thesis of this dissertation is that Leopardi's interpretation of the Renaissance as imagination's return beyond the world-measurement becomes a poetic image that Leopardi offers in order to make the unity of his poetry and his philosophy intelligible. Leopardi's philosophical investigation, adopting the quantitative approach of metaphysical reason, repeats the fulfillment of the world-measurement, in order to achieve a representation of the finiteness of finitude that allows the images of the infinite to return. Centered on the hermeneutics of Leopardi's *1824 Dialogue of Christopher Columbus and Pierre Gutierrez* in Chapter V, this reading of Leopardi's itinerary is based on the results achieved by the more limited inquiries with which the other chapters of this dissertation are concerned.

4.3 The idea that Leopardi's return to poetry is a return from beyond the fulfillment of metaphysics implies the closure, that is to say, the systematic character, of Leopardi's philosophy. The existence of such a system in Leopardi's writings has been a recurring claim in several different readings of Leopardi, which have remained rather marginal in the scholarly debate. The failure of these attempts to provide a convincing image of Leopardi's thought has consolidated the opinion that the lack of a system is a distinctive character of Leopardi's philosophy. In the last fifty years, systematic closure started to be perceived as the symptom that

reveals the totalizing ambitions of idealistic philosophies; the general disaffection towards the system has made it possible to read in Leopardi's lack of systematicity the most precious, most modern, quasi-post-modern, aspect of his philosophy.

4.4 It is certainly understandable that the enthusiasm for Leopardi has spurred the desire to see him as a forerunner of postmodern critique of systematic thought. However, such a reading tends to overlook some aspects I will briefly recount here:

- 1) in several passages of the *Zibaldone*, while condemning the excesses of systematic spirit, Leopardi declares that it is impossible to be a philosopher without having a system;
- 2) Leopardi repeatedly refers to himself as a philosopher, and to his philosophical meditation as “my system”;
- 3) In several passages of the *Zibaldone*, and of his letters and his literary projects, Leopardi refers to a part of his philosophical meditation as “metaphysical”.

Based on these three elements, the discussion about the presence of a system in Leopardi's philosophy cannot be resolved negatively: it is merely dogmatic to say that there is no system in Leopardi. The problem is rather that we do not have a credible image of this system, an image which is poetic enough to be suited to something we know too well of Leopardi, that is, the disquieting power of his poetic words. Although a failure on such an ambitious topic would be peculiar, it is conceivable that a credible reconstruction of this system can be provided, one that could better illuminate aspects of Leopardi's writings, without dispelling the powerful aura of his poetry.

4.5 The contribution I propose with the reconstruction of Leopardi's system in Chapter VII does not really consist of introducing new ideas, but rather in the elaboration of concepts which can mostly be found in Aloisi's book on *habituation*. I read Leopardi's theory of *habituation* in the light of the systematic order he was familiar with from the manuals of metaphysics he had studied in his youth. I substitute the term *habituation* with the term *conformability* because this is the technical term that Leopardi develops to define the living being in a passage that he calls a "*metaphysical definition of life*". Given the fundamental role that the living being plays in the economy of Leopardi's thought, I propose to understand the word *conformability* as the fundamental term of Leopardi's metaphysics.

4.6 In the interpretation I propose in Chapter VI, Leopardi's attempt to bring empiricism to metaphysical coherence should not be regarded as a mediation between different European traditions, but rather as a theoretical move that expresses Leopardi's critical stance towards these traditions. Leopardi dismantles the pretenses of metaphysics with his empiricism, and employs a metaphysical systematic order to bring empiricism to its extreme consequences. Such a criticism does not consist so much in the research and eventual discovery of inconsistencies in those philosophical traditions, but rather in a glance to their origin, and in the question of their meaning. Rationalism and empiricism are for Leopardi two aspects of the same historical event, which is the measurement of the world by reason. Leopardi's poetry and philosophy is essentially concerned with this event.

4.7 The main point which is proposed in Chapter VII, is that Leopardi's philosophical meditation can be interpreted as something close, finite. Interpreting Leopardi's meditation in this way makes it possible to account for the expression «*conclusion of the entire metaphysics*» which Leopardi employs in the *Zibaldone* to characterize his thesis of the opposition between the existent and existence. This aspect takes a specific meaning in light of the main argument which this dissertation proposes, meaning that Leopardi interpreted his own return to poetry in 1828 as a return from beyond the fulfillment of metaphysics. The entire dissertation is an attempt to explain how such a return was conceived, prepared and pursued.

4.8 The closure of Leopardi's metaphysics allows us to read Leopardi's philosophy as a part of his poetry. That is to say, in the interpretation proposed by this dissertation, Leopardi's philosophical research has a fundamentally poetic character, in the sense that its meaning can be expressed in a poetic image, which is what I call the *symbol of the Renaissance*. Such a symbol, at the same time, is based on Leopardi's philosophical interpretation of the Renaissance, and therefore it allows us to understand the existence of Leopardi's poetry despite the conclusions of his philosophy in terms which are not merely paradoxical. From this point of view, Leopardi's poetry can be considered coextensive with his philosophy, in the sense that Leopardi's thought can explain what his poetry does. In other words, I propose reading the symbol of the Renaissance as the door that allows Leopardi to move from poetry to philosophy and from philosophy to poetry, realizing that *ultraphilosophy* he considered the only possible modernity.

4.9 The development of Leopardi's interpretation and symbolism of the Renaissance can help to trace a line of continuity in Leopardi's writings, in order to grasp the persistency as well as the transformation of the political problem, both in his poetic and philosophical research. Such a continuity, however, goes through a radical transformation of the symbolism of the Renaissance which was conventional in Italy at the time: Leopardi progressively strips the symbol of the Renaissance of its nationalistic content, tuning it in a key which is at the same time more intimate and more inclusive. The Renaissance becomes for Leopardi an image of the maximum tension between reason and poetry, an image of the fate of what is poetic in the age in which metaphysical reason dominates the world. Such a tension is not just a tension between two particular disciplines that exist among the others, but rather a tension between the universalizing force of reason and the individualizing force of imagination. According to Leopardi, the balance between these two forces shapes the form that humanity assumes in a given historical time, and therefore the concrete possibilities of happiness that belong to a certain civilization. For this reason, the Renaissance becomes for Leopardi a symbol of his own intimate experience of such tension, the experience of being a poet who abandons poetry and devotes himself to philosophical research, returning to poetry at the end of his metaphysical journey.

4.10 The conflagration of particular and universal, which has been said to be the most distinctive character of Leopardi's poetic style, appears from this point of view as the distinctive trait of Leopardi's thought as well. Appropriating philosophy through poetry, Leopardi transforms the universal into a part of the particular. The symbol of the Renaissance captures the movement through which the universality of reason, after imposing his sovereignty on the universe, can be

restituted to the individuality of the living. Our age of the algorithm in many respects materializes the age of the fulfillment of the world-measurement that Leopardi hints at in his symbol of the Renaissance. He raises his voice from the struggles of the Age of Revolutions and entrusts us with his words. The radicalism of his critique of modernity challenges us to rethink the very form of critique, in order to overcome the distinction between form and content. With the symbol of the Renaissance Leopardi does not prescribe a fate to the history we live in. He poses to us the challenge of a possible destiny, one he chose for himself: the return.

Chapter I

The conversation on the Renaissance at the Gabinetto Vieusseux

Introduction

The problem of the relationship between Renaissance and Risorgimento has often been considered as an essentially Italian problem. In a fragment of his *Notebooks*, Gramsci writes: «It is noteworthy that in Italian historico-political discourse there exists a series of expressions that are difficult, and sometimes impossible, to translate into a foreign language: thus we have the group ‘Rinascimento,’ ‘Rinascita,’ ‘Rinascenza,’».²⁵ The word ‘Risorgimento’ — as Gramsci remarks a few lines below — belongs to this series. Gramsci attributes the peculiar untranslatability of this family of terms to a tendency in national historiography that conceives the Italian ‘nation’ as born with Rome, thus maintaining the existence of «an essential continuity of the history that happened in the Italian peninsula». The trope of the rebirth, in other words, rests on the implicit assumption of the identity of the subject that undergoes the process of decline and reawakening.

At the time when Gramsci was writing, the relationship between Risorgimento and Renaissance appeared in Italian historiography mainly in terms of the problematic tension between continuity

²⁵ANTONIO GRAMSCI, *Prison Notebooks*, vol. 2, ed. and tr. by J. Buttigieg, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p. 387. The original reads: «Nel linguaggio storico-politico italiano è da notare tutta una serie di espressioni, legate strettamente al modo tradizionale di concepire la storia della nazione e della cultura italiana, che è difficile e talvolta impossibile di tradurre nelle lingue straniere. Così abbiamo il gruppo «Rinascimento», «Rinascita» («Rinascenza», francesismo), termini che sono ormai entrati nel circolo della cultura europea e mondiale, perchè se il fenomeno indicato ebbe il massimo splendore in Italia, non fu però ristretto all’Italia» ANTONIO GRAMSCI, *Quaderni dal Carcere*, Quaderno 26 (XII), §(11), ed. by V. Gerratana, Torino, Einaudi, 1975.

and discontinuity in Italian history. Was it possible to establish a connection between the crisis of Renaissance civilization at its peak in the sixteenth century, subsequent decadence, and ultimately the reawakening of the Risorgimento? This question was in turn connected with alternative genealogies of Risorgimento offered by authors of different political views, even though they shared the idea of this continuity in Italian history²⁶.

In its most refined form, this historiographical tradition appears in Croce's short essay *The crisis of the sixteenth century and the link between Renaissance and Risorgimento*²⁷. Here Croce addresses the problem of continuity in Italian history by abandoning every sort of «causal or deterministic explanation», in favor of the study of the «ideal elements» that, in each historical age, have pointed towards the future. That is to say, what is truly historical are not so much the events concretely happening in a certain age, but rather the possibilities which this age bequeaths to the future. This disclosure of possibility is what Croce calls the *positive*, as opposed to what fades without entering the future. This point of view allows Croce to minimize the cleavage, or as he says, the *hiatus*, that the writers of the Risorgimento had felt in front of the sixteenth century, which appeared to many of them as an age of moral decadence that brought with itself political decline as a necessary consequence. On the contrary, Croce focuses on the intellectual heredity of the Renaissance, and thus reads the writings of Vico, and foremost Giannone, as a manifestation of the continuity in the Italian culture, an episode that preludes, and somehow prepares, the political rebirth of the Risorgimento.

²⁶ S. J. WOOLF offered an interesting reconstruction of this problem in his *Risorgimento e Fascismo: il senso della continuità nella storiografia Italiana*, in «Belfagor», Vol. 20, No. 1 (31 Gennaio 1965), pp. 71-91.

²⁷ B. CROCE, *La crisi Italiana del Cinquecento ed il legame del Rinascimento col Risorgimento*, «La Critica. Rivista di Letteratura, Storia e Filosofia diretta da B. Croce», 37, 1939, pp.401-11.

It took almost half of a century before this perspective could be openly challenged in Dionisotti's article *Renaissance and Risorgimento: the moral question*.²⁸ Rather than the problem of an implicit continuity between Renaissance and Risorgimento, a continuity which he rates as "weak", Dionisotti — after acknowledging his debt towards Croce — investigates the reasons of the negative evaluation of the sixteenth century that many authors of the Risorgimento have given in their writings. He distinguishes three sets of reasons: ignorance, distance and incompatibility. The first refers to the lack of serious historical knowledge of the fifteenth and sixteenth century in Italy, during the Risorgimento. The second is inaccessibility for most of the Italian historians given that the best European literature on the argument was mainly in German and that few among them could understand that language. The third, finally, is the necessity for the ruling class of the Risorgimento to establish - also from a moral point of view - the authority of the state in front of the Church: according to Dionisotti, tracing back the newborn state to the century that in Italy witnessed an unprecedented degree of moral license, anarchy, and political ruthlessness, would have weakened its prestige.

To Croce's history of the positive, Dionisotti opposes the historical reconstruction of what were the obstacles, the limitations and the barriers that prevented the Risorgimento from a deeper understanding of the Renaissance: in brief, a history of the negative. Both of these methodological positions, the positive and the negative, have proved to be productive in the

²⁸ C. DIONISOTTI, *Rinascimento e Risorgimento: la questione morale*, in *Il Rinascimento nell'Ottocento*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1987, pp.157-69.

successive development of lines of historical research²⁹. Both of them indeed have good reasons on their side, since in a certain sense they look at two different objects: while Croce examined what we could call the future of the Renaissance (objective genitive), a historical object which is essentially “prospective”, Dionisotti on the contrary looks at the past of the Risorgimento (subjective genitive), and the object of his research is thus plainly “retrospective”. Despite their seemingly oppositional positions, these two readings of the relationship between the Risorgimento and the Renaissance nevertheless share an important methodological assumption: both of them employ the notion of Renaissance as a fixed historiographical category, substantially overlooking the fact that such a category, in the sense they mean it, does not appear in the historiography of the age of the Risorgimento. This approach is, generally speaking, methodologically correct: if we study the use of iterations in the traditional poetry of a nomadic tribe, the concept of iteration — even if unknown to the language of that tribe — can help us to understand certain aspects of that poetry. Iteration helps us to construe the object of our research. It can be also meaningful to ask if the tribe has a poetic word to refer to iterations. With this question we turn towards an entirely different research. This peregrine example is meant to introduce the problem of the presence of a certain notion of Renaissance different from ours, in the historiography of the age of the Risorgimento. The problem of the relationship between Risorgimento and Renaissance, put in these terms, has a retrospective nature, insofar as its object

²⁹ It could seem easy today to dismiss Croce’s idea of the history of the positive as burdened by its idealism. As a matter of fact, an important contribution as F. VENTURI, *La circolazione delle idee* («Rassegna storica del Risorgimento», XLI, 2-3, Aprile -Settembre, 1954), with all the fruitful lines of research that it opened, can be traced back to Croce’s ideas on the continuity between Risorgimento and Renaissance. There is an intrinsically ideal element in the empirical fact that each past has its own history, and thus its past and future. As Venturi writes at the beginning of his essay, what is true for political history is not always equally true in the history of ideas. Future and past, we can say, may hardly be erased from the first, but certainly not from the latter.

is the way in which the authors taken in consideration conceived their history. At the same time, this question looks prospectively towards the development of the notion of Renaissance in the successive period.

In the following pages this issue will be addressed by examining the circle gravitating around the *Gabinetto* Vieuzeux in Florence in the first half of the nineteenth century. The discussion on the Renaissance at the *Gabinetto* Vieuzeux takes place in a crucial moment in the history of the development of this historiographical category, just before its crystallization in its “modern” form, conventionally traced back to Michelet, at the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century. The debate on the Renaissance at the *Gabinetto* Vieuzeux can thus be understood as a moment in the history of the European elaboration of the concept of Renaissance. In its material aspect, this research — albeit conducted at a much smaller chronological and geographical scale — tries thus to move along the lines of research laid down by Cantimori in his essay *On the history of the concept of Renaissance*³⁰. In this essay dated 1932, the author analyzed the successive layers of historical interpretations that have contributed to shaping our notion of Renaissance. From a formal standpoint nevertheless, there is a difference: Cantimori’s essay aimed at the purification of the notion of Renaissance from the superimposed ideological incrustations, in order to offer a critical concept of Renaissance that could be employed by the contemporary historians³¹. Cantimori indeed meant to handle in this

³⁰ D. CANTIMORI, *Sulla storia del concetto di Rinascimento*, Annali della R. Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Lettere, Storia e Filosofia, Serie II, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1932), pp. 229-268.

³¹ This is, at least, what Cantimori explicitly stated in the essay. The fact that, without being mentioned in the title, the comparison between Reformation and Renaissance occupies such a large portion of this article, seems nevertheless to suggest that the essay aimed at a broader study of the relationship between these two defining moments in the European self-awareness.

way the problem of the circularity of historical notions, a problem that he had found in Gentile's *Logic*. In the following pages, on the contrary, there is no attempt to construe a purely scientific notion of the Renaissance, because the object of the inquiry here is precisely the twist, taken *per se*, of the different sets of motivations that were at play in the elaboration of the modern notion of Renaissance. This elaboration indeed happened in a historical context where the reformulation of the collective memory was closely intertwined with the development of the public sphere, the diffusion of press and the increasing of its political relevance³². Under this point of view, the relationship between Risorgimento and Renaissance appears as a moment, or, to better say, as one of the possible formulations, of a wider European question³³.

1. Hints on the Gabinetto Vieusseux

In the opening pages of the *Chartreuse*, Stendhal's description of the reaction of the Milanese to Napoleon's entrance into the city portrays a scene of enthusiasm and enlightenment:

³² See B. ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origins and the Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1991, and R. KOSELLECK, *Critique and Crisis. Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1988.

³³ The question of a contraposition between a "Europeanist" and a "nationalistic" understanding of the Risorgimento has been clearly exposed in L. SALVATORELLI, *The Risorgimento, thought and action*, (tr. by M. Domandi, Harper and Row, New York, 1970). It can be worthy to quote his words here, as an *ex ergo*, since they perfectly frame the much more modest problem of the relationship between Risorgimento and Renaissance: «The purely Europeanist thesis does not suppress the real data of the Risorgimento, nor does it distort its true process; it merely blocks a complete view. The nationalistic thesis, on the other hand, ignores or falsifies the history of Italy before the Risorgimento — the very history which should provide its most solid foundation. For it is precisely from a study of the continuity between pre-Risorgimento and Risorgimento Italy that the European inspiration bursts forth, the European need to which Risorgimento responds. The Risorgimento takes up the thread of Italian history precisely inasmuch as it brings Italy back to European civilization, back to the path of European progress from which it had departed when it abandoned the traditions of liberty and universality of thought that has formed its true greatness» (ivi, p.12). Salvatorelli's rhetoric, which could sound overloaded today, must be read with an eye to the dates: this book was first published in 1943. For a historical contextualization, see M. CILIBERTO, *Difesa del Risorgimento*, in *Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti. Il contributo italiano alla storia del pensiero*, Ottava Appendice, Filosofia, ed. by M. Ciliberto, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2012, pp. 377-381.

A whole people discovered, on the 15th of May, 1796, that everything which until then it had respected was supremely ridiculous, if not actually hateful. The departure of the last Austrian regiment marked the collapse of the old ideas: to risk one's life became the fashion. People saw that in order to be really happy after centuries of cloying sensations, it was necessary to love one's country with a real love and to seek out heroic actions. They had been plunged in the darkest night by the continuation of the jealous despotism of Charles V and Philip II; they overturned these monarchs' statues and immediately found themselves flooded with daylight.³⁴

While obviously not a historical account, Stendahl's description nevertheless captures an important aspect of these events. In just a few lines, it gives us a sense of the particular intertwining of foreign invasion, universal revolutionary principles and patriotic sentiments that constitutes the most striking aspect of the Napoleonic Kingdoms of Italy. The last in a long series of invasions dating back to Charles VIII's in the fifteenth century, that of Napoleon was widely perceived not only as an opportunity for the ending of the *ancient regime*, but also as a premise for the creation of an independent Italian state. «There was no independence, it is true — Cesare Balbo recalled around fifteen years after — but it had never seemed so close³⁵».

Soon enough, however, with the decline of Napoleon's lucky star, the enthusiasm awakened by the experience of the two Italian Kingdoms faded. Notwithstanding the victories of the Northern Kingdom's army against the Austrians, the independence of the two kingdoms was fatally undermined by the political fragmentation between the two respective capitals, Naples

³⁴ STENDHAL, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, University of Adelaide Press, Chapter I.

³⁵ C. BALBO, *Storia d'Italia*, Torino, Pomba, 1846, pp.437-8The full passage reads: «Non v'era indipendenza, è vero, ma non ne furono mai speranze così vicine. Non v'era libertà politica, ma n'erano almeno le forme in un gran centro italiano; non libertà civile ben guarentita, ma legale almeno; e poi, v'era quella eguaglianza che a molti, bene o male, fa compenso alle mancanze di libertà. Non libertà di scrivere, certamente; ma non gelosie, non paure d'ogni sorta di coltura, non disprezzo degli uomini colti, non quella separazione tra essi e gli uomini pratici, che è il maggior de' disprezzi, e quasi smentita e scherno delle vantate protezioni. Chiuso poco dopo il mare, non vi fu operosità commerciale; ma v'eran quelle delle industrie, e dell'agricoltura, e della milizia: dico quell'operosità di guerra, che è senza dubbio calamità all'universale, ma felicità suprema forse a molti di coloro che l'esercitano, perché è supremo esercizio dell'umane facoltà».

and Milan, and by that within the Milanese patriciate itself. When the Austrians reentered Milan on April 28th 1814, Italy was widely expected to return to its long lasting slumber, as if nothing had happened. A bitter sense of resignation echoes in the words Foscolo wrote from Zurich in the aftermath of the fall of the northern Kingdom: «you are convinced, as well as I, and all but a small number of desperate fanatics — we are all convinced that Italian independence is a most desperate thing: others will say that we are not ripe for it; I believe, rather I know, that we are ripe to the point of rottenness, and that without a fire like that which broke out in France, we will not change our condition: but is it necessary to burn everything in order to make Italy? — Better to be wretched, as indeed we are, than lunatics before the world's eyes³⁶».

Foscolo was not only a famous poet at the time, but also someone who had fought in the Napoleonic army and had had an active role in the Milanese political scene, trying to preserve the independence of the northern Kingdom after the fall of Napoleon. Along with many others who had opposed the return of the Austrians, he was forced to go into exile. Alternating between resignation and lucidity, he continued nevertheless to meditate on the causes of the failure of the experience of the Italian Kingdoms. According to Foscolo, more than the power struggle of the great European nations, factionalism within Italy was the main stumbling block on the path to national independence. The incipit of his *Discourses on the independence of Italy*, written right after the return of the Austrians in Milan, tellingly reads: «In order to make Italy, it is necessary to unmake the factions». Foscolo thought that among the many obstacles impeding independence, the first that had to be overcome was the absence of a wide consensus regarding certain ideas that had a preliminary role in the formation of an independent state. When the

³⁶ U. FOSCOLO, Letter to S. Trechi, Zurich, 2 June 1815. Quoted in U. Foscolo, *Opere*, Vol. 2, Milano-Napoli, Ricciardi, 1981, pp. 1194-5.

young marquis Gino Capponi, a learned descendent of one of the most ancient families of Florence, went to visit Foscolo in London, he found a few pages titled *Opinions on the project of a literary journal* on his desk.³⁷ These pages had been written by Foscolo in response to an invitation from the count Fiquelmont, on behalf of the Austrian government just reestablished in Milan, to become the editor of a literary journal. With this move the Austrians were aiming to pacify the occupied territories, hoping that granting permission to publish a literary journal under the authority of Foscolo would be taken as a sign of benevolence, as well as of the possibility of peaceful coexistence between the Italians and the occupiers in the context of the Hapsburg's super-national empire. For Foscolo, accepting such an invitation would have meant turning himself into a pawn on the chessboard of Austrian politics. Though Foscolo ultimately refused, he carefully considered the proposal, even drafting a possible answer. Taken at face value, the task of Foscolo's drafted literary journal was to create a public opinion that would moderate the fierce sentiments of the people in order to make the subjects more subservient to the will of the sovereigns:

Every reigning house has the need, the right and the duty, to make the opinions of its subjects conform to their system of government: the means of doing so, however, have to be extremely delicate, and especially so where there are factions; violence not only provokes the discontented into protest, it also encourages vindictive insolence on the part of the partisans of the new government (...) Thus it is literature which can mediate between reason of state and the passions of the people³⁸.

³⁷ For an introduction to Capponi see P. Treves, *Gino Capponi* in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 19, Roma 1976, pp. 32-46; on Capponi's intellectual profile see E. Garin, *Il Pensiero di Gino Capponi*, in AA. VV. *Gino Capponi, Storico, Linguista e Pensatore*, pp. 39-56; cf. also, in the same volume E. Sestan, *Gino Capponi, Storico e Cittadino*, ibi, pp. 27-38.

³⁸ G. CAPPONI, *Lettere di Gino Capponi e di altri a lui*, ed. by A. Carraresi, Firenze, Le Monnier, 1884, pp.500-1: «Ogni casa regnante ha bisogno, diritto e dovere di ridurre le opinioni dei sudditi al sistema del suo governo; i mezzi ad ogni modo vogliono essere delicatissimi, e più che mai dove trova esulcerate le sette; la violenza, mentre provoca le querele de' malcontenti, accresce l'insolenza vendicativa de' partigiani del nuovo governo. [...] Così dunque la letteratura può farsi mediatrice fra la ragione di stato e le passioni del popolo».

Foscolo's precise identification of a moderate agenda — acceptable for the interests of the sovereigns — with the interests of the struggle for independence, allows him to offer us a masterful example of double thought: while ostensibly aiming at the repression of the factions in favor of the reinforcement of the constitute power, he is in fact drafting a plan to bring about the conditions for the replacement of the sovereigns themselves and the creation of an independent Italian nation. Following Foscolo, the literary journal was to be an open space where Italian public opinion could grow and strengthen, tuned into debates taking place in the rest of Europe and protected from the disruptive influence of the factions. That is, the journal was to serve as instrument for the unmaking of the factions, and so as a foundation for the movement towards independence.

Aware of the ambiguity inherent in his project, Foscolo was extremely reluctant to make it public. Still, Capponi's enthusiasm, fueled by his clear understanding of Foscolo's strategic outlook, sufficed to get the pages out of Foscolo's hands, though only with the promise that they would remain secret until their author's death³⁹. While traveling through France, the Netherlands and Switzerland, Capponi reworked Foscolo's pages into his *Project for a Journal*. He wrote to his friends in Tuscany sharing his enthusiasm about the project and making plans for the time of his return to Florence.

The situation of the press in Italy at the time was characterized by two contradictory tendencies: on the one hand, after the sudden outburst of freedom in the revolutionary triennium (1796-99), the press was rapidly brought under the control of the state, first by the French and later by the

³⁹ Cf. *Lettere di Gino Capponi e di altri a lui*, cit., p.499, n.1.

Austrians. On the other hand, as Galante Garrone observed, after the experience of the Revolution «the idea of press conceived as instrument of propaganda, and explicit or disguised apology of the regime, was no longer to be abandoned⁴⁰». Under the control of the state, the political role of the press continued to be enhanced, albeit in a conservative sense. In prospective, this new role acquired by the press constituted the implicit premise for its transformation in an instrument for the diffusion of ideas contrary to the regime⁴¹. However, after the Napoleonic interlude, the regulation of the activity of the press was among the first concerns of the recently re-established government in Tuscany. Preventive censorship was instituted for the writings published within the State, and political debate was banned from the press⁴².

Notwithstanding these unfavorable conditions, when Capponi arrived Florence in 1819, he found that something analogous to what he had in mind was already taking place in town: Jean Pierre Vieusseux, a merchant belonging to a Genevan family, had just opened in Palazzo Buondelmonti

⁴⁰ ALESSANDRO GALANTE GARRONE, Franco della Paruta, *La stampa Italiana del Risorgimento*, Bari, Laterza, 1979, p. 8. See also M. ISABELLA, *Italy 1760-1815*, in *Press Politics and Public Sphere in Europe, 1760-1820*, edited by H. Barker and S. Burrows, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp.201-23.

⁴¹ The oscillation between freedom of speech and censorship in the development of the political role of the press, tends to smoothen Koselleck's distinction between the understanding of the dichotomy public/private on which the absolutist state rested, and the one that was developed in the *republic des lettres*. See also J. HABERMAS, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, tr. by Thomas Burger, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989, esp. p.24: «Not the notorious dress codes, but taxes and duties and, generally, official interventions into the privatized households finally came to constitute the target of a developing critical sphere. (...) Because, on the one hand, the society now confronting the state clearly separated a private domain from public authority and because, on the other hand, it turned the reproduction of life into something transcending the confines of private domestic authority and becoming a subject of public interest, that zone of continuous administrative contact became "critical" also in the sense that it provoked the critical judgement of a public making use of its reason. The public could take on this challenge all the better as it required merely a change in the function of the instrument with whose help the state administration had already turned society into a public affair in a specific sense—the press».

⁴² Cf. A. CHIAVISTELLI, *Dallo Stato alla Nazione, Costituzione e sfera pubblica in Toscana dal 1814 al 1849*, Roma, Carocci, 2006, especially §2.6, *Uno Stato senza pubblico: parole e idee sotto controllo*, pp.84-93.

his *Gabinetto di Lettura*, a reading room and circulating library whose members had the opportunity to read the most prestigious journals from the rest of Europe and to share their ideas in informal conversation every Thursday evening. This institution would prove its importance in the years to come, counting among its associates not only the most important Italian intellectuals of the time, but also important figures of European culture such as Stendahl, Savigny and Schopenhauer. Vieusseux immediately embraced Capponi's idea for a journal, and in 1821 the two established the *Antologia* which went on, in the following decade, to become the leading force in the creation of Italian public opinion. The success of the initiative was also due to Vieusseux's activity for enhancing the institutional conditions that would have made possible his commercial enterprise. Under this point of view, as Carpi has argued, the historical relevance of the journal cannot be fully understood without considering Vieusseux's endeavors for the institution of commercial agreements among the Italian states, in order to diminish the level of the tariffs, and his campaign for the recognition of intellectual property and copyright⁴³. The transformation of the institutional conditions regarding the press market, the commercial enterprise of the journal and the cultural reunions in Palazzo Buondelmonti were all part of the same project, namely, the creation of a space open to public debate, different in nature from the secret meetings held by factions. The Gabinetto, as a physical space of encounter, functioned as a sort of incubator for the journal: the ideas that appeared in print were somehow the result of a collective process. Guided by Foscolo's intuition about the role of factions in Italian politics, Capponi and Vieusseux sought not to impose an ideological program, but to establish a common ground on

⁴³ U. CARPI, *Letteratura e società nella Toscana del Risorgimento. Gli intellettuali dell'«Antologia»*, De Donato, Bari, 1974, see especially pp. 102-111.

which different perspectives could be exchanged and eventually compete in the development of a wider plan for independence⁴⁴.

2. Mirrors of the Risorgimento

The people gathered for Thursday meetings at Palazzo Buondelmonti and the contributors to *Antologia* shared a common vision for the future; namely, to end the longstanding fragmentation of Italy so as to achieve political autonomy. They frequently referred to this future in terms of *risorgimento*, a return to life, and this word rapidly assumed a programmatic meaning: in a letter to the philosopher Baldassare Poli, Vieusseux himself describes the mission of his journal as that of being an instrument of *risorgimento*: «(...) the nature of my journal» he writes «requires free and elevated sentiments, expressed with earnest liberty, and always with the wider possible utility for

⁴⁴ The image of the *Gabinetto* sketched in this and the following paragraph is clearly selective, and partly differs from that given in the scholarly literature on this topic. Tracing back to Foscolo the idea of the project, and connecting this idea with his experience in the fall of the Italian Kingdom, the emphasis falls on the endeavor to establish public sphere as an institution. The coexistence of different political, religious and economic points of view in the circle is therefore understood as a consequence of the main argument. On the contrary Umberto Carpi, who has given some of the most interesting contributions on the subject, has stressed the existence of a common ideology emerging from the different ideological perspectives in the circle (see U. CARPI, *Letteratura e società nella Toscana del Risorgimento. Gli intellettuali dell'«Antologia»*, cit., especially the first chapter, «Vieusseux e il modello toscano di sviluppo», pp.11-73). Carpi does not overlook the presence of ideological positions that cannot be reduced to that of the core, but rates them as “marginal”. The apparent contradiction between these two points of view can be overcome, once the necessity of establishing the public sphere as a political institution is understood as an essential part of the ideological position of the core of the circle. In this sense, Carpi’s interpretation is compatible with the one given here, and it will only need a slight terminological change: the presence of different points of view in the circle should be said “strategical” rather than “marginal”, for the whole circle was defined by it as non-ideological, and thus institutional. This apparent ambiguity, regarding the enhancement and the denial of an ideological program within the circle, can be read as a consequence of the classical liberal point of view: the distinction, according to the principle of the Rule of Law, between the formal level of the desirable institutions, considered as universal, and their actual political content, which is historically determined. Liberalism places itself at once as the form and the content of its political project, or, to better say, as the whole and a part. In the Vieusseux circle the “core” was only a part of the group, but yet it was this part that was most interested in the existence of the circle as a whole. On Carpi’s position see also GALANTE GARRONE, *I giornali della restaurazione*, in *La stampa italiana del Risorgimento*, cit., pp.129-31.

the good and the *risorgimento* of the Italian culture.⁴⁵ To this day, we use the term *Risorgimento* in order to characterize that season of Italian history. Still, the people in the Vieuxseux circle conceived of this future in quite divergent ways. When it came to politics, religion and more, they lacked a common point of view. Each of them arrived at the doors of Palazzo Buondelmonti from a different path. Just as their opinions about the future differed, so, too, did their opinions about the past. Their views about how to realize independence reflected how they looked at Italian and European history; at the same time, their interpretations of the past shaped their vision of the future. If this is true of their approach to the past in general, it is especially true regarding their understanding of the specific historiographical category that we now refer to by the name of *Renaissance*. Roughly speaking, in Italy at the time this category was expressed by the word *risorgimento*.⁴⁶ Not only a concept without a thing — in the sense that it does not refer to something material, but rather to a certain historical awareness grounded in a specific interpretation of temporality — the Renaissance has also long been an idea in pursuit of a word.

The origin of this notion is usually traced back to Vasari's «*rinascita*», which, however, was used in the context of art history. In the historiography of the Enlightenment there is the idea of a plurality of *renaissances*, the *renaissance des arts, des lettres, des lumières*. It was only relatively late — in the second half of the XIX century — that the French word «*renaissance*» — followed by the Italianized form «*rinascimento*» — acquired a temporarily indisputable status. In the period with which we are concerned, things were different. From the publication of

⁴⁵ J. P. VIEUSSEUX, letter to Baldassarre Poli, September 15, 1827, Vieuxseux Archive, Florence, copy letter book, 03.0326.

⁴⁶ The asymmetry in the use of capitalization ('Renaissance', 'risorgimento') reflects the fact that, writing in Italian, the authors of the Gabinetto Vieuxseux usually do not capitalize the word 'risorgimento'. In the context of this article, it is also meant to stress the difference between their notion of 'risorgimento' and the current historiographical category of 'Risorgimento'.

Bettinelli's 1786 book *Del Risorgimento dell'Italia negli studi, ne' le arti e nei costumi dopo il mille*, the word «risorgimento» in Italy began to take on a technical value as historiographical category, momentarily surpassing other forms such as «rinascita» and «rinascimento» that had sporadically appeared in art history literature⁴⁷. The main novelty of Bettinelli's book was that it showed the interlacements among the various *renaissances* of enlightenment historiography, framing them within the wider social and political context. In keeping with this well-established historiographical tradition, discussion of the Renaissance at Palazzo Buondelmonti largely made use of the word «risorgimento», which nevertheless carried quite different connotations depending on who pronounced it. Still, across its many uses, this word always involved a conflation of past and future. For those in the Vieusseux circle, the future rebirth they longed for and the one they saw in the past mirrored each other. From the mutual reflection of these rebirths, there emerges an image in movement of the intellectual circle gravitating around the *Gabinetto*, of its manifold souls and of the project of gathering these different forces towards the realization of a common end.

The authors' discussions in the following pages were connected in different degrees to the Vieusseux circle: some of them visited Palazzo Buondelmonti only a few times, while others were in the core of the circle. Some of them expressed their ideas about the Renaissance in the *Antologia*, others published books that were discussed in the journal, and still others wrote on issues related to this topic only several years after publication of the journal had ceased. Still, we can imagine that arriving at Palazzo Buondelmonti on a Thursday evening, one might have encountered in conversation some of the ideas that we find in these sources. Thus, the scope of

⁴⁷ Cf. A. COTUGNO, “‘Rinascimento’ e ‘Risorgimento’ (XVIII-XIX secolo)”, in *Lingua e Stile*, 47(2), December 2012, p. 272 .

the present argument is, to a certain extent, fictive insofar as such a conversation could never have happened in Palazzo Buondelmonti. Collecting these sources nonetheless allows us to have a sense of the semantic fields and the conceptual patterns that were associated with the word «risorgimento» in that context.⁴⁸

The different ideas of the Renaissance held by the members of the Vieuksseux circle will not appear here in the chronological order in which they appeared in print. Rather than a history of the development of certain ideas about the Renaissance in the Vieuksseux circle, the following pages place these ideas on a map, or, alternatively, a taxonomic table.

The span of time to which these authors understood the category of «risorgimento» was usually much wider than that implied by the late XIX century notion of Renaissance, as will become clearer in the discussion of the different theories of the origins of the «risorgimento». Despite the remarkable differences between the notion of *Risorgimento* as it was understood by the Vieuksseux circle and the concept of Renaissance that later came to dominate in historiography, in the following pages I use the term Renaissance to refer to the Italian «Risorgimento». The main reason for doing so is that in the period here considered, these two words were used interchangeably, so that for instance in the Italian edition of D'Agincourt's *Histoire* the word «renaissance» was translated as «risorgimento», while an Italian author writing in French would have rendered «risorgimento» as renaissance, as indeed Libri does in his *Histoire des sciences mathématiques en Italie, depuis la renaissance des lettres jusqu'à la fin du dix-septième siècle*.

⁴⁸ In this respect this chapter complements the attempt to understand the presence of the Renaissance in the horizon of the Gabinetto Vieuksseux made by Leandro Pierini through the study of the library. Cf. Leandro Pierini, *Il Rinascimento al Vieuksseux*, *Archivio Storico Italiano*, gennaio-marzo 2001, Vol. 159, No. 1 (587), pp. 171-190.

Art history naturally played an important role in this conversation. Nonetheless the notion of «Risorgimento» proved to have had a specific trans-disciplinary interest for those involved with the *Gabinetto*. The issue of the renaissance was addressed in discourses on political history, as in Capponi's *On the Langobards in Italy* (1844-59), literary history, as in Mazzini's article *On a European literature* (1829), socio-economic history, as in Romagnosi's *On the measure and causes of civilization, with the example of its renaissance in Italy* (1832), and even in history of the sciences, as in Libri's *History of the mathematical sciences, after the renaissance des lettres till the end of the seventeenth century* (1838).

Political and aesthetic concerns underlaid this trans-disciplinary discussion, which developed in conversation with coeval interpretations of the Renaissance in the landscape of European romanticism. In this context, the notion of Renaissance which emerges from the authors considered here shows several peculiarities that will be discussed below.

The following texts share the common idea that European civilization has known a moment of reawakening after a long decadence beginning in late Antiquity. This return to life is generally understood from these authors as the origin of the intellectual, ethical and political values of modernity, that they recognized as valid, such that among their writings — including the aforementioned different interpretations — a positive evaluation is often embedded in the notion of «Risorgimento». The evaluation of the historical causes of this reawakening are therefore a sensitive issue in order to understand the defining elements of the different interpretations.

3. Migrations and invasions

According to a consolidated historiographical tradition that we find echoed in several authors from Bayle to d’Alembert, the fall of the Eastern empire and the consequent migration of the Byzantine scholars towards Italy marked the beginning of the return of the antiquity in the Latin world. This interpretation of the origins of the Renaissance was known in the circle of the *Gabinetto* — among the other sources — from the monumental history of art written by c, which was published in Italian between 1824 and 1828. The book was warmly welcomed on the *Antologia* by an enthusiastic announcement⁴⁹ in the bibliographical bulletin and by an accurate review⁵⁰ at the hand of Stefano Ticozzi, who had also translated the book.

The role of D’Agincourt in shaping the modern idea of Renaissance can hardly be overlooked. Adopting an approach reminiscent of Bettinelli’s *Risorgimento*, a work he likely knew about through his friend Tiraboschi, D’Agincourt framed the *renaissance des arts* into a wider cultural and political framework, raising the question of the origin of the great transformation that happened in the arts at the end of the Middle Ages. Tracing the origin of the *renaissance des arts* D’Agincourt writes: «After the conquest of Constantinople the arts disappeared completely from all the provinces that were subjected to the rough and ignorant

⁴⁹ The announcement reads: «It is superfluous to recommend the importance of this publication, especially in our country where the arts were born to a new life, while the night of barbarism layed on the rest of Europe» («È inutile il viepiù raccomandare l'importanza di quest'opera, particolarmente fra noi ove l'arti rinacquero a nuova vita, mentre la notte della barbarie ricuopriva il resto d'Europa»), in *Antologia*, n. III, January 1824, p.190.

⁵⁰ S. TICOZZI, review to “Storia dell'arte dimostrata coi monumenti dalla sua decadenza nel IV secolo fino al suo risorgimento nel XVI, di G.B.L.G. Séroux d'Agincourt”, *Antologia*, n. LXXXXI, July 1828, pp. 39-50, and n. LXXXXII, August 1828, pp.1-19.

Ottoman: expelled from Greece, they found a refuge among the Italians, which for them became and still is a new homeland⁵¹».

We can find this interpretation echoed in the *Antologia* with a slight change of tone in an article on ancient German art by Enrico Meyer, where the author traces back the beginnings of the new art in Italy to the influence of the Byzantines. Meyer is referring here to a period of Italian history that precedes that of the fall of Constantinople, and his attention is mainly attracted by the influence in figurative culture: «a slight hint sometimes can give a sudden impulse to those forces that, ignored by ourselves, had been sleeping till that moment: so the rough products of Byzantine art reawakened in various parts of Italy the ardor of several minds that started to go back to the imitation of nature, laying the ground for that dominion that would have consoled the Italians for the other they had lost.⁵²» Even if the causal connection between the Byzantine culture and the development of Italian art here appears to have been retained, the adjective “rough” seems to imply a remarkable limitation on the extent of this influence.

The idea of a Byzantine origin of the Renaissance indeed does not seem to have had a strong appeal in the Vieusseux circle. A friend and admirer of D’Agincourt, and as well one among the most prestigious authors in the *Antologia*, the count Leopoldo Cicognara wrote against this interpretation in his *History of Sculpture in Italy*, a book which was meant to serve as a continuation of D’Agincourt’s history. According to Cicognara, the Byzantines never had a

⁵¹ J.B. SEROUX D’AGINCOURT, *Storia dell’Arte dimostrata coi monumenti dalla sua decadenza nel IV secolo fino al suo Risorgimento nel secoloXVI*, first Italian translation by Ticozzi, Prato, Fratelli Giachetti, 1826, XXIV, p.347: «Dopo la conquista di Costantinopoli le Arti scomparvero affatto da tutte le provincie soggette al feroce e rozzo Ottomano: ma cacciate dalla Grecia, trovarono tra gl’Italiani un asilo, che fu ed è tuttavia per loro una nuova patria».

⁵² ENRICO MAYER, *Dell’antica scuola di pittura in Colonia*, in *Antologia*, n. LVII, Settembre 1825, p. 4.

precise knowledge of the classical style: «The arts, since the moment they moved from Rome to Constantinople, were in a state of decadence, relying for their survival only on the splendor of richness and on the luxuriousness of their methods and materials. During a many centuries-long decay, they never had a chance for any kind of renaissance.⁵³» In this shared anti-byzantine sentiment, two main factors seem to overlapped: on the one hand the tendency to consider the Renaissance as an endogenous phenomenon, as an expression of the national character; on the other hand the negative evaluation of the Byzantine domination in Italy, that can be traced back to the historiographical guidelines laid down by Muratori, the most important Italian scholar of the 18th century, in his *Annali d'Italia* (1744).⁵⁴

Interestingly enough Guglielmo Libri, a mathematician and historian of sciences who collaborated with the *Antologia*, arrived at a similar conclusion regarding the Byzantine influence in his *History of the mathematical sciences from the Renaissance* despite starting from a much different and original premise: He notes, «It is generally believed that the renaissance des lettres preceded that of the sciences; but this opinion is erroneous (...) The Romans had made little advancements in the exact sciences, they bequeathed nothing but much imperfect notions to the Italians of the middle ages. The schism of the Greek Church, the hatred of the Greeks against the new masters of Italy, interrupted all the communications between Rome and Constantinople: and it were the Arabs that restituted again the writings of Euclid and Archimedes to the

⁵³ L. CICOGNARA, *Storia della Scultura dal suo risorgimento in Italia fino al secolo di Canova, per servire di continuazione all'opere di Winkelmann e D'Agincourt*, edizione seconda, riveduta ed ampliata dall'autore, Prato, Fratelli Giachetti, 1823, Vol. I, p.100, "Stato delle arti bizantine": «Le arti, dal momento che furono trasferite da Roma a Costantinopoli non avevano altro fatto se non che andar peggiorando, sostenendosi colla falsa luce della ricchezza e del lusso dei lavori e delle materie, e in una declinazione di tanti secoli non ebbero mai un'alternativa per veruna sorte di risorgimento».

⁵⁴ On this point, as it will be shown in Chapter IV, the position of Giacomo Leopardi appears starkly isolated in the context of the *Gabinetto*.

Italians⁵⁵.» Turning on its head the consolidated perspective on the relationship between humanism and the development of modern science, Libri opens to a different genealogy of the Renaissance, one that reorients the historiographical axis towards a different east.

The influence of the Arabs appears to have been much better tolerated than that of the Greeks among the people of Palazzo Buondelmonti, likely due to the diffusion of the book *On the origins and progresses of all literature* (1782-1799) by the Jesuit Juan Andres. In his review of Berington's *A literary history of the middle ages*, which appeared on the *Antologia* in 1821, Antonio Benci similarly states that «the first language that brought back to life the sciences was that of the Arabs⁵⁶». These praises were often further qualified so as to limit the Arab contribution. Benci for instance immediately adds that the Arabs «could not make great advancements, because, they didn't want to study the well learned languages of Greece and Rome, since they feared that their language would have been altered⁵⁷.» Libri as well traces a clear boundary, both geographical and disciplinary, to the Arab influence: «the Arabs introduced their social organization, their sciences and their literature in all southern Europe; but, too far from their homeland and weakened by their luxury, they could never settle in the north. Literature, art and science can be shared by enemy nations; but the nations who are subject to the

⁵⁵ G. LIBRI, *Histoire des sciences mathématiques en Italie, depuis la renaissance des lettres jusqu'à la fin du dixième siècle*, Paris, Renouard, 1838, vol. II, p. 19: «On croit généralement que la renaissance des lettres a précédé celle des sciences; mais cette opinion est erronée (...) Les Romains, peu avancés dans les sciences exactes, n'avaient pu léguer que des connaissances fort imparfaites aux Italiens du moyen âge. Le schisme de l'Église grecque, la haine des Grecs contre les nouveaux maîtres de l'Italie, avaient interrompu tous les rapports entre Rome et Constantinople; et ce furent les Arabes qui rendirent d'abord aux Italiens les ouvrages d'Euclide et d'Archimède.»

⁵⁶ A. BENCI, review of J. BERINGTON, *A literary history of the middle ages* (Mawman, London, 1814), in *Antologia*, n. 4, April 1821, Firenze: «Ed il primo idioma, che fece risorgere le scienze, fu quello degli Arabi.»

⁵⁷ Ivi: «(...) i quali ebbero subito riputazione, ma non fecero grandi progressi, perchè temendo che la loro favella s'alterasse, non vollero studiare nelle lingue dotte della Grecia e di Roma.»

Gospel and those which obey to the Qur'an must necessarily have different political institutions.⁵⁸» Tracing these boundaries Libri implicitly reveal his preference for an indigenous origin of the Renaissance, something analogous to that we have seen in the dismissal of the idea of a Byzantine influence.

A third exogenous factor that was taken into account in the discussion on the renaissance was that of the Lombard domination of Italy. On this point the debate becomes more fervent, and we can find a plurality of perspectives. The discussion was opened in 1822 by Alessandro Manzoni, with the publication of his *Discourse on several points of the Langobardic history in Italy*, that was meant to serve as an introduction to his tragedy *Adelchi*. Manzoni, belonging to the Milanese milieu, was not an ordinary presence at Palazzo Buondelmonti, but he was nevertheless received with full honors in the circle during his stay in Florence. His *Discourse* was mainly intended to dismantle a certain historiographical tradition, tracing back to Muratori and Giannone, and ultimately from Machiavelli, that looked favorably to the Langobardic domination, essentially relaying the narrative given by the Lombard historian Paul the Deacon. Manzoni's argument is that this historiographical tradition, interpreting Paul the Deacon's words on the virtues of Langobardic rule, has taken for granted that Lombards and Romans were merged into a single nation. On the contrary, according to Manzoni, the Romans lost their freedom under the Lombards, and were treated as slaves. For Manzoni, stressing the negative

⁵⁸ G. LIBRI, *Histoire des sciences mathématiques en Italie, depuis la renaissance des lettres jusqu'à la fin du dix-septième siècle*, cit., p. 6: «les Arabes introduisirent leur organisation sociale, leurs sciences et leur littérature dans tout le midi de l'Europe; mais trop éloignés de leur patrie et amollis par le luxe, ils ne surent jamais s'établir dans le nord. Les lettres, les arts, les sciences, pouvaient se communiquer entre des peuples ennemis; mais les nations soumises à l'évangile et celles qui obéissaient à l'alcoran devaient nécessairement avoir des institutions politiques différentes.»

elements of the Langobardic invasion meant to exalt the decision made by Adrian VI when he asked Charlemagne to cross the Alps and free Italy.

At the other extremity of the spectrum we can find Mazzini's sporadic observations in his article *On a European Literature*, which appeared in the *Antologia* in 1829. Returning to Machiavelli's point of view, but with an accentuated anti-papal intonation reminiscent of Giannone, Mazzini exalts the Langobardic domination, tracing an explicit connection with the "risorgimento": «The Lombards founded in Italy a kingdom that, unique in those times, contained the seeds of representative government: they created a system of law that deserved Montesquieu's praise. The Lombards fell under Charlemagne's strength and the ambushes of the popes; but the effects of their domination lasted, and all these causes gave to the Italians a strength of character and a quantity of elements of renaissance, that would have later formed the Italian prominence.⁵⁹»

Amid these two extremes we can find the epistolary exchange that took place several years after the *Antologia* ceased to be published (1844-59), between Capponi and Pietro Capei, who was another former collaborator of the journal. Here Manzoni's question on the conditions of the Romans during the Lombard domination is raised at an institutional level, and the question becomes whether or not the Roman municipalities survived the occupation. The importance of this question stems from the origin of the municipalities of the middle ages and whether they can be traced back to the persistence of Roman institutions as opposed to being a consequence of

⁵⁹ G. MAZZINI, *Di una letteratura Europea*, in «Antologia», n. 36, October 1829: «(...) i Longobardi aveano fondato in Italia un regno, singolare esempio a que' tempi, che conteneva i germi del governo rappresentativo: aveano creato un sistema di leggi che meritò un elogio da Montesquieu. I Longobardi caddero anch'essi sotto la forza di Carlomagno e gli agguati de' papi; ma gli effetti della lor dominazione durarono, e tutte queste cagioni davano agli Italiani una energia di carattere, e una quantità d'elementi di risorgimento, che doveano più tardi formare la preminenza italiana.»

Germanic invasion. The focus here is no longer on the importance of the Church of Rome in the construction of modern Europe, but rather on the role played by the Roman heritage and by the Germanic infusion in this process. Following Savigny's interpretation, Capponi maintains the existence of a fundamental continuity in the history of the Italian municipalities: «If the Germanic institution of the commons is (be it allowed to say) a dream of the scholars, and if some kind of municipal administration has remained in Italy after the fall of the empire; it must follow that this had to be a vestige of the ancient roman forms, preserved by the ancient men and ruled by them, rather than by the Lombards that didn't understand these things.⁶⁰» According to Capponi, the positive aspect of the Lombard invasion was precisely in the fact that the invaders didn't merge with the Romans, allowing them to retain their laws. Of the same advice was another prestigious name of the circle, Giandomenico Romagnosi, likely the most important Italian jurist of that generation, who was in contact with Vieusseux and published a few articles on the *Antologia*. In his book *On the measure and causes of civilization* he writes: «(...) it is like if the conquerors had told to the Italians: we settled here among yours, you will pay taxes to us and be subject to us: and we allow you to use the Roman laws, as your law, since it is the one you like to live with.⁶¹» On the opposite front we find another former collaborator of the *Antologia*, Carlo Troya, who in his exchange of letters with Cesare Balbo (1830-9) had expressed

⁶⁰ G. CAPPONI, *Sui Longobardi in Italia*, Letter II, in *Scritti editi e inediti*, vol. I, Firenze, Barbera, 1877, p.120: «Se dunque l'istituzione germanica dei comuni (mi sia lecito dirlo) un sogno degli eruditi, e se una quale si fosse amministrazione comunale rimaneva pure nell'Italia dopo la caduta dell'impero; e forza il con chiudere ch'ella non fosse altro che un avanzo delle antiche forme romane, conservato dagli antichi uomini e governato da loro, anziché dai Longobardi che tali cose non intendevano.»

⁶¹ G.D. ROMAGNOSI, *Dell'indice e dei fattori dell'incivilimento, con esempio del suo risorgimento in Italia*, in *Scritti Filosofici*, vol.II, Milano, Ceschina, 1974: «(...) pare che i conquistatori abbiano detto agli Italiani: Noi siamo stanziati presso di voi, e voi sarete i nostri tributarj e dipendenti: e noi come statuto vostro, sanzioniamo le leggi romane, con cui a voi piace vivere.»

the contrary view, that the catastrophic ending of the Empire likewise ended Roman institutions⁶².

4. Church, religious spirit and the crusades

As has been hinted above, since Manzoni's *Discourse*, the problem of the Lombard domination had been strictly connected with the evaluation of the role of the Church of Rome in the origin of the Renaissance. We have seen that Mazzini negatively judged the decision of Adrian VI to call upon the Franks in order to put an end to the Langobardic domination. We can find a similar opinion in Pietro Giordani, according to whom the pontiffs wanted to get rid of the Lombards only because they represented a limitation to papal ambition. «Italy — he writes — will always have to complain for the great loss they caused sending away the Lombards.⁶³» Of the opposite advice is Capponi, that reads in the decision of Adrian VI to crown Charlemagne as emperor a moment that has changed the destiny of civilization. According to him, the coronation of Charlemagne is «the most grandiose act that a pontifex or another prince has ever dared, the most solemn, and the most rich of important consequences for ten centuries for the entire world.⁶⁴»

⁶² Cfr. C. BALBO, C. TROYA, *Della civile condizione dei Romani vinti dai Longobardi e di altre quistioni storiche. Lettere inedite di Carlo Troya e Cesare Balbo*, ed. by E. Mandarini, Napoli, 1869.

⁶³ P. GIORDANI, *Opere di Pietro Giordani*, Milano, Borroni e Scotti, 1854, p.191: «Dei quali dovrà eternamente, come di gravissimo danno per la cacciata che procurarono di quella gente, dolersi l'Italia.»

⁶⁴ G. CAPPONI, *Sui Longobardi in Italia*, cit., Lettera V, p.75: «Il più grande atto che un pontefice o altro principe osasse mai di sua propria autorità, il più solenne, il più durevole, il più fecondo di effetti gravi per dieci secoli sull'intero mondo (...).»

For Libri instead, the turning point for European civilization has rather to be found in a different pontificate, that of Gregory VII. Although probably not concerned with the destiny of Italy, Libri points out, this pope laid down the premises for the age of Communes when he challenged the supremacy of the empire: « Whatever Gregory had in his mind, whether he wanted to enhance the liberation of Italy, or, what is proper to his condition and more likely, he dreamed nothing but to establish ecclesiastic supremacy, one is compelled to trace back to this man the new political organization of Italy⁶⁵.» According to Libri the claim to papal supremacy, opening the political space for the ascent of the Communes, was the historical precondition that made possible Renaissance civilization : «Without the struggle of the pope with the emperors, one would have probably never seen the exploit of the Lombard League, neither the liberation of the Communes. It must be admitted that it was papal supremacy that gave a new sparkle to Italy, bringing back to her the scepter of Europe. The rapid march of the Italians on the way of civilization, their shining glory in science and literature, must be traced back to the day when pope Alexander put, as they say, his foot on Frederic's neck.⁶⁶» While exalting the role of the Church of Rome in initiating the age of Communes, Libri harshly judges the role played by the papal state in the following century in making impossible the creation of a national state. Following a trope that can be traced back to Machiavelli — and is used as well by other authors

⁶⁵ G. LIBRI, *Histoire des sciences mathématiques en Italie, depuis la renaissance des lettres jusqu'à la fin du dixseptième siècle*, cit., p.2: «Quelle qu'ait été la pensée de Grégoire, soit qu'il ait voulu marcher à l'affranchissement de l'Italie, soit, ce qui est plus conforme à sa position, et plus probable, qu'il n'ait songé qu'à établir la suprématie ecclésiastique, on est forcé d'attribuer surtout à cet homme extraordinaire la nouvelle organisation politique de l'Italie.»

⁶⁶ Ivi: «Ce fut, il faut l'avouer, la suprématie papale qui donna un nouvel éclat à l'Italie et qui lui rendit le sceptre de l'Europe. La marche rapide des Italiens dans la voie de la civilisation; leur brillante gloire dans les sciences et les lettres, semblent dater du jour où le pape Alexandre posa, dit-on, le pied sur le cou de l'empereur Frédéric.»

of the circle such as Giordani, Romagnosi and Mazzini — Libri, regrets that the popes could not convert their power into a hereditary monarchy, such that in the end, Libri concludes «it was the destiny of the pontiffs to be always contrary to the Italian independence⁶⁷.» According to Libri the initial impulse to make a change had been gradually lost by the papal state, so that «in modern times, not only the popes have no longer been the sustain of the spirit against brutal force, of the national civilization against foreign barbarism, but they have appealed, and still appeal at every moment, in order to stop the progress, suffocate civilization and extinguish the enlightenment.⁶⁸»

Rather than focusing on singular figures of great pontiffs, as Capponi and Libri did, Cicognara prefers to stress the importance of religious spirit. «Among the causes that brought to the renaissance of the arts in Italy, we have to count— he writes — (...) the religious spirit, unique in that age, that influenced so many disciplines, and that particularly enhanced painting.»⁶⁹ In his article on the origins of German art, Enrico Meyer stresses the European dimension of the rebirth of the arts, tracing it back to the religious unification of Europe: «(...) not only in Italy, but in many other parts of Europe as well, the arts that once had flourished there had been preserved, or had been introduced where the ancients didn't know them. Wherever the

⁶⁷ Ivi, p. 4: «(...)il était dans la destinée des pontifes d'être toujours hostiles à l'indépendance italienne.»

⁶⁸ Ivi, p.5: «Enfin, dans les temps modernes, non-seulement les papes n'ont plus été les soutiens de l'esprit contre la force brutale, de la civilisation nationale contre la barbarie étrangère, mais ils ont appelé, et ils appellent en core à chaque instant les étrangers, pour arrêter le progrès, étouffer la civilisation et éteindre les lumières.»

⁶⁹ L. CICOGNARA, *Storia della Scultura dal suo risorgimento in Italia fino al secolo di Canova, per servire di continuazione all'opere di Winkelmann e D'Agincourt*, edizione seconda, riveduta ed ampliata dall'autore, Prato, Fratelli Giachetti, 1823, Vol.III, p.40 “Spirito di religione”: «Fra le cause particolari però per le quali risorsero le arti in Italia conviene ascrivere in questi primi tempi, oltre le già accennate che dipendono dalla forma del governo, dal favor dei potenti, o dalla gara delle nazioni, lo spirito di religione, singolare a dir vero in quella età che influi su tanti studj e in modo poi segnalato produsse alla pittura un gran numero di lavori».

Christian missionaries preached the new faith, they also brought the holy images (...) Thus France, Spain and England (...) have ancient images and ancient illuminated codices. Narrowing the scope to Germany, here the vestiges of art can be traced back to the most ancient centuries⁷⁰.»

As well as Libri, Cicognara too seems to distinguish different stages regarding the influence of the Church of Rome on the new civilization. To the initial stage — that he places somewhere around the XI century, when the religious spirit had a positive influence on the rebirth of the arts — Cicognara counters the role the Church played beginning with the XIII century. Going against the authority of his predecessor D'Agincourt, who had a more favorable look at the role of the Church in this period, Cicognara states that in those times «the Roman pontiffs were the only that didn't contribute as they could have at the development of the arts⁷¹.» Even when he notes the positive role the monks played in developing the art of illuminated codices («the most visible intermediate link between decayed art and reborn art»), he immediately qualifies this praise; according to him their merit was «counterbalanced by the delay the arts suffered as a result of excessive study of civil law and sophistic dialectic, to which

⁷⁰ E. MAYER, *Dell'antica scuola di pittura in Colonia*, in *Antologia*, n. 57, September 1825, p. 6: «non in Italia soltanto, ma anche in molte altre parti d'Europa, eransi in certo modo o conservate le arti che un dì vi aveano fiorito, o introdotte ove non le aveano conosciute gli antichi. Dovunque i missionari cristiani predicavano la nuova fede, vi apportavano ancora le immagini sante davanti alle quali dovevano abbattersi gli idoli, e dovunque o tempj o monasteri venivano stabiliti, e fatto uso negli esercizi di pietà di libri sacri, questi formavano un ricco arredo di quelle congregazioni che l'arte dei miniatori rendeva ancor più preziosi. Così la Francia, la Spagna, l'Inghilterra stessa, nella quale la storia delle arti non si fa generalmente cominciare che nel secolo scorso, offrono antiche immagini e antichi manoscritti miniati. Ma restringendo il discorso alla sola Germania, in antichissimi secoli rintracciarsi le vestigia delle arti.»

⁷¹ L. CICOGNARA, *Storia della Scultura dal suo risorgimento in Italia fino al secolo di Canova, per servire di continuazione all'opere di Winkelmann e D'Agincourt*, edizione seconda, riveduta ed ampliata dall'autore, Prato, Fratelli Giachetti, 1823, Vol.III, p.16.

many minds were seduced by the cupidity of a better fortune, desiring to gain glory even with the most illiberal means⁷².»

The historical judgment on the crusades is also connected with the evaluation of the role of the Church in enhancing the rebirth. According to a certain historiographical tradition that we can find for instance in Hegel, the crusades signaled the twilight of the Middle Ages. This point of view appears in Libri, when he writes that during the crusades the Italian republics «took advantage of the circumstances in order to widen their commerce, multiply their relationships with the East (...)»⁷³» Even more, Libri sees a connection between the crusades and the decline of the feudal system: «It was the Church that made the crusades, and every one knows what a

⁷² L. CICOGNARA, *Storia della Scultura dal suo risorgimento in Italia fino al secolo di Canova, per servire di continuazione all'opere di Winkelmann e D'Agincourt*, Vol.III, cit., p.45: «Ciò in qualche maniera servì di compenso al ritardo che le arti provarono per il troppo coltivarsi la giurisprudenza civile e la dialettica sofistica, in cui molti ingegni sedotti dalla cupidigia della fortuna e anelanti della gloria coi mezzi anche più illiberali.»

⁷³ G. LIBRI, *Histoire des sciences mathématiques en Italie, depuis la Renaissance des lettres jusqu'à la fin du dixième siècle*, tome second, Paris, Renouard, 1838, p.10. Full passage reads: «Ce ne fut que lorsque l'Eglise eut dit aux peuples : «aunom du Seigneur, secouez le joug des impies» que la Lombardie, la Toscane et les Marches s'insurgèrent : plusieurs villes s'érigèrent alors en république, d'autres ne firent que chan gerde tyran, mais toutes brillèrent par l'indus trie et les lumières. Pendant que les papes le vaient une conscription européenne, et faisaient marcher les peuples et les rois à la délivrance du sépulcre, les républiques italiennes profitaient de la circonstance pour étendre leur commerce, multiplier leurs relations avec l'Orient et s'emparer des dépouilles de l'empire grec ,qui avait offert aux croisés une proie bien plus facile à saisir que ne l'étaient l'Asie-Mineure et l'Égypte»

terrible blow they were for feudality⁷⁴.» Similarly, Antonio Benci writes on the gains of the crusades in his review of Berington's *Literary History*⁷⁵.

Cicognara on the contrary describes the crusades in a much different fashion, writing that «the movement of this rabble all across Europe (...) the devastations they committed, leaving nothing but the leftovers of a pillage wherever they passed, the corruption of their habits (...) could not be promising of any gain to the development of the arts⁷⁶». Mazzini shared a similar judgment, but where Cicognara's negative evaluation stressed the plebeian character of the crusaders, Mazzini on the contrary ridicules them for their very ideals, writing that the first crusade was the highest expression of the «superstitious, aristocratic and chivalric spirit» that dominated in Europe at the time.

⁷⁴ Ivi, p.4: «C'est l'Eglise qui a fait les croisades, et l'on sait quel coup terrible elles ont porté à la féodalité.»

⁷⁵ A. BENCI, review of J. BERINGTON, «A literary history of the middle ages», Mawman, London, 1814, in *Antologia*, n. 4, April 1821, Firenze: «Quindi non so perché il Berington s'ingegni di di mostrare, che poco utile venne a noi dalle Crociate. Imperocché l'Europa fu sì spopolata: ma la gente, che passò nell'Asia, era divenuta un peso intollerabile nel comune servaggio. Onde que'nostri antenati che non si dipartirono dalle loro abitazioni, ebbero perciò sollievo ed opportunità d'innovare le leggi ed i costumi: e quelli che ritornarono vittoriosi alla patria, non più nemici furono, ma bensì d'aiuto alle nuove e migliori istituzioni. Sicché il discorso del Berington è vero soltanto per rispetto agl'inglesi; a'quali, ei dice, fu assai più giovevole il frequentare in Italia ed in Roma, che non l'andare viaggiando per tutta l'Europa infino all'Asia nella Palestina: perché l'Inghilterra trasse da'moderni usi de' romani quel miglioramento, che a tutti è noto».

⁷⁶ L. CICOGNARA, *Storia della Scultura dal suo risorgimento in Italia fino al secolo di Canova, per servire di continuazione all'opere di Winkelmann e D'Agincourt*, Vol.II, Prato, Fratelli Giachetti, 1823, p.23. Full passage reads: «Il movimento per tutta l'Europa di tanta canaglia che non potevano contenere in alcuna sorta di militar disciplina i prodi campioni che marciavano alla conquista del santo sepolcro; le devastazioni che commetteva lasciando orme solo di rapina nel suo passaggio; la corruzione di ogni costume dei cristiani medesimi, per cui vennero instituite le ammende pecuniarie ai delitti, che i miserabili speravano di espiare flagellandosi la schiena, tutto questo non poteva certamente far promettere alcun vantaggio alle arti».

5. Risorgimento as the age of the Communes

The intellectual circle of the *Gabinetto* had a tacit commitment for the creation of an independent and unified state in Italy. Unity was mostly seen as a precondition for independence. According to a tradition that goes back to Machiavelli, it was the lack of unity and the consequent weakness of the Italian states that had been the cause of the invasions of the XVI century, and ultimately, the arrested the development of the Italian civilization. Michele Ciliberto has defined this strand of thought as an «ideology of the absence», that he epitomizes in the regret for the lack of three fundamental requirements of the liberal state: «absence of independence, absence of national government, absence of political representation⁷⁷». As was noted before, this perspective echoes in the judgement of the role of the Church in many authors of the circle, for whom the temporal power of the popes was the main hindrance that prevented unification. As Ciliberto points out nevertheless, the point of view of the «ideology of the absence» was widely transversal, and it can be found as well in the neoguelph historiographical interpretations — as that of Cesare Balbo — where the historical role of the Church was positively valued.

However, beside this transversal strand of argumentation, in the Vieusseux circle we also find the condition of political fragmentation that characterized Italy considered under a different respect. «It seems that the unification of Italy in one only power would have in those times strengthen her internal regime, and provoked more respect in her external enemies» writes Cicognara. «But — he continues — from this void of politics (...) from the infinite subdivisions in this land, a remarkable gain came to the arts, since they were able to reawaken in various ways and produce

⁷⁷ M. CILIBERTO, *Interpretazioni del Rinascimento: Balbo e Romagnosi*, in *Il Rinascimento nell'Ottocento*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1987, p.73. Here Ciliberto transposes to the Renaissance a phrasing that C. Pogliano employed to define Gobetti's interpretation of the Risorgimento (Cf. C. POGLIANO, *Piero Gobetti e l'ideologia dell'assenza*, De Donato, Bari, 1976).

better fruits, that which has to be imputed to the analogies between different systems, and could have not come out from the invariable unity of one only regime.»⁷⁸

Romagnosi, who, as Ciliberto has observed, was the most aware opponent of the «ideology of the absence», stresses the fact that fragmentation implied that every political unity had to develop by its own knowledge and practices that which constitutes a civilization: «Each city, I would even say each village almost, jealous of its own independency, wants to have its own laws; and this turned the minds to think about politics and to honor jurisprudence. Each city wanted to be strong and flourishing; and competition increases the stimuli, and thus the artists of a certain kind are excited. Each city needs armies for the external, and civil governors for the internal; and for this reason military valor is researched, and the knowledge of everything that can enhance the government.»⁷⁹

⁷⁸ L. CICOGNARA, *Storia della Scultura dal suo risorgimento in Italia fino al secolo di Canova, per servire di continuazione all'opere di Winkelmann e D'Agincourt*, Vol.III, Prato, Fratelli Giachetti, 1823, p.14. The full passage reads: «Sembra che la riunione dell'Italia in una sola potenza avrebbe in allora potuto consolidare il suo interno regime, e incutere un maggiore rispetto a' suoi esterni nemici allontanando le pretese e i dominj delle case di Svevia, di Angiò e di Aragona, che vennero mai sempre a distruggerla sotto lo specioso pretesto di proteggerla, ne fecero un teatro continuo di guerra, vi mantennero e vi suscitarono diversi partiti per più dominarla, e vi lasciarono vicarj, reggenti e legati d'infanda memoria; ma questo voto della politica, che qui non è luogo d'esaminare e discutere, non avendo avuto un effetto, ne derivò alle arti un vantaggio sensibile, poiché poterono variamente animarsi e produrre migliori frutti, i quali debbono ascriversi all'analogia di diversi sistemi, e non sarebbero risultati dall'invariabile unità d'un solo regime. Se fosse stata una sola capitale, sarebbesi anche facilmente veduta un'accademia sola predominare su tutti gli ingegni, una cabala letteraria avrebbe inappellabilmente pronunciato su tutte le produzioni e un metodo uniforme ristretto avrebbe nelle arti i confini del genio a una sola maniera servile; ma al contrario per le infinite suddivisioni del bel paese, una varietà piacevole di capi d'opera in ogni classe di produzioni riconsola anche al presente l'Italia, e le tien luogo d'ogni altra palma presso tutte le nazioni del mondo».

⁷⁹ G.D. ROMAGNOSI, *Dell'indice e dei fattori dell'incivilimento, con esempio del suo risorgimento in Italia*, cit., p.246: «Ogni città, e quasi direi ogni borgata, gelosa della sua indipendenza, vuole avere leggi proprie; e ciò cominciò a far pensare alla politica, ed a porre in onore la giurisprudenza. Ogni città vuol essere forte e florida; e la gara accresce li stimoli, e quindi li artisti di un certo genere sono eccitati. Ha bisogno di condottieri d'eserciti al di fuori, e di rettori civili al di dentro; e perciò si ricercano il valor militare e la perizia di tutti ciò che si può giovare al governo».

As a consequence of this multiplication of political units, Cicognara points out, a strong competition developed in all the fields, because of the rewards that were granted to those who could enhance the fame of their patrons: «It will not seem surprising that the many public honors which were granted to science and literature produced in this age a remarkable effect on the development of knowledge and on the advancement of the enlightenment.»⁸⁰

The apology of the political fragmentation in the age of Communes appears connected in certain authors of the circle with a negative judgment on the immediately successive stage, the XIV century, when the communes began to decline and a process of political concentration started; after having subjected the smaller towns around them, the most powerful communes turned into *Signorie*, wherein the city was brought under the rule of a lord.

The evaluation of this process anyway varies considerably among the people of Palazzo Buondelmonti. In the last chapter of his *History of Florence*, for instance, Capponi acknowledges the positive role of the Medici in promoting literature and the arts in Florence. At the same time nevertheless, he soberly observes that this age of the history of his own city was marked by the loss of communal liberty: «The ancient forms of the Republic faded: the charge of the Executor of the Orders was mutated in that of the Bargello. The population tolerated this changes because the souls were weakened: they no longer wanted lively and turbulent liberty, but rather the ornamentation of intelligence and the splendor of the gentle Arts that are nurtured by peace.»⁸¹

⁸⁰ L. CICOGNARA, *Storia della Scultura dal suo risorgimento in Italia fino al secolo di Canova, per servire di continuazione all'opere di Winkelmann e D'Agincourt*, vol. III, cit., pp. 21-2: «Non farà meraviglia che tanti onori resi pubblicamente alle scienze e alle lettere producessero nel corso di quest'età un effetto sensibile nello sviluppo delle cognizioni e nel progresso dei lumi».

⁸¹ G. CAPPONI, *Storia di Firenze*, Firenze, Barbera, 1876, p. 365: «Svanivano tutte le forme antiche della Repubblica: l'Esecutore degli Ordini di giu stizia era mutato in un Bargello. Soffriva il popolo queste cose perché gli animi affraliti non più chiede vano l'esercizio di viva e torbida libertà, ma invece di questa gli ornamenti dell'ingegno e lo splendore delle Arti gentili che si alimentano della pace.»

A much harsher evaluation on the Medici can be found in the closing chapter of Libri's *Histoire*. He writes, «Rather than reawakening and protecting the arts as we hear everyday — Lorenzo De Medici has done nothing but protecting mediocrity, as the powerful people always do. The members of his platonic academy were just erudite payed by him that praised him in their writings: but in the meanwhile, the most illustrious people among the Tuscans where forced to expatriate.»⁸²

But where Capponi attributed to the weakening of the people the loss of communal liberty, Libri rather blames the tyrants for having suffocated the flame of the renaissance: «The Italian civilization is due to the men that liberated it from feudality, to the poets and artists who have inspired her with the sentiment of beauty, that is still widespread among the Italian people. It is due to those who have opened for them the sources of antiquity. It is democracy that has done everything in Italy, while despotism wanted to arrest everything.»⁸³

Despite differing interpretations of the process that brought from the medieval Communes to the *Signorie*, we can see here the most remarkable difference between the historiographical category of *Risorgimento* as it was understood in the Vieusseux circle and the concept of renaissance that substituted this notion in the second half of the XIX century. The

⁸² G. LIBRI, *Histoire des sciences mathématiques en Italie, depuis la Renaissance des lettres jusqu'à la fin du dixseptième siècle*, tome second, Paris, Renouard, 1838, p.280: Au lieu de ranimer et protéger les lettres, c o m m e on le répète tous les jours, Laurent de Médicis n'a fait, comme font d'ordinaire les grands, que protéger la médiocrité. Les m e m b r e s de son académie platonique étaient des érudits qu'il payait et qui le vantaient dans leurs écrits: mais en même temps les Toscans les plus illustres étaient forcés de s'expatrier.»

⁸³ G. LIBRI, *Histoire des sciences mathématiques en Italie, depuis la Renaissance des lettres jusqu'à la fin du dixseptième siècle*, tome second, cit., p. 283: «l'Italie doit sa civilisation aux hommes qui l'ont affranchie de la féodalité, 284 aux poètes et aux artistes qui lui ont inspiré ce sentiment du beau, si répandu encore à présent dans le peuple italien, à ceux qui lui ont ouvert les sources de l'antiquité. C'est la démocratie qui a tout fait en Italie; le despotisme a voulu tout arrêter.»

chronological extension of the concept of *Risorgimento* is much wider than that of the later notion of Renaissance, because here the focus is shifted on the civilization of the Communes. The XV and the XVI century, the age of the *Signorie*, that will become the chronological core of the notion of Renaissance starting with Michelet, were interpreted in the Vieusseux circle not necessarily as a decadence, but however as the crepuscule, the final stage of the *Risorgimento*. For this very reason in his dictionary of the Italian language published in 1879, Tommaseo — who had been a close friend with Capponi and one of the main contributors to the *Antologia* almost half a century before — warns that the rendition of the french term *Rénaissance* with the Italian *Risorgimento* is not correct. In his dictionary the entry *Risorgimento* reads: «Risorgimento of the civilization, of the arts, of literature. Age of the risorgimento (fr. *Rénaissance* [sic]) not proper; because neither in the fourteenth century nor in the fifteenth the arts have reawakened or were reborn, but rather they have begun to decay at that time.»⁸⁴ Here Tommaseo registers the birth of the new category of Renaissance, which is no longer interchangeable with the concept of «*Risorgimento*» as it was used fifty years before in the Vieusseux circle.

6. Europe, Romanticism and the return of Antiquity

The circle gravitating around the Gabinetto was obviously not an insular reality. The debate on the Renaissance developed there in communication with the coeval debate in the rest of Europe. We have seen that the work of D'Agincourt was well known in the circle, mainly thanks to the mediation of his friend Cicognara. It was a friend of the latter, Ticozzi, who had translated

⁸⁴ In N. TOMMASEO, B. BELLINI, *Dizionario della lingua italiana*, Turin, UTET, 1861-1879, vol. IV, p. 3: «Risorgimento della civiltà, Delle arti, Delle lettere. Età del risorgimento (fr. *Rénaissance* [sic]), non pr.; perchè non tra il quattrocento e il cinquecento risorsero nè rinacquero le arti, ma cominciarono a scadere».

D'Agincourt's *Histoire*. Another source of primary importance anyway was Sismondi's *Histoire des républiques italienne du moyen âge*, whose many volumes appeared in the Italian translation — at the hand of Ticozzi as well — between 1810 and 1820. Sismondi — an economist and historian well acquainted with Madame de Stael's Romantic circle in Coppet — was introduced at Palazzo Buondelmonti by Vieusseux himself, since their family had known each other in Geneva since several generations.

In his *Histoire* Sismondi looked at the age of the communes as the highest expression of the republican spirit since the end of Antiquity and as the origin of the modern conception of political freedom. A similar point of view had been expressed from Benjamin Constant — another member of the Coppet circle, and a well known author among the circle of Palazzo Buondelmonti — in his *On the liberty of the ancients and the moderns* (1819).⁸⁵ Here the medieval Communes were considered as the birthplace of the new conception of liberty that would have been later developed in Britain and France. This exaltation of the republican model of medieval Italy was part of a wider effort made by the Coppet circle aiming at the elaboration of a cultural program that could stand as an alternative to Napoleon's imperial ideal of Europe. It is interesting to observe that in Sismondi's *Histoire* the concept of Renaissance is rarely employed in a technical sense, and only according to the use of enlightenment historiography (*renaissance de l'art et de la poesie, renaissance des lettres*).⁸⁶ The standpoint presented in Sismondi's *Histoire* was nevertheless extremely palatable for the people at Palazzo

⁸⁵ See the two reviews of Constant's annotations to Filangieri's *Science of Legislation* appeared on the «Antologia», (n.17, January, February, March 1825, pp. 20-44, and n.24, October, November, December 1826, pp. 233-42).

⁸⁶ Cf. S. DE SISMONDI, *History of the Italian Republics in the Middle-ages*, VII.

Buondelmonti: the notion of *Risorgimento* that had been elaborated in a broader cultural sense in Italy by Bettinelli at the end of the preceding century could now receive a precise political meaning. The people in the Vieusseux circle welcomed Sismondi's narration because it answered their want for a national representation that could strengthen the ambition to have a legitimate place in the family of the European nationalities. It made possible to think of a future that was not simply an imitation of the more advanced European countries as France and Britain, but rather a return to an ancient tradition. The Renaissance became for them a path towards modernity.

The fact that in the Vieusseux circle the debate on the origins of the Renaissance was centered on the question of the origin of the medieval commune, and thus on the respective roles of the Church, of the Langobards and of the Roman tradition, tells us that Sismondi's point of view was widely shared. The gravitational center of the conversation was the Commune. The role of the Church and of the Langobards was disputable, as well as that of the Arabs and the Byzantines, but whatever was the origin of the commune, it was in the latter that unity could be found. The Commune was at the same time national and supranational: it was rooted in a local tradition — emerging from the darkness of a world of struggling passions — but it had originated a political ideal that was understood as universal.

In Sismondi's romantic narration of the age of the communes nevertheless there was something that was potentially problematic for the people of the Gabinetto. At the very core of the myth of the *renascentia*, as it had developed in Italy beginning with Petrarch and the early humanists, there was the idea that the Italians were the heirs of Roman civilization. In its original sense, the image of the rebirth meant a rebirth of Romanity. The rediscovery of the latin authors

started at the end of the XIV century meant for the Italian humanists a rebirth of the classics that had a strong identitive content, as we can easily see for instance in Petrarch's poem *To Italy*. Erudition was understood in this context as a fundamental instrument for the restoration of Roman civilization. The return of Antiquity became then the ideological program that was embraced and developed by the Italian elites in the following two centuries. The transition from the age of the communes to that of the *Signorie* didn't interrupt this process, which rather reached its peak in the XVI century.

In his *Histoire* Sismondi considered the humanist movement and the whole phenomenon of the return of antiquity as a symptom of the decadence of communal liberty. Under this respect Sismondi shows his debt towards the Romantic movement. The anti-classicist polemic of the Romantics indeed urged for a reconsideration of the Renaissance, in order to dismantle the conception inherited by the Enlightenment. The dawn of the age of reason had to be transformed into the reawakening of passions. The focus had to shift from the return of the classical authors to the rebirth of civic virtues. The universality of the classic had to be substituted with the extreme particularism of a land teemed with manifold autonomous identities. Addressing the masters of late Italian Renaissance in his esthetic writings, Schlegel — who was in the romantic circle of Coppet as well, and who was read and discussed in the Vieusseux circle — will similarly focus his attention on the elements he found revealing of the national spirit, widely overlooking the use of the classical figurative language.

We have seen traces of this point of view in Libri's severe judgement of the humanists at the Medici academy in Florence. The entry «Rinascimento» in Tommaseo's Dictionary proves as well the penetration of romantic esthetic in the authors that had attended the *Gabinetto*:

«Someone translates with this word — writes Tommaseo — the french Renaissance (so they call the imitation of ancient art in the modern one). With Architecture of the Renaissance they mean the time when the genius of art, inspired by the new time, begun to die.»⁸⁷ The imitation of the classics appears to Tommaseo as a form of regression, the loss of the connection between art and the spirit of the time. Accepting the romantic point of view on the Renaissance meant for Tommaseo to get rid of the inheritance left by the humanistic movement to Italian culture, and even more, to get rid of their dream of a rebirth of the Roman civilization. His full embracement of the romantic perspective on the Renaissance can probably be connected with the polemic against the Renaissance that had been developed at the beginning of the XIX century by a number of catholic writers. The return of the antiquity was considered in these catholic fringes as essentially pagan at its core. In its most refined and starkly original version this strand of thought appears in Tommaseo's spiritual guide, the philosopher Antonio Rosmini, who conceived the erudition of the humanists as a late manifestation of a process of progressive drying up of spirituality that had begun with the late Scholastic movement. It need scarcely be mentioned that, ironically enough, Sismondi's condemnation of the Italian civilization of the XV and XVI century was among other things an expression of his aversion to Catholicism, and especially to the excesses of late Renaissance Rome, a privileged subject in the historiography of the Reformation that somehow echoes in his writings.

Not everyone at the Vieusseux circle was anyway as eager as Tommaseo to get rid of the humanistic inheritance. Capponi, who shared with Tommaseo a close friendship as well as

⁸⁷ N. TOMMASEO, B. BELLINI, *Dizionario*, op. cit., vol. IV, p. 28: «Rinascimento della civiltà. Taluni traducono il fr. Renaissance, che così chiamano l'arte moderna fatta imitatrice all'ant. – Architettura del rinascimento, intendano di quando incomincia a morire il genio dell'arte ispirata ai nuovi tempi».

similar religious beliefs, concludes his History of Florence with a passionate praise of the culture of the mature Renaissance in all its forms. His observation on the transformation of the political regime in Florence does not involve an overall negative judgment. Here the Medici academy is not seen as a company of idle courtiers as it was in Libri, but is praised instead for having introduced the philosophy of Plato in Italy, the influence of which — according to Capponi — supported Galileo's scientific revolution. Romagnosi as well, in his *Of the measure and the causes of civilization* defends the humanists, stressing the fact that their struggle for reaching philological truth dismantled the structure of superstition that had grown in the preceding ages. According to Romagnosi, at the time of the humanists, erudition was necessary «not only as an aide for the development of the mind, but also to delete from the mind of the ignorants and of the well learned the dominant opinions that were irreconcilable with true civilization. (...) The Italian culture was the first one to get rid of the yoke of the coarse barbaric beliefs, that were supported by false documents, and the rest of Europe received from her a great beginning to its modern moderation.»⁸⁸

Cicognara also does not consider the age of the *Signorie* as a period of decay, but rather as the highest expression of the Renaissance, and this not only under the artistic respect, but as well for what concerns politics: «The Italians in the XVI century, and above all in the first half of

⁸⁸ G.D. ROMAGNOSI, *Dell'indice e dei fattori dell'incivilimento, con esempio del suo risorgimento in Italia*, cit., p. 298.

that century, had two great passions: the love for national independency and the love for arts. This was evident in their wars as well as in the infinite works of painting and sculpture (...).»⁸⁹

Both in Capponi and in Romagnosi the appreciation for the humanists is paired with the idea that the age of the communes had been a manifestation of the survival of the Roman usages and laws in the Italian municipalities. We have already seen that Capponi ridiculed the idea of a Germanic origin of the institution of the commune. Romagnosi as well maintained that ««Italy never lacked the knowledge and practice of the good roman law.⁹⁰» According to him, the main cause of the Renaissance in the age of the communes was that for the first time in history the new religious belief of Christianity merged with the philosophy, literature and jurisprudence of the ancient world: «the authority of the civil laws, of philosophy and of literature, at the beginning of the Italian Renaissance, were associated with the sacred studies; that which had been abhorred before, in order to break every connection with Paganism».

The Romantic conception of the Renaissance struggled in the Vieusseux circle with a Neoclassical perspective that did not want to get rid of the connection with the classical inheritance. But it is rather an approximation to see an opposition between the two perspectives. For both these interpretations, the renaissance was not only the return of the antique authors, but rather a return to life of a whole civilization in all its aspects. In this sense the “Neoclassical” interpretation took advantage of all the rhetoric of Romanticism. Even more, it adapted it to the

⁸⁹ L. CICOGNARA, *Storia della Scultura dal suo risorgimento in Italia fino al secolo di Canova, per servire di continuazione all'opere di Winkelmann e D'Agincourt*, Vol. VII, cit., p.22-3: «Gl'italiani nel cinquecento, e massime nella prima metà ebbero due grandi amori: amore della nazionale indipendenza, e amore delle arti. Ciò si è veduto egualmente nelle loro guerre, come nelle opere infinite di pittura e scultura.»

⁹⁰ G.D. ROMAGNOSI, *Dell'indice e dei fattori dell'incivilimento, con esempio del suo risorgimento in Italia*, cit., p.253: «(...) convien ricordare che la cognizione e la pratica del buon diritto romano non mancarono mai all'Italia (...).»

peculiar reality of Italian historiography. If romanticism meant the exaltation of the genius loci and the discovery of national identity, in Italy it revealed at the bottom of national particularism the ideal of classicality.

7. Conclusions

Many threads were weaved together in the conversation about the renaissance that played out in the *Gabinetto Vieusseux*. We can sum the main ones up as follows: the Germanic or Roman origin of the communes, the role of the Church, the evaluation of the age of the *Signorie* and of the humanistic movement. Following these threads, it is easy to become absorbed in the content of the conversation, but it is also important to step back for a moment and recognize the voices that are speaking. We can then see the *verso* of the conversation, which is made up of a pattern of different intentions. We can recognize in Mazzini's idea of the Lombard origin of the Commune a challenge to the Neo-Guelph interpretation of Italian history, as proposed by Manzoni and Capponi, wherein the Renaissance was traced back to the positive role of the Roman Catholic Church. In Tommaseo's harsh condemnation of the age of the *Signorie* we can recognize the strong democratic instance that differentiated him from Capponi in the Neo-Guelph movement itself, and that was shared on the contrary with Mazzini. A more favorable understanding of the age of the *Signorie* can be taken as a signal of the preference for constitutional monarchy, an ideal that could be shared by a freemason as Romagnosi and a rather devout Catholic as Capponi.

The fact that all these different voices were — at least virtually — in conversation at the *Gabinetto Vieusseux* can be seen as the realization of Foscolo's original project for the unmaking

of the factions and the creation of a public sphere. The success of this project also aimed at the involvement of a wider segment of the population in the political process. If it's true that the Gabinetto still represented an elite phenomenon — according to Gramsci's famous judgment on the Risorgimento in general as the work of elites and not a national-popular revolution — it was an elite that was trying to overcome ideological differences, promote the circulation of ideas, and create the legal and institutional conditions for the existence of a larger and more inclusive public sphere. Still, the process of political history can hardly be as ecumenical as the *republic des lettres*. In the following decades the process of unification was accomplished in a way that discontended many, and in particular the Neo Guelphs and the democrats. The experience of the Vieusseux circle nevertheless constituted a crucial moment in the construction of the consensus for Italian unification.

By articulating different images of the past that often corresponded to alternative visions of the future, the Renaissance was instrumental in building a consensus for national unity, both political and cultural. Therefore, the debate about the Renaissance at Palazzo Buondelmonti marks an intermediate stage in the history of the elaboration of the modern notion of Renaissance. This process has a European dimension, and the internal debate of the Vieusseux circle, with its own specificities, appears firmly rooted within this wider context. We could say that besides the process of construction of a «national biography», of which many authors — starting from Benedict Anderson — have written, there is as well a «biography of Europe» that is also written in this period, with the shift from the historiography of the Enlightenment to that of Romanticism.⁹¹ The importance given to the age of communes from this new European

⁹¹ Cf. B. ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities*, cit., pp.204-205.

historiography, in search for a genealogy for the liberal ideals, had also an impact on the development of the notion of Renaissance. It was indeed in these years that the Enlightenment notion of a plurality of Renaissances came gradually to be substituted with the idea of the Renaissance as a global phenomenon that encompassed all aspects of culture, including politics, art, literature, science and technique. What is most important, is that the Renaissance was no longer conceived as an elite phenomenon, as it was in the historiography of the Enlightenment. The disciplinary distinctions among the several *renaissances* that characterized the XVIII century notion of Renaissance did no longer stand, because history was no longer conceived as a project of the cultivated elites, but as an overall phenomenon encompassing the entire culture. The elites themselves, as the humanists of the XV and XVI century, were now seen as a product of this wider process. Historian Alberto Banti has correctly stressed the discovery of Vico, also through the intermediation of Cuoco, as a crucial moment in the intellectual formation of the generation of authors associated with the Risorgimento⁹². Certainly the heredity of Vico could have given to many of them the instruments to understand the historicism later promulgated by such Romantic authors as Friedrich Carl von Savigny and Barthold Georg Niebuhr. But it is impossible to say whether the Vieuiseux intellectuals were able to understand the Romantics because of Vico or if — on the contrary — their interest for Vico was guided by the tendencies of Romantic historiography. Both the things are probably true. What is important however, is that a new conception emerges from this period, where history is no longer considered just as an object for reason, because reason is no longer the subject of history, like in the Enlightenment. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, the term “historicism” can hardly be of some use here, since

⁹² Cf. A. M. BANTI, *La nazione del Risorgimento. Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell'Italia unita*, Einaudi, Torino, 2000, pp.112-119.

it has been longly associated with the question of teleology,. It would be as well inadequate to speak of irrationalism or anti-rationalism. Nothing of this would be found at Palazzo Buondelmonti, where the ideals of the Enlightenment were still the guiding stars of the intellectual and political activity. Yet, the balance between reason and history is shifting. The interpretation of the Renaissance according to a non-elitist perspective, resulting in the unification of the plurality of renaissances, belongs to this wide transformation of the historical awareness.

This new conception of the Renaissance clearly appears in the eighteen thirties with Romagnosi's and Libri's works, but is also already present in Cicognara's attempt to frame the *renaissance des arts* within a broader historical context. Indeed a similar development was happening in France during these same years, and can be recognized in the writings of the art historians de Montor and Montabert, who followed D'Agincourt's example in treating art history as a part of a broader cultural history. In France, however, the concept of Renaissance was to remain confined to the field of art history until the second half of the nineteenth-century.⁹³

In conclusion, the category of «Risorgimento» elaborated by Bettinelli facilitated the transition to a more comprehensive notion of Renaissance in Italy, while the process appears to have been slower in the rest of the European historiography. In the second half of the century — with the seventh volume of Michelet's *Histoire de France* titled «Renaissance» (1855) and Burckardt's *Die Kultur des Renaissance in Italien* (1860) — the chronological boundaries of this

⁹³ Cf. B. Bullen, *The Source and Development of the Idea of the Renaissance in Early Nineteenth-Century French Criticism*, *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Apr., 1981), pp. 311-322.

notion were to be shifted and narrowed again.⁹⁴ Yet, the concept of Renaissance would retain the broader scope it acquired in the first half of the century, as exemplified by the range of debates in the *Gabinetto Vieusseux*

⁹⁴ On Burckhardt's reception of the Italian debate through the mediation of Libri's book, cf. R. Fubini, *Considerazioni su Burckhardt: Il libro sul Rinascimento in Italia; De Sanctis e Burckhardt*, *Archivio Storico Italiano*, Vol. 158, No. 1 (583) (gennaio-marzo 2000), pp. 102-4.

Chapter II

The concept of history in Leopardi

Introduction

A great part of Leopardi's thought belongs to the literary genre of philosophical history, a genre which knew its golden age between the 18th and the 19th century, from Vico to Marx. Philosophical history is a kind of history that moves at a high level of abstraction, asking questions that are meant to frame the historical events within a wider ideological — and often methodological — view. Philosophical history does not discover new historical facts, but rather interprets facts that are already sedimented in the historiography of a certain age. This interpretation of historical facts is meant to justify or criticize a position that entails certain philosophical principles.

Leopardi's interpretation of the Renaissance appears within the context of his philosophical history. Before tackling the subject it can be useful to outline Leopardi's conception of history from a formal, which is to say methodological, point of view. There is indeed a tension between the literary genre of philosophical history and the concept of history as developed by Leopardi. While philosophical history tends to generalize, Leopardi's concept of history inclines towards the individual. Without taking in account this aspect, Leopardi's philosophical history runs the risk to be flattened on the model of the idealist or positivist philosophies of history that — born

respectively in Germany and France — were spreading all around Europe in the first half of the eighteenth century. In order to grasp the specificity of Leopardi's position, and its irreducibility to the main philosophical currents of his time, this chapter exposes Leopardi's idea of history as a science of unique events, as it appears in a fragment Leopardi wrote in 1826. The full development of this idea belongs to Leopardi's mature thought, and for this reason many concepts presented in this chapter will recur in the exposition of Leopardi's metaphysics of conformability that will be tempted in chapter VII. Nevertheless, the idea that the true dimension of history is the individual one appears very early in Leopardi's writings. In 1814, at the age of sixteen, Leopardi prepared a philological edition of Porphyry's *De vita Plotini*. Leopardi introduced his work with some observations on the literary genre of illustrious lives among the ancients.⁹⁵ The incipit reads: «*Historia universa nil aliud, quam seriem praestat, texturamque Vitarum illustrium virorum.*» («The entire history offers nothing but the series and the intertwining of the lives of the illustrious men»).⁹⁶ The juvenile idea of history as a series and a braid of biographies is the insight which Leopardi fully develops in his later idea of history as the science of that which happens only once. The meditation on the nature of history is therefore one of the most profound aspects of continuity in the development of Leopardi's thought, and helps us to frame Leopardi's interpretation of the Renaissance in the wider context of his conception of history.

⁹⁵ Interestingly, this is the same subject that Arnaldo Momigliano chose for his 1968 series of lectures at Harvard, which would have later been published with the title *The development of Greek Biography*. Momigliano, as it is well known, was an important influence for Carlo Ginzburg. This can maybe help to understand the presence of some "microhistorical" aspects in Leopardi's methodological conception of history. Cf. A. Momigliano, *The development of Greek Biography*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 1993.

⁹⁶ G. Leopardi, *Porphyrii de vita Plotini et ordine librorum eius*, Olschki, Milano, 1982, p.19. The english translation is mine.

1. Science and history

We may think of the *Zibaldone* (the collection of Leopardi's notebooks) as a travelogue, a journal in which Leopardi mapped day by day the moving landscapes of his philosophical wandering. Access to the *Zibaldone* is made difficult by the lack of an order of exposition, and the reader can often feel lost. From time to time though one finds something like a pause, where Leopardi seems to look back at the path traveled. It is useful to take advantage of these pauses to discover the lanes that cross the enigmatic wood of his thoughts. The fragment dated October 12th 1826, can be read as one of these pauses. By 1826 the larger part of Leopardi's meditation had already been collected in the *Zibaldone*, to which he intensely devoted himself especially after he interrupted writing poetry in 1822. Sporadic annotations would continue until 1832, but after 1827, with his return to poetry, the frequency of the annotations diminished again. The fragment in question belongs then to what we could consider a conclusive stage in Leopardi's meditation. Under the disguise of a philological observation on the original meaning of the Greek word *ιστόρια* and on its vicissitudes through the ages, Leopardi introduces his conception of history. The passage starts from an observation on the term *natural history*:

Natural history. It is curious to observe how small, disparate, and distant are the causes which determine the most stable, and the most universal, habitations and ideas of men. What is called natural history is a true science, since it defines, distinguishes into classes, has principles and draws conclusions. If we had to call it history because it narrates the characteristics of animals, of plants, etc., the same name would have to be given to chemistry, to physics, to astronomy, to all non

abstract sciences. All these sciences narrate, that is they teach what can be learned from observation, which is their subject, as is equally the case in natural history.⁹⁷

Once established the distinction between the “abstract sciences,” mathematics, geometry and ideology, and from all the other sciences, Leopardi introduces the idea that all the sciences but the abstract ones — with the exceptions of ideology — are “narrations,” in the sense that they describe something that exists, “they teach what can be learnt by the observation” they are knowledges of existing objects.

Only the arts can dispense with narration, since in that case giving rules is sufficient. Even ideology narrates, although it is an abstract science. Besides the world history, as it is generally understood, is the narration of successive events one following after the other, not of what always happens and happens in a certain way. Such narration is part of the sciences. It is teaching. And this is the kind of narration that natural history does. Why then do we give this science the name of history? Because it was established by Aristotle: who called it history, because the noun in greek comes from *istor*, (a learned man, an expert), a verbal noun formed from the verb *isèmi*, (*scio*) [to know], meaning *knowledge, information, erudition, know-how, doctrine, science, φυσική ιστορία, information on nature*⁹⁸.

If we look beyond the appearance of an etymological observation, typical of Leopardi’s style in the *Zibaldone*, we see that these lines lay out a theoretical outline on the division of sciences that strives to go back to the foundations of Western rationality established by Aristotle. Leopardi

⁹⁷ Zib.4214: «Istoria naturale. Curioso è l’osservare da quanto piccole, quanto disparate e lontane cause sieno determinate le assuefazioni e le idee degli uomini le più costanti, e le più universali. La così chiamata istoria naturale è una vera scienza, perocch’ella definisce, distingue in classi, ha principii e risultati. Se la si dovesse chiamare storia perch’ella narra le proprietà degli animali, delle piante ec., il medesimo nome si dovrebbe dare alla chimica, alla fisica, all’astronomia, a tutte le scienze non astratte. Tutte queste scienze narrano, cioè insegnano quello che si apprende dall’osservazione, la quale è il loro soggetto, come altresì della istoria naturale.» All the quotations in Italian from the *Zibaldone* are from “Giacomo Leopardi, *Pensieri di varia filosofia e di bella letteratura*, Firenze, 1921”. The english translations are from “Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, New York, 2013”.

⁹⁸ G. Leopardi, Zib. 4214-5: «Solo le arti possono dispensarsi dal narrare, bastando loro il dar precetti. Anche l’ideologia narra, benchè scienza astratta. Oltre che il nome di storia, secondo la sua generale accezione, significa racconto di avvenimenti successivi e susseguenti gli uni agli altri, non di quel che sempre accade ed accade ad un modo. Questo racconto appartiene alle scienze. Esso è insegnamento. Or tale è il raccontar che fa la storia naturale. Perchè dunque si dà a questa scienza il nome di storia? Perocch’essa fu fondata da Aristotele: il quale la chiamò istoria, perchè questo nome in greco viene da *istor* (conoscente, intendente dotto), verbale fatto dal verbo *isèmi* (*scio*) e vale conoscenza, notizia, erudizione, sapere, dottrina, scienza, φυσική ιστορία, notizia della natura.»

opposes the abstract form of scientific knowledge to that of the arts, the techniques, which do not describe existing objects, but rather give instructions on how to make them exist. Yet, Leopardi does not make entirely clear whether the abstract sciences, mathematics and geometry, can be considered arts or not. Indeed, the core of the argument is not this distinction between abstract and empirical sciences, but rather a distinction between different kinds of narrations. If every science is a narration, what distinguishes science from other narrations is the possibility of giving definitions, distinguishing classes, having principles and effects. It seems likely that these general features of all sciences are rooted for Leopardi in what he describes as their specific object: what happens always in the same way. Only this kind of narration, thanks to the stability of its object, gives us a knowledge that is true in manifold cases: only science teaches us general rules. It is in relation to this definition of science, , that we find a definition of history, which is for Leopardi also a description, but one that describes only “successive events.” As is implied in the juxtaposition with the natural events that always happen in the same way, the series of subsequent events is precisely distinguished by the fact that these events do not always happen in the same way: they are successive because they are always different from each other. The kind of knowledge that can be applied to the latter, Leopardi suggests, does not teach us a general rule, but rather points to the singular case. The realm of history extends on the things that happen only once.

In order to better understand Leopardi’s thesis on the nature of the historical event, which can seem rather dogmatic if considered onto itself, we need to trace back the evolution of Leopardi’s meditation on history throughout the years leading to 1826.

2. Principles of an outlaw history

Reading through the pages of the *Zibaldone* we can find the long path that has brought Leopardi to his conclusion about the uniqueness of the historical event. This meditation on the nature of the historical event appears within the broader context of a critique of all teleological interpretations of history, a critique that is an aspect of the so-called anti-platonic stance of Leopardi's thought.⁹⁹ About five years before the annotation on the distinction between history and science, Leopardi had jotted down in his notebook one of his main philosophical theses:

Nothing preexists things. Neither forms, nor ideas, neither necessity nor a reason for being, and being thus or thus, etc. etc. *Everything* is posterior to *existence*.¹⁰⁰

With a number of technical terms belonging to the history of metaphysics, Leopardi here denies the precedence of the essence to the things. Such a precedence for Leopardi embraces two different but strictly intertwined fundamental meanings: on a cosmological level, that is to say regarding the nature of the totality of things in their connections, it is related to the Leibnitian principle of reason «*nihil est sine ratione*».¹⁰¹ On the ontological level, that is to say regarding the nature of the things in themselves, it refers to the conception according to which reality conforms to a model. It is in relation to these two aspects that Leopardi distinguishes between the «*necessity of existing*» and the «*necessity*

⁹⁹ The critique of the idea according to which reality conforms to an antecedent model is a crucial aspect of Leopardi's thought. Such an aspect is usually indicated as anti-platonic. Leopardi's understanding and evaluation of Platonism, however, is extremely complex, and would deserve a separate treatment. For this reason, notwithstanding the cost of burdening the sentences with long circumlocutions, I prefer to restrict Plato's mentions to the cases where they are strictly unavoidable. On Leopardi and Plato see F. D'Intino, *Leopardi, Platone e il libro morale*, Marsilio, Venezia, 2009.

¹⁰⁰ Zib. 1616, «Niente preesiste alle cose. Nè forme, o idee, nè necessità nè ragione di essere, e di essere così o così ec. ec. Tutto è posteriore all'esistenza».

¹⁰¹ The original formulation of the thesis reads: «Il n'y a ni ne se fait rien à propos de quoi il ne puisse être rendu raison, au moins par un être omniscient, du fait qu'il est plutôt que n'est pas, qu'il est ainsi plutôt qu'autrement» (*Opuscules et fragments inédits de Leibniz. Extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque royale de Hanovre par Louis Couturat*, Paris, F. Alcan, 1903, p. 25).

of being so or so». Doing so Leopardi follows the duplicity of Leibniz' principle of reason as both sufficient and determining reason.¹⁰² As far as history is concerned, the corollary of Leopardi's stance against the precedence of the essence, is that there is no law that justifies the fact that historical events happened as they did. In other words, Leopardi does not reject the causal connection between historical events, but he rather rejects the conclusion that they can be interpreted as the product of a transcendent teleology. This sort of interpretation is based on the assumption that rationality is an end unto itself. Consistent with the assumption that «*nothing preexists things*» Leopardi considers reason a product of history rather than its cause. Reason therefore, is not justified by any historical or transcendent law which could grant its existence, but is only the product of casual circumstances. A couple of weeks after the capital thesis on the primacy of existence, Leopardi wrote in his notebook a long passage in which he outlines the enormous number of material circumstances that have contributed to the development of modern rationality throughout the course of history:

Where did the invention of the telescope, which has had such a great influence on navigation, on metaphysical philosophy itself, and so on civilization, come from? From chance. And the invention of gunpowder, which has changed the face of war, and of nations, and done so much to geometricize the spirit of the time and destroy the old illusions, along with individual valor, etc.? Chance. Who knows if aeronautics will not exert a supreme influence over man's state one day? And what does it derive from? Chance. And that infinite number of discoveries, startling in quality, which had to take place for man to reach even the *imperfect* state in which he is presented in the remotest memory of nations to have come down to us; discoveries that the human spirit is at loss to understand how they could ever have been conceived, even today, when they were made so long ago, when they have been perfected, when our minds have been so accustomed to them; languages, alphabets, the mining and smelting of metals, the manufacture of bricks, textiles of every sort, seafaring and so trade between peoples, the cultivation of cereals and vines, the making of bread and wine, inventions that the ancients ascribed to the gods, that scripture places after the flood, and were certainly very late indeed, even the cooking of meat, vegetables, etc. etc. etc., all these marvelous and almost frightening inventions, what we suppose gave rise to them? Chance. Let us consider all those difficult modern discoveries which were made at a time when the human mind had so many and such enormous additional aids to invention. When we see that all of them in one way or another are due to chance, and that none or very few of them derive from the spontaneous and deliberate application of the human mind, or from a calculation of the consequences and the systematic progression of knowledge; that very few again are the result of direct attempts and specially established experiments, but rather of groping in the dark and at random (as were of necessity, you can say, all those experiments, very few in number, that

¹⁰² Cf. footnote above.

yielded some notable discovery); so much more must we believe the same of all the ancient discoveries that were the most necessary to the existence of formal society. If, therefore, we pay attention to the course of events and the history of mankind, we must agree that all of human civilization is purely the work of chance. And because chance varies in different remote countries, or is lacking, it has produced different kinds of civilizations (that is, perfection) or its complete absence»¹⁰³.

The accumulation of apparently redundant examples in this long passage works as an analytic instrument: it captures the wide interlacement between different aspects of reality that has contributed to shaping civilization in the form we know it. The wideness of this interlacement, in turn, expresses the chaotic nature of the process, which cannot be reduced to the flat dimensions of the cartesian plane. The strong interdependence Leopardi observes between the different dimensions of human history is an unmistakable trait of his meditation, to the point that each event seems to appear ubiquitous in his eyes, as a link that belongs to different chains: history is a twist of histories. The invention of the telescope is at the same time a link between the history

¹⁰³ Zib. 1739-40: «Da che nacque l'invenzione del canocchiale che ha tanto influito sulla navigazione, sulla stessa filosofia metafisica, e quindi sulla civilizzazione? Dal caso. E l'invenzione della polvere che ha mutato faccia alla guerra, ed alle nazioni, e tanto contribuito a geometrizzare lo spirito del tempo, e distruggere le antiche illusioni, insieme col valore individuale ec. ec.? Dal caso. Chi sa che l'aeronautica non debba un giorno sommamente influire sullo stato degli uomini? E da che cosa ella deriva? Dal caso. E quelle scoperte infinite di numero, sorprendenti di qualità, che furono necessarie per ridurre l'uomo in quel medesimo imperfetto stato, in cui ce lo presenta la più remota memoria che ci sia giunta delle nazioni; scoperte che hanno avuto bisogno di lunghissimi secoli e per essere condotte a quella condizione ch'era necessaria per una società alquanto formata, e per essere poi perfezionate come lo sono oggidì; scoperte che oggi medesimo, dopo ch'elle son fatte da tanto tempo, dopo ch'elle sono perfezionate, dopo che la nostra mente vi s'è tanto abituata, lo spirito umano si smarrisce cercando come abbiano potuto mai esser concepite; le lingue, gli alfabeti, l'escavazione e fonditura de' metalli, la fabbrica de' mattoni, de' drappi d'ogni sorta, la nautica e quindi il commercio de' popoli, la coltura de' formenti, e delle viti, e la fabbrica del pane e vino, invenzioni che gli antichi attribuivano agli dei, che la scrittura pone dopo il diluvio, e che certo furono tardissime, la stessa cocitura delle carni, dell'erbe, ec. ec. ec. tutte queste maravigliose e quasi spaventose invenzioni, da che cosa crediamo che abbiano avuto origine? Dal caso. Consideriamo tutte le difficili scoperte moderne, fatte pure in tempo dove la mente umana aveva tanti, ed immensi aiuti di più per inventare; e vedendo che tutte in un modo o nell'altro si debbono al caso, e nessuna o pochissime derivano da spontanea e deliberata applicazione della mente umana, nè dal calcolo delle conseguenze, e dal preciso progresso dei lumi; pochissime ancora da tentativi diretti, e sperienze appositamente istituite, benchè a tastoni e all'azzardo (come furono per necessità, si può dir, tutte quelle pochissime che fruttarono qualche insigne scoperta); molto più dovremo creder lo stesso di tutte le scoperte antiche le più necessarie all'esistenza di una società formale. Se dunque porremo attenzione all'andamento delle cose, e alla storia dell'uomo, dovremo convenire che tutta quanta la sua civilizzazione è pura opera del caso. Il quale variando ne' diversi remoti paesi, o mancando, ha prodotto quindi diversi generi di civilizzazione (cioè perfezione), o l'assoluta mancanza di essa sulla stessa filosofia metafisica, e quindi sulla civilizzazione?»

of metaphysics and of geography, which are themselves both connected with the history of languages as well as with the histories of economics, technology, nations and war. In this interconnection of histories there is no room for a rigid distinction between “high” and “low” history: draperies, wines and metaphysics lie on the same and singular floor. In this history of histories, reason plays only a minor role as a causal condition, appearing towards the end of the chain and giving a limited contribution to its own development, which is mainly due to external circumstances. As a result of the tight interconnection which binds the events to each other, each historical event can be seen as the product of an imponderable number of circumstances, each in turn produced by another series of circumstances. Inside these chains of causal relationships, the events that make history, those that produce the differences between the ages are not those which are the most likely, but rather those that happen only when particular combinations of circumstances come together. History then happens only through exceptions, events which do not presuppose a regularity. Borrowing a term from modern evolutionism, the historical events take place in a sort of punctuated equilibrium, where change occurs abruptly, suddenly breaking the former regularities. The exceptional concurrence of circumstances required by each historical event indeed makes it «*difficult*» for the historical event to happen. The difficulty of the discovery does not consist in the fact that these events require an extraordinary effort of strength or intelligence, but just an extraordinary concurrence of circumstances. In an annotation dated October 11th 1823, halfway between the thesis on the primacy of existence and the passage on the distinction between science and history, Leopardi derives from this *difficulty* of the historical event the idea of its uniqueness:

I would argue that all these inventions, customs, etc., which are found to be common to all or most of the peoples, had a single origin (whether chance, or whatever else that

origin might have been), that the immense difficulties by which nature opposed such inventions, etc., were overcome by men on one occasion only, that these inventions, etc., were propagated along with mankind, that the most savage peoples who to date have existed on the most remote islands and the furthest removed from all commerce were already significantly corrupted by the time they traveled there, and carried with them these same inventions, etc., which they share with all other peoples, because all other peoples derived from the one source and got from the one place and nation those customs and knowledge, etc., not because these came into being as many times as there are or were peoples, who possess or possessed them. If the use of fire is common to all peoples, I maintain that its origin was one and one alone. If navigation is common even to many savages and barbarians who from time immemorial until recent centuries or even recent years have had no relations with civilized people, or even to some which still do not have them, I maintain nonetheless that navigation was invented once only, and that all peoples who travel by boat profited from this discovery, and that canoes made from just a hollowed-out tree trunk, and with but the branch of a tree used as an oar to move them, derive from it no less than the most carefully constructed ships and steamers. ¹⁰⁴

Again, in this passage Leopardi accumulates examples in order to grasp the contingency of the historical event. Leopardi refutes the idea that the similarities between nations far removed from one another are due to some perennial nature of the human race. For him, who considers human nature a product of history rather than as its condition, just the opposite is true. The history that has shaped civilization is too exceptional to happen more than once. The only way left, then, to explain the similarities between distant civilizations is to assume their common origin, or afterwards the communication between them through the ages. In the end, this strong assumption leads to the idea of the uniqueness of the historical event, which is strongly and recurrently

¹⁰⁴ Zib. 3663-4: «Dico che tutte le dette invenzioni, usanze ec. che si trovano esser comuni a tutti o alla più parte de' popoli, ebbero una origine sola, (o il caso, o qualunque altra ch'ella si fosse); che una sola volta furono dagli uomini superate le immense difficoltà che la natura a tali invenzioni ec. opponeva; ch'elle si propagarono insieme coll'uman genere; (che i più selvaggi popoli che fino al dì d'oggi si trovino nelle più remote isole e più divise da ogni commercio, erano, quando in esse si recarono, già notabilmente corrotti, e portarono seco le dette invenzioni ec. che lor sono comuni con tutti gli altri popoli, perchè tutti gli altri ancora dalla medesima fonte derivarono, e dal medesimo luogo e nazione ebbero quei tali usi e cognizioni ec., e non perchè queste nascessero tante volte quanti sono e furono i popoli della terra che le posseggono e possederono). Se l'uso del fuoco è comune a tutti i popoli, io dico che la sua origine fu sola una. Se la navigazione è comune anche a moltissimi selvaggi e barbari che da tempo immemorabile fino agli ultimi secoli o fino agli ultimi anni, non ebbero relazione alcuna coi popoli civili, o niuna per ancora ne hanno; io dico che la navigazione fu scoperta una volta sola, e che di questa scoperta tutti i popoli che navigano ne profittarono, e che da essa derivano non meno le canoe fatte di un sol tronco scavato, e mosse con un ramo d'albero per remo, che i bastimenti i più artificizati e le barche a vapore.»

stressed in the passage. This idea is briefly summarized in the index of the *Zibaldone* Leopardi drafted in 1827, one of the subtitles of the entry *Uomo* (Man) reads: «if it were destined to occupy the earth. Philosophical history of the propagation of the human kind. Civilization was one in the origin: as well as the inventions and the difficult discoveries».¹⁰⁵ With such a conception Leopardi adopts a methodological paradigm which starkly opposes both the positivistic and idealistic theological interpretations of history that in the same years were spreading throughout European culture.

This conception of the uniqueness of the historical event, however, leaves an empty space regarding the principle of the unity of history. The simple subsequence of unique events would not be enough to make them historical. History, taken in this sense, would be nothing but chronology. It is probably for this reason that, in Leopardi, the uniqueness of the historical event appears balanced by a tendency to propagate. Through history, what once had been an exception often becomes a regularity, and the discoveries that have happened in one place propagate all over the world. In this respect what has happened once continues happening, and the present recapitulates the past, following the ontogenesis-phylogenesis analogy. Leopardi explains this aspect through the individual process of assimilation of knowledge. From this empirical perspective, in an annotation dated April 8th 1824, Leopardi justifies the age-old analogy between the ages of history and those of human life:

Now at birth, each individual is precisely, as far as his intellect is concerned, in the same state of the first man. Those individual that with the passing of time reach the level of knowledge of our age, have necessarily passed through all the states through which the human spirit has passed from the beginning of the world until the present days (at least those stages through which it has passed by progressive advancement), and has experienced in himself all the events of the intellect that the human race has experienced

¹⁰⁵ G. Leopardi, *Indice del mio Zibaldone di pensieri*, my translation from G. Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, vol. II, Mondadori, Milano, 1997, p. 3196.

in all centuries from its beginning until now. The history of his intellect is that then of all these centuries reduced and compressed into twenty or thirty years. Hence from all the changes that his intellect has experienced, changes that many times have brought him to convictions and states very different from previous ones, and finally to a system of conviction and to a state very different from his original one; from all these changes, I repeat, there must have necessarily emerged in him as many different and successive changes in his character, have been produced in nations and in humankind in general by the different principles and opinions and by the different advancement and state of knowledge in every age needed to bring humankind from its original state to where it is now. (8 April 1824). Hence this individual has within himself and epitomizes, not only the history of the human spirit, which is perhaps the major part, but also that of the successive characters of nations, insofar as they had their origin and dependency on opinions and knowledge.¹⁰⁶

Leopardi's idea is that through learning, the individual implicitly goes through the concrete historical circumstances that have led to a certain notion or discovery. From this empirical perspective, Leopardi transforms the age old analogy between the ages of human life and the ages of history into a peculiar analogy between human life and the succession of national histories. The overall result is that uniqueness of the historical event does not fragment the history of humanity into individual atoms, because — thanks to this process — once it has happened the historical event can become part of a shared experience. Such a shared experience, however, is still essentially individual in its nature. The empirical unity of the series of historical

¹⁰⁶ Zib. 4065: «Ora ciascuno individuo quando nasce è precisamente, quanto all'intelletto nello stato medesimo in cui fu il primo uomo. Quegl'individui che coll'andar del tempo si sono posti a livello delle cognizioni del nostro tempo, sono necessariamente passati per tutti quegli stati per cui lo spirito umano è passato dal principio del mondo fino al dì d'oggi (almeno per quei gradi per cui egli è passato progredendo e avanzando), e ha sperimentato in se tutti gli avvenimenti dell'intelletto che il genere umano ha sperimentato in tanti secoli quanti sono corsi dalla sua origine insino a ora. La storia del suo intelletto è quella appunto di tutti questi secoli ristretta e compresa in venti o trent'anni di tempo. (Laonde da tutti i cambiamenti che il suo intelletto ha provati, cambiamenti che più volte l'hanno portato a persuasioni e stati contrarissimi ai passati, e in ultimo a un sistema di persuasioni ed a uno stato contrarissimo al suo primitivo; da tutti questi cambiamenti, dico, deggiono di necessità essere risultate in lui tante diversità e successivi cambiamenti di carattere, quanti ne sono stati prodotti nelle nazioni e nel genere umano in generale dai diversi principii e opinioni e dal diverso progresso e stato di cognizioni in tutto il tempo che ci è bisognato per portarlo dal suo primitivo stato al presente. (8. Aprile. 1824.)). Onde questo tale individuo rinchiude e compendia in se, non solo la storia dello spirito umano, ma quella eziandio de' caratteri successivi delle nazioni, in quanto essi ebbero origine e dipendenza dalle opinioni e conoscenze, che certo è grandissima e forse la massima parte.»

events substitutes that ideal unity that Leopardi has refuted with the thesis of the primacy of existence. The transmission of knowledge through the ages does not support an essential distinction between “high” and “low” history, as a difference between what is bequeathed and what is forgotten. On the contrary, the process of accumulation of knowledge of which Leopardi speaks remains essentially contingent. Since the unity of history is simply empirical, once a certain discovery is lost, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to find it again:

In this connection, consider also how many inventions, etc., proper to the ancients for such a long period of time, and that were common to many nations, and widespread too, once they were lost in later times could never be repeated, nor will they probably be repeated ever again (such as “encaustic painting”);¹ and this despite the fact that we have information about them in general, that is, the memory that they existed and what they were like, and often also a lot of specific information about them, that is, traces of what they were like, the methods and processes, etc., the means, ingredients, etc., the form in which they were used, etc., and particular, distinct information regarding their effects, purposes, etc. Nonetheless, even for minds as civilized, refined, acute, penetrating, trained, cultivated, speculative, inventive, accustomed, and devoted to inventing, speculating, meditating, reflecting, observing, comparing, reasoning, etc., as human minds have become (for primitive and savage minds, etc., certainly are and were something quite different), they did not have the capacity, from when civilization began to return, to discover them a second time.¹⁰⁷

The “return” of civilization to which Leopardi hints at the end of the passage is the Renaissance.

The rediscovery of the civilization of the ancients, which started with the Renaissance, has not been sufficient to recreating many discoveries whose description we can still read. Knowledge of those discoveries arrives to us stripped of all the concrete circumstances that have made them possible, so that they remain inaccessible to us. The ontogenesis-phylogenesis analogy allows

¹⁰⁷ Zib. 3671-2: «A questo proposito si consideri ancora quante invenzioni ec. che per lunghissimo tempo furono proprie degli antichi, ed anche comuni a molte nazioni, ed anche volgari; perdute ne’ tempi bassi, non si sono potute mai più rinnovare, nè mai probabilmente si rinnoveranno (com’è quella della pittura all’encausto); e ciò, non ostante che se n’abbia pur la notizia in genere, cioè la memoria ch’esse furono e quali furono, e sovente ancora parecchie notizie in ispecie, cioè vestigi del come furono, de’ metodi e processi ec. del modo ec. de’ mezzi, ingredienti ec. della forma di adoperarle ec., e le notizie particolari e distinte de’ loro effetti e fini ec. Contuttociò ad ingegni così civili, così raffinati, acuti, penetranti, esercitati, coltivati, così speculativi, così inventivi, così avvezzi e dediti a inventare, a speculare, a meditare, a riflettere, a osservare, a comparare, a ragionare ec. quali son divenuti gl’ingegni umani (ben altri erano certo e sono i primitivi e selvaggi ec.), non è bastato l’animo, dalla risorta civiltà in poi, di poterle ritrovare una seconda volta. (11. Ott. 1823.)»

Leopardi to conceive the unity of history in a contingent sense. Such an empirical unity can be thought of in terms of path dependency: in the chain of the causal connections, the assimilation of the preceding historical experiences becomes one of the circumstances that determine the successive events. This path dependence — under certain conditions — makes possible the conservation of the unique event, so that from the exception a new regularity can arise. In terms of the modern theory of complex systems, the appearance of this contingent regularity could be thought of as an emergent property: a pattern or a regularity which arises through interactions among smaller or simpler entities that in themselves do not exhibit such a property.¹⁰⁸ The attention to the individual nature of the historical event is here conciliated with the possible emergence of regularities, which are not determined by preexisting rules, but are instead an effect of the way in which the individual elements behave. There is no law that precedes history, rather history gives to itself its own laws.

3. Natural history as cosmology

In the definition of history that Leopardi gives us there is no mention of the human being as the distinctive subject of history. We could have indeed expected a definition that would have assigned the realm of humanity to history and that of nature to science, as is often implied in the trivial usage of these words. But Leopardi's definition seems to be rather indifferent to the idea of an essential distinction between humanity and nature, pointing instead to a formal difference, which characterizes the respective subjects of these disciplines regarding their temporal

¹⁰⁸ Cf. F. Hayek, *The Theory of Complex Phenomena*, in *Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics*, University of Chicago Press, 1967.

structure. The distinction Leopardi adopts leaves the door open to a consideration of natural events according to an historical perspective. In the pages of the *Zibaldone*, indeed, humanity is considered in no other way than as a moment, probably the last, in the history of the universe. About thirty years before the publication of Darwin's *On the origin of the species*, 1859, Leopardi seems to come to a sort of evolutionist conception, according to which the concrete forms of the individual elements are shaped by their interaction with their circumstances. The concept of adaptation (*conformabilità, assuefabilità*) is central in many pages of the *Zibaldone*, where it is a crucial factor in explaining the variety of plants and animals that dwell on the earth, as well as the evolution of distinctive human attitudes as memory, imagination and reason. In his *Frammento apocrifo di Stratone di Lampsaco* Leopardi sketches a cosmology where the present state of the universe appears as the result of the motion of matter, which determines the appearance as well as the destruction of all the things of the universe, from the distant stars to the earthly species. As with historical events, also natural ones appear to be a product of chance and therefore can also be considered individual in their nature. From the point of view of this true *natural history* the conception of the existence of eternal laws that rule the universe appear somehow inadequate. The so-called laws of nature can be considered mere regularities, characterizing a determinate state of the universe that corresponds to a moment in the trajectory of its evolution. In this sense the laws of nature are for Leopardi nothing other than *facts*, as he writes in a passage that precedes by only a few months the one on the distinction between history and science:

We happily speak every day about the laws of nature (even to reject this or that fact as impossible) as if we knew something else about nature other than facts, and very few at that». ¹⁰⁹

The thesis on the primacy of existence is here brought to its extreme, and the critique of the idea of a transcendent order, embodied by natural laws, leads Leopardi to a criticism of some assumptions of classical Physique. If — from the philological point of view seen in the 1826 passage — natural history is nothing but science, Leopardi still thinks possible to consider nature from an historical point of view. This perspective on nature is surely not less true than that of science, but rather wider and more comprehensive, since it encompasses the truth of science in its own. From this point of view, the sciences of nature can be considered as approximations of an historical truth, a static perspective on what is intrinsically dynamic, and a generalization of what happens at the level of the individual. Leopardi seems to foreshadow here the perspective of that part of modern physics that in more recent times has become known as physical cosmology, the study of the evolution of the universe as a whole. From the perspective of such a science, all the laws that the other branches of the natural science consider as given, have to be considered as a consequence of a particular stage in the development of the universe. ¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Zib. 4189. «Nominiamo francamente tutto giorno le leggi della natura (anche per rigettare come impossibile questo o quel fatto) quasi che noi conoscessimo della natura altro che fatti, e pochi fatti. Le pretese leggi della natura non sono altro che i fatti che noi conosciamo».

¹¹⁰ Cfr. W. H. McCrea, *Cosmology*, «Reports on Progress in Physics», Vol. 16, 1953, pp. 321-363. As McCrea reports, the birth of modern cosmology can be placed at the beginning of the 20th century: «The modern study of cosmology may be dated from 1917, when Einstein and de Sitter published their relativistic models of the universe. Enormous effort has gone into the development of the subject since then, but particularly since about 1930, when Hubble, following upon earlier observational work by Slipher, had accumulated enough observations to announce his law of the apparent recession of the nebulae, and when Eddington called attention to the significance of earlier theoretical work by Friedmann and Lemaitre on non-static models» (p. 322). The definition of Cosmology given in the introduction of the article can be of some interest in respect of the present argument: «Cosmology may be said to be that part of physics for which the main interest lies in what exists ‘actually’ or ‘accidentally’. It may be contrasted with ordinary physics, for which the main interest lies in what exists ‘typically’ or ‘generally’» (p.323).



The conception of history outlined in this chapter can help to frame Leopardi's interpretation of the Renaissance which will be outlined in chapters III-IV. On the basis of this interpretation, as it will become clearer in chapters V-VIII, Leopardi transforms the Renaissance into a poetic symbol. Such a poetic symbol has a very specific nature, and it seems proper to touch upon this fact here, in the context of Leopardi's discussion of the concept of history. Symbol — following the greek etymology *símbolon*, “a sign by which one infers something” — is commonly understood to be a connection between a concrete reality and a meaning which is not immediate. Thanks to the historical predominance of the platonist interpretation of the symbol, such a connection has mostly been taken as the reflection of a transcendent reality on the material world. Based on Leopardi's methodological conception of history, the following chapters will outline a symbolism which, on the contrary, is strictly historical in its nature — a connection between things that have happened only once.

Chapter III

Two emblems of the Renaissance

Introduction

Leopardi's references to the Renaissance take place in a determinate historical reality. The voices in conversation at the Gabinetto Vieusseux (cf. Chapter I) account for the ferment surrounding the question of the Renaissance at that time. For the people of Palazzo Buondelmonti the Renaissance was not just a historical argument, but as well the political question of the future of their land. Leopardi entered into epistolary contact with Vieusseux in 1824. In 1827 he spent a period of time in Florence and had the chance of getting acquainted with the people of the Gabinetto. Yet, the crucial years for the formation of Leopardi's thought at that point had already passed. Leopardi arrived at the Gabinetto after his meditation had largely been delivered to the pages of the *Zibaldone*. For Leopardi, as for most of the other people of Palazzo Buondelmonti, the Gabinetto was a point of arrival, not one of departure. The conversation about the Renaissance at the Gabinetto Vieusseux, involving intellectuals of different political orientations and coming from several different parts of Italy, certainly helps to place Leopardi's reference to the Renaissance within the intricate vicissitudes of the Italian history of the eighteenth century. However, it can also be useful to to scale down the picture, in order to see from which region of this landscape Leopardi came from.

Born in Recanati — a small town not too far from Ancona, the main port of the Papal State — Leopardi was the descendant of a noble family that for centuries had been at the service of the Pope in the local administration. Leopardi's 1820 poem *Ad Angelo Mai* — presenting a dialectical image of the Renaissance as both fulfillment of the world-measurement and return of imagination — witnesses Leopardi's attempt to gain the favor of papal bureaucracy, by means of construing a poetic profile meant to be both honest and ideologically appealing. In this chapter the dialectical image of the Renaissance which Leopardi outlines in *Ad Angelo Mai* will be presented in light of his efforts to gain the favor of state bureaucracy, culminating in his first travel to Rome.

1. The robes of the philologist

In 1822 Leopardi moved from Recanati, a small town in the northeastern territories of the Papal States, to the capital. Introducing himself on the Roman literary scene, in an attempt to escape the isolation of his ancestral village and to gain independence from his family, soon Leopardi found himself disgusted with the pedantry and lack of ingenuity of the literary circles there, where antiquarian studies was the only discipline to be taken seriously. «Philosophy,» he wrote to his father «ethics, politics, the science of the human heart, eloquence, poetry, philology, all of this is foreign in Rome, like a childish entertainment, compared to finding if a certain piece of copper belonged to Marcus Antonius or Marcus Agrippa.»

He then turned his attention on a number of foreign intellectuals, some of whom were serving as diplomats at the pontifical court, such as the Prussian ambassador, the Roman historian Barthold von Niebuhr, the Dutch ambassador, Johann Reinhold, also a poet and a translator of Petrarch,

and the German Greek scholar Friedrich Thiersch. However, this also came at a price, as he wrote to his younger brother in a letter: «You must realize that foreigners don't give a shit about philosophy here, nor about any sort of genius, nor therefore about literature of any kind: because, since they do not understand Italian, they wouldn't understand one fucking bit of the most beautiful writings you could show them in this language. I have therefore changed my robes, or rather, I have retaken those that I used to wear when I was a lad. Here in Rome I'm not a writer, but an erudite and a Greek scholar.»¹¹¹ This disguise proved to be to a certain extent successful, helping Leopardi to gain respect and even friendship from Niebuhr, who was at the time gathering the materials for his *Roman History*, the influential book that would have brought the philological method into historiography. Niebuhr substantially accepted all the conjectures Leopardi advanced on a text he was editing at the time, the *Merobaude*, and later publicly recognized Leopardi's contributions in several of his philological editions.

Nonetheless, in the letters to his brother, Leopardi appears extremely disenchanted about his successes in this field, to the point that he called «bollocks»¹¹² the article he had published in Rome, one that had met Niebuhr's enthusiasm. «You are certainly laughing, as I am» Leopardi writes to his brother «at the philology I'm using here in Rome. I use it only for the purposes I

¹¹¹ Letter to Carlo Leopardi, Rome, January 22, 1823: «Dovete però sapere che la filosofia, e tutto quello che tiene al genio, insomma la vera letteratura, di qualunque genere sia, non vale un cazzo con gli stranieri: i quali non sapendo niente d'italiano, non gusterebbero un cazzo le più belle produzioni che si mostrassero loro in questa lingua (...). Io dunque ho mutato abito, o meglio ho ripreso quello che io portai da fanciullo. Qui a Roma non sono letterato (...) ma sono un erudito e un grecista.»

¹¹² Letter to Carlo Leopardi, Rome, March 12, 1823: «Ti mando uno degli articoli da me pubblicati qui. Ti parrà una coglioneria: pur sappi che questo ha fatto che il Ministro di Prussia desiderasse di conoscermi.»

already told you, and the more I use it, the more I realize its futility.»¹¹³ In fact, Leopardi's enchantment for the antique world never faded. Rather, his mockery of philology expresses the refusal of every attempt to gain access to antiquity only by means of technique. Although he mastered the instruments of this technique to an extent that was unrivaled in Italy at the time, he was dissatisfied with the idea of alienating antiquity into a simple object of theoretical contemplation. The reality disclosed by the ancients' lost world would simply dissolve once confined to the categories of science¹¹⁴. And yet, notwithstanding his disenchantment, for several years he continued wearing the robes of the philologist and of the Greek scholar in search of an occupation under his «natural Prince»¹¹⁵, as he refers to the Pope in the official letters. When encouraged by Niebuhr to write to the Secretary of State, Cardinal Consalvi, and to other members of the Curia, in order to get a position in the ranks of bureaucracy, Leopardi always recalled his merits as a philologist, asking for an occupation that could allow him to better commit himself to his research in this field.

This attitude of his can be better understood taking into consideration Leopardi's reaction, about three years before, to the discovery in the Vatican library of a palimpsest containing 151 folios of Cicero's *De Republica*, a work that had been given for lost till then. The discovery was made by the recently appointed keeper of the Vatican library, Monsignor Angelo Mai, with whom Leopardi had corresponded since 1816, when he had sent him his *Discorso sopra la vita e le*

¹¹³ Letter to Carlo Leopardi, Rome, March 22, 1823: «Devi certamente ridere, come io fo, della filologia della quale mi servo qui in Roma, solamente per le ragioni che ti dissi altra volta, e servendomene, sempre più ne conosco la frivolezza».

¹¹⁴ Cf. A. M. Capodivacca, *Nietzsche's Zukunftsphilologie: Leopardi, Philology, History*. California Italian Studies, 2(1) 2011, retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2528k6vm>.

¹¹⁵ Letter to Carlo Bunsen, Milan, August 3, 1825: «(...) per dedicarmi al servizio del mio Principe naturale sono pronto a lasciare ogni più utile destinazione in paese estero (...)».

opere di M. Cornelio Frontone, a prose work occasioned by his reading of Mai's edition of Fronto's writings. Congratulating Mai for the discovery of Cicero's books, Leopardi writes: «Your Excellency sends us back to the time of Petrarch and the two Poggios, when every day was enlightened by a new classical discovery, and the wonder and the joy of the learned had no time to rest.»¹¹⁶ Here Leopardi's letter seems to echo a passage from the letter in which Mai announced to Pius VII the discovery of the palimpsest in the Vatican library. Mai indeed had compared the present Pope to those that had protected and enhanced the rediscovery of classical antiquity in the Renaissance. However anachronistic these comparisons could seem, they can be adequately understood only by taking into consideration their fundamental faithfulness to the essential anachronism of the Renaissance: the ideal and practice of the return of antiquity, where critical detachment through philology is mainly intended as a means to achieve identification with the classical civilization. In a climax of analogies that proceeds from the individual to history, Pius VII becomes Leo X, Angelo Mai becomes Petrarch, and Leopardi at last makes himself the bard of the return of the Renaissance, publishing a few months later the poem *Ad Angelo Mai, quand'ebbe ritrovato i libri di Cicerone «Della Repubblica»*.

¹¹⁶ Letter to Angelo Mai, January 10, 1820: «V.S. ci fa tornare ai tempi dei Petrarca e dei Poggi, quando ogni giorno era illustrato da una nuova scoperta classica, e la meraviglia e la gioia de' letterati non trovava riposo.»



1. Francesco Hayez, *Meditazione sulla Storia d'Italia*, 1850, Galleria d'arte moderna Achille Forti, Verona.

In this poem the praise for the discovery of Cicero's books and the exaltation of Mai's enterprise of reawakening the voices of the «ancient fathers» is countered with the idleness and slumber of Italy in the present day. This opposition of light and darkness frames a series of poetic emblems from Dante to Alfieri, a gallery of heroic portraits, which is a philosophical history of Italy in a nutshell: historic events are understood as manifestations of the struggle between the living element and death. With this «emblematic» narration of the history of Italy, much alike its later

figurative counterpart, Hayez' *Meditation on Italian History* (cf. fig. 1), the poem is meant to hold up a mirror to contemporary Italy, prodding her to awaken and arise, or be ashamed forever. It seems that, at the time when Leopardi wrote this lyric, his disenchantment for philology was yet to come. His commitment to the ideal expressed in the poem can be taken as genuine, but at the same time it is certainly not naive, as it appears from a letter he wrote to Pietro Brighenti, a friend of his who published the poem in Modena, telling him how he successfully escaped his father's reactionary surveillance¹¹⁷. However, not everyone in Italy was so easy to trick. Shortly after its publication, censorship banned *Ad Angelo Mai* in the Hapsburg provinces of northern Italy. Leopardi's celebration of a philological achievement was not meant to be an erudite and innocuous entertainment, but rather had the precise meaning of a political gesture pointing towards rebellion against foreign domination. The political ideal Leopardi outlines in this poem is a return to the Renaissance in the sense of a return to the return of antiquity.

(...) *presenti*
paion que' giorni allor che dalla dira
oblivion antica ergean la chioma,
con gli studi sepolti,
i vetusti divini, a cui natura
parlò senza svelarsi, onde i riposi
*magnanimi allegrâr d'Atene e Roma.*¹¹⁸

What makes the ancients divine is their colloquy with non-unveiled nature, which manifests itself in the profound quietude of their arts. The subalternity of the Italian states to foreign

¹¹⁷ «The title (...) is most innocent. But my father does not imagine that there is someone who might take advantage of any subject to talk about what he cares for most. He does not suspect at all that, behind that title, a poem full of awful fanaticism hides itself.» Lettera a Pietro Brighenti, Recanati, 28 April, 1820. testo it...

¹¹⁸ That those old days appear again,/ When, roused from dire oblivion's tomb,/ Came forth, with all the treasures of their lore,/ Those ancient bards, divine, with whom/ Great Nature spake, but still behind her veil,/ And with her mysteries graced/ The holidays of Athens and of Rome.

powers is interpreted as obliviousness to this colloquium. In turn, the greatness of the Renaissance consists in the fact that it awakened itself to the memory of Antiquity, lending its ear to the lost voices of that dialogue. In a way that closely echoes certain passages from Petrarch, philology becomes, in the strictest sense, a matter of national interest, though one in which the nation is not conceived in an ethnic sense, but as a civilization of memory: contemporary Italy turns to the Renaissance, the Renaissance looks back to Rome, and Rome points toward Athens. While the nature of such humanism is not essential but rather memorial, the poetry of *Ad Angelo Mai* is a poetry of reclamation, in the sense that it claims the return to a foundation illegitimately suppressed.¹¹⁹

In order to better understand the political meaning of philology in this poem, it is important to consider the context of the education Leopardi had undertaken during his youth, which fashioned him into a descendant of the Renaissance philologists. As a member of the papal aristocracy, his father had supported Leopardi's studies mainly by leaving at his disposal the huge library acquired at the cost of bringing the family near to financial collapse. Wide as Leopardi's curriculum was, ranging from mathematics to metaphysics, the core of his education was still dedicated to knowledge of the classics, both in Latin, which he studied under a priest, and in Greek literature, which he taught himself.

¹¹⁹ I use the term «reclamation» here in order to stress the analogy with the rhetoric of reclamation, understood as a distinctive trait of later nationalistic discourse (cf. Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, “Reclamation”, in *Political Concepts: a Critical Lexicon*, Issue 3, 2013). The discourse on the “ground” which the rhetoric of reclamation elaborates on appears particularly suited to grasp Leopardi's attempt to develop a political foundation for what he calls “the age of universal egoism”. Leopardi's symbolism of the Renaissance can be considered as an immanent critique which Leopardi addresses to the premises of the foundation of the liberal state in Italy. As it will appear more clearly in the last chapter of this dissertation, the specific form the rhetoric of reclamation takes on in Leopardi's mature thought and poetry widely differs both from the one of his contemporaries and from those that were later adopted by Fascism and other nationalistic discourses: in it, it is the very absence of ground that founds the reclamation. Leopardi's reclamation of the Renaissance in *Ad Angelo Mai* can thus be understood as an intermediate step towards the transvaluation of the “ground” in his mature philosophical meditation.

If this persistence of the humanistic paradigm held true for most of the European intellectuals at least till the beginning of the twentieth century, it was nevertheless more transparent in the case of an Italian intellectual, and even more so for an Italian intellectual that was subject to a king that was also the Pope. From a strictly materialistic point of view, Leopardi saw in the presence of the papacy in Rome the principal reason for the achievements of Italian civilization after the end of antiquity. As he wrote in his philosophical notebook:

The domination of religion in past times» and up to the revolution (although always decreasing but not extinct by the time of that revolution), but especially before the 17th century, and consequently the credit, influence and importance of the Pope and the Court of Rome, contributed greatly, and perhaps, especially in certain periods, principally, to keep Italy in action, to give it the space to practice politics and affairs, to give it material and means to be involved in negotiations, to give it importance and weight, negotiators, diplomats, politicians, men who had an active role in the events and destinies of Europe, whose names went down in history.»¹²⁰

Leopardi's historical judgment on the role of the papacy during the Renaissance, is here driven by the idea of «action», in the sense of the possibility of deployment of accumulated energies and development of new ones. Interestingly, in this passage Leopardi seems to translate in a materialistic language a point of view that was not exclusively of the Neo Guelph historians as Balbo and Capponi, but could be shared also by the freemason Romagnosi or by the anticlerical Libri.

Coming to the capital in search of an occupation that could make him independent and allow him to devote himself to poetry, Leopardi was in a certain sense looking for the remnants of pre-Counter Reformation Rome, a city where there was enough «action» to allow Machiavelli's *Mandragola* to be performed in honor of the Pope. For him the robes of the humanist were, if not the «regal and curial robes» of Machiavelli's letter to Vettori, at least a disguise in the form of an

¹²⁰ Zib. 3887, 17 Nov. 1823.

archaism, or, more precisely, a ceremonial costume that could be worn earnestly in the perilous process of entering into society without renouncing his poetic vocation¹²¹.

In the end, partly because of his political opinions, partly because of a remarkable reluctance to compromise, this attempt failed. Leopardi abandoned the Papal States in 1825, moving to Milan where he collaborated with the publishing house Antonio Fortunato Stella. The milanese developing editorial market, far less humanist and Renaissance in style, offered him more chance of independence than did the papal bureaucracy. Nevertheless, Leopardi's self-fashioning as a post-Renaissance humanist is essential to understand the space of meaning where his references to the Renaissance occur. For this very reason the *Canzone ad Angelo Mai* offers us a precious door in order to access the path of Leopardi's interpretation of the Renaissance.

2. Renaissance's dialectic

Ad Angelo Mai constitutes an early turning point in the trajectory of Leopardi's style. The poetic form Leopardi adopts here, the *canzone*, is the most solemn poetic form in the Italian literary tradition: Dante associates it with the *stile tragico*, the one reserved to subjects of the highest gravity. Inherited from the *canzon* of Provençal poetry, it was canonized by Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, and became one of the main points of reference for the Italian and European poetic traditions. According to Leopardi, the use Petrarch makes of the *canzone* form, is such that this meter «resembles the one used in Greek odes consisting of strophe, antistrophe,

¹²¹ The word “panni” which Leopardi employs reminds of Machiavelli's “vesti”. I'm indebted to Ronald Martinez for the suggestion of this interesting comparison.

and epode, and has so noble and dignified a harmony, one that is suited to sublime lyric.»¹²² The classicality reached by the canzone form is thus in a certain sense a rebirth of classical poetry. The relationship Leopardi establishes with this form in his early poems is sharply dialectical¹²³: in the two opening poems of his collection, *I Canti*, the closed form inherited from tradition is accepted, but is then dismantled from the within. In *To Italy* the metrical scheme Leopardi adopts is ABcdABCeFGeFHGIkIMiM for stanzas with an odd number and AbCDaBDEFgEfHgIHKLiL for the stanzas with even number; in *On Dante's funerary monument* the scheme is aBcADBeFDGefGHIhI for the stanzas with an odd number and BcADbEfDGefGHIhI for the stanzas with an even number. Both these schemes appear extremely complex. They abandon some traditional elements of internal coherence — such as the bipartite structure of *fronte* and *sirima* — preferring unconventional treatment of the stanza that leads to new criteria of consistency: complex use of symmetries and asymmetries in the length of verses and the disposition of rhymes create a variegated structure, more intrinsic, less immediately perceptible on a visual or auditory level at first, but not less calculated than traditional models. The invisible closeness of this less immediately perceptible structure, is struggled in turn from within, by means of syntax and the use of enjambments. The overall effect is that, while on an exterior level form is retained, its function is transformed, as the structure of the stanza loses its immediate recognizability.

¹²² Zib.1209: «(...) somiglia a quello delle odi greche composte di strofe, di antistrofe, e d'epodo, ed ha un'armonia così nobile e grave, ed atto alla lirica sublime»

¹²³ This paragraph widely relays on an insightful essay by Francesco De Rosa, *Il trattamento leopardiano della forma canzone (1818-1822)*, «Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Classe di Lettere e Filosofia», Serie III, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1993), pp. 225-273.

Compared with the two opening canzoni of Leopardi's *Canti*, *Ad Angelo Mai*, which immediately follows, displays a lightened and more regular metrical structure: AbCBCDeFGDeFGHH. Such a structure recuperates the framing value of the stanza through the unrhymed verse (A) in the opening and the rhyming couplet at the end (HH). The abandonment of the traditional bipartite structure, which also characterized the two preceding canzoni, is here retained, but the movement of the stanza goes back to a rectilinear trajectory, so that the traditional value of the form is restated by new means. This dialectical appropriation of the canonical form becomes starkly expressive in light of Leopardi's appeal to the Renaissance as memorial civilization: the metrical form, which itself arisen from the dead, is the voice of this appeal, and at the same time its response, which is in an essential sense poetic. To this formal dialectic corresponds in turn a dialectic of content, which regards the meaning of the rebirth of antiquity, and is expressed through the juxtaposition, at the very heart of the poem, of two emblems belonging to the age of the Renaissance.

A) The age of the world's measurement

Exactly in the middle of the well-calculated poetic design of *Ad Angelo Mai*, in the sixth and seventh stanza, the center of this twelve stanza poem, Leopardi places the emblem of Columbus. The first of these two stanzas is characterized by the recurrence of images related to the natural elements of land, sea, and stars, which seems to give an almost material consistency to the image of Columbus' enterprise.

*Ma tua vita era allor con gli astri e il mare,
Ligure ardita prole,
Quand'oltre alle colonne, ed oltre ai liti
Cui strider l'onde all'attuffar del sole*

*Parve udir su la sera, agl'infiniti
 Flutti commesso, ritrovasti il raggio
 Del Sol caduto, e il giorno
 Che nasce allor ch' ai nostri è giunto al fondo;
 E rotto di natura ogni contrasto,
 Ignota immensa terra al tuo viaggio
 Fu gloria, e del ritorno
 Ai rischi. Ahi ahi, ma conosciuto il mondo
 Non cresce, anzi si scema, e assai più vasto
 L'etra sonante e l'alma terra e il mare
 Al fanciullin, che non al saggio, appare¹²⁴.*

Columbus' life, spent among the elements of nature, appears at the opening of the stanza together with the recall of the belief, widespread in the ancient world, of the sun sleeping in the ocean at night. With his travel, following the path of the sun¹²⁵, Columbus goes to the other side of the world, a side that before — in the old world's horizon — was only occupied by the beliefs and imaginations of the ancients. In a certain sense, Columbus is one of the ancients: he is an energetic figure, a hero of action. In his navigation he fights against the elements of nature and wins them all, safely coming back home at the end of his travel. Most of all, his enterprise towards the unknown opens towards a new enterprise, new travels, the exploration of a new «unknown, measureless land»: it is in this disclosure of a new unknown, of a new possibility of action and discovery, that consists Columbus's «glory».

¹²⁴ «But thy life, then, was with the stars and sea,/ Liguria's hardy son,/ When thou, beyond the columns and the shores,/ Where oft, at set of sun,/ The waves are heard to hiss,/ As he into their depths has plunged,/ Committed to the boundless deep,/ Didst find again the sun's declining ray,/ The new-born day didst find,/ When it from us had passed away;/ Defying Nature's every obstacle,/ A land unknown didst win, the glorious spoils/ Of all thy perils, all thy toils./ And yet, when known, the world seems smaller still;/ And earth and ocean, and the heavenly sphere/More vast unto the child, than to the sage appear.»

¹²⁵ In respect of the following section, it is significant that the comparison between Columbus' itinerary and that of the sun towards the west can be read as well in Ariosto's *Furioso*: «e del sole imitando il camin tondo,/ritrovar nuove terre e nuovo mondo» (XV, 22), a coincidence which is reinforced by the occurrence of the verb «ritrovare» in both the texts.

Navigation, nevertheless, is for Leopardi not only a heroic activity, but also an example of the series of rare and difficult discoveries that have shaped civilization. Columbus somehow recapitulates this long history of discoveries, and with the impetus given by the accumulation «breaks every contrast of nature». The hindrance he overcomes is not only the physical opposition of the natural elements, but most of all the cognitive limitation of man living in a world whose shape remains unknown to him. This limitation of knowledge is the supreme «contrast of nature», which is broken once and for all by his travel. In this respect, Columbus is absolutely modern: he is the hero of reason that changes the image of the world, bringing the light of truth where before there were only the dreams of imagination. The world appears now steadily enlightened over all its surface. The result of this transformation is, however, most unfortunate: the discovery of the new world makes the whole world smaller.

Here probably Leopardi is not just vaguely interpreting the figure of Columbus according to his own thought, but rather meditating Columbus' very own words, as they have reached us in his *Lettera Rarissima*, the letter he wrote to the sovereigns of Spain from Jamaica, on the 7th of July, 1503: «I say that the world is not so big, as people say» Columbus writes «and that one degree of the equinoctial line is 56 miles and two thirds: and soon it will be possible to put a finger on it.»¹²⁶ It is this change in the representation of the world, turned into a numeric quantity, into something that can be proven, which it is possible to «put a finger on», that most of all captures Leopardi's poetic attention. In the following stanza the figure of Columbus seems to fade out, and a meditation on the meaning and the consequences of these very few words takes the scene.

¹²⁶ «Dico che il mondo non e' tanto grande, come il volgo dice, e che un grado della linea equinoziale e' miglia 56 e due terzi: presto si toccherà con mano.» I'm quoting from the Italian edition that Leopardi could have read, C. Colombo, *Lettera Rarissima. Riprodotta e illustrata dal cavaliere abate Morelli*, Bassano, Stamperia Redimondiniana, 1810, p. 12.

*Nostri sogni leggiadri ove son giti
 dell'ignoto ricetta
 d'ignoti abitatori, o del diurno
 degli astri albergo, e del rimoto letto
 della giovane Aurora, e del notturno
 occulto sonno del maggior pianeta?
 Ecco svanire a un punto,
 e figurato è il mondo in breve carta;
 ecco, tutto è simile, e, discoprendo,
 solo il nulla s'accresce. A noi ti vieta
 il vero, appena è giunto,
 o caro immaginar; da te s'apparta
 nostra mente in eterno; allo stupendo
 poter tuo primo ne sottraggon gli anni;
 e il conforto perì de' nostri affanni.¹²⁷*

In the erudite note accompanying the poem, Leopardi refers to the sources of the legends on the Antipodes and the sun's nocturnal abode, that are rapidly hinted at in the opening of this stanza. Among them are Stesichorus, Æschilus and Mimnermus¹²⁸. Here again, as in the case of Columbus' words, the poem reveals a philological texture, like that of a meditation on historical facts, through the interpretation of the texts that have bequeathed them. Ancient Greek poetry is regarded not just in a literary sense, but with an almost ethnological gaze, since it bears the witness of the image of the world that has been lost with the civilization of the ancients. All

¹²⁷ «Where now are all the charming dreams/Of the mysterious retreats/Of dwellers unto us unknown,/Or where, by day, the stars to rest have gone,/Or of the couch remote of Eos bright,/Or of the sun's mysterious sleep at night?/They, at one point, vanished all;/And the world is portrayed in a brief chart/Lo, all things are alike; discovery/But proves the way for dull vacuity./Farewell to thee, O Imagination, dear,/If plain, unvarnished truth appear!/Thought more and more is still estranged from thee;/Thy power so mighty once, will soon be gone,/And our poor, wounded hearts be left forlorn.»

¹²⁸ «Mentre la notizia della rotondità della terra, ed altre simili appartenenti alla cosmografia, furono poco volgari, gli uomini, ricercando quello che si facesse il sole nel tempo della notte, o qual fosse lo stato suo, fecero intorno a questo parecchie belle immaginazioni: e se molti pensarono che la sera il sole si spegnesse, e che la mattina si raccendesse, altri immaginarono che dal tramonto si riposasse e dormisse fino al giorno. Stesicoro, apud Athenaeum, l. xi, c. 38 (ed. Schweighäuser, t. iv, p. 237); Antimaco, apud eundem, i, c. 238; Eschilo, l. c.; e più distintamente Mimnermo, poeta greco antichissimo, l. c., cap. 39, p. 239, dice che il sole, dopo calato si pone a giacere in un letto concavo, a uso di navicella, tutto d'oro, e così dormendo naviga per l'Oceano da ponente a levante. Pitea, marsigliese, allegato da Gemino, c. 5, in Petavio, Uranologia (ed. Amstelodami, p. 13), e da Cosma egiziano, Topographia Christiana, l. ii, ed. Montfaucon, p. 149, racconta di non so quali barbari che mostrarono ad esso Pitea il luogo dove il sole, secondo loro, si adagiava a dormire.»

through his life Leopardi entertained the project of drafting a map of this lost image of the world that would have been an *Essay on the popular errors among the ancients*. It is in this context that we find the first mention of the Antipodes in his writings. When he drafted a version of this work in 1815, Leopardi framed the project in terms of a work of trans-chronological comparative anthropology: «in order to make this work more profitable» he writes, «I've often compared, at the end of the chapters of which it is composed, the ancients and the moderns, showing that some of the errors of which I had spoken were still alive among the people.»¹²⁹ Under this respect, the original project of Leopardi's essay on “the popular errors” can be compared to Andrea De Jorio's famous *Gesture in Naples and gesture in classical Antiquity*, the first ethnographic study on gesture, published in Naples about two decades later, in 1832.¹³⁰ In this book the author, a well learned priest and a member of the *Accademia Ercolanense* in Naples, collected from vases, frescoes and mosaics a wide repertoire of the gestures of the Greeks and the Romans, comparing them with those that were still observable in Naples in his days.

¹²⁹ Saggio sopra gli errori, Prefazione, p.873, my translation.

¹³⁰ F. De Jorio, *La mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire napoletano*, Cartiere del fibreno, 1832.



1. Engraving from F. De Jorio, *La mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire napoletano*, 1832.

In *Ad Angelo Mai*, written just four years after the first draft of the *Essay on the popular errors among the ancients*, Leopardi's perspective has already changed. The standpoint from which Leopardi looks now at the illusions of the ancients is no longer given by their persistence, but rather by the abysmal gulf that world-measurement digs between the ancient world and modernity.

The footnotes to *Ad Angelo Mai* reveal an important aspect of Leopardi's poetry, which conflates elements coming from a variety of disciplines, such as history, philology and anthropology. This conflation of disciplinary fields is not just an ornament of Leopardi's style, but rather its very

heart. One of the most distinctive aspects of Leopardi's poetry is indeed precisely that of not avoiding the particular relationship with truth which is established by the sciences. Leopardi is not a poet who simply tolerates, mentions, or refers to science: rather he goes further, and thinks scientific truth poetically. It is because of this acceptance of the form of truth of science that in this poem the footnotes — this characteristic symptom of the flat objectivity of the scientific text — while they are certainly meant to speak to a specific audience of potential erudite patrons, are nevertheless absorbed into the domain of poetry. They do not simply explain, but rather poetically refract the rational truth that is here grasped in its poetic meaning. The poetic condensation which Leopardi achieves in these lines is not just a condensation of different meanings, as is usual in the metaphors of poetry, but rather a condensation of *different sorts of truth* into an image where poetic truth resonates with science, history, metaphysics. Such a result, which is so characteristic of Leopardi's poems, is given here by the fact that poetry attracts into its sphere different disciplines of scientific knowledge. This is possible in turn because Leopardi understands all the sciences as studying aspects of history: they all refer to the singularity of a historical event, and tackle it at different levels of explanation. But it is precisely this singularity, a fact, that is the object of Leopardi's poetry, and the center of gravity of the multiplicity of truths that it encompasses. The poetry of Leopardi is, one is tempted to say, empirical.

In the footnote, the quotation of the ancient sources that have been mentioned is poetically intensified through the juxtaposition with several verses from Petrarch, that remind us the persistence, not so much of those beliefs, as rather of the state of poetic indeterminacy regarding

the shape of the world, in a time which was relatively close to Columbus¹³¹. Leopardi observes how the meaning of a couple of lines of a poem where Petrarch refers to the Antipodes (and that our day flies/ to people there who are *perhaps* awaiting it) has changed after Columbus' discovery, which has replaced poetic indeterminacy with objective certainty. In the light of this juxtaposition, the definitive disappearance of that condition of uncertainty at the very moment of Columbus' arrival in the new world, flashes in all its instantaneous disruptiveness, as a sudden manifestation of *καίρος*, an empirical singularity that brings with itself a cosmic change. All at once, an entire image of the world is wiped out, together with the half-awake dreams of imagination that were rooted in it.

*Ecco, svanire a un punto
E figurato è il mondo in breve carta;*

A un punto – at one point. It is a point in time and space, the moment of Columbus' discovery. But it is also a point on the map that Columbus' travel has made possible. It is a point that emanates its own time and space. It is a fixed point, a temporal and spatial nail, which fixes its own representation and is fixed by it. This fixation is made possible by a process of progressive shrinking of the world which is achieved through the understanding of the mutual relations among things. It is a process that for Leopardi is likely to have begun with a shepherd that faces an insurmountable difficulty, when he tries to count his flock before the night comes.

¹³¹ «E il Petrarca si accostò a queste tali opinioni volgari in quei versi: (canzone «Nella stagion», stanza iii) *Quando vede il pastor calare i raggi/ del gran pianeta al nido ov'egli alberga*. Siccome in questi altri della medesima canzone, stanza i, seguì la sentenza di quei filosofi che per virtù di raziocinio e di congettura indovinavano gli antipodi: *Nella stagion che 'l ciel rapido inchina/ verso occidente e che 'l di nostro vola/ a gente che di là forse l'aspetta*. Dove quel «forse», che oggi non si potrebbe dire, fu sommamente poetico; perché dava facoltà al lettore di rappresentarsi quella gente sconosciuta a suo modo, o di averla in tutto per favolosa: donde si deve credere che, leggendo questi versi, nascessero di quelle concezioni vaghe e indeterminate, che sono effetto principalissimo ed essenziale delle bellezze poetiche, anzi di tutte le bellezze del mondo».

Suppose a primitive or a savage shepherd who lacks speech or numbers and, as is only natural, wants to make a tally of his flocks in the evening. He would absolutely not be able to do this except in the most concrete fashion such as placing all the sheep in a line in the morning, marking and measuring the space they occupy, drawing them up in the same place in the evening, and thus making the comparison. Or, and this is the more probable, gathering, let us suppose, as many stones as there are sheep. This done, however, there is no way that he could compare them exactly with the stones on the basis of some idea of quantity. Because, being unable to count either sheep or stones, he would still be less able to form any concept of the mutual relation or the comparison between two specific numerical quantities.(...)

It is certain that the invention of numerals was one of the most difficult things to do, and one of the last inventions made by the first discoverers (trovatori) of language. The idea of quantity, not only absolute and indefinite (indeed this is less difficult, the idea of more and less, and hence of indefinite quantity, being concrete and tangible) but also definite, also relating to very concrete things, properly understood, is almost wholly abstract and metaphysical¹³².

It is not possible here to adequately explain what Leopardi means with the adjective «metaphysical», since he is not thinking metaphysics in a historiographical sense. The word metaphysics assumes a determinate meaning only in the context of a thought that determines its essence, and such is Leopardi's thought¹³³. It is possible though to understand certain aspects of the meaning of this adjective through the thing that is here defined by it, that is to say the idea of quantity. With the creation of numbers, the first «troubadours» of language, those that have found it first, these primitive poets, have achieved the power of reducing things into the closed field of numeric comparison. This «most difficult invention» is also the *last* of the generation of the auroral poets, because with it, their time comes to an end. The creation of numbers creates in turn a new humanity, because now reason, which is for Leopardi the faculty of establishing analogies and similitudes, has found itself in the number. The number indeed is the absolute analogy: it establishes a point of reference to which all the existing things can be compared. All the things are similar to the number, while the number is only similar to itself. Its essence is not

¹³² Zib. 10723.

¹³³ The determination of the meaning of the word metaphysics in Leopardi will be tempted separately in chapter VII.

given by the things to which it is referred, since it rather consists in this very reference; it is neither given by the quantities of which it is composed, nor by those which precede or succeed it, but by the simple sign =. This sign stands now between the stones and the sheep, as well between the measured world and the map that portrays it «*in breve carta*». Columbus' travel fulfills the measurement of the world, which is now entirely subsumed under the sign of identity. The equation is the general form of a world where everything is made similar by the number, which assigns to each thing its proportion to the other things.

*ecco, tutto è simile, e, discoprendo,
solo il nulla s'accresce.*

Everything is similar now. «*Truth equates the things*» Leopardi writes in a variant of these verses.¹³⁴ The mathematization of the world brings with itself an ominous mathematical phenomenon, which is the growth of the amount of naught. This happens because it belongs to the power of reason to make things smaller, to the point where they turn insignificant.¹³⁵ In the *Zibaldone* there is a passage which can be seen as an early version of the note about Petrarch's verses on the Antipodes that accompanies this canzone. Here Leopardi elaborates on the role of mathematics in this quantitative transformation of the world:

Things are not small in themselves. (...) But as soon as man has gained the measure of something hitherto immeasurable, as soon as he becomes familiar with the parts of it, or is able to conjecture about them in accordance with the laws of reason, then that thing immediately seems very small, it no longer satisfies, and leaves him feeling very discontent. (...) So mathematics, which measures when we do not want to measure, defines and circumscribes when

¹³⁴ «Le cose il vero agguaglia», G. Leopardi, *I canti*, critical edition by E. Peruzzi, Rizzoli 1981, 49 — III. *Ad Angelo Mai* 91-105 An.

¹³⁵Cf. Zib. 1364: «We are quite accustomed to judging the misfortunes, privations, etc., that befall us as petty, or reparable, etc., because we know and feel the nothingness of the world, the small importance of things, the paltry weight of the men who slight us, etc. Opposite of the ancients, who judged the things of the world, and men, to be so important that they believed the dead and the immortals were more interested in them than anything else.»

we do not want to set limits (even if these are vast, *even if reality is beyond our imagination*) analyzes when we do not want analysis or an intimate, exact knowledge of something we found pleasurable (*even when this knowledge does not reveal any defects but rather enables us to see that the object is more perfect than we had supposed, as happens in the scrutiny of works of genius, when discovering all their virtues makes them disappear*), mathematics, I say, must necessarily be the opposite of pleasure¹³⁶.

The simple fact of juxtaposing pleasure to mathematics sounds at first odd to the point of embarrassment. Leopardi is here clearly overlooking the experience of the beauty and elegance of a good mathematical formulation. His thought seems to be one-sided at best, probably lazy, more likely incompetent. As the bracketed passage makes clear though, speaking of mathematics Leopardi is also speaking of philology, a discipline he mastered at the highest level of the science of his times. He is thus speaking of science as such, and he is making an empirical observation about its effects. He is, we could say, mathematically looking at the relationship between pleasure and science. The main hindrance in order to read this passage adequately is given by the fact that Leopardi is using the very common word «pleasure» in a way which is accessible only through a careful meditation of that aspect of his thought he refers to as *Theory of Pleasure*. In order properly to understand Leopardi's use of this word, it is necessary to abandon every positivistic assumption about the sensation and its object. The structure of pleasure is for Leopardi essentially reflexive, so that the object of sensation does not constitute one of the two extremes of a linear relationship, but rather a moment in a circular movement: pleasure is for Leopardi the perception, occasioned by an object, of an infinite desire of pleasure¹³⁷, which Leopardi calls *amor proprio*. Therefore, pleasure is not a positive feeling opposed to the negativity of sorrow: insofar as the living being perceives the infinity of his desire for pleasure in

¹³⁶ Zib. 246-8.

¹³⁷ Zib. 165-7

a perception, whether pleasant or painful, that perception constitutes pleasure¹³⁸. Pleasure is not just a condition or an attribute of the living being, but rather the essential expression of self-love (*amor proprio*), the fundamental force of which every expression of life is an exterior manifestation¹³⁹. Pleasure is therefore the universal principle of individuation, that which makes each thing be what it is. Pleasure is never fulfilled, but exists only as a desire for pleasure. The infinity entailed in the perception of pleasure is not real indeed, but imagined. Imagination is essentially the faculty of representing an infinite pleasure, that is the infinite desire for an infinite fulfillment of pleasure¹⁴⁰. Pleasure can thus be understood as imagination imaging itself in the future on the occasion of a perception¹⁴¹:

Each individual moment of the act of pleasure is relative to the moments that follow, and it is pleasurable only in relation to the moments that come after, that is, to the future. At this moment, the pleasure that I feel does not satisfy me, and since it does not gratify my desire, so it is not yet pleasure, but surely I will feel it immediately, surely the pleasure will grow and I will be entirely satisfied. Let us proceed further. Still I do not feel true pleasure, but now (who could doubt it?) I am about to do so. Such is the mind's reasoning, its journey, its activity, its working, and its sensation in the act of any pleasure.¹⁴²

The circularity of pleasure is due to the infinite motility of imagination, which is a living mirror that mirrors itself¹⁴³. Representing not only the object of a determinate representation, but the condition of that representation itself, pleasure — intended as desire of pleasure — is — notwithstanding the fact that its fulfillment never happens — the most real, or using one of

¹³⁸ Zib. 1545-6

¹³⁹ Zib. 182

¹⁴⁰ Zib. 384-5

¹⁴¹ Zib. 535

¹⁴² Zib. 533

¹⁴³ Zib. 1382

Leopardi's words, the most *actual* thing.¹⁴⁴ Pleasure is never actual, and yet the approximation to pleasure that happens in the circle of imagination brings life into actuality. It is precisely this actuality that gets lost in the measured world. This lack of actuality is what Leopardi indicates with the quasi-mathematical term «naught».¹⁴⁵ Truth, or as Leopardi says, *so called truth*¹⁴⁶, has made the world less real, so that naught-ness dominates. This happens because the circular movement of pleasure is arrested by the limitation that quantitative reason imposes on imagination. Things in the measured world do not allow imagination to imagine itself. This limitation takes the form of reason enclosing imagination into its circle. Actuality is replaced by truth, so that imagination appears now *false*. «Knowledge of truth, that is to say of the limits and definitions of things» Leopardi writes in the *Zibaldone* «circumscribes the imagination.»¹⁴⁷ Opposed to the infinite motility of the inner circularity of imagination, reason operates with the external and circular finitude of the measurement that encircles the world. The relationship between the circle of reason and that of imagination is characterized by a structure of violence that manifests itself in the form of a ban:

*A noi ti vieta
il vero, appena è giunto,*

¹⁴⁴ On the correlative problem of the *in-actuality* and un-timeliness of pleasure — considered from the point of view of its fulfillment — cf. M. Riva, *Leopardi, l'inattuale: Tristano contro Zarathustra*, in Carrera (ed. by) *Giacomo Leopardi: poeta e filosofo: atti del Convegno dell'Istituto italiano di cultura*, New York, 31 marzo-1 aprile 1998, Fiesole, Cadmo, 1999, pp.78-9.

¹⁴⁵ The question of naught in Leopardi has been interpreted in ontological terms by several readers as Emanuele Severino (*Il nulla e la poesia. Alla fine dell'età della tecnica: Leopardi*, Rizzoli, 1990; *Cosa arcana e stupenda. L'Occidente e Leopardi*, Rizzoli, 1997) and Sergio Givone (*Uno sguardo dal nulla, «Paradosso»*, 5, 1993, pp. 29–46). The problems connected with such a hypostatization of Leopardi's naught will be touched upon in chapter VII. The problem of naught however can be understood in cognitive terms as the philologico-mathematical question of the world-measurement as outlined in this chapter.

¹⁴⁶ Zib. 4497

¹⁴⁷ Zib. 168

Since the very first instant of the fulfillment of the world's measurement, imagination is banned from the entire surface of the earth. The reference to the Greek poets and Petrarch mentioning the Antipodes, materializes the suddenness of the overall transformation of the world at the moment when imagination is forever banned: written words that have stayed quietly unchanged for thousands of years on the pages of the ancient books, all of a sudden change their meaning. The ban of imagination signals the end of the *reign of poetry*, since poetry is such that it can never adapt to an ancillary role. «Where philosophy *reigns*» Leopardi writes «there poetry cannot be found. It is right that poetry, wherever it may be, should always reign, and should not adapt (...)»¹⁴⁸. The abruptness of the transformation brought by the imagination's ban unveils the silent violence which is taking place. Violence of reason consists in the absoluteness of its sovereignty: reason does not tolerate resistance or disobedience, everything that exists must be submitted to its power. The apparent peacefulness of its dominion is deceptive: reason seems to leave things to themselves, simply assigning them to their own truth. Precisely doing so, the «*empire of reason*»¹⁴⁹ erases from the face of earth everything that is different from itself.

Through the metaphors of the reign of poetry and the empire of reason, Leopardi expresses the conflict between reason and poetry in terms of a conflict of *sovereignty*. The logic of reason's sovereignty, however, is the differentiation and multiplication of its own universality, which progressively penetrates the manifold dimensions of reality. Thinking in terms of sovereignty, therefore, is not sufficient in order to grasp the local aspect of the conflict that Leopardi sees

¹⁴⁸ *Zibaldone*, 1313

¹⁴⁹ *Zibaldone*, 37.

unraveling all around the world and through all the spheres of experience. This is why, with the image of the encirclement operated by world-measuring reason, Leopardi goes further, considering the struggle for sovereignty from the standpoint of *tactics*, where the mathematical calculation of time and space specifies the universality of the conflict.

The tactical violence depicted in Columbus's emblem is nevertheless only the definitive manifestation of the inherent violence of civilization, that since its beginning takes the form of a fratricidal threat of reason to imagination. In a poem written about three years later, *Inno ai Patriarchi*, Leopardi portrays the birth of civilization under the sign of Cain's fratricide, from which human civilization emerges in the form of an infernal city dominated by violence:

*(...) e violento
sorse il disperato Erebo in terra.¹⁵⁰*

The foundation of the first city, which according to the biblical tradition traces back to Cain¹⁵¹, marks for Leopardi the beginning of the violence of reason, which fulfills itself with Columbus' travel and the measurement of the world. History is for Leopardi essentially a history of reason's violence. While in *Ad Angelo Mai* Leopardi looks at Columbus' travel towards the west from an occidental perspective, from the shores of Italy, in the last stanza of *Inno ai Patriarchi* Leopardi adopts the opposite perspective, placing *us*, that is to say the reader and first of all himself, in the silence of the still uncontaminated woods of California, from where *we* can see the apocalyptical arrival of *our* colonial reason from the Orient.

*Oh contra il nostro
scellerato ardimento inermi regni
della saggia natura! I lidi e gli antri*

¹⁵⁰ «(...) and, in violence, despairing/Erebus emerged from the earth.»

¹⁵¹ Zib., 191

*e le quiete selve apre l'invitto
nostro furor; le violate genti
al peregrino affanno, agl' ignorati
desiri educa; e la fugace, ignuda
felicità per l'imo sole incalza.*¹⁵²

Where imagination is banned, the world becomes the victim of reason's «invincible folly», which consists in the fact that utility becomes the supreme principle under the sovereignty of reason. Transforming the most effective means into the supreme end, reason destroys every possible human end. It is this absolute absence of meaningful ends that Leopardi calls naught. Western civilization colonizes the entire surface of the earth as a civilization of naught. «Strange griefs» and «unknown desires», all the superfluous things made necessary by the principle of utility, are the effects of the cruel «education» of reason; it is an education that teaches to live without an end, endlessly reiterating the multiplication of naught. At his heart, this empire of naught is essentially identical to its peripheries. Before colonizing the far-away lands, western civilization has colonized itself by dismantling the artful construction of the civilization of Antiquity. It is not that reason becomes colonial at a certain point, but rather colonialism is the essential manifestation of reason's intrinsic claim to absolute sovereignty. The violence that affects the «violated people» of California, together with the armless kingdom of their landscape, is essentially the same that has led to the end of Antiquity. Leopardi's reference to Rome and Athens in *Ad Angelo Mai* can only be understood if we get rid of every simplistic reading of the classicist paradigm: it points toward a civilization that is able to balance the struggle between the

¹⁵² «(...) Oh,/wise nature's realms, defenceless/against our sinful daring! The shores and caves/and peaceful woods lie open to our un-abating/fury: the violated people learn/strange griefs, unknown/desires: and happiness, fleeing, naked,/is chased, into the western deeps.»

two circles of imagination and reason, remaining in colloquium with non-unveiled nature¹⁵³. This balance is forever broken with the fulfillment of the measurement of the world. Leopardi's call to the rebirth of the rebirth of Antiquity remains therefore unanswerable.

Under the appearance of a celebratory poem expressing a sharp ideological stance, an unsolvable contradiction glimmers in the verses of *Ad Angelo Mai*. The poetic of reclamation, in the sense of claiming back the foundational realm of imagination, is first evoked and then dismantled from the inside. The Renaissance shows itself in a tenebrous light, as the age that, while trying to move towards Antiquity, perpetrated its definitive sacrifice, submitting the entire surface of earth to reason's sovereignty.

B) The return of poetry

Leopardi's dialectic is not keen on syntheses. When contradiction manifests itself, it is already too late to find a solution. On the contrary, once there is a contradiction, it is often the case that there has to be a contradiction in the contradiction as well. Lack of unity does not presupposes unity at its origin, as is characteristic of the dialectic of German idealism. Rather, the lack of unity is for Leopardi the apparent clue of a more arcane absence of unity. The emblem of Columbus, and his fulfillment of reason's sovereignty, is immediately followed in *Ad Angelo Mai* by that of Ariosto, wherein, at the very moment of the world's measurement, inexplicably imagination breaks the ban cast forever on her.

¹⁵³ The determination of the concept of nature in Leopardi will be tackled in chapter IV. For now, it suffices to remind that — as it has been touched upon in chapter II — Leopardi's thought witnesses the abandonment of every essentialistic understanding of «nature», and this at a degree of methodological awareness that can hardly find comparison in the philosophical thought of his time. In his late meditation Leopardi goes so far to challenge the very notion of «law of nature», and thus the entire theoretical construction of classical physics.

It could seem at first inappropriate to put on the same level the planetary transformation brought by the mathematization of the world and the fantasies of a courtly poet. Not to Leopardi though, who understands language as the most delicate, complex and powerful of human inventions. The power of language is that of the origin that can never be erased from all its successive developments, remaining immanent in each of them. Whatever enters into human discourse, even the number that has measured the world and banned imagination, is essentially poetic and belongs to language. Therefore Leopardi can write that «languages are always a thermometer of the customs, opinions, etc., of the nations and the times, and by their nature follow their progression.»¹⁵⁴ Literature is for Leopardi the mirror of a civilization and therefore of its language, so that «the literature is always like the language and vice versa.»¹⁵⁵ Therefore poetry, which means deliberately entering into a reference to the poetic nature of language, is called by Leopardi «the summit of human discourse.»¹⁵⁶ The elevation of poetry should not be understood as a honorific title connoting a high rank in some hierarchy of disciplines. The honor in this sense would have rather to be conferred to the poetic nature of human discourse at every level, from everyday conversation to science, and not to poetry as a specific mode of language. On the contrary, the elevation of poetry — similar under this regard to that of passion and several other conditions of natural or induced excitement¹⁵⁷ — consists for Leopardi in the fact that it

¹⁵⁴ Zib. 1215

¹⁵⁵ Zib. 2013

¹⁵⁶ Zib. 245

¹⁵⁷ In the bracketed passage I have omitted, Leopardi resembles the poet to «the philosopher in the sublimity of speculation, the man of imagination and sentiment in the throes of enthusiasm, any man at the height of a strong passion, in the enthusiasm of weeping, I would dare add, half-warmed by wine.»

condenses the most extreme possibilities of a historical world, to the extent that it belongs to language:

The lyric poet, when inspired (...) sees and looks at things as though from a high place, higher than that which the mind of man normally occupies. Hence, in discovering all at once many more things than he would ordinarily be accustomed to notice at one time, and in discerning and seeing at a single glance a multitude of objects, each of which he has seen individually on many occasions but never all together (apart from in similar circumstances), along with them he is able to see all their reciprocal relations, and as a result of the novelty of this multitude of objects that presents itself to him all together, he is led to consider these objects, albeit fleetingly, better than he has done before this time, and better than he is used to doing, and to want to look at and note these relationships. ¹⁵⁸

The power of poetry is not that of the origin but, rather, the more fragile one of the end. As the most extreme manifestation of a historical world, poetry is indeed also the most sensitive to its transformations. The oscillations that take place at the foundation, reach the top with intensified power. In the age of the world's measurement, the relationship between man and poetry thus changes. The possibility of poetry appears deadly wounded by the mathematization of reality and the ban on imagination:

How can the poet», Leopardi asks, «employ the language and adopt the ideas and display the customs of a generation of men for whom glory is a phantom, for whom liberty, the homeland, love of country do not exist, for whom true love is a childish fancy, and for whom in short, illusions have all vanished, for whom passions, not only the great and noble and beautiful ones, but all passions are extinct? (...) Can a poet as such, be egoistic and metaphysical?¹⁵⁹

Through this accumulation of questions Leopardi describes the effects of the ban of imagination under the absolute sovereignty of reason. There is no place for the poetic image in quantified space. Images can no longer be truly poetic, because their effect is limited by the knowledge of

¹⁵⁸ Zib. 3269-70.

¹⁵⁹ Zib. 1294-5

their falsity. The world's measurement makes it impossible for the poet to persuade the reader with his images, so that the circular motion of imagination is arrested. The path of the images must thus be abandoned. The impossibility of referring to the external reality leaves to poetry the only possibility of turning inwards, towards interiority.

The creative power of imagination is the exclusive property of the ancients. Ever since man (...) came to know himself and things so much more deeply than he should have, and the world became philosophical, imagination, truly strong, fresh, fertile, creative, fruitful imagination, has no longer belonged to anyone but children, or at most to people with little education (...) Though the mind of the poet or writer may be born full of enthusiasm, genius and fantasy, it no longer yields to the creation of images except reluctantly and against his intrusion or shall we say renovated nature (...) The power of such a mind when it abandons itself to enthusiasm (which is no longer so frequent) turns to emotions, feeling, melancholy, sorrow.¹⁶⁰

The poetry that comes from this turn towards interiority is called by Leopardi «sentimental», and belongs to modernity, as imaginative poetry belonged to Antiquity¹⁶¹. Sentimental poetry escapes the ban on imagination, taking refuge in the «heart», becoming «psychological», passing from the visible to the invisible, in order to avoid the conflict of sovereignty with reason. But this is for Leopardi a precarious refuge, since it is in the nature of poetry to not tolerate any border. Deprived of its sovereignty, poetry becomes feeble and is ready to disappear.¹⁶² Sentimental poetry, the only kind possible after the world's measurement, is thus for Leopardi a sort of agony or terminal state of poetry, where the body lives in function of its disease: «the sentimental» Leopardi writes «is founded upon and springs from, philosophy, experience and knowledge (...) And, if we consider poetry in the sense in which the term was first used, the sentimental can

¹⁶⁰ Zib.725-7

¹⁶¹ Zib. 734

¹⁶² According to Leopardi, the final effect of this weakening of the poetic faculty — produced through rationalization and the measurement of the world — is the destruction of the community. As Suzanne Stewart Steinberg poignantly writes, for Leopardi «modernity is constituted by one important and singular fact: that by way of its rationalism and demystification it undermines all grounds for (ideological) belief and therefore destroys the social bond.» (Suzanne Stewart Steinberg, *The Pinocchio Effect*, Chicago University Press, 2007, p. 2014).

hardly be said to be poetry, but rather a form of philosophy or eloquence, except that is more splendid, more ornate than the philosophy or eloquence of the prose.»¹⁶³ Sentimental poetry is a poetry that is not poetry, and thus it can survive as a specter of poetry in the measured world.¹⁶⁴ Ariosto's emblem, immediately following that of Columbus in the poetic history of Italy in *Ad Angelo Mai*, comes here as a twofold contradiction. His appearance is introduced by a temporal proposition that signals contemporaneity with the instant of the world's measurement, «meanwhile» (*intanto*). At the very moment of the ban on imagination from the measured world, a poet is born. What is more, he is the only poet among the moderns who, for Leopardi, does not follow the path of sentimental poetry, rather reaching the rank of «ancient» for his imagination. Ariosto's case is an absolute exception that is signaled in several passages of the *Zibaldone*¹⁶⁵. This absolute exception, nevertheless, is not explained, but just presentified in a fistful of verses.

*Nascevi a dolci sogni intanto, e 'l primo
Sole splendeati in vista,
Cantor vago de l' arme e de gli amori
Che in età della nostra assai men trista
Empier la vita di felici errori:
Nova speme d'italia. O torri o celle
O donne o cavalieri
O giardini o palagi, a voi pensando
In mille vane amenità si perde*

¹⁶³ Zib. 734-5

¹⁶⁴ Leopardi's discussion of sentimental poetry widely resonates with Schiller's essay *On Sentimental and Naive Poetry*. The notion of sentimental poetry arrived to Leopardi probably mediated by De Stael's *De l'Allemagne*, which was also an important source of information about many other aspects of the Romantic movement in German culture. The question of Leopardi's exact stance towards Romanticism has been for long time an important part of the reception of Leopardi's writings in Italy. The range of the interpretations spans from Biral's and Rigoni's attention to romantic aspects in Leopardi, to Timpanaro's and Mengaldo's characterization of Leopardi as, respectively, "Neo-illuminist" and "Anti-romanticist", passing through the golden middle point of Binni's "Neoclassical-romanticism". The fact that these characterizations were perceived as expedient appears today somehow mysterious. What was at the stake in this debate? It would be interesting to read the "history of the intellectuals in Italy" in that period from the point of view of the Neoclassicism-Romanticism opposition.

¹⁶⁵ On Ariosto's exceptionality in Leopardi cf. M. Piperno, "*Eccetto l'Ariosto*": *Giacomo Leopardi legge l'Orlando furioso*, «I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance», Fall 2017, pp. 295-315.

*L'ingegno mio. Di vanità, di belle
Fole, e strani pensieri
Si componea l'umana vita: in bando
Gli cacciammo: or che resta? or poi che 'l verde
È rapito a le cose? il certo e solo
Veder che tutto è vano altro che 'l duolo.¹⁶⁶*

The emblem portrays the power of Ariosto's poetry. It is a poetry which is able to create once more the lost world where imagination ruled with the vagueness and multiplicity of its creations. The enumeration of things and characters belonging to the *Furioso* (*O torri, o celle/ O donne, o cavalieri/ O giardini, o palagi*) discloses a view from afar on its poetic world, which is a world characterized from that multitude of echoes, possibilities and resonances which only is able to put in motion the circular movement of imagination, representing an infinite possibility of pleasure. The images of Ariosto's poetry have for Leopardi the power of preserving the shadow that belongs to imagination in the world completely enlightened. The age that Ariosto marks is an age of return of the images, the age of the return of poetry. With an epigraphic formula, Ariosto is called «new hope of Italy». In his poem the ideal of the rebirth of the Antiquity becomes real, and the Renaissance appears as a moment of intensification of life, which creates a meaningful end in the work of art, and thus arrests for an instant the flood of naught invading the measured world.

But it is an impossible hope. Whence there is a contradiction, it is too late for a solution. The ending part of the stanza recalls the ban cast on imagination; Ariosto's poetry seems to come from nowhere, and leaves no footprints to follow for those who want to follow in his steps. The

¹⁶⁶ «But, in the meanwhile, thou for these sweet dreams wast born,/And the old sun upon thee shone,/ Delightful singer of the arms, and loves,/That in an age far happier than our own,/Men's lives with pleasing errors filled./New hope of Italy! O towers, O caves,O ladies, cavaliers,/O gardens, palaces! Amenites./At thought of which, the mind/Is lost in thousand splendid reveries!/Ye lovely fables, and ye strange thoughts,/Now banished! And what to us remains?/Now that the bloom from all things is removed?Alas, the sole, the certain thought,/That all except our wretchedness, is nought.»

reclaimed ground is forever lost, together with the path towards the rebirth of the rebirth of Antiquity.



The juxtaposition between the two emblems of Columbus and Ariosto, in the context of the political and ideological manifesto of *Ad Angelo Mai*, is the poetical representation of a contradiction of which Leopardi offers no explanation. But it is in this dialectic between *measurement of the world* and *intensification of life* that we can grasp the elements of Leopardi's interpretation of the Renaissance. The unresolved contradiction between these two aspects underlies Leopardi's understanding of the chronologic, geographic and linguistic extension of the Renaissance, of which the next chapter will offer a map. At the same time this contradiction creates a condition of unrest in Leopardi's meditation, preparing a new configuration of his thought that will be announced in 1824, with a different interpretation of the figure of Columbus, in the homonymous dialogue of Leopardi's *Small Moral Works*.

Chapter IV

A map of Leopardi's Renaissance

Introduction

The image of the Renaissance emerging from the two Renaissance emblems in the *Canzone ad Angelo Mai* appears compressed in a poetic symbolism that leaves many questions unanswered.

For instance, the canzone does not explicitly state that Columbus and Ariosto belong to the Renaissance. It portrays an image of the Renaissance, without giving us a clear delimitation of its historical existence. What is the thing that Leopardi calls Renaissance? When did it happen? Did it start with the civilization of the communes or the Langobardic invasion? Where did it originate? Does Leopardi think of the Renaissance as just a moment in Italian history or as a wider European phenomenon? An answer to these questions will be searched for in this chapter.

As it will become clearer in the following pages, the determination of the chronological and spatial dimensions of Leopardi's interpretation of the Renaissance has its fundament in a third dimension, which is that of language. Such an essentially linguistic understanding of the

Renaissance leads Leopardi to have an original point of view on many of the topics that were touched upon in the historiographical debate of the time. In certain cases — for instance the evaluation of the Italian *Cinquecento* and of the late Byzantine empire's historical role — Leopardi's perspective polemically challenges the historiographical debate of his times. Under one respect, however, Leopardi's interpretation of the Renaissance completely fits in the picture of the debate on the Renaissance that was going on in Italy at the time. For Leopardi, as well as for the people involved in the conversation of the Gabinetto Vieusseux, the Renaissance was not only the object of an erudite curiosity, but mainly a political ideal that connected the past and the future of Italy. Also under this respect, however, Leopardi's standpoint appears characterized by a polemical stance that distances him from the other voices that were taking part in the conversation. The Renaissance, both as a historical event and as a political program, appears in the *Zibaldone* not as an ideal of progress, but rather as the project of the return to antiquity.

1. A Renaissance of nations

In Leopardi's writings language is understood neither as a simple manifestation of a supposed ethnic character, in the sense of a *Volkgeist*, nor as a product of the climate, in the fashion of that Montesquieuan socio-political climate theory which was so widely accepted in the European culture of the time.¹⁶⁷ Certainly, Leopardi pays his tribute to this historiographical trend in many

¹⁶⁷ For a general introduction to Montesquieu's theory of the influence of climate on the population see M. Richter, *An Introduction to Montesquieu's "An Essay on the Causes That May Affect Men's Minds and Characters"*, «Political Theory», Vol. 4, No. 2 (May, 1976), pp. 132-138
On the evolution of this theory in Montesquieu see R. Shackleton, *The Evolution of Montesquieu's Theory of Climate*, «Revue Internationale de Philosophie», Vol. 9, No. 33/34 (3/4) (1955), pp. 317-329.

passages of the *Zibaldone*.¹⁶⁸ His conception of language is nevertheless more nuanced, since he refuses considering language as a given. On the contrary, Leopardi takes the interaction between the heredity of the past and the alternative possibilities that a certain historical present discloses carefully into account. This aspect clearly appears in a passage of the *Zibaldone* written at the beginning of September 1823, where Leopardi reflects on the losses that come to a certain civilization due to its own literature's interruption. According to Leopardi, the main hindrance the civilization of the Renaissance had to overcome at its beginning was the lack of a language suited to its needs:

How much do we believe that the advances of the human spirit following the rebirth of studies were delayed (not just in one nation but in the whole of Europe) by the lack of languages appropriate to the new letters? A lack which derived solely from the lengthy interruption of literature in Europe. ¹⁶⁹

The idea that the survival of a certain language depends on the liveliness of its literature must seem counterintuitive at first. On the contrary, we are used to thinking of literature as a secondary effect of the living use of a given language. Literary language changes because the spoken language has become different. The problem that Leopardi stresses in this passage, is that a given language is never truly identical to itself. In the absence of literature, as he observes elsewhere, language changes incessantly:

A language without a literature, or with very little, may be extinguished without difficulty, or distorted until it becomes unrecognizable, because it had not been possible, given its immature

¹⁶⁸ In *La luna nel cortile* (Rubettino, 2006), Lucio Felici gives an attentive account of Leopardi's appropriation and progressive transformation of Montesqueian climate theory (ibi, pp. 64-75).

¹⁶⁹ *Zibaldone*, 3336: «Quanto crediamo noi che ritardasse gli avanzamenti dello spirito umano (non in una sola nazione ma in tutta l'Europa) dopo il risorgimento degli studi, la mancanza di lingue proprie alle nuove lettere? La qual mancanza non da altro provenne che dalla diuturna interruzione della letteratura in Europa. Perocchè la lingua latina non avrebbe cessato di esser parlata e propria degli europei, se fosse durata la letteratura latina.

and imperfect state, for it to be fully formed, nor as a consequence, to become too firmly rooted and consolidated.¹⁷⁰

For this very reason the existence of a literature is the essential condition for the development of a language, since it is necessary in order to prevent the loss of words and concepts already acquired. Under this respect, oral poetry appears as a primitive form of accumulation. The invention of writing can only reinforce such an accumulative function. Written language provides the conditions for the language's growth, which can never happen without the conservation of the previous linguistic resources. As Leopardi remarks in another passage:

Because with additions to knowledge, and with the resulting variation in customs, opinions, ideas, intrinsic or extrinsic circumstances, etc. etc., the words and the treasury of language in everyday use increase, and from this use they must pass into writing, if the latter is to speak to contemporaries, and as a contemporary, and about current things, etc.¹⁷¹

According to Leopardi, had Latin literature survived the end of the Empire, Latin would have continued to be a spoken language. All the linguistic novelties that had emerged would have enriched the language, without transforming it into a new one:

Of course it would have changed with the times, so it would be different from ancient Latin today. But it would still be Latin, and in Europe today we would speak and write Latin as our own language, as a modern language in tune with our times (which it would be), and the human spirit would be further advanced than it is, because it would have used the time in cultivating wisdom and letters which instead had to be spent in forming languages proper to them and to the customs and character of modern centuries.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Zib. 995: «una lingua senza letteratura, o poca, non difficilmente si spegne, o si travisa in maniera non riconoscibile, non potendo ella esser formata, né per conseguenza troppo radicata e confermata, siccome immatura e imperfetta. (...) Non così una lingua abbondante di scritti.»

¹⁷¹ Zib. 787-9: «(...) cogli' incrementi delle cognizioni e col successivo variar degli usi, opinioni idee circostanze estrinseche crescono le parole e il tesoro della lingua nell'uso quotidiano e da quest uso debbono passare nella scrittura, se questa ha da parlare ai contemporanei, e da contemporanee delle cose del tempo.»

¹⁷² Zib. 336-7: «Ben si sarebbe sempre modificata secondo i tempi, di modo ch'ella oggidì sarebbe diversa dall'antica; ma sarebbe pur lingua latina; e in Europa si parlerebbe e scriverebbe il latino come lingua propria, come moderna, come conveniente a' nostri tempi (quale infatti ella sarebbe); e lo spirito umano sarebbe più oltre ch'ei non è, perchè sarebbe stato impiegato nel coltivar la sapienza e le lettere quel tempo che fu dovuto spendere nel formare delle lingue convenienti a queste, e ai costumi e al carattere de' moderni secoli.»

We are accustomed to think of Leopardi as an anti-progressive thinker who refuses any linear idea of the development of history. It is interesting that in this passage he ventures to think of the alternative possibility of a rectilinear trajectory of civilization, if Latin as a living language had survived. The Latin he imagines is a language which has survived the great transformation at the end of Antiquity, the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, and is now suited to the needs of modernity. The interruption of Latin literature though, has erased this possibility. Leopardi interprets the endeavor of the humanists to return to classical Latin as a desperate attempt to overcome the shortage of words in their vernacular. Rather than working to refine their spoken language, the humanists tried to resurrect Latin, without considering that a dead language cannot be suited to the needs of a new time:

(...) the first cultivators of the revival of studies (...) insisted on continuing to write in Latin. But Latin was an ancient language, and modern things can never be written nor be written in modern fashion in an ancient language. This insistence was extremely harmful to the progress of the enlightenment and culture and the formation of the modern, national spirit. Which would never have been formed if the modern languages had not been “formed and established instead of Latin. Whereas on the contrary it is clear that these were not formed and established before the modern, national spirit had begun to take shape and assume a form and features of its own, first in Italy then in Spain, then in France and England, and finally in Germany, which last of all these nations abandoned the use of Latin as the literary and illustrious language, and replaced it with its own national tongue.¹⁷³

In this most interesting passage, Leopardi intertwines some of the key words of his historiographical discourse on the Renaissance: language, national spirit, and progress of

¹⁷³ Zibaldone 3337-8, my translation: «(...) i primi cultori de' risuscitati studi, si ostinarono a volere scrivere in latino; ma il latino era lingua antica, né mai in una lingua antica si potranno scriver cose moderne né scriverle modernamente. E molto nocque una tale ostinazione al progresso de' lumi e della coltura e alla formazione dello spirito nazionale e moderno. Il quale non mai si sarebbe formato se non fossero state formate e stabilite le lingue moderne in vece della latina. Siccome per lo contrario si vede che queste non prima furono formate e stabilite di quel che lo spirito nazionale e moderno pigliasse una consistenza e una certa forma e fisionomia propria, prima in Italia, poscia in Ispagna, indi in Francia e in Inghilterra, ultimamente in Germania, che ultima di tutte queste nazioni lasciò l'uso della lingua latina come letterata e illustre, e le sostituì la nazionale.»

enlightenment. What Leopardi calls here “the progress of enlightenment” (*progresso dei lumi*) is not to be understood directly as the Age of the Enlightenment, but more widely as the development of modern rationality and modern science — that world-measuring force which we have seen at work in the effigy of Columbus¹⁷⁴. In Leopardi's writings, Renaissance often appears associated with *lumi*, a word which nowadays in Italian is closely connected with the idea of the Enlightenment, but which Leopardi often uses in this wider sense, sometimes even in the concise formula “renaissance of enlightenment” (*risorgimento dei lumi*). Renaissance and the progress of enlightenment appear in this passage as an effect of the development of modern national literatures. Modern and national in this context point to the same, meaning the new civilization that replaces the universalism of the Middle Ages. These modern national literatures, however, did not just flow from the pen of the national writers, but were made possible by the progressing definition of the “national spirit”. The latter expresses itself in the national language, which in turn can grow only thanks to literature; “national spirit” and national language go hand in hand, as one must mirror the other.¹⁷⁵ What is most important however, is that national spirit and national language receive through literature a form that allows them to preserve their continuity through change. This continuity is their principle power, since it enables civilization to

¹⁷⁴ On Leopardi's duplicitous stance towards the Enlightenment, confront C. Luporini, *Leopardi Progressivo*, pp.

¹⁷⁵ The use of the term “spirit” is rather rare in Leopardi. When the word appears it often has a negative sense, meaning the product of the process of “spiritualization” that is brought by the diffusion of reason. More rarely the word appears in order to express the nature of the livings. In this case the word loses every “spiritualistic” connotation, and is rather employed in a biological sense. In the *History of the human kind*, for instance, humanity ends up hating «the spirit and the light». Spirit taken in this sense — following its Latin etymology — is for Leopardi nothing but breathe. Thus, when Leopardi speaks of “national spirit” he seems to apply this biological meaning to the life of the nation. If such a terminology implies a sort of organicism, however, it is merely of a “historical” — in the sense outlined in chapter II — and not teleological kind.

name things both ancient and new. Literature, in other words, establishes a circularity between national spirit and national language, which is the fundamental condition for the conservation and growth of civilization. The relationship between literature and politics in Leopardi does not appear as linear, proceeding from power to culture, but rather as a circular one, so that the two spheres mutually determine each other.¹⁷⁶ The linguistic continuity established by literature is thus the horizon of each civilization, a living embodiment of history — past, present and future. The emphasis given to the linguistic dimension leads Leopardi to consider the Renaissance not so much as a fixed chronological category, but rather as a historical phenomenon shifting in time depending on the different conditions of the various nations. Nor is it a phenomenon connected to a specific geographical area, since its principle is precisely the reciprocal differentiation of the various European regions connected to the emerging national spirits. After starting in Italy, the Renaissance successively happened at different times in Spain, France, England, Germany and other European nations. Happening at disparate moments in the development of European civilization, and expressing distinct national spirits, these various renaissances brought with themselves different characteristics and consequences.

¹⁷⁶ Leopardi's meditation on the influence of politics on literature has received a certain attention. See: B. Biral, *Discorso di un Italiano intorno alla poesia romantica (1818)*, «Clizia», 1960, n. 34-5; F. Russo, *Leopardi politico, o della felicità impossibile*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1999, p. 46; M. Luciani, *L'Italia ritrovata grazie ad un poeta? Politica e forma di governo nel pensiero di Giacomo Leopardi*, «Rivista di Diritto Pubblico», 1-2, 2010, pp. 55-140; M. Karp, *Il metro de «Il Risorgimento»*, «Leussein», Such a relation, however, has to be complemented with the inverse influence of literature on the national spirit — and therefore on politics — that this section outlines .

2. The arc of the Italian Renaissance

The fact that the Renaissance has its beginning in Italy is not put into question by Leopardi. In this respect, he certainly agrees with the historiography of his own time. The reasons he brings forward, however, are quite different from those we have encountered in the conversation about the Renaissance at the Gabinetto Vieusseux. For Leopardi, the new national civilization that replaces Middle Age's universalism is not due to the heredity of Roman Law, nor to the novelty of Lombard institutions, or to the influence of Arab science. Certainly Leopardi takes into account the role played by the papal court in Rome, as well by the Byzantine diaspora after the fall of the Eastern Empire. His understanding of the role played by literature in the development of civilization though, brings him to regard the birth of Italian vernacular literature as the true foundational moment of the Renaissance. For this reason, in a long passage of the *Zibaldone* Leopardi expands on Dante as the founder of the Italian literature, and on the effects of his linguistic decisions on European civilization:

(...) from the observations I have made on the need of Europe and the human spirit for new illustrious languages in order to make progress both in customs and in sciences, in letters, and in philosophy following the rebirth (*risorgimento*) of studies, on the great detriment and delay brought to the renascent civilization by the renewal of the exclusive use of Latin as the illustrious language, and on the even greater damage and delay which the continued use of this language would have brought to it, it becomes clearer than ever not just how much the Italian language owes to Dante, which is often proclaimed, by the nation itself, all of Europe and the human spirit. For Dante was absolutely the first in Europe (...) to dare to conceive and compose a classical work of literature in a modern vernacular, raising a modern language to the level of an illustrious language capable of taking the place of or, at least, ranking alongside, the Latin language, which until that time had been esteemed by all, and even afterward by quite a few, as the only one capable of reaching such heights. And this classical work was not merely a work of poetry, but like the poems of Homer, expressly embraced all the knowledge of its age, theology, philosophy, politics, history, mythology, etc. and it proved to be classical not just with respect to its own time but to all times, and among the foremost, not just with respect to Italy, but to all nation and literatures. Without such an example and such daring, or if it had proved less successful and dazzling, if this work had been less universal in its subject matter and belonged less - so to speak - to all genres of literature and teaching, it may without doubt be believed, if nothing else, that both Italy and the other nations would have taken considerably longer than they did to elevate their own modern languages to the status of illustrious languages, and then to form their own

modern literatures conforming to their times, and hence the national and modern, distinct, determined spirit and character, etc.¹⁷⁷

Leopardi considers the *Comedy* as an experimental model of a classic work of literature in a vernacular language. According to Leopardi, the encyclopedic scope of the *Comedy* is the key feature of its success. The choice of the subject and the manifold technical languages that are woven in this poem, have the instrumental role of proving that not only everyday things, but also the most abstract scientific concepts can be expressed adequately in the Italian language. The *Comedy* worked as the empirical proof of this project's sustainability, and therefore the fundamental element that allowed the transition to the modern vernacular civilization. Once the path towards vernacular literature had been opened by the test of strength of the *Comedy*, Europe finally had the means to develop the manifold national spirits that were dormant under the blanket of the Latin language. In the absence of such a proof, Europe would have continued to use a dead language for the most important things, thus hindering the birth of the new civilization. This is why what interests Leopardi most in this passage is the fact that such a result was not achieved by accident, but rather was the outcome of a deliberate design:

Dante set the example, opened up and smoothed the path, showed the purpose, and with his daring and success gave courage to Italians: so much is incontrovertible. Nor was what Dante did done by chance, or without reason and reflection, profound reflection. He deliberately sought to replace Latin with a modern illustrious tongue, for he judged that this was what the circumstances of the times and the nature of the things required, and he expressly sought to have the Latin language banished from the use of the cultured, the learned, legislators, notaries, etc., as no longer befitting the times. What Dante did came as a result of proposition and design, and was aimed at a specific purpose. And this proposition, design, and purpose (...) (and in the same way also the choice and use of means) were those of a most acute, profound, and wise philosopher.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Zib. 3338-9

¹⁷⁸ Zib. 3340

Leopardi calls the founder of the new vernacular poetry "a most acute, profound, and wise philosopher". This appears rather puzzling in light of the dialectic between reason and imagination that has been shown in the preceding chapter. The two conflicting polarities of the Renaissance that we have seen at play in the emblems of Columbus and Ariosto appear mysteriously reunited in the image of Dante as poet and philosopher that emerges from this passage of the *Zibaldone*. This contradiction is strengthened by the fact that Leopardi here considers philosophy not so much as some kind of arcane wisdom, but rather the very process of outlining a hypothesis (design) in order to resolve a certain problem (purpose), and choosing the proper means to verify it (choice and use of means). This amounts to saying that what Leopardi considers philosophical here is nothing other than the wide scale application of scientific method to the life of civilization. The wideness of the scale does not regard the numeric extension to the different occurrences of an identical variable, as happens in a stochastic analysis; rather it concerns the ability to poetically penetrate the almost innumerable aspects constituting the life of a civilization — from divine wisdom to the most familiar emotions of everyday life. The encyclopedic poetry of the *Comedy* appears in this light as a gigantic *experiment*, whose effect is the birth of the new modern and national culture, that is, in one word, the Renaissance.

The first evidence of this transformation is given by Petrarch's and Boccaccio's writings which, along with Dante's experiment, contributed to laying the foundation of Italian literature. Leopardi however repeatedly stresses the fact that neither Petrarch nor Boccaccio were fully aware of the philosophical consequences implied in Dante's decision of using the vernacular:

(...) Dante was quite correctly, and has always been held to be, both in intention and in outcome, the founder of the Italian language. But the other two only wrote Italian as a pastime, and so far were they from wishing to apply it to literature that on the contrary they only wrote those things in that language because they thought them unworthy of the literary language, that is, Latin, the

language in which they wrote everything they hope would make their name as men of letters and that would add to literature. For they judged the Italian language to be unworthy and incapable of serious subject matter and literature (...) Petrarch's opinion about his *Canzoniere* is likewise only too well known. He wrote his poems in Italian, like Boccaccio writing his stories and romances for the amusement of small gatherings (as nowadays one would write in dialect), and for ladies and gentleman, people of the world who thought themselves incapable of understanding literature (...)¹⁷⁹

Regardless of the purpose for which they were writing in Italian, the writers of the *Trecento* found themselves confronted by a language that was not yet fully formed. Both the great irregularity of the language in the writers of this age and its great richness and variety, are for Leopardi the symptoms of a language that has not yet been standardized in a grammatical form. Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio (and most of all Petrarch) were able to confer a classical form to a language that was still lacking a stable shape. Differing from all other European languages, Italian can trace back its "classical literature" to an age where its form had not yet been subsumed under the rules of rationality and grammar:

(...) to Italy's good fortune it so happened that in the 14th century, that is, well before any other nation, there emerged three great writers, judged to be great even afterward, independently of the age in which they lived. It was they who applied our language to literature, wresting it from the mouths of the plebs, and gave it stability, rules, style, character, all the modifications needed to make of it a language, which, though not fully formed (something that three writers on their own could not do), was nonetheless such that by using it one could be a great writer (...) This circumstance has meant that the Italian language, which today, unlike all others, can boast of five whole centuries of *literature*, is the richest of all. It has meant that its formation and character are decidedly ancient, that is, very beautiful and very free, together with the other myriad advantages of ancient languages. (...) It has meant too that our language has never repudiated the ancient words, phrases, and forms, and the authority of the ancients from the 14th century onwards.¹⁸⁰

Leopardi's evaluation of the writers of the *Trecento* — Dante above all — could be taken at first as a Romantic feature of his linguistic thought. The *Comedy*, previously overlooked because of

¹⁷⁹ Zib. 1525-7.

¹⁸⁰ Zibaldone, 1994-6.

its obscurity and linguistic irregularities, saw a renewed fortune during the Romantic era, starting with the writings of August Wilhelm Schlegel and the authors of the *Sturm und Drang*. The historiographic opposition between the republican *Trecento* and the monarchical *Quattrocento* had a great part in this rediscovery of 14th century authors. Dante had a special place in the rediscovery of the *Trecento*, since his political engagement offered a vivid expression of the republican spirit that gave birth to the civilization of the commons. In Leopardi's Italy, nevertheless, it was the classicist faction of Cesari and, from a more moderate position, Giordani, that praised the *Trecento* as the golden century (*secolo aureo*) of Italian literature. For them the language of the *Trecento*, still unrefined, had more of the liberty of ancient Greek than of Latin's solemn regularity; they recommended their contemporaries rediscover and imitate the authors of this century, not only the most famous, but the many forgotten ones as well.

This latter conclusion was not shared by Leopardi, according to whom the *Trecento* had only a small number of classical authors, while the rest of the writers in that period did not apply the language to literature, but merely employed it. Leopardi's position, in other words, carefully distinguishes between the condition of the spoken language and that of literature. For Leopardi, the greatness of the classical authors of the Italian *Trecento* consists in the fact that they were able to give a classical form to a language that still had the youthful energy of grammatical indeterminacy. This does not automatically mean that the writings of this century must be imitated, since most of the time their appeal is only due to the beauty of the language they spoke, and not to the style they adopted in their writings.

According to Leopardi, from the ruleless vivacity and the high classicality of the *Trecento*, Italy passed in the following century to a period where the Italian language was almost banned in

literature, in favor of the rediscovery of classical Latin as the language of literature. Leopardi's evaluation of this century is not as negative as that of some of the authors we have encountered at the *Gabinetto Vieusseux*, Tommaseo for instance. Leopardi defines the *Quattrocento* as the century of the “slumber of Italian literature”¹⁸¹, where the use of Italian language «while it had given way to erudition, still remained incorrupt, and erred rather on the side of insufficiency¹⁸²». Notwithstanding the paucity of the literary production in vernacular, the intense study of the classics during this period provided the Italian writers with a linguistic awareness that would have fully emerged in the following century. The Medici court in Florence at the end of the century is regarded by Leopardi as the epicenter of an early rebirth of the Italian literature after this period of slumber. Still, this rebirth is ambiguously valued in a passage where Leopardi traces a parallel between the loss of freedom of the language after the *Quattrocento* and the loss of political freedom in Florence. «Italian letters» Leopardi writes «awoke from that fifteenth century slumber under Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici, who founded the Tuscan monarchy and destroyed the republic. In this revival (and then under Leo X), literature took on a regular form, quite different from that of the fourteenth century (...)»¹⁸³ Here Leopardi seems to follow a trope that we have widely encountered at the *Gabinetto Vieusseux*. In another passage of the *Zibaldone* Leopardi focuses on the early introduction of ancient philosophy into Italian literature, which had been one of the great enterprises that were patronized at the Medici court in Florence, thanks to the work of Marsilio Ficino, Agnolo Poliziano and Pico della Mirandola. In this respect,

¹⁸¹ Zib. 392

¹⁸² Zib. 2

¹⁸³ Zib. 392

according to Leopardi, Italian differs from all other European languages, wherein philosophical vocabulary was introduced only after modern philosophy had developed. Even if this passage is mainly concerned with the problem of developing a modern philosophical lexicon, it is very generic in its chronological scope and does not make explicit reference to the *Quattrocento* or the Medici court, it can be useful to take it into consideration in this context:

It is worth noting that, more than any other modern language, Italian has cultivated ancient philosophy and has an abundance of writers (including classical ones) who expounded it either professionally or incidentally and solely for their use. (...) Italian from the 14th to the 17th centuries, from Dante to Galileo, that is to say, from the rebirth of study to the renewal of philosophy, always cultivated ancient philosophy, enriched itself with its vocabulary, etc. etc. ¹⁸⁴

More than belonging to a discussion on Italian history, this passage relates to Leopardi's meditation on the absence of a modern philosophical tradition in Italy, and to the linguistic difficulties associated with it. While developing his own philosophical system, Leopardi reflects on the problem of the language of philosophy, and turns back to the Renaissance in search of elements that can be useful to develop his own philosophical lexicon. This passage therefore has to be read in connection with Leopardi's reflection on the distinction between words and terms, as well as with his observations on the importance of the Scholastic philosophical lexicon for the scientific. The passage, however, gives a quite precise formulation of the chronological boundaries of the Italian Renaissance: «from the 14th to the 17th centuries, from Dante to Galileo, that is to say, from the rebirth of study to the renewal of philosophy.» The arc of the Renaissance falls between the two names of Dante and Galileo, between the birth of the new poetry and that of the new science.

¹⁸⁴ Zib. 1402-3.

This arc reaches its culminating point in the sixteenth century, the *Cinquecento*, which Leopardi considers the golden century (*secolo aureo*) of the Italian literature. Leopardi assumes therefore a polemical stance against Giordani's classicism and its veneration for the *Trecento*. For Leopardi the *Cinquecento* is the golden age not only for literature, but for language as well:

The sixteenth century is the one and only golden age, of both our language and literature. When language is concerned a great many disagree with what I am saying, and would have it that its true golden age was the fourteenth century. But let them take note. Almost all writers of the sixteenth century, Tuscan or non-Tuscan, have used our language fittingly and well, and more or less all of them can as a rule employ its elevated style, so that a writer from the present day whose language had as many qualities as the least of the mediocre writers of that time would be admired and studied.¹⁸⁵

What strikes Leopardi most about the literature of this century is the universality of the correct use of language and style. In this respect, according to him, the *Cinquecento* does not have any comparison with other ages of the Italian literature, nor with any other modern literature, but rather, could only be compared with the literary achievements of the Latins and the Greeks:

Such perfection was never seen in any style whatsoever, whether Italian or foreign, before or after that century, from the Latin authors onward (I refer here to style, not thoughts). No other nation has achieved it, even in its best centuries, and perhaps the same degree of perfection that foreign style attained in its golden centuries will turn out not to have been as universal in the national writers of that time as such perfection was in Italy in the sixteenth century.¹⁸⁶

For Leopardi, the reason for this linguistic and literary blossoming is the diligent study of the classics, to which the Italians had devoted themselves since the previous century. «Through study, and the correct application of Greek and Latin rules — Leopardi writes — the style of the sixteenth century had generally acquired such nobility and dignity, and such a wealth of other qualities, that it had almost attained perfection (...)»¹⁸⁷. Writing on the model of the classical writers — which they studied as examples of grammar and syntax — the authors of the

¹⁸⁵ Zib. 690-1

¹⁸⁶ Zib. 697

¹⁸⁷ Zib. 695

Cinquecento were led to understand their own language in grammatical terms. However, the process of codification through which the Italian language underwent in the sixteenth century is regarded by Leopardi under a positive light, as a moment of balance between order and anarchy, and resembled to to the classical age of Greek culture:

(...) although the 16th century did not lack rules (while the 14th century lacked them altogether), these had nothing to do with the accuracy and refinement, etc., and servility of the ones that came later, and could be compared (especially in matters of language) with those which in matters of rhetoric or poetics, etc., the Greeks, too, had in their heyday.¹⁸⁸

The literary liveliness of the *Cinquecento*, with its “universality” and its wise balance between rules and life, appears to Leopardi as an aspect of a wider situation where institutional factors certainly played a role.

3. Unity and fragmentation

The importance that Leopardi gives to the birth of vernacular literature does not prevent him from devoting attention to the institutional conditions that framed the blossoming of culture in sixteenth century Italy. In a long passage that is worthy to quote extensively here, Leopardi provides a vivid depiction of the Renaissance civilization in Italy, which echoes several historiographical themes that we have already seen at play in the conversation at the Gabinetto

Vieusseux:

Italy has been a slave since the end of the Roman empire, because it was divided. But right up to the 16th century a proper Italian military force did exist, and the Italian courts and republics operated by themselves, although they were small and weak. Government was in the hands of Italians, dynasties were Italian in far greater numbers than they were afterward and are now. Although influenced and dominated by foreigner governments and armies, Italian governments and armies, for they were still Italian, did nevertheless act on their own account, and had business to conduct. These were the ones who offered themselves to foreigners, sometimes to one,

¹⁸⁸ Zib. 1069-70

sometimes another, who called foreigners in, drove them away, or contributed to doing that, who made alliance with foreigners, or against them, with other foreigners, or with other Italians, against other Italians, or in their support. The friendship of Italian governments, even if they were very small, and of individual cities, was held in regard and sought after by foreigners, and their enmity was feared, and in one way or another Italian governments and cities were friends or enemies of this or that foreign power. The Italians acted on their own account in foreign courts, and foreigners in Italian ones.¹⁸⁹

This long sequence begins with a statement which belongs to the most rigorous observance of that “ideology of the absence” which we have encountered at the Gabinetto Vieusseux: "Italy has been a slave since the end of the Roman empire, because it was divided". The absence of the unified modern State seems here to be the cause of Italy's backwardness in respect to the great European powers. Nevertheless, the passage develops a much more nuanced understanding of the Italian situation, where fragmentation does not seem to impede an extraordinary intensification of life. According to Leopardi, the condition of political fragmentation that characterized Italy during the Renaissance appears to have facilitated rather than hindered this intensification of life. In another passage from the *Zibaldone*, after observing that «in the sixteenth century all learned men exercised their minds to exhort the nations and princes of Europe, with printed speeches, letters and poems (...)»¹⁹⁰, Leopardi comments:

At that time there were more private politicians in Italy than elsewhere (...) because (...) on the one hand culture, love of letters and sciences, and erudition were greater and more common and more widely diffused among the different classes in Italy (...) and on the other turbulent freedom fomented by the plethora and small size of the different States, enabled those who had breached the law, or spoke or written too liberally, or offended some prince or republic in the Italian state in which they originally resided, to find safety and impunity with ease, by crossing borders and changing residence.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Zib. 3855-61.

¹⁹⁰ Zib. 3129.

¹⁹¹ Zib. 3129, n.

According to Leopardi, political fragmentation in Italy alleviated political repression in a time where, as he remarks «all the governments in Italy and elsewhere were monarchies»¹⁹² therefore facilitating the diffusion of culture even among the different social classes, although in a situation of concentration of political power. Leopardi attributes a fundamental role in enhancing social life in the peninsula to the presence of one of the most important political centers of the time. Indeed, another passage of the *Zibaldone*, one which Leopardi explicitly connects with the long one quoted above on the relationship between literature, language, and politics, stresses the relevance of the presence of the papal court for this intensification of life:

Whether in strictly religious matters, which then were closely bound up with political affairs, and were of great temporal importance, or even in matters which were purely political, Italians at that time received from religion great and continuous opportunities, and the need, to act and think. How much politics had to be set in motion by Italians at the council of Trent and in all the affairs of Lutheranism, Calvinism, etc. Great negotiations and bargaining and maneuvering and great and solemn affairs were then conducted by Italians, or by an Italian Court, such as the Pope's, and by members who belonged to an Italian court, and among these not a few politicians shone out, etc. Cardinals and nuncios and prelates and bishops etc., powerful with foreigners, etc. Negotiations, etc., of foreigners with us, who preserved the use and exercise of politics and affairs in our country, etc. etc. This cause of action and some form of life for Italy was not limited in its effects to politics, diplomacy, public affairs. Naturally itself spread to all parts of civil society. There was a life in Italy. So all parts of the nation and society participated in it, as usually happens. Hence the splendor of the arts, the great building projects, etc., especially in Rome, seat of the most important politics in Italy, etc., the church of St. Peter, the sculptures, paintings, poems, orations, histories, the age of Leo X, industry commerce etc. Especially in the fifteenth century (...) Rome - by bringing together outstanding minds and setting them in motion, its own, Italian, foreign as well, and by affording material to intellects to develop and the opportunity to those already developed to take part in it and and practice their skills, given its position as the seat of important affairs - possessed a spirit of society, and social intercourse, etc. (...) ¹⁹³

In the various theories regarding the origin of the Renaissance that were competing in Italy at the time — as it has been shown in chapter I — the discussion of the role of papacy was a sensitive issue. However, a positive evaluation of the historical role of papacy was not always indicative

¹⁹² Zib. 392

¹⁹³ Zib. 388-9

of a Neo-Guelph orientation, as for Capponi, but could also be shared by a freemason as Romagnosi. Leopardi appropriates this point of view, considering the religious relevance of papacy from the standpoint of its material effects in the life of the peninsula.

4. Machiavellianism

This wide eulogy of the *Cinquecento*, which seems to extend to every aspect of the Italian civilization, finds nevertheless a stark and bitter counterpoint in the octaves of Leopardi's late mock-heroic poem *Paralipomeni alla Batracomiomachia*, where he turns to consider the political reality of this age. Here Leopardi calls the *Cinquecento* "that wretched century, when cruelty reigned with mysterious intrigue, and cowardice of thought with boldness¹⁹⁴", saying that «among us the great man of that dark century vie not for honor but for hatred and contempt». ¹⁹⁵ Only exceptions in this desolate landscape are for Leopardi Andrea Doria, who came close to the threshold of true glory for renouncing the crown offered him by the Genoese¹⁹⁶, and Lorenzino de' Medici, who killed his cousin, the tyrant Alessandro de' Medici¹⁹⁷. The negative evaluation of the sixteenth century however does not confine to Italy, but rather extends to the entire history of Europe in this age, which Leopardi calls «a desert revealing no act of uncorrupted virtue»¹⁹⁸. This severe judgement on the political dimension of the sixteenth century can probably be

¹⁹⁴ G. Leopardi, *The war of the mice and the crabs*, III, 25, Chapel Hill, North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, 1976, p. 56.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibi*, III, 32, p. 58.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibi*, III, 24, p. 55.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibi*, III, 27, p. 56.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibi*, III, 26, p. 56.

connected with Leopardi's sharp rejection of Machiavellianism, which he dismisses for being «the method of multiplying and complicating the wheels and springs of a watch, and of doing with more the same as could be done and was already being done with less»¹⁹⁹. Once Machiavellianism has been invented, its advantages are almost immediately lost, since it won't take long before it is used by both the parts in the conflict; the final result will thus be identical as if it were never discovered. Elevating intrigue to the dignity of an art or a technique, Machiavellianism is the very opposite of art as intended in the classical and Renaissance tradition: rather than an imitation of nature, machiavellianism is the imitation of the artifice itself. Machiavellianism therefore is for Leopardi «the most strange and pointless thing of ever.»²⁰⁰ The essence of Leopardi's anti-Machiavellianism is condensed in the thesis according to which «the means are more important than the ends.»²⁰¹ This reversal of Machiavelli's apocryphal dictum according to which the end justifies the means, rests on Leopardi's critique of the concept of utility, which in turn depends on the psychology of his *Theory of Pleasure*. The impossibility of achieving pleasure in an actual form results in the vanity of every end that is presumed to be useful: «As there is never either the act or the possession of pleasure, so there is neither the act nor possession of usefulness, for the useful is none other than that which leads to happiness, which resides only in pleasure, by whatever name it happens to be called.»²⁰² The

¹⁹⁹ Zibaldone, 4198.

²⁰⁰ Ibi.

²⁰¹ Zib., 4477.

²⁰² Zib. 986:«Come non si dà mai l'atto nè il possesso del diletto, così neanche dell'utilità, giacchè utile non è se non quello che conduce alla felicità, la quale non è riposta in altro che nel piacere, con qualunque nome ei venga chiamato.»

point for Leopardi is not so much about what ends have to be achieved, but rather about by what means they will be achieved. It is on the means that the frail possibility of getting closer to pleasure, although without ever achieving it, rests. Utility, understood as the achievement of a certain end, is for Leopardi something useless, and therefore “frivolous”: «Everything is therefore frivolous in this world, and the useful is far more frivolous than the delightful plain and simple.»²⁰³ Leopardi's anti-Machiavellianism, one of the most profound aspects of his thought, has nothing to share with the various attempts to refute Machiavelli, from Campanella to Frederick the Great, which have always resolved in as much varieties of ultra-Machiavellianism. All these attempts to refute Machiavelli have always failed to grasp the principle of the «effectual reality» on which Machiavelli's thought rests. Rather, they preferred to condemn Machiavelli for his immorality, while at the same time using the category of effectivity for their own aims. Leopardi on the contrary, moves with great confidence on the terrain of the effectual reality opened by Machiavelli, who indeed he commends as «the founder of a profound, modern politics»²⁰⁴. For Leopardi, Machiavelli is not the inventor of Machiavellianism, but rather the thinker that has unveiled the political aspect of the fulfillment of the world-measurement. In a most profound passage of the *Zibaldone*, written with the deceiving lightheartedness of an eighteenth century libertine, Leopardi traces the line of a project of destruction of Machiavellianism, intended as the practice of artifice and deception. Such a destruction would happen once words are reconciled with facts. Paradoxically, the fragment can easily be

²⁰³ Zib.1507: «Tutto dunque è frivolo a questo mondo, e l'utile è molto più frivolo del semplicissimo dilettevole.»

²⁰⁴ *Zibaldone*, 1858.“

interpreted as an apology of Machiavelli, following Alfieri's oblique interpretation of the *Prince* as a popular manual on the iniquities of the rulers²⁰⁵. The passage reads:

A certain gentleman, hearing it said that life is a comedy, remarked that today it is more like a rehearsal of a comedy, or one of those performances that schoolboys or the like sometimes put on for their own amusement. Because there are no longer any spectators, everyone plays a part, and, as for the virtue and good qualities that are feigned, no one has them and no one believes that others have them. Indeed, he was proposing a new approach, whereby the world finally stopped being a theater, and life became for the first time, or, at any rate, in a very long time, a true form of action. If it was ever such a thing, this was because men, at any rate the greater part, were truly good, or tended toward virtue. Something that is now impossible, and no longer to be hoped for. This goal should therefore be pursued from another, almost opposite direction. The Galateo, the laws, teaching both public and private, child-rearing, books on manners, dictionaries, etc., should be reformed. In such a fashion that something no longer necessary, indeed pointless and essentially harmful, should no longer be necessary even in appearance. Thus men would be rid of the need to lie all the time, and to no purpose, since they no longer deceived anyone; of the embarrassment this so often caused them; of the contradiction between the outside and the inside; of falsehood, etc., and truth would be brought back into the world. Life would remain the same, neither more nor less than it is today, and once men were rid of this language and these conventional forms, these pointless and insubstantial *bienséances* [proprieties], and honor, and respect for an audience that thinks and acts the same way as you do already seemed to be tending in this direction, not that deeds were harmonizing with words, but that words were beginning to adapt to, accord, and make peace with deeds; and that they were now negotiating with their enemies and asking them what their terms are. And that perhaps now, too, the outside and the inside, words and deeds, are more in accord with each other than they have been for a long time.²⁰⁶

This passage has to be related with Leopardi's later project of writing a book titled *Machiavello di Società* or *Galateo Morale*. The constant reference to the contraposition between sayings and facts, and the project of giving precedence to the latter, shows Leopardi's acquaintance with Machiavelli's principle of effectual reality. It is on this very ground that Leopardi throws his challenge to Machiavellianism. Leopardi's anti-Machiavellianism places him in very peculiar position in the history of western thought, and — through its adhesion to the principle of

²⁰⁵ The origin of the oblique interpretation of Machiavelli's *Prince* can be found in Traiano Boccalini's *Ragguagli di Parnaso* (Venezia, 1612-15). This perspective was later adopted by several authors, such as Spinoza (*Tractatus Theologicus-Politicus*), Alfieri (*Del Principe e delle Lettere*) and Foscolo (*I sepolcri*). Leopardi himself takes this point of view in a draft for a prose titled *Novella di Senofonte e Machiavello* that he meant to include in his *Small Moral Works*.

²⁰⁶ Zib. 663-5

effectual reality — it can be placed in relation to Nietzsche's rigorous metaphysical Machiavellianism, as elaborated in Heidegger's interpretation.²⁰⁷ Indeed, the origin of Leopardi's anti-Machiavellianism cannot be found in a moralistic judgment on power and its use. Rather, it must be searched in Leopardi's meditation on the nature of subjectivity, or, which comes to the same, on the position of humanity in the universe, as it will become more clear in the exposition of Leopardi's metaphysics of conformability and in relation to his conception of grace.

5. The end of the Renaissance

According to Leopardi with the seventeenth century the Italian Renaissance enters in its declining stage . Decadence is first of all political, given that «not since the 17th century have the Italians (...) had any political affairs or military force of their own.»²⁰⁸ Literature's decline immediately follows, since for Leopardi the seventeenth century abandoned the path traced in the previous centuries, being incapable of understanding the style of the founders of Italian literature: «because it was not weak but corrupt, was not only incapable of creating good work but despised work that was good, was even offended by it. Thus Dante, Petrarch, etc., were forgotten and no longer printed.»²⁰⁹ The crepuscule of the Renaissance is nevertheless marked by two figures which are of great relevance for Leopardi. The first one is Tasso, for whom Leopardi harbors a sympathy that goes beyond his evaluation as an artist. Of him Leopardi writes:

²⁰⁷ M. HEIDEGGER, *Il Nichilismo Europeo*, Adelphi, Milano, 2003, p. 270. On Leopardi and Nietzsche cf. RIVA Massimo. *Leopardi, l'inattuale: Tristano contro Zarathustra*, in *Giacomo Leopardi poeta e filosofo*, ed. by Alessandro Carrera, pp. 59- 80.

²⁰⁸ Zib. 3855

²⁰⁹ Zibaldone, 3.

«Anyone who is intimately familiar with Tasso, even if he does not place the writer or the poet among the greatest, will certainly place him among the foremost of his time, and perhaps first among them.»²¹⁰ And besides Tasso, Galilei, called by Leopardi «the first reformer of philosophy and of the human spirit»²¹¹. With him and his mathematization of nature, modern philosophy begins. And it is such that, differently from that of the ancients, it cannot be reconciled with poetry:

Contemporary philosophy, which reduces metaphysics, ethics, etc., to an all but mathematical form and condition, is no longer compatible with literature and poetry, whereas the philosophy of the times in which our language, Latin and Greek were formed was so.²¹²

The circumscribing power of the number gets unleashed in Galilei's philosophy. The arc of the renaissance, raised from Dante's poetry, ends with the foundation of the new science.

6. Languages of the Renaissance

As we have seen above, Leopardi identifies the Renaissance with the abandonment of middle-age universalism and the birth of national spirit which finds its core element in the development of vernacular literature. This conceptual interpretation of the Renaissance — while it gives precedence to Italy for being the first to become a nation — tends at the same time to extend the Renaissance outside the linguistic borders of the peninsula. Leopardi therefore considers the

²¹⁰ Zib. 462

²¹¹ Zib. 4241. The importance of Galileo for Leopardi can hardly be overestimated. Starting from the precocious astronomical passion that led Leopardi to write an erudite *History of Astronomy*, and then developing through the pages of the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi's dialogue with Galileo is uninterrupted. Cf. G. Polizzi, *Galileo in Leopardi*, Le Lettere, 2008.

²¹² Zib. 1359

Renaissance as a widely European phenomenon, one that speaks many different languages. Indeed, several passages of the *Zibaldone* address the dynamic of the development of European literature, often reading it in connection with the history of the European nations. Under this respect, it can be interesting to address Leopardi's interest in the birth of the different national literatures in Europe, given that for Leopardi this amounts to the development of the Renaissance as a European phenomenon.

In a passage quoted above, we have read an outline of Leopardi's understanding of the parable of this European Renaissance, from Spain to Germany, after its blossoming in Italy.²¹³ However this list overlooks at least two early attempts at the development of national literature, that Leopardi refers to in other passages of the *Zibaldone*.

The first precedes the birth of Italian literature, and it is the literary civilization of Provence. Leopardi compares the relationship between Italian and Provençal to that between Latin and Greek²¹⁴. At the time of the formation of the Italian literature, in the fourteenth century, «...the Provençal nation was (...) the most cultured, and had a kind of literature which was well known in Italy...»²¹⁵, so that the Provençal language, Leopardi writes quoting Giulio Perticari «was reckoned in Italy to be “the most delightful and widely known of all the other languages then spoken and we wrote in that language rather than our own, reckoning it to be "more beautiful and better...”»²¹⁶ Notwithstanding its precocity, Provençal didn't last long, partly because it was

²¹³ Cf. n.148.

²¹⁴ Zib. 312.

²¹⁵ Zib. 2505-6.

²¹⁶ Zib. 1993-4.

superseded by the development of French language, as we will see later, and partly because its literature was not sufficient to provide the language with a regular form: «Even though the Provençal language was written by many in poetry and in prose, it died completely after a very short life, because it was not yet sufficiently ordered or systematized into a grammar.»²¹⁷

Another language that doesn't appear in the above mentioned list is Portuguese, and the reason could be that Leopardi considers the Portuguese language a very considerable dialect of the Spanish.»²¹⁸ In several passages of the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi discusses Camoens' poem *Os Lusíadas*. On the one hand, Leopardi seems to appreciate the poem for the choice of a subject of great national interest.²¹⁹ On the other hand Leopardi rebukes Sismondi's idea that this poem is «the first classical poem to come to light in Europe after the Renaissance»²²⁰, arguing that «even within a single genre (such as epic) there are a thousand species»²²¹. While denying that the *Lusíades* was the first classical poem written in vernacular Europe, the passage at the same time takes for granted that Portuguese literature had its own classical beginning in the sixteenth century. Given that Leopardi, somehow oddly, considered Portuguese as a Spanish dialect, it seems plausible that it is precisely because of Camoens' poem that Spain has the second rank after Italy in the genealogy of the European Renaissances. Across the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, Spain develops its own vernacular literature, and the Spanish language comes to

²¹⁷ Zib. 2699

²¹⁸ Zib. 1299

²¹⁹ Zib. 3104; 4475-6

²²⁰ Zib. 1672

²²¹ Zib. 1673

compete with Italian for the role of universal language in Europe²²². The sudden political decline of the seventeenth century brought to the end of this privileged position for both the languages, which therefore share a similar fate, as Leopardi stresses in several passages of the *Zibaldone*: «The Italian and Spanish languages and literatures, the most similar in the world perhaps under a thousand other headings (...) are also similar through their history, and through their present and past state (...)»²²³ Following the same path of Italian history, the decline of Spain's political power led to its literary decadence.

The empty space left by the Italian and Spanish literature and language in the seventeenth century gets soon occupied by the French. The characteristic of the French language and literature is for Leopardi the removal of the past operated by the linguistic reformation made by the French Academy under the reign of Louis XIV. This reformation marks a leap in the

²²² Zib. 242; 3066

²²³ Zib. 3830.

development of French literature²²⁴, introducing unity and uniformity according to reason, through a process of geometrization. After this reformation, French literature and language abandoned the authority of the ancient writers,²²⁵ so that French emerged as an integrally modern language.²²⁶ This reform was made possible by the concentration of French culture in the

²²⁴ Cf. Zib. 688-70: Come appunto è accaduto alla lingua francese, perchè ancor ella da principio, ed innanzi all'Accademia, e massime al secolo di Luigi 14. non era punto unica, ma l'indole sua primitiva e propria somigliava moltissimo all'indole della vera lingua italiana, e delle antiche; era piena d'idiotismi, e di belle e naturalissime irregolarità; piena di varietà; subordinatissima allo scrittore (notate questo, che forma la difficoltà dello scrivere, come pure dell'intendere la nostra lingua a differenza della francese) e suscettibile di prendere quella forma e quell'abito che il soggetto richiedesse, o il carattere dello scrittore, o che questi volesse darle; adattata a diversissimi stili; piena di nerbo, o di grazia, di verità, di proprietà, di evidenza, di espressione; coraggiosa; niente schiva degli ardiri com'è poi divenuta; parlante ai sensi ed alla immaginativa, e non solamente, come oggi, all'intelletto; (sebbene anche al solo intelletto può parlare la lingua italiana, se vuole) pieghevole, robusta, o delicata secondo l'occorrenza; piena di sève, di sangue e di colori- to ec. ec. Delle quali proprietà qualche avanzo se ne può notare nella Sévigné, e nel Bossuet e in altri scrittori di quel tempo. Talmente che s'ella fosse rimasta quale ho detto, non sarebbe mai stata universale, con che vengo a dir tutto. E s'ella prima della sua mortifera riforma, avesse avuto tanto numero di cultori quanto n'ebbe l'italiana, che l'avessero condotta secondo il suo carattere primitivo, e d'allora, alla perfezione, come fu condotta la nostra, sarebbe anche più evidente questo ch'io dico della prima e originale natura della lingua francese, la quale ben si congettura efficacemente dalla considerazione de' loro antichi scrittori, ma non si può pienamente sentire perch'ella non ebbe scrittore perfetto in quel primo genere, o non ne ebbe quanto basta. Né quel primo genere prese mai stabilità, ma quando le fu data forma stabile e universale nella nazione, fu ridotta, quale oggi si trova, ad essere in ogni possibile genere di scrittura, piuttosto una serie di sentenze e di pensieri esattissimamente esposti e ordinati, che un discorso. Dove l'intelletto e l'utilità non desidera nulla, ma l'immaginazione il bello, il dilettevole la natura, i sensi ec. desiderano tutto. (24. Feb. 1821.)»

²²⁵ Cf. Zib. 758: «La francese, la quale a differenza dell'italiana, si è spogliata della facoltà di usare quelle delle sue parole e modi antichi e primitivi, che le potessero tornare in acconcio (come ho detto altrove); parimente a differenza di ciò che si esigerebbe dalla italiana, ha conservato sempre ed usato la facoltà di mettere a frutto e moltiplico il suo presente tesoro.»

²²⁶ Cf. Zib. 1997: «La lingua francese non ebbe uno scrittore assolutamente grande e da riconoscersi per tale in tutti i secoli, prima del secolo di Luigi 14. o in quel torno. (Montagne nel 500. o non fu tale, o non bastò, o non era tale da formare e fissare bastantemente una lingua.) Quindi la sua epoca non va più in là, ella conta un secolo e mezzo al più, l'autorità degli antichi è e dev'esser nulla per lei.»

capital²²⁷. On the one end, this process brought the language to lose a great treasure of words and expressions, reducing the power of imagination that belongs to every ancient language.²²⁸ On the other hand, this very uniformation and rationalization made of French the true universal

²²⁷ Cf. Zib. 2058-9: «Or quando l'arbitra della lingua è una sola città, per vasta, popolosa, e abitata o frequentata ch'ella sia da diversissime qualità di popolo, e di nazioni, la lingua prende sempre una indole determinata, circoscritta, ristretta a limiti più o meno estesi, ma che sempre son limiti certi e riconosciuti; la lingua si uniforma, si equilibra, per tutti i versi, e perde necessariamente quel carattere di notevole e decisa libertà ch'è proprio delle lingue antiche formate o no, e di tutte le lingue non ancora o non bene formate. La formazione di una lingua e di una letteratura, in tal circostanza, introduce sempre in esse una grande uniformità; siccome accade in Francia, dove Parigi, ch'è pur il centro di tutta la vasta nazione, e si frequentata da forestieri d'ogni parte d'Europa, essendo però l'arbitra siccome de' costumi, così della lingua e della letteratura nazionale, le dà quella uniformità medesima, quella circoscrizione, quella limitazione, quella servitù che dà allo spirito, e a tutte le altre parti della società, e che né queste né quelle sicuramente avrebbero mai avute, senza la somma influenza di una vasta capitale sull'intera nazione.» See also Zib. 1889-90: «Questa riforma era naturalissima nella Francia a differenza di tutte le altre nazioni. Lo spirito di società che costituisce tutto il carattere, tutta la vita de' francesi; come forma l'indole de' loro costumi, così necessariamente quello della loro lingua in ciascun tempo. Ora essendo effetto naturale di detto spirito, l'uniformare gli uomini, ed uniformando i costumi, uniformare inseparabilmente la lingua, è naturale ancora che questa uniformità s'intenda ristretta agli uomini che di mano in mano sono, e non a quelli che furono. Ond'è che il francese vuole e dee vivere e parlare come vivono e parlano i suoi nazionali moderni e presenti, non come i suoi nazionali antichi, nel qual caso, egli differirebbe dai presenti, peccato mortale per un francese, e qualità incompatibile collo spirito di società, in quanto egli è tale, in qualsivoglia nazione. Così che la riforma della lingua francese, dovendo introdurre l'uniformità, non poteva non iscartare tutto l'antico, (siccome difforme dal moderno) tutto ciò che non fosse in presente e corrente uso, ancorchè buonissimo e bellissimo, tutta l'autorità di qualunque scrittore che non fosse moderno; giacchè non poteva uniformare quanto alla lingua se non i presenti coi presenti, e non i presenti cogli antichi, ch'era impossibile sì per se stesso, sì perchè una lingua non ritorna antica, se ogni sorta di costumi e di opinioni ec. non ritorna antico, e precisamente tal qual era.»

²²⁸ Cf. Zib. 769-70: «La riforma di essa lingua, la regolarità prescrittata, la figura datale, avendo uniformato tutti gli stili, la poesia alla prosa; impedita la varietà e molteplicità della lingua, secondo i vari soggetti e i vari ingegni; tolta la libertà, e la facoltà inventiva agli scrittori, in questo particolare; tolto loro l'ardire, anzi rendutinegli affatto schivi e timidi ec. ec. la Francia è venuta a mancare della varietà degli scrittori, non ostante che n'abbia la copia, ed abbia la varietà de' soggetti, perchè tutti i soggetti da tutti gl'ingegni si trattano, possiamo dire, in un solo modo. E ciò deriva anche dalla natura e forza della eccessiva civiltà di quella nazione, e della influenza della società: così stretta e legata, che tutti gl'individui francesi fanno quasi un solo individuo. E laddove nelle altre nazioni, si cerca ed è pregio il distinguersi, in quello è pregio e necessità il rassomigliarsi anzi l'uguagliarsi agli altri, e ciascuno a tutti e tutti a ciascuno. Queste ragioni rendendogli timidi dell'opinione del ridicolo ec. e scrupolosi osservatori delle norme prescritte e comuni nella vita, li rende anche superstiziosi, timidi, schivi affatto di novità nella lingua. Ma tutto ciò quanto alle sole forme e modi, perchè questi soli, sono stati fra loro determinati, e prescritti i termini (assai ristretti) dentro i quali convenga contenersi, e fuor de' quali sia interdetto ogni menomo passo. E così quanto allo stile uniforme si può dire in tutti, e in tutti i generi di scrittura, anche nelle traduzioni ec. tirate per forza allo stile comune francese, ancorchè dallo stile il più renitente e disperato; e quanto in somma all'unità del loro stile, e del loro linguaggio che ho notata altrove. Ma non quanto alle parole, nelle quali, restata libera in Francia la facoltà inventiva, e il derivare novellamente dalle proprie fonti, sempre aperte sinchè la lingua vive; la lingua francese cresce di parole ogni giorno e crescerà.»

language of modernity, and French literature the model for all the nation aspiring to develop a modern literature.²²⁹

German and English literature, finally, are regarded by Leopardi as still going through a process of formation. Stemming from the Italian Renaissance, the new vernacular culture spreads all over Europe, assuming a from time to time a different aspect depending on the historical circumstances surrounding her development.

7. The Greek Renaissance

Leopardi's understanding of the dynamic of the Greek culture leads him to consider the declining stage of the Byzantine Empire as a crucial factor for the development of the Renaissance. Leopardi does not restrict the importance of Byzantine culture to the fact that it transmitted to the West precious manuscripts that otherwise would have gone lost. Challenging the paradigm of Protestant historiography — according to which Luther would have brought a new morality to Europe after the excesses of the court of Rome — Leopardi construes an alternative narrative, that links the insurgence of a new moral sentiment to the last breath of the Greek culture, right before the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

It would be interesting to extract from the *Zibaldone* an anthology of the passages where Leopardi tries to grasp and define the manifold qualities of Greek language in a litany of adjectives evocating, among the other things, its exactness, simplicity, humbleness, suppleness, pliability, adaptability, fertility, incorruptibility, inexhaustibility, immortality, omnipotence. It

²²⁹ Zib. 1001-2: «Giacchè la lingua francese è per eccellenza, lingua moderna; vale a dire che occupa l'ultimo degli estremi fra le lingue nella cui indole ec. signoreggia l'immaginazione, e quelle dove la ragione. (Intendo la lingua francese qual è ne' suoi classici, qual è oggi, qual è stata sempre da che ha preso forma stabile, e quale fu ridotta dall'Accademia).»

would be short sighted to consider Leopardi's love of Greek just as a form of aestheticization. Greek civilization is the Archimedean point on which Leopardi makes leverage in order to weigh the modern world, using happiness as unity of account. The weight-scale which Leopardi adopts has few in common with that of the utilitarians, since it does not take the abstraction of wealth as a counting unit. Wealth is something that relates to happiness only mediately, depending on whether or not it is possible to exchange it with something that makes you happy. Rather, the happiness of which Leopardi is thinking when he thinks of Greece belongs to the concreteness of the work of art. The latter is conceived as something that is able to activate the infinite circle of imagination imagining itself, which constitutes the only immediate and actual pleasure. Leopardi's attitude towards the Greeks cannot be seen as merely aestheticizing insofar as it does not place the work of art in a separate and superior sphere. On the opposite it is completely immanent, and therefore can be considered in political terms: the meditation on Greece, its history, its literature and most of all its morality, serves as a term of comparison in order to imagine an alternative order for humanity. The fact that Leopardi rarely addresses problems of Greek politics, or, even more, politics in general, should not be used as a counterargument: the roots of the political order are for Leopardi deeply buried in the soil of language and literature, where the scope of the possibilities open to each civilization is determined. Leopardi's meditation on the characteristics of the Greek language, albeit it employs the scientific categories of philology, assumes therefore a meaning which is widely non specialistic. Leopardi's philological understanding of the Greek language is delivered to his philosophical meditation.

Among the many aspects considered by Leopardi in his meditation on the Greek language, there is one that opens a strand of thoughts which crosses that of the interpretation of the Renaissance,

and brings to an interesting page of conjectural history. This aspect is given by the longevity of the Greek language, its ability to resist the pressure coming from other languages (above all Latin) and continuing to renew itself through thousands of years. Even after the Roman invasion, Leopardi observes, the oriental part of the Mediterranean continued to employ Greek in everyday life, and the use of Latin was restricted to the official texts of the Byzantine bureaucracy²³⁰. One of the causes of the Greek language's longevity is the fact that it remained one and the same through the centuries, both because of the authority of the ancient authors and the solicit care of the philologists.²³¹

Leopardi mentions the authors of the early Greek civilization only rarely, and we would be tempted to say, almost reluctantly, as if their names would overweight the page²³². References to presocratic philosophers for instance are never explicit, and always covered under a veil. On the contrary, Leopardi reserves special attention to the writers who lived at the crepuscule of the Greek literary civilization, in the last centuries of the Byzantine empire. He is especially interested in the authors from the period in between the 12th and 15th century, such as Ioannis Tzetze, Theodoros Metochita, and Georgios Gemistus Plethon. What strikes Leopardi most, is

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²³¹ Zib. 996-7: «Infatti i greci anche nel tempo della barbarie, conservarono sempre la memoria, l'uso, la cognizione delle loro ricchezze letterarie, e la venerazione e la stima de' loro sommi antichi scrittori. E questo a differenza de' latini, dove ne' secoli barbari, non si sapeva più, possiamo dir, nulla, di Virgilio, di Cicerone ec. L'erudizione e la filologia non si spensero mai nella Grecia, mentre erano ignotissime in Italia; anzi nella Grecia essendo subentrate alle altre buone e grandi discipline, durarono tanto che la loro letteratura sebbene spenta già molto innanzi, quanto al fare, non si spense mai quanto alla memoria, alla cognizione e [997]allo studio, fino alla caduta totale dell'impero greco. Ciò si vede primieramente da' loro scrittori de' bassi tempi, in molti de' quali anzi in quasi tutti (mentre in Italia il latino scritto non era più riconoscibile, e nessuno sognava d'imitare i loro antichi) la lingua greca, sebbene imbarbarita, conserva però visibilissime le sue proprie sembianze: ed in parecchi è scritta con bastante purità, e si riconosce evidentemente in alcuni di loro l'imitazione e lo studio de' loro classici e quanto alla lingua e quanto allo stile; sebbene degenerante l'una e l'altro nel sofisticato, il che non toglie la purità quanto alla lingua.»

²³² E. Viani, *Ancora su Leopardi e i presocratici: Eraclito*, «Carte Italiane», 1985, 1(6), pp. 51-60.

that even in these authors, which represent the swan's song of Greek literature, the language and the style remains faithful to that of the ancient authors.²³³

The memory of the ancient authors, as we can see from this passage, can be confined to the realm of erudition. Even in this case though, it has a value for Leopardi, because it preserves the language and thus leaves the door open to the re-appropriation of possibilities that would be lost otherwise. Differently from Latin, Greek survived as a living language till the Early Modern period, so that the Greek civilization never knew the interruption experienced by the Latin one. In his introduction to his own translation of an oration by Plethon, Leopardi sketches a vivid portrait of this long lasting flame of the Greek civilization:²³⁴

And truly this Greek nation is something admirable. In the space of twenty four centuries, without interruption, she was, regarding civilization and literature, most of the time sovereign and with no equals in the world, never equaled: conquering, propagated one and the other in Asia and in Africa; conquered, communicated them to the other European populations. And all through thirteen centuries, preserved them flourishing most of the time, always almost incorrupt; for the remaining eleven, only she preserved them in the barbarous world that had forgotten every doctrine. At the time of the Crusades, Greece showed an admirable spectacle to the European nations: a cleaned, littered population, living in noisy, wide cities, splendid for their temples, squares, magnificent palaces, for egregious works of art of every kind; to rough people, with scarcely any notion of education, living in towers, small villages, or on the mountains; almost savage, and inhuman. At last, just before entering under a barbarous yoke and lose her name,

²³³ Zib. 997-8: I would venture to say that in some of them, and up until the very last years of the Greek empire, there was even a degree of notable elegance in both language and style. In Gemistus, both are cause for astonishment. If one were to remove a handful of trivial little errors in the language (such as are only evident to the very learned), his works, or at any rate many of them, may safely be compared to and placed alongside all that is most beautiful in the most classical Greek literature and its best period. Furthermore, erudition and philological doctrine and study of the classics are manifest in the later Greek writers, by contrast with Latin writers. The ancient classics, and particularly Homer, though the most ancient of all, were constantly quoted in Greek writings for as long as Greece had someone to write. Italian: «Arrivo a dire che in taluni di loro, e ciò fino agli ultimissimi anni dell'impero greco, si trova perfino una certa notevole eleganza e di lingua e di stile. In Gemisto è maravigliosa l'una e l'altra. Tolti alcuni piccoli erroruzzi di lingua (non tali che sieno manifesti se non ai dottissimi) le sue opere o molte di loro si possono sicuramente paragonare e mettere con quanto ha di più bello la più classica letteratura greca e il suo miglior secolo. Oltre a ciò l'erudizione e la dottrina filologica, e lo studio de' classici è manifesto negli scrittori greci più recenti, a differenza de' latini. Gli antichi classici, e singolarmente Omero, benchè il più antico di tutti, non lasciarono mai di esser citati negli scritti greci, finchè la Grecia ebbe chi scrivesse.»

²³⁴ On Leopardi's translation of Plethon's oration cf. F. D'Intino's critical edition of Leopardi's *Volgarizzamenti in prosa 1822-1827*, Marsilio, Venezia, 2012, pp. 71-89.

and so to say her life, it seemed that, as a flame, while blowing out, she sparked of a stronger light: it gave birth to several most noble minds, worthy of much better times: when she fell — since many of them fled from her ruin and went to different places — she was for a second time, for Europe and the rest of the world, teacher of civilization and literature.²³⁵

The comparison with the Latin civilization presentifies in all its concreteness the singularity of the Greek case. The contrast between the barbarous Crusaders, used to live dispersed among the mountains, and the civilized, urban, polite Byzantines, pictures in a snapshot the difference between the fate of the Latin and Greek civilizations. Until the end of the Byzantine Empire, the Greek civilization never needed a Renaissance. Until that moment, Greek language never really

²³⁵ G. Leopardi, *Discorso in proposito di un'orazione greca di Giorgio Gemisto Pletone*: «Veramente è cosa mirabile questa nazione greca, che per ispazio d'intorno a ventiquattro secoli, senza alcuno intervallo, fu nella civiltà e nelle lettere, il più del tempo, sovrana e senza pari al mondo, non mai superata: conquistando, propagò l'una e l'altre nell'Asia e nell'Affrica; conquistata, le comunicò agli altri popoli dell'Europa. E in tredici secoli, le mantenne per lo più fiorite, sempre quasi incorrotte; per gli altri undici, le conservò essa sola nel mondo barbaro, e dimenticò di ogni buona dottrina. Fu spettacolo nuovo, nel tempo delle Crociate, alle nazioni europee: gente polita, letterata, abitatrice delle città romorose, ampie, splendide per templi, per piazze, per palagi magnifici, per opere egregie d'arti di ogni maniera; a genti rozze, senza sentore di lettere, abitatrici di torri, di ville, di montagne; quasi salvatiche e inumane. All'ultimo, già vicina a sottentrare ad un gioco barbaro, e perdere il nome e, per dir così, la vita, parve che a modo di una fiamma, spegnendosi, gittasse una maggior luce: produsse ingegni nobilissimi, degni di molto migliori tempi: e caduta, fuggendo dalla sua rovina molti di essi a diverse parti, un'altra volta fu all'Europa, e però al mondo, maestra di civiltà e di lettere.» Similar passages can be found in the Zibaldone, cf. for instance 2696-7: «Ma tornando al proposito nostro, siccome la Grecia, in tutta la storia conosciuta, è la nazione che per più lungo tempo ha conservato una civiltà, così la lingua greca illustre è di tutte le lingue illustri conosciute nella storia antica o moderna, quella che ha durato più lungo tempo. Sebbene nei secoli bassi la civiltà greca fosse in gran decadenza, e similmente e proporzionatamente la lingua greca illustre, nondimeno la Grecia non divenne assolutamente barbara, se non dopo la presa di Costantinopoli, conservandosi almeno qualche parte della civiltà greca, se non altro, nella Corte di Bisanzio finchè questa durò. E fino a questo medesimo termine durò ancora la lingua greca illustre, in maniera che gli scrittori greci di questi ultimi tempi, come Teofilatto e quei della Storia Bizantina, sono per la più parte intelligibili e piani senz'altro particolare studio, a tutti quelli che intendono Omero ed Erodoto. Di modo che la lingua greca illustre durò sempre una e sempre quella, per 23 secoli, cioè da Omero fino all'ultimo imperatore greco. Durata meravigliosa: ma tale altresì fu quella della greca civiltà. Perchè la Grecia per niuna circostanza di tempi non divenne mai interamente barbara finchè non fu tutta sudita de' turchi; nè mai per tutto l'intervallo de' secoli antecedenti fu priva di letteratura, neanche ne' peggiori secoli, come si può vedere, considerando anche solamente la Biblioteca di Fozio scritta nel nono secolo, e le varie opere di Tzetze [scritte nel 12° oltre il Violario d'Eudocia Augusta, il Lessico di Suida ec. opere che in niun'altra parte del mondo fuor della parte greca, quando pur fossero state tradotte nelle rispettive lingue, si sarebbero a quei tempi sapute neppure intendere, non che comporne delle simili.»

died, as witnessed from «those Greeks who came to Italy in the fourteenth century, and after the fall of the Greek empire in the fifteenth century»²³⁶:

And while in Italy the ancient Latin authors who had lain buried and forgotten for so long in their own homeland were being resuscitated, the Greeks were bringing their Homer, their Plato, and the other ancients here, not as if they had just risen or been dug up but as if they had always been alive. So well known are the erudition and scholarship of these Greeks, the things they did in Italy, the knowledge they introduced, the works they wrote, partly in Greek, some of them truly elegant, and partly in Latin, stooping at last for the first time to using the language of their former, already destroyed, conquerors, that there is no need for me to do more than allude to them.²³⁷

Among the Byzantines that brought to Italy the treasures they saved from the final shipwreck of Greek civilization, Leopardi reserves a special place to Plethon, the Platonist philosopher and religious reformer that convinced Cosimo the Medici and Sigismondo Malatesta to support the diffusion and translation of Plato and the Neo-Platonists in Italy. Among the other things, Plethon also entertained an intellectual exchange with Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli, the Italian mathematician and cosmographer whose theories are supposed to have influenced Columbus' enterprise. While attending the Council of Florence in 1439, Plethon acquainted Toscanelli to the writings of the Greek geographer Strabo, thus bequeathing to the new era the treasure of geographical wisdom of the ancient world. However, introducing Plethon in his *Discorso in proposito di un'orazione greca di Giorgio Gemisto Pletone*, Leopardi especially recalls Plethon's endeavors for a religious and moral reform, in order to restore the values of the classical Greek civilization:

I will overlook the aspects that can be read in many other writers: I will just mention the fact that, after examining the religions of his time, having rebuked the muslim one — which in those days, planted in the most beautiful country of Europe, seemed almost triumphant and close to achieve supremacy — he was neither satisfied from the christian one. And, one hundred years before the

²³⁶ Zib. 998: «quei greci che vennero in Italia nel trecento, e dopo la caduta dell'impero greco, nel quattrocento»

²³⁷ Zib. 998: «mentre in Italia si risuscitavano gli antichi scrittori latini che giacevano sepolti e dimenticati da tanto tempo nella loro medesima patria, i greci portavano qua il loro Omero, il loro Platone e gli altri antichi, non come risorti o disseppelliti fra loro, ma come sempre vissuti. Della erudizione e dottrina di quei greci, delle cose che fecero in Italia, delle cognizioni che introdussero, delle opere che scrissero, parte in greco, ed alcune proprio eleganti; parte in latino, riducendosi allora finalmente per la prima volta ad usare il linguaggio de' loro antichi e già distrutti vincitori; essendo cose notissime, non accade se non accennarle. (29. Aprile. 1821.)»

Reformation (not moved from animosity or rage, as Luther, but from his very philosophical and political conclusions) designed, tempted, and in a certain measure achieved, and still hoped, and not long before dying predicted, the establishment of new beliefs and new religious practices, more suited, according to him, to the times and to the needs of the nations.²³⁸

There is probably much of Leopardi himself in this portrait of Plethon. In him Leopardi finds a kindred soul, educated by the acquaintance with the great authors of the ancient world to observe his own times from a removed standpoint. But also to take advantage of this distance in order to excogitate far away possibilities, aiming at turning upside down the elements of the current discourse, bringing back to life the ancient words that ensured the order of a lost world. The ascending climax “designed, tempted, and in a certain measure achieved, and still hoped, and not long before dying predicted” has to be seriously considered: each word seems to stress a different aspect of Plethon’s activity, and the complete sequence reveals the great importance Leopardi attributes to him. “Designed” puts in evidence the projectual dimension of Plethon activities, the fact he developed his ideas on a theoretic level, both with the study of the ancient authors and with his own original meditation. “Tempted and in certain ways achieved” refers to his endeavors to put into practice and realize his own ideals through the influence he obtained, first at the Imperial court in Byzantium and then in Italy with Cosimo and Sigismondo. “Hoped” enters into a more personal dimension, revealing an almost religious aspect, Plethon’s personal adhesion to his own ideals. “Not long before dyeing, foresaw” enlarges on this latter aspect,

²³⁸ G. Leopardi, *Discorso in proposito di un’orazione greca di Giorgio Gemisto Pletone*: «Lascero le altre particolarità che di lui si possono vedere in molti scrittori: solo ricorderò che egli, esaminate le religioni dei tempi suoi, riprovata la maomettana, che di quei giorni, piantata nel più bel paese di Europa, pareva come trionfante e già prossima ad ottenere il primo grado, non fu soddisfatto nè anche della cristiana. E cento anni prima della Riforma (movendosi, non per animosità ad ira, come Lutero, ma per sue considerazioni filosofiche e per discorsi politici) disegnò, intraprese e procurò in alcuni modi, ancora sperò, e non molto avanti di morire predisse, lo stabilimento di nuove credenze e di nuove pratiche religiose, più accomodate, secondo che egli pensava, ai tempi ed al bisogno delle nazioni.» The english translation is mine.

reading Plethon as the prophet of the new spirit that through the Renaissance bequeathed to the Enlightenment the possibility of abandoning Christianity as a universal worldview. In these few lines, Leopardi is proposing an alternative reading to the well established historiographical interpretation that saw the Reform as the intermediate link between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. According to this perspective, the Reform complemented the aesthetic individualism of the Renaissance with a moral dimension, based on new religious ideas and practices. Leopardi refuses this reading: for him, the Reform is mainly the product of animosity and rage. The new religious and moral aspect was brought to the rest of Europe not from Germany but from Greece; not by Luther, but by Plethon. Without overlooking the other scholars that came to Italy after the fall of Constantinople, Leopardi places Plethon on a different level. As we have already seen in Dante's case, Leopardi puts a special attention on the possibility of the individual to influence his own times through a "design". Together with Dante, Plethon appears to Leopardi as the philosopher of the Renaissance. Not in the sense that he was an expression of his own age, but rather in the opposite sense that he read in his own age an opportunity for a change, and was able to make it real. Again, as in Dante's case, the possibility of this change is grounded in a linguistic dimension. Opposed to the mere erudition of other Byzantine's scholars, Plethon is for Leopardi an evidence of the power of a language that, after surviving the end of the Ancient world, is still living at the dawn of the new era. This linguistic proximity discloses to Plethon the possibility of trespassing the wall that divides the civilization of the Ancients from that of the Moderns, bringing back to life ideas, or rather forms of life, that have been banned by the absolute sovereignty of reason with the end of the Ancient world. This happens for instance when Plethon, in his funerary oration for the Empress Helen, does not

praises her because of her Christian virtues, or for her despise of the world, as it would be expected for a Christian Empress who in her late life renounced the crown to become a nun. Rather, Plethon chooses to praise her for her happiness, as it was common for the ancients, who — differently from the Christians — used to consider happiness as a sign of morality:

Concerning the esteem which the ancients had for happiness, and how they considered it to be one of the main attributes of their heroes, and as the principal subject of praise, it is curious to observe how Georgius Gemistus Pletho, in his brief and most elegant oration on the death of the Empress Helena, who later became a nun by the name of Hypomone, which was published by Moustoxydes and Schinas in their συλλογή ἑλληνικῶν ἀνεκδότων [Collection of Unpublished Greek Writings] τετράδιον, i.e., fascicule 3, successfully imitated the ancient writers in this respect, as well as in other ways, by praising that woman principally for the favors of fortune, a sentiment that was alien to his own times.²³⁹

Leopardi reads Plethon as a survivor from the catastrophe of the Ancient world, rescued by the flood of reason on a raft made of ancient books. According to Leopardi, Plethon's literary style «didn't miss anything for being ancient, apart from the fact of being ancient». The possibility of his being at the same time modern and ancient dwells in the resources of the Greek language, which allow him to understand both worlds. For Leopardi indeed, there is a specific fertility that characterizes the Greek language, allowing it to adapt to all the novelties and the historical

²³⁹Zib. 4240: «Circa la stima che gli antichi facevano della felicità, e il contarla come una delle principali doti dei loro eroi, e come soggetto principalissimo di lode, è curioso vedere come Giorgio Gemisto Pletone, nella sua breve ed elegantissima orazione in morte della imperatrice Elena, poi fatta monaca e detta Ipomone, pubblicata da Mustoxidi e Scinà nella loro συλλογή ἑλληνικῶν ἀνεκδότων, cioè quaderno 3, imitando nelle altre cose, e molto felicemente, gli antichi, gl'imiti anche in questo, di lodar principalmente quella donna per li favori della fortuna; sentimento alieno da' suoi tempi.)»

transformations²⁴⁰ This quality of the Greek language is so powerful that, at least at a certain extent, it survives the death of the language itself. Even after ancient Greek is no longer spoken, new words are forged out of its alloy, irrigating the language of the new sciences developed in Europe especially after the French Revolution:

And this may be seen plainly in what is happening today, since in such a wide range of times, customs, and opinions, in so many novel forms of knowledge and discoveries, we have recourse to the Greek language whenever we need to represent and name anything new, especially if it is scientific. No living language, even though the living languages are contemporary with our knowledge and discoveries, deems itself equal to this task, and we call on a dead and very ancient language for the purpose of signifying and enunciating those things which are beyond the reach of thriving living languages. The French Revolution, by demanding new words for new things, populated the French and also the European lexicon with new Greek words. Physics, chemistry, natural history, mathematics, military strategy, naval studies, medicine, metaphysics, politics, and every kind of science or discipline, even though renewed and very different from those practiced and known by the ancient Greeks, even though entirely new, found in that language enough capital for the needs of their nomenclatures. Every new science or discipline begins by taking its name from Greek. And even though it has been extinct for centuries, this language remains forever inexhaustible, and suffices for everything, and it could be said that man will lose the power to know, apprehend, and discover, and all

²⁴⁰ *Zib.*, 736-7: «From its beginnings up to the end, the Greek language never ceased to enrich itself, and to acquire ever more elements, and new words in particular. There is virtually no Greek writer, of whatever period, who, when he comes to light, cannot serve to enrich the Greek lexicon with something new. During every period in which correct Greek was in use (a very long time span, that is, at least up until Constantine, since St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom are quoted, I believe, in the Glossary as well as in the Lexicon), the language was enhanced by new words and even phrases not found in the earlier authors. And these additions were all drawn from deep within itself, for the Greek language was exceedingly averse to anything foreign; rather, it found the ability to say all it needed, and to match new words to new things, in its own roots and in the immense fluency and abundance of its compound words, without having recourse to foreign assistance. In short, the wealth and nature, and not only the richness but the natural and particular fertility of the Greek language, was sufficient on its own to deal with everything new that needed to be expressed, like a country so fertile that it could feed any number of new inhabitants or foreigners» The original reads: «La lingua greca da' suoi principii fino alla fine, non lasciò mai di arricchirsi, e acquistar sempre, massimamente nuovi vocaboli. Non è quasi scrittore greco di qualsivoglia secolo, che venga nuovamente in luce, il quale non possa servire ad impinguare il vocabolario greco di qualche novità. Non è secolo della buona lingua greca (la quale si stende molto innanzi, cioè almeno a Costantino, giacchè credo che S. Basilio e S. Crisostomo si citino nel Glossario sebbene anche nel Vocabolario) ne' cui scrittori la lingua non si trovi arricchita di nuove voci e anche modi, che non si osservano ne' più antichi. E questi incrementi erano tutti della propria sostanza e del proprio fondo, giacchè la lingua greca fu oltremodo schiva d'ogni cosa forestiera, ma trovava nelle sue radici e nella immensa facilità e copia de' suoi composti, la facoltà di dir tutto quello che bisognava, e di conformare la novità delle parole alla novità delle cose, senza ricorrere ad aiuti stranieri. Insomma il tesoro e la natura, e non solamente ricchezza, ma fertilità naturale e propria della lingua greca, era tale da bastare da per se sola, a tutte lenovità che occorresse di esprimere, come un paese così fertile che fosse sufficiente ad alimentare qualunque numero di nuovi abitatori o di forestieri.»

sources of the knowable will be exhausted, before the Greek language loses its capacity for expression and the source of its names and words has dried up. Such a use, even if I disapprove of it and condemn it for the reasons I have given elsewhere does nonetheless make plain and palpable the immortal omnipotence of that language.²⁴¹

Because of this adaptability and fertility, Greek appears to Leopardi much different from Latin²⁴². During the Renaissance indeed, the latter proved to be incapable of adapting to the modern world, as soon as the the new age took “a proper and determinate spirit”, the spirit of a non-universalistic era:

Of all languages, Latin is the least adaptable to modern things, because, having an ancient character, and being very precise and very distinctive, it has no freedom, contrary to the other ancient languages; hence it is not capable of anything but the ancient, and, unlike Greek, is not adaptable to the modern. So it turned out that it was corrupted very early, again unlike Greek, and also that, like French today, it ceased to be a universal language, commonly understood, and came to be used much more for civil and diplomatic purposes, etc., and to be employed by the cultured

²⁴¹ *Zib.*, 737-8: «E questo si può vedere manifestamente anche per quello che interviene oggidì. Giacchè in tanta diversità di tempi e di costumi e di opinioni, in tanta novità di conoscenze e di ritrovati, e fino d'interesse scienze e dottrine, qualunque novità massimamente scientifica occorra di significare e denominare, si ha ricorso alla lingua greca. Nessuna lingua viva, ancorchè pure le lingue vive sieno contemporanee alle nostre cognizioni e scoperte, si stima in grado di bastare a questo effetto, e s'invoca una lingua morta e antichissima per servire alla significazione ed enunziatione di quelle cose a cui le lingue viventi e fiorenti non arrivano. La rivoluzione francese, richiedendosi alla novità delle cose, la novità delle parole, ha popolato il vocabolario francese ed anche europeo di nuove voci greche. La fisica, la Chimica, la storia naturale, le matematiche, [738]l'arte militare, la nautica, la medicina, la metafisica, la politica, ogni sorta di scienze o discipline, ancorchè rinnovellate e diversissime da quelle che si usavano o conoscevano dagli antichi greci, ancorchè nuove di pianta, hanno trovato in quella lingua il capitale sufficiente ai bisogni delle loro nomenclature. Ogni scienza o disciplina nuova, comincia subito dal trarre il suo nome dal greco. E questa lingua ancorchè da tanti secoli spenta, resta sempre inesauribile, e provvede a tutto, e si può dire che prima mancherà all'uomo la facoltà di sapere di conoscere e di scoprire, prima saranno esaurite tutte le fonti dello scibile, di quello che manchi alla lingua greca la facoltà di esprimerlo, e sia inaridita la fonte delle sue denominazioni e parole. Il qual uso, ancorchè io lo biasimi e condanni per le ragioni che ho dette altrove, non è però che non renda evidente e palpabile l'onnipotenza immortale di quella lingua.»

²⁴² Come appunto la lingua greca, vera figlia della natura e del bello, fu tanto atta alla filosofia, quanto forse nessuna delle moderne, le quali a lei tuttora ricorrono ne' loro bisogni filosofici ec.; la lingua greca si conservò per tanti secoli e tante vicissitudini di cose incorrotta; la lingua greca si può con certezza presumere che se oggi vivesse, oggi conservando il suo stesso primitivo carattere, sarebbe capacissima e forse più d'ogni altra anche moderna, di tutte le cose moderne, siccome ne può far fede il vedere quante di queste non si sappiano denominare se non ricorrendo a essa lingua; la lingua greca si adatterebbe [1899]all'analisi, a ogni sottigliezza della nostra moderna ragione, senza però perder nulla della sua bellezza, della sua antica indole, e della sua adattabilità alla antica natura, perocchè la natura può considerarsi come antica.

and the learned in place of the spoken languages. It had to cease, I mean, as soon as the times took on a definite character of their own, to which Latin could not adapt.²⁴³

This brings Leopardi to venture in a remarkable piece of conjectural history, where he considers the gain that would have come to Europe, were Greek its universal language in the Middle Ages, as it was in the eastern part of the Mediterranean:

That might not have happened in the case of Greek, and if in recent times it had been universal in Europe, as Latin was, and as it had been in ancient times, especially in the East, perhaps it would not yet have lost that quality, and we would still use an ancient language among nations, and would write in it, etc. In that case we would really be very happy, because of the infinite capacity, power, and adaptability of that language, combined with its beauty, etc., which make it equally appropriate and sufficient to both the imagination and the intellect of all eras. So it would have turned out if Greek arms had prevailed in Europe over Latin.²⁴⁴

Such a circumstance indeed would have brought to a different kind of Renaissance, where Europe instead of turning to classical Rome would have been oriented towards Greece:

I believe that it is possible to translate works that are modern or philosophical or that have any argument whatsoever into good Greek (especially in the case of works in Italian or Spanish or the like), just as I am sure that they could never be translated into good Latin. If circumstances in our countries had caused the Greek language to prevail over Latin, and if the former rather than the latter had served scholars during the rebirth of classical scholarship,¹ the use of a dead language would perhaps have been able to endure for a longer period of time, or at any rate would have been more successful (not only in such scholarship but also in all the other uses to which the Latin language was put until the modern European languages had assumed an adequate form). Our elegant Latin writers of the 16th century, etc., could have been almost modern had they written in Greek, whereas writing in Latin they made sure that the only praise they could receive was from the ancients, that they would serve men of the past rather than posterity, and to be

²⁴³ Zib. 2007-8: «La lingua latina è fra tutte quante la meno adattabile alle cose moderne, perch'essendo di carattere antico, e proprissimo, e marcatissimo, è priva di libertà, al contrario delle altre antiche, e quindi incapace d'altro che dell'antico, e inadattabile al moderno, a differenza della greca. Quindi venne e ch'ella si corrompesse prestissimo a differenza pur della greca, e ch'ella dovesse cessare di esser lingua universale, per intendersi scambievolmente, come oggi col francese, e molto più di servire agli usi civili e diplomatici ec. ed essere adoperata dai letterati e dai dotti in luogo delle parlate; dovesse dico cessare appena i tempi presero uno spirito determinato e proprio, al quale il latino era inadattabile.»

²⁴⁴ Zib., 2008-9: «Ciò forse non sarebbe accaduto alla lingua greca, e s'ella ne' bassi tempi fosse stata universale in Europa, come lo fu la latina, e com'essa l'era stata anticamente, e massime in oriente, forse ella non avrebbe perduto ancora questa qualità, e noi ci serviremmo ancora tra nazione e nazione di una lingua antica, e in questa scriveremmo ec. Nel che saremmo in verità felicissimi per la infinita capacità, potenza, e adattabilità di quella lingua, unite alla bellezza ec. che la fanno egualmente propria e bastante e all'immaginazione e alla ragione di tutti i tempi. Così sarebbe accaduto se l'armi greche avessero prevaluto in Europa alle latine. ».

remembered rather than to hope. If the language “rather than to hope. If the language that children still study today, and the one that many, especially in Italy, still stubbornly seek to employ on one occasion or another were Greek rather than Latin, it would serve modern life far better, it would far more effectively facilitate thought, and the imagination, etc., and it would be rather more likely that it could be put to some practical use, etc. ²⁴⁵

For Leopardi, a Greek speaking Renaissance would have had much more historical influence than the Latin one, because it would have better suited modernity. Leaving aside the given historical circumstances, Leopardi goes so far to consider the possibility the Renaissance had of *choosing* Greek as its own language.²⁴⁶ The arbitrary choice of restoring classical Latin, that Leopardi attributes in a very materialistic fashion to the dramatic lack of words of the vernacular, could have been substituted by an analogous choice of adopting Greek as the language of the intellectual elites. From this linguistic decision, a different Renaissance and a different modernity

²⁴⁵ Zib. 1793-4: «Io credo possibile il tradurre le opere moderne o filosofiche o di qualunque argomento, in buon greco (massime le italiane o spagnuole o simili), come son certo che non si potrebbero mai tradurre in buon latino.] Se le circostanze avessero portato che la lingua greca avesse nei nostri paesi prevaluto alla latina, e che quella in luogo di questa avesse servito ai dotti nel risorgimento degli studi, l'uso di una lingua morta, avrebbe forse potuto durare più lungo tempo, o almeno esser più felice (nè solo negli studi, ma in tutti gli altri usi in cui s'adopra la lingua latina fino alla sufficiente formazione delle moderne europee); i nostri eleganti scrittori latini del 500. ec. avrebbero potuto esser quasi moderni, se avessero scritto in greco, laddove scrivendo in latino si assicuravano di non poter esser lodati se non dagli antichi, e di servire ai passati in luogo de' posteri, e di potersi piuttosto ricordare che sperare; e se la lingua che oggi si studia tuttavia da' fanciulli, e quella che molti, massime in Italia, si ostinano a voler ancora adoperare in questa o quella occasione, fosse piuttosto la greca che la latina, essa servirebbe molto più alla vita moderna, faciliterebbe molto più il pensiero, e l'immaginazione ec. e sarebbe alquanto più possibile il farne un qualche uso pratico ec. »

²⁴⁶ See also Zib. 2210-22: «Se la lingua greca nel risorgimento delle lettere avesse prevaluto alla latina, quanto all'uso de' dotti, alle cose diplomatiche ec. ella sarebbe stata (oltre gli altri vantaggi) più facile a trattare e a scrivere anche elegantemente, e con quella perfezione con che in Italia fu scritto il latino, e ciò non solo per la sua adattabilità alle cose moderne, ma per la maggior facilità assoluta della sua costituzione e proprietà, che risulta dalla sua naturalezza, semplicità di frase di andamento ec. E la minore anzi niuna somiglianza che avrebbe avuta col materiale delle lingue moderne e viventi, sarebbe stato uno scoglio di meno alla sua purità, ed eleganza, alla conservazione della sua vera indole, e in vece del latino barbaro, si sarebbe scritto un greco puro, e la barbarie non avrebbe dovuto esser cagione di abbandonarla, come la latina, barbara anche oggi negli scrittori tedeschi ec. che la usano. Oltre il gran vantaggio, scioltezza ec. che avrebbe recato agl'intelletti, alla concezione e all'espressione delle idee, alla chiarezza e facilità dell'una e dell'altra, la familiarità la pratica e l'uso di quella onnipotente lingua. (2. Dic. 1821.)

would have followed. Or maybe, a third thread would have been intertwined with those of Dante's vernacular and Petrarch's ciceronian Renaissances.

8. Leopardi's interpretation of the Renaissance in the context of the Viesseux circle

As we have seen in chapter I, the word "risorgimento" was politically sensitive in the first half of the nineteenth century in Italy, and it was susceptible to manifold historiographical interpretations which in turn implied different ideological connotations. The conversation at the Gabinetto Vieusseux shows the relevance of the interpretation of the Renaissance in the philosophical histories that were competing at the dawn of the Italian unification. Leopardi's meditation on the Renaissance enters in this conversation. The map of Leopardi's Renaissance sketched in this chapter shows both similarities and differences with the voices we have heard in conversation at the Gabinetto Vieusseux. There is for sure a family resemblance that, besides the specific contents, regards the literary genre: the discourses on the Renaissance at the Gabinetto Vieusseux were often on the level of philosophical history. Such a genre can be a powerful instrument for spreading ideas, and thus has a specific political function which suited the needs of the intellectuals at Palazzo Buondelmonti.

However, compared with the various interpretations that were present at the *Gabinetto Vieusseux*, Leopardi's understanding of the Renaissance shows several distinctive features. Whereas at the Gabinetto the discussion was mainly focused on the ethnic and institutional origins of the new civilization, this aspect appears only marginally in Leopardi. Mentions of the Arabs and the Lombards are only sporadic in the *Zibaldone*. Certainly, Leopardi acknowledges the role of the Arabs in preserving and developing the sciences that Rome had received from Greece, and goes

so far to say that, under their dominion, Spain was the only civilized part of Europe.²⁴⁷ In the meanwhile, Leopardi notices that the Arab civilization never really mingled with the inhabitants of the Iberian peninsula. This is why, after the expulsion of the Moors, no relevant trace of it was left in the language and culture of Spain. Similarly, but in a different way, according to Leopardi the Lombard language did not leave any trace on the Italian language. The language of the Lombards succumbed to the encounter with Latin, because, compared to the latter, it was much less formalized. Thus the Lombards, at the end of their political domination, ended up being completely absorbed by the rest of the Italian population, without leaving any trace on the language.²⁴⁸

The most remarkable specific point of divergence between Leopardi's interpretation of the Renaissance and those we have seen at play in the Vieuilleux circle, is probably the different evaluation of the role of the Byzantines. Even if at different extents, and regarding different fields as art, literature, science or jurisprudence, the Byzantine heredity was minimized, and sometimes even completely denied, by the people in the Vieuilleux circle. This was mostly an effect of a long standing historiographical tradition that can be traced back to Muratori. Such a "national" perspective on the Byzantine heredity was consolidated at the Vieuilleux circle by the

²⁴⁷ According to Leopardi, the Arabs preserved and increased the Greek sciences, delivering to the western culture new words that were necessary for these sciences (Zib. 1229); Leopardi stresses the importance of the numeration system they introduced (Zib. 1398); their civilization left no traces in Spain (Zib. 3581).

²⁴⁸ According to Leopardi the Lombards completely mingled with the Italians (Zib. 1592); they were scarcely civilized (Zib. 1879); their language couldn't prevail on Latin, because the latter was already "formed" (Zib. 3581).

heredity of enlightenment historiography (Montesquieu, Voltaire, Gibbon²⁴⁹) which regarded Byzantium as a symbol of tyranny. Breaking this consensus, Leopardi draws a different scenario: not only the Renaissance would have been much more influential if the Greek element would have substituted the Latin one, but even more, the core of its moral message came from Greece, thanks to Plethon's endeavors. Leopardi's position appears extremely polemical, considering that he creates a narrative which — without making concessions to the Neo-Guelph perspective — challenges at the same time both Protestant and Enlightenment historiography.

Besides this specific difference on the historical evaluation of the Byzantine empire, the main distinctive point of Leopardi's interpretation lies in the prominence he gives to the linguistic sphere. From this point of view, his position in the trend we have outlined as the marking character of the interpretations of the Renaissance at the Gabinetto Vieusseux — that is to say the transition from the conception of a plurality of Renaissances to the new unitary conception — appears particularly complex. Even if Leopardi — as several other authors we have met at the Gabinetto Vieusseux — still makes use of the disciplinary distinction between different aspects of the Renaissance, the new unitary conception of the Renaissance is clearly expressed in his writings, as proven both by the formula «Renaissance of civilization» and by the idea that above has been referred to as the “arc of the Renaissance”, the fact that for him the Renaissance goes from poetry to science, passing through all the aspects of civilization. At the same time, because of the prominence he gives to the linguistic element, he tends to consider the *renaissance des lettres* as the founding moment of the wider overall Renaissance phenomenon.

²⁴⁹ Cf. S. Ronchey, *Profilo di storia della storiografia su Bisanzio da Tillemont alle Annales*, in *Europa medievale e mondo bizantino*, (Tavola rotonda del XVIII Congresso del CISH – Montréal, 29 agosto 1995), ed. by G. Arnaldi e G. Cavallo, Roma, Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medioevo, 1997, pp. 283-304.

The Renaissance is for Leopardi essentially the birth of the vernacular literatures that marks the end of Middle-age universalism. It is this linguistic transformation that causes an enhancement of life that produces the birth of a new civilization. Leopardi understands language as the wider sphere of civilization, the element in which all the other aspects are rooted. Compared to language, literature represents a much smaller circle; but still, through its influence on language, literature can have the most powerful effects on civilization. This fact puts the author in a very special position: if he is able to enter the circle that connects language and literature, giving form to the possibilities that lay unexpressed in the language, he can contribute to forge the “national spirit”. Because of the importance attributed to the *renaissance des lettres*, the disciplinary interpretation of a variety of Renaissances still holds a certain validity for Leopardi, but yet, it no longer has the same meaning it had in the Enlightenment historiography. Indeed, Leopardi does not completely refuse the new Romantic interpretation of the *Volksgeist*, which is still present in the idea that the national spirit finds its expression in the vernacular language. But the historical efficacy of this linguistic transformation is still in need of receiving a literary form; otherwise the flow of the linguistic change would never reach the stability which is necessary for the growth of language. The political implication of this point of view is that the masses and the elites have a complementary role in the formation of the new civilization. Even more than the elites, we could say, what interests Leopardi is the possibility that certain individuals have to deviate the flow of the events in a direction they find preferable. In the chaotic sequence of casual collisions of which history is made of, there is still space for making choices that can have a wide and long lasting influence on the life of civilization. This role of the great individuality only apparently suits the type of the Romantic genius: even if, at first sight, Leopardi’s portraits of Dante and

Plethon could be taken for such, the element of the “design” makes this category inappropriate. In a certain sense, Dante and Plethon are considered by Leopardi more as scientists: their method is strictly empirical, moving towards the future from the observation of reality. What differentiates them from the scientist is not so much the method, but rather the wideness of the object they take in account, which is the entire civilization. Leopardi translates the great individuality of the romantics in the material terms of empiricism.

More broadly speaking, we can say that, compared with the other interpretations of the Renaissance that were at play in the Vieusseux circle, that of Leopardi is characterized by a higher degree of conceptualization. The historical fact is read through Leopardi’s meditation on the language and its relationship with the life of civilization. The fact of reading the Renaissance as an essentially linguistic phenomenon, tends to transform its notion from a simple historical periodization into a transhistorical concept. Not in the sense of a predeterminate phase of civilization, which would obviously be incompatible with Leopardi’s anti-deterministic understanding of history, but rather as a concrete possibility that can be disclosed in a certain place and at a certain time in front of a given civilization.

We don’t know till what point Leopardi shared his ideas on the Renaissance with the other people of the Vieusseux circle. There is little doubt, however, that he could have ignored what was at the stake in this conversation, that is to say the guidelines for the upcoming Italian unification. The scattered references to the Renaissance that can be found in Leopardi’s writings have therefore to be placed in this wider historical context, where their originality starkly emerges, together with their political meaning.

9. Chances of renaissance

Leopardi's tendency to read the Renaissance as a transhistorical phenomenon somehow facilitates its transposition from the past to the present and the future, as it appears in a series of fragments of the *Zibaldone* where the word is employed to characterize a possibility that Leopardi reads in his own times. Leopardi sees a tendency to renaissance, taken in this wider sense, in the transformation happened in Europe after the French Revolution:

A rebirth (*risorgimento*) begun in Europe through the French Revolution, a rebirth (*risorgimento*) that was weak and very imperfect because it derived not from nature but from reason, indeed from philosophy, which is a very weak, false, sorry, unenduring principle of civilization. And yet it is a kind of rebirth (*risorgimento*); and note that—despite the insufficiency of means on the one hand and, on the other, the manner in which those means clash with nature—nonetheless the French Revolution (as has often been observed) and the present time have brought men closer nature, the sole source of civilization, have set in motion great and powerful passions, have restored to formerly dead nations, I do not go so far as to say life but a certain palpitation, a certain distant impression of vitality. Even though that has been by means of half-philosophy, an instrument of civilization which is uncertain, inadequate, weak, and by its very nature fleeting, because half-philosophy naturally tends to grow and to become perfect philosophy, which is a source of barbarism..²⁵⁰

In this passage Leopardi subsumes the French Revolution under the transhistorical notion of renaissance, thus implicitly establishing a comparison with the Renaissance properly meant. This appreciative comparison with the Renaissance is qualified by the remark that, taken as a renaissance, the French Revolution was «extremely imperfect and weak, because it was

²⁵⁰ Zib. 1077-8: « Risorgimento incominciato in Europa dalla rivoluzione francese, risorgimento debole, im- perfettissimo, perchè derivato non dalla natura, ma dalla ragione, anzi dalla filosofia, ch'è debolissimo, tristo, falso, non durevole principio di civiltà. Ma pure è una specie di risorgimento; ed osservate che malgrado la insufficienza de' mezzi per l'una parte, e per l'altra la contrarietà ch'essi hanno colla natura; tuttavia la rivoluzione francese (com'è stato spesso notato), ed il tempo presente hanno ravvicinato gli uomini alla natura, sola fonte di civiltà, hanno messo in moto le passioni grandi e forti, hanno restituito alle nazioni già morte, non dico una vita, ma un certo palpito, una certa lontana apparenza vitale. Quantunque ciò sia stato mediante la mezza filosofia, strumento di civiltà incerta, insufficiente, debole, e passeggera per natura sua, perchè la mezza filosofia, tende naturalmente a crescere, e divenire perfetta filosofia, ch'è fonte di barbarie.»

grounded on reason, or rather, on philosophy». If we compare this passage with the others on the French Revolution, we find that the problem for Leopardi is always the same: the Revolution expected too much from reason. It wanted reason to build up a new world, where reason instead could only destroy the old one.

Even if philosophy paved the way for the French Revolution, it did not bring it about, because philosophy, especially modern philosophy, is incapable by itself of achieving anything. And even if philosophy itself had the power to start a revolution, it could not sustain it. It is really moving to see how the French republican legislators thought that they could keep up the revolution, decide its length, and influence its progress, nature, and scope by reducing everything to pure reason, and expected for the first time *ab orbe condito* [since the earth was formed] to geometricize every aspect of life.² Something not only deplorable had it succeeded, and therefore foolish to desire, but something that could not succeed even in this mathematical age because it is directly contrary to the nature of man and the world.²⁵¹

Not only reason cannot make a revolution or maintain freedom. On the contrary, reason for Leopardi is the essential instrument of despotism, or rather, it is intrinsically despotic herself. Dissipating every illusion regarding the existence and the importance of common good, reason spreads individualism, which for Leopardi is the twin of despotism:

Pure reason dispels illusion and fosters egoism. Egoism, shorn of illusions, extinguishes the nation's spirit, virtue, etc., and divides nations by head count, that is, into as many parts as there are individuals. *Divide et impera* [divide and rule]. Such division of the multitude, especially of this kind and resulting from this cause, is more the twin than the mother of servitude.²⁵²

²⁵¹ Zib. 160: «160 La rivoluzione Francese posto che fosse preparata dalla filosofia, non fu eseguita da lei, perchè la filosofia specialmente moderna, non è capace per se medesima di operar nulla. E quando anche la filosofia fosse buona ad eseguire essa stessa una rivoluzione, non potrebbe mantenerla. È veramente compassionevole il vedere come quei legislatori francesi repubblicani, credevano di conservare, e assicurar la durata, e seguir l'andamento la natura e lo scopo della rivoluzione, col ridur tutto alla pura ragione, e pretendere per la prima volta *ab orbe condito* di geometrizzare tutta la vita. Cosa non solamente lagrimevole in tutti i casi se riuscisse, e perciò stolta a desiderare, ma impossibile a riuscire anche in questi tempi matematici, perchè dirittamente contraria alla natura dell'uomo e del mondo.»

²⁵² Zib. 161: «La pura ragione dissipa le illusioni e conduce per mano l'egoismo. L'egoismo spoglio d'illusioni, estingue lo spirito nazionale, la virtù ec. e divide le nazioni per teste, vale a dire in tante parti quanti sono gl'individui. *Divide et impera*. Questa divisione della moltitudine, massimamente di questa natura, e prodotta da questa cagione, è piuttosto gemella che madre della servitù.»

The reason and the philosophy of which Leopardi speaks here are those of the Enlightenment. However, Leopardi's negative judgment on French Revolution does not involve a negative evaluation on the philosophy of the Enlightenment as such. On the contrary, beyond any doubt, Leopardi holds in high esteem the inheritance of the Enlightenment. What is at the stake in this passage indeed, is not a comparison between the philosophy of the Renaissance and that of the Enlightenment, but rather a negative evaluation of the role philosophy played in the French Revolution. The new philosophy was born with Galileo at the end of the Renaissance, and it was an effect, not the cause, of the great historical transformation happened between the XIII and the XVII century. Before expressing its own philosophy, the Renaissance had already vivified and renewed all the different aspects of civilization. This happened because it was grounded on poetry and on the study of the Ancients. Beginning from the end, that is to say from philosophy, the French Revolution exposed the European civilization to the risk of aridity. The «half-philosophy» that the Revolution spread all around Europe, runs indeed the risk of turning into «perfect philosophy» very soon, thus destroying the temporary enhancement of life brought by the Revolution, burying Europe under a new age of barbarism. Here Leopardi seems to turn upside down the historiographical paradigm known as «Renaissance-dawn, Enlightenment-noon»,²⁵³ that is to say the idea, widespread since the Enlightenment historiography, that the Renaissance had foreseen what the Enlightenment later fulfilled. In a certain sense, this is the historical interpretation that the Enlightenment gave of itself, its own autobiography. Notwithstanding his high appreciation for the Enlightenment, Leopardi refuses this historiographical construction. This passage of the *Zibaldone* seems indeed to imply that the

²⁵³ M. Ciliberto, 'Aurora' rinascimentale, 'sole' illuministico', in *Il Contributo italiano alla storia del Pensiero – Filosofia* (2012)

foundation of the Renaissance was wider and more resistant compared to that of the Revolution. Beginning from philosophy, the Revolution started wherefrom the Renaissance ended. From this point of view, the Enlightenment appears as the peak of an iceberg which rests on the solid foundation laid down by the Renaissance. Renaissance is the fulfillment, the Enlightenment risks to become an epilogue. The «Renaissance dawn, Enlightenment noon» paradigm is turned into a “Renaissance dawn, Enlightenment dusk” paradigm.

Notwithstanding this limitation, Leopardi is still interested in grasping certain elements of «Renaissance» in his own age, that he traces back to the French Revolution. Among them Leopardi notices the disappearance of a number of «barbarous, ridiculous and monstrous things that were fashionable “such as farthingales, men’s and women’s hairstyles, etc. etc., that held sway, at any rate in Italy, up until the final years of the last century and were destroyed at a stroke by the revolution».²⁵⁴ Leopardi comes back to this subject a few pages later in the *Zibaldone*, adding new elements to the symptoms of Renaissance he sees in his age, and

²⁵⁴ Zib. 1078

deepening his analysis of the elements of Renaissance he grasps in his time.²⁵⁵ The three elements he stresses in this passage show the connection he reads between politics, aesthetic and morality. The political element is «the mitigation of despotism» that is to say the fact that, even besides the concrete defeat of the French Revolution, a sentiment of intolerance towards despotism has become widespread across Europe. The political ideals of the Enlightenment, Leopardi seems to suggest, have penetrated the absolutist state itself, bringing to the new figure of the enlightened monarch. This political transformation is accompanied on the aesthetic level by the introduction of sentimental poetry. This is a necessary corrective to the fact that poetry of imagination tends to disappear under the sovereignty of reason. It runs the risk of becoming a mere rhetorical exercise. Its dominion in the form of courtly poetry was indeed a characteristic of

²⁵⁵ Zib.1084: «Relate to this rebirth of civilization (which is anyway ephemeral and weak and false) the alleviation of despotism and the more wide-spread intolerance displayed toward it, the perfection dating from the revolution of what is termed the sentimental genre, the rebirth of certain chivalric ideas which, as such, were subjected to utter ridicule in the 18th century, and in part of the 17th century (as in the novels of Marivaux, etc.), in respect of which Mariana, as is well known, blames Don Quixote (which is as much as to say the ridicule heaped upon strong and intense and sweet illusions) for the undermining of valor (and hence of national life and the appalling advances of despotism) among the Spanish. I said Mariana, and I think that's who it is. I find the same thought, however, in Father D'Orléans, *Rivoluzioni di Spagna*, bk. 9. But I think Mariana is quoted in this regard by the Marquise de Lambert, *Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes*.² And likewise so many other opinions and social prejudices, which are nonetheless noble, "charming, and appropriate, etc., which we wouldn't dare ridicule now, as was the fashion in those times; rather more respect for the religion of our forebears, etc. etc. All things that demonstrate a degree of rapprochement of the world with nature and with natural opinions and feelings, and which show that we have stepped back a little, though listlessly, and for reasons that are feeble, not impelled by life but deathly, that is, the progress of reason, philosophy, and knowledge.» The original reads: «Riferite a questo (per altro effimero e debole e falso) risorgimento della civiltà, la mitigazione del dispotismo, e la intolleranza del medesimo più propagata: il perfezionamento di quello che si chiama sentimentale, perfezionamento che data dalla rivoluzione: il risorgimento di certe idee cavalleresche, che come tali si mettevano in pieno ridicolo nel 700, e in parte del 600 (come nei romanzi di Marivaux ec.); al qual proposito è noto che il Mariana attribuisce al Don Chisciotte (che è quanto dire al ridicolo sparso sulle forti e vivaci e dolci illusioni) l'indebolimento del valore (e quindi della vita nazionale, e gli orribili progressi del dispotismo) fra gli spagnuoli. Ho detto il Mariana, e così mi pare. Trovo però lo stesso pensiero nel P. d'Orléans *Rivoluz. di Spagna* lib.9. Ma il Mariana mi par citato a questo proposito dalla march. Lambert, *Réflex. nouvelles sur les femmes*. e così di tante altre opinioni e pregiudizi sociali, ma nobili, dolci e felici ec. che ora non si ardisce di porre in ridicolo, com'era moda in quei tempi: un certo maggiore rispetto alla religione de' nostri avi ec. ec. Cose tutte che dimostrano un certo ravvicinamento del mondo alla natura, ed alle opinioni e sentimenti naturali, ed alcuni passi fatti indietro, sebbene languidamente, e per miseri e non vitali, anzi mortiferi principii, cioè il progresso della ragione, della filosofia, de' lumi.»

the despotic XVII century. The turn from poetry of imagination towards sentimental poetry is for Leopardi a sign of awareness of the ongoing transformation, as it has been understood already at the crepuscule of the ancient world by Virgil, or at the dawn of the Renaissance by Dante and Petrarch. The third element is the return of chivalrous sentiments that were banned in the two preceding centuries. Leopardi seems to connect their disappearance in Spain with the development of despotism and the correspondent decline started in the XVII century. These three elements of renaissance that Leopardi recalls appear randomly chosen, belonging to three disjointed spheres of activity, albeit they have a common feature in their reference to despotism. There is nonetheless a deeper unifying thread: all three of them point towards a turn from universality to individuality, from the abstractness of reason towards the concreteness of the emotional tonalities. It is important to observe that when Leopardi interprets these tendencies as elements of renaissance, he is not using the word renaissance as a generic term to express an ascending stage of civilization: what he implies in the term renaissance, even taken in the wider sense of a transhistorical concept, is always a return to Antiquity. The positive element of the renaissance, taken both in the narrow and wider sense, does not consist in some element of novelty, except if we consider the principle of the return of Antiquity as a novelty. The chances of renaissance he reads in his own age are therefore not at all chances of modernity. On the opposite, they are chances of Antiquity. This sharp inversion of the chronological axis reflects on Leopardi's understanding of the political discourse. This clearly appears in a passage from the *Zibaldone* where Leopardi disentangles liberalism from the rhetoric of the revolution, offering instead a renaissance-reading. Liberty is not an invention of the moderns, but on the contrary despotism is a prominent trait of modernity:

They say that liberal maxims are modern and are shocked and laugh at the world because only now does it think it has reached the truth. But they are as old as Adam and what is more always held sway, more or less, and with different aspects, up until around a century and a half ago. That was the sole true era when despotism was perfected, consisting in large part in a certain moderation that made it universal, total and enduring. The supposed antiquity of despotic maxims, that is, of their true and universal power among the peoples (speaking in general and not individually) does not therefore go back further than the mid-seventeenth century. And that is how the time which ran from that era up until the revolution really was the most barbarous period of civilized Europe from when civilization was restored onward. A barbarism that civilized times inevitably fall into, that takes on various different aspects, depending on the nature of the civilization from which it derives and which it replaces, and on the nature of nations and the times. E.g., the barbarism of Rome, which, having replaced its freedom and civilization, was fiercer and more intense, while that of the Persians was similar to our own in its softness, inaction, and torpor.

Coming from the age of the perfection of despotism, the weak rebirth coming after the revolution is considered by Leopardi as an attempt to go back to antiquity:

And that is how the present time may be regarded as an era featuring a new (though weak) rebirth (*risorgimento*) of civilization. And thus liberal maxims may be described as having risen again (at any rate so far as their universality and power are concerned), but not as having been invented or being modern. On the contrary, they are essentially and characteristically ancient, and this is perhaps the only respect in which the present age resembles antiquity.²⁵⁶

In these few lines Leopardi sketches a definite plan to get rid of the political rhetoric surrounding him. On the one side the liberals he met at the Gabinetto Vieusseux, with their faith in progress and modernity, implicitly relying on a linear understanding of history. On the opposite side, the traditionalists, whose point of view Leopardi knew well, since his father Monaldo was probably

²⁵⁶ Zib. 1100-1: «Chiamano moderne le massime liberali, e si scandalezzano, e ridono che il mondo creda di essere oggi solo arrivato al vero. Ma elle sono antiche quanto Adamo, e di più hanno sempre durato e dominato, più o meno, e sotto differenti aspetti sino a circa un secolo e mezzo fa, epoca vera e sola della perfezione del dispotismo, consistente in gran parte in una certa moderazione che lo rende universale, intero, e durevole. Dunque tutta l'antichità delle massime dispotiche, cioè del loro vero ed universale dominio nei popoli (generalmente e non individualmente parlando), non rimonta più in là della metà del seicento. Ed ecco come quel tempo che corse da quest'epoca sino alla rivoluzione, fu veramente il tempo più barbaro dell'Europa civile, dalla restaurazione della civiltà in poi. Barbarie dove inevitabilmente vanno a cadere i tempi civili: barbarie che prende diversi aspetti, secondo la natura di quella civiltà da cui deriva, e a cui sottentra, e secondo la natura de' tempi e delle nazioni. Per esempio la barbarie di Roma sottentrata alla sua civiltà e libertà, fu più feroce e più viva: quella dei Persiani fu simile nella mollezza e nella inazione e torpore, alla nostra. Ed ecco come il tempo presente si può considerare come epoca di un nuovo (benchè debole) risorgimento della civiltà. E così le massime liberali si potranno chiamare risorte (almeno la loro universalità e dominio); ma non mica inventate nè moderne. Anzi elle sono essenzialmente e caratteristicamente antiche, ed è forse l'unica parte in cui l'età presente somiglia all'antichità. »

the most famous Catholic reactionary intellectual in Italy at the time. To the firsts, Leopardi opposes that liberalism is a return to the past, a return to the Renaissance, which is a return of the Antiquity. Leopardi goes so far with his virtuoso interpretation of the political terminology of his time to substitute the construct «renaissance of civilization» (risorgimento della civiltà) with the hapax legomenon «restoration of civilization» (restaurazione della civiltà)²⁵⁷. The liberal ideals are not a revolution but a restoration, a return to the past, because the ideal of liberty comes from the greco-roman civilization. To the seconds, consistently, Leopardi observes that their traditionalism follows a very recent tradition. Despotism, far from being Ancient, is on the contrary the real hiatus, or to better say, following Leopardi's reasoning, the true revolution, the true expression of modernity.

Leopardi, however, is looking far beyond the battle of political ideologies, as witnessed by the apparently incidental observation that liberal ideals are «the only part for which the current civilization resembles that of the ancients». Reason, philosophy, ideas seem to be the only thing in which modernity has been able to get close to Antiquity. But they are only a small part of reality. Leopardi looks favorably at the attempts to widen the scope of the return of Antiquity, especially for what concerns the practices of the body:

There is still much to be recovered from ancient civilization, by which I mean the Greeks and the Romans. Consider the many ancient institutions and customs which have very recently been revived: schools and the use of gymnastics, bathing and similar practices. In the physical education of youths and children, in the bodily regimen of adults and people of every age, in every aspect of practical hygiene, in all the physical aspects of civilization—see p. 4291—the ancients are still much superior, an aspect, unless I am mistaken, which is neither minor nor insignificant. The tendency over these recent years, more marked than ever before, toward social

²⁵⁷ Although this is the only occurrence of this expression in Leopardi's writings, the association of the term «restoration» with the age we call Renaissance was not uncommon at that time in Italy. See for instance a book by Appiano Buonafede, published under the pen name of Agatopisto Cronziano in 1785 with the title *Della restaurazione di ogni filosofia nei secoli XVI, XVII e XVIII*.

improvement, has brought about, and continues to do so, the renewal of many ancient practices, both physical, and political and moral, which had been abandoned and forgotten during barbarous times, from which we have not yet entirely emerged. The current progress of civilization is still a revival; it still consists, for the most part, in recovering what has been lost.²⁵⁸

The «corporeal of civilization», which is the concrete life of civilization, has to be transformed according to the lesson of the Ancients. Again, in this passage Leopardi repeats the same move against the rhetoric of modernity. Progress is a return to Antiquity: «the current progress of civilization, is still a renaissance; it consists in recuperating things that were lost». The general idea underlying the argument is that of the cycle of civilization, as it had been thought in the ancient historical thought and later expanded in the meditation of Machiavelli and above all Vico. It was Vico indeed who had thought of the declining stage of civilization as characterized by an excess of reason, what he calls the «barbarism of reason». Similarly, civilization for Leopardi develops through a circle of stages that are characterized by different proportions of reason and imagination. The stage of the absolute sovereignty of reason coincides with what Leopardi calls barbarism. The problem for Leopardi, is that of employing reason in order to design a point of balance in the cycle of civilization. This brings to Leopardi's much commented fragment where he introduces the term *ultraphilosophy*:

The civilization of nations consists in tempering nature with reason, where nature has the greater part. Consider all the nations of the ancient world, the Persians at the time of Cyrus, the Greeks,

²⁵⁸ Zib. 4289: «Ci resta ancora molto a ricuperare della civiltà antica, dico di quella de' greci e de' romani. Vedesi appunto da quel tanto d'instituzioni e di usi antichi che recentissimamente si son rinnovati: le scuole e l'uso della ginnastica, l'uso dei bagni e simili. Nella educazione fisica della gioventù e puerizia, nella dieta corporale della virilità e d'ogni età dell'uomo, in ogni parte dell'igiene pratica, in tutto il fisico della civiltà, v. p.4291. gli antichi ci sono ancora d'assai superiori: parte, se io non m'inganno, non piccola e non di poco momento. La tendenza di questi ultimi anni, più decisa che mai, al miglioramento sociale, ha cagionato e cagiona il rinnovamento di moltissime cose antiche, sì fisiche, sì politiche e morali, abbandonate e dimenticate per la barbarie, da cui non siamo ancora del tutto risorti. Il presente progresso della civiltà, è ancora un risorgimento; consiste ancora, in gran parte, in ricuperare il perduto. (18. Sett. 1827.)»

the Romans. The Romans were never such philosophers as they were when they bowed to barbarism, that is in the time of tyranny. And likewise, in the preceding years, the Romans had made great progress in philosophy and in general knowledge, which was something new for them. We can draw another conclusion from this, which is that the safeguards of a nation's freedom are neither philosophy nor reason, which are now expected to regenerate public affairs, but virtue, illusions, and enthusiasm, in other words nature, from which we are very far removed. A nation of philosophers would be the most small-minded and cowardly in the world. Thus, our regeneration will depend on what might be called an ultraphilosophy,¹ which, through a complete and intimate knowledge of things, brings us close again to nature. And this should be the outcome of the extraordinary enlightenment of this century.²⁵⁹

The context of this chapter can probably help to grasp the political meaning of these lines.

Ultraphilosophy is essentially the possibility of the return of non unveiled nature in the age of the absolute sovereignty of reason. It is the project of the return of Antiquity, the design of the Renaissance as a point of balance in the cycle of civilization. As such, it is the project of accomplishing the chances of renaissance (*risorgimento*) that Leopardi reads in his own age. Leopardi's meditation on the limits of French Revolution leads him to figure out a way to overcome these limits. In order to defend civilization, philosophy is not enough, because it would defend only one side of the balance. The chances of renaissance can be fulfilled only if it is possible to involve a wider field than that of ideas, crossing the bridge between the names and the things. But this is a project, something that has to be thought and designed. How can thinking go beyond philosophy? How can the design go beyond the design? How can the absolute sovereignty of reason be employed for the return of non unveiled nature? Under this respect, the

²⁵⁹ Zib. 114-5: «La civiltà delle nazioni consiste in un temperamento della natura colla ragione, dove quella cioè la natura abbia la maggior parte. Consideriamo tutte le nazioni antiche, la persiana a tempo di Ciro, la greca, la romana. I romani non furono mai così filosofi come quando inclinarono alla barbarie, cioè a tempo della tirannia. E parimente negli anni che la precedettero, i romani aveano fatti infiniti progressi nella filosofia e nella cognizione delle cose, ch'era nuova per loro. Dal che si deduce un altro corollario, che la salvaguardia della libertà delle nazioni non è la filosofia nè la ragione, come ora si pretende che queste debbano rigenerare le cose pubbliche, ma le virtù, le illusioni, l'entusiasmo, in somma la natura, dalla quale siamo lontanissimi. E un popolo di filosofi sarebbe il più piccolo e codardo del mondo. Perciò la nostra rigenerazione dipende da una, per così dire, ultrafilosofia, che conoscendo l'intiero e l'intimo delle cose, ci ravvicini alla natura. E questo dovrebbe essere il frutto dei lumi straordinari di questo secolo.»

interpretation of the Renaissance cannot be taken as just one of the many threads that are twisted in the labyrinth of Leopardi's writings. The Renaissance instead reveals itself as crucially connected with the entirety of Leopardi's philosophical meditation, wherein ultraphilosophy appears at the horizon.

Chapter V

From “philosopher of society” to “metaphysician”

Introduction

In the two preceding chapters, Leopardi’s meditation on the Renaissance has been accessed from two different points of view. First, in Chapter III, through the close reading of two stanzas of *Ad Angelo Mai*, a poem Leopardi composed in 1820. The two emblems of Columbus and Ariosto have offered a highly symbolical and condensed view of Leopardi’s meditation on the Renaissance. Then, in Chapter IV, Leopardi’s interpretation of the Renaissance has been outlined through the collection of several passages from the *Zibaldone* that shed light on its geographical, chronological and linguistic dimension. Comparing the “emblematic” representation of the Renaissance sketched in chapter III with the “cartographic” representation of the Renaissance drafted in chapter IV, a certain divergence comes to the attention. The struggle for sovereignty that counterposes imagination and reason in the emblematic representation of *Ad Angelo Mai* somehow fades in the larger view of the Renaissance map extrapolated from the *Zibaldone*. The dialectic between reason and imagination seems to loosen, while the idea of a continuity between the two emerges. This clearly appears in the “arc of the Renaissance”, the idea that the Renaissance, sprung from Dante’s poetry, reached its conclusion with the foundation of the new science in Galilei. At the same time, the importance Leopardi grants to the figures of Dante and Plethon, seen as philosophers that have designed a way out of the crisis of their own times, implies a new understanding of the relationship between poetry and reason. The most important

passage on *ultraphilosophy* itself suggests the idea of governing the power struggle between imagination and reason, and the project of finding a point of balance in their cycle. The overall idea that emerges is that development and diffusion of reason is not simply an ineluctable fate, as it appeared in *Ad Angelo Mai*, but rather a process which can be governed by humanity, in order to avoid its most destructive aspects.

These differences between the emblematic and the cartographic representation make clear that Leopardi's meditation on the Renaissance is an organic element in the transformation of his thought. At the "iconographic" level — the one concerned with the figural use of the Renaissance which was conventional at the time, following Panofsky's terminology (cf. Introduction) — the image of the Renaissance which Leopardi develops both influences and is influenced by the development of his later philosophical position. The passages of the *Zibaldone* that have been commented on in the third chapter range from 1820 to 1827. These are crucial years for the development of Leopardi's thought. In this span of time, the *Theory of Pleasure* that Leopardi had elaborated in the years 1819-1820 is progressively integrated into a wider landscape of thoughts, where the sovereignty-struggle between imagination and reason is considered from a higher point of view.²⁶⁰ Like the iconographical level of Leopardi's symbolism of the Renaissance, also the iconological one — the one concerned with a symbolic use of the Renaissance which is not conventional, but specific to his writings — both belongs to and

²⁶⁰ The scholastic periodization of Leopardi's thought in the three stages of historical pessimism, cosmic pessimism and heroic pessimism certainly grasps a certain dynamic of the development of Leopardi's thought. At the same time, it tends to hide the elements of continuity in this development, and thus its inner coherence. For this reason, the following exposition will attempt to follow Leopardi's thought without mentioning it.

contributes to constitute this higher point of view. Before accessing this last symbolic layer, the transition to Leopardi's new philosophical standpoint will be briefly sketched in this chapter.

1. The reformulation of the dialectic reason-imagination

The concept of habituation (*assuefazione*) plays a crucial role in the development of Leopardi's philosophical meditation. Leopardi's elaboration on this aspect originates from the integration of a new dimension, besides those of imagination and reason, in the *Theory of Pleasure* — that of memory. In several passages of the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi elaborates a conception of memory as habituation that is perfectly indifferent to the distinction between body and mind:

Memory is the general preserver of habits. Or rather (since we see that, when what is called memory is lost, the habits persist) since memory, as a faculty, is a pure habit, so every other habit is a memory. All the senses, all the organs, all the moral or physical parts of man, which can "become habituated and capable, and can acquire any faculty, are provided with memory. Memory is first a disposition, then a faculty of habituation which the human intellect possesses. The capacity to become habituated and the habituations of the other parts of man are dispositions and faculties of remembering, of retaining, which those parts have. Memory is a habit, habits are likewise memories, assigned by nature to each part of the living thing that is able to become habituated as dispositions, and acquired as faculties and habits.²⁶¹

Memory is here defined as a «pure habit» in the sense that it is the habit of habituation. While all the other habits have a precise content, a skill to do something which has been acquired through repeated experiences, memory is here considered as the pure habit of having habits. In this sense, every habit is a memory. For this very reason, Leopardi tends to consider memory as something which is not separated from the intellect, but as an aspect of the intellect itself:

²⁶¹ Zib. 2047-8: «La memoria è la generale conservatrice delle abitudini. O piuttosto (giacchè vediamo che, perduto quello che si chiama memoria, pur si conservano le abitudini) siccome la memoria, in quanto facoltà, è una pura abitudine, così ciascun'altra abitudine è una memoria. Di memoria son provveduti tutti i sensi, tutti gli organi, tutte le parti fisiche o morali dell'uomo, che son capaci di avvezzarsi, e di abilitarsi, e di acquistare qualunque facoltà. La memoria è da principio una disposizione, poi una facoltà di assuefarsi che ha l'intelletto umano; l'assuefabilità, e le assuefazioni delle altre parti dell'uomo, sono disposizioni e facoltà di ricordarsi, di ritenere, che hanno esse parti. La memoria è un abito, gli abiti altrettante memorie, attribuite dalla natura a ciascuna parte assuefabile del vivente, in quanto disposizioni, ed acquistate in quanto facoltà ed assuefazioni.»

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 it differs from the faculty of conceiving or of understanding, etc. And so necessary is it to the intellect that, without it, it is not capable of any action (the action of the intellect differs from mere conception, etc.), because every action of the intellect is composite (that is, composed of premises and consequence), nor can the consequence be derived without the memory of the premises.²⁶²

In other passages, a certain terminological oscillation leads Leopardi to distinguish between a general faculty of habituation on the one hand, and memory strictly considered on the other. The latter is the same faculty of habituation, only considered as far as the intellect is concerned.²⁶³ What is important, however, is that beyond this terminological oscillation Leopardi is considering the different activities of mind — which are all associated with memory — as the expression of habituation. For this reason he refuses the idea that memory is an innate faculty of mind:

In origin our minds simply have more or less delicacy and susceptibility in their organs, that is to say, a faculty for being affected in different ways, a capacity and adaptability, either to all or to some definite kind of apprehension, habituation, perception, attention. This is not strictly speaking a faculty, but mere disposition. In our mind there do not originally exist any faculties, not even that of remembering. Rather, the mind is so disposed that it acquires them, some sooner, others later, by means of exercise. And in some it acquires (others say develops) more of them, in others less, in some better, in others imperfectly, in some more easily, in others less easily, in some in a particular way, in others modified, according to circumstances, which diversify almost the kinds of one and the same faculty.²⁶⁴

²⁶² Zib. 1453-4: «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, diversa dalla facoltà di concepire o d'intendere. ec. Ed è tanto necessaria all'intelletto, ch'egli senza di essa, non è capace di verun'azione, (l'azione dell'intelletto è diversa dalla semplice concezione ec.) perchè ogni azione dell'intelletto è composta, (cioè di premesse e conseguenza) nè può tirarsi la conseguenza senza la memoria delle premesse.»

²⁶³Zib. 1509: «La memoria si può generalmente considerare come la facoltà di assuefazione che ha l'intelletto. La qual facoltà è il tutto nell'uomo.»

²⁶⁴ Zib. 1661-2: «La nostra mente in origine non ha altro che maggiore o minor delicatezza e suscettibilità di organi, cioè facilità di essere in diversi modi affetta, capacità, e adattabilità, o a tutti o a qualche determinato genere di apprensioni, di assuefazioni, concezioni, attenzioni. Questa non è propriamente facoltà, ma semplice disposizione. Nella mente nostra non esiste originaria- mente nessuna facoltà, neppur quella di ricordarsi. Bensì ell'è disposta in maniera che le acquista, alcune più presto, alcune più tardi, mediante l'esercizio; ed in alcuni ne acquista (gli altri dicono sviluppa) più, in altri meno, in alcuni meglio, in altri imperfettamente, in alcuni più, in altri meno facilmente, in alcuni così, in altri così modificate, secondo le circostanze, che diversificano quasi i generi di una stessa facoltà.»

From this point of view, interestingly, Leopardi can find a truth in the platonic doctrine according to which knowledge is essentially memory:

“Scire nostrum est reminisci” [For us to know is to remember], the Platonists say. An error in their reasoning, that is, the idea that the soul does no more than recall what it knew before uniting itself with the body. But it can apply very well to my system, and Locke’s. For, because man (and the animals) knows nothing by nature, etc., he knows only what he remembers, that is, what he has learned through the experience of the senses. It may be said that memory is the sole source of knowledge, that it is connected to, and all but constitutes everything we know and all our mental and material abilities, and that without memory man would know nothing, and would not know how to do anything.²⁶⁵

As an intellectual habituation, memory comes to coincide with attention, which is both the ability of deliberately forming new habits and an involuntary disposition to habituation. With regard to these two different kinds of attention, Leopardi distinguishes between a “spiritual” attention and a “material” one. “Spiritual attention” is thought by Leopardi to be an effect of assuefaction, and therefore a consequence of “material attention” itself:

There is no memory without attention. (...) But there are two kinds of attention. One voluntary, and one involuntary; or rather, one spiritual, the other material. You only become capable of the first through the habituation to (and hence the faculty of) paying attention. And consequently, thoughtful men and generally great or applied minds, ordinarily have good memories, and are very distinct from the general run of men by their faculty for remembering even minutiae, because they are in the habit of paying attention. The second kind consists of instances of attention that derive from the strength and intensity of sensations whose impression forces the soul to pay a kind of attention which is in some way material. ²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Zib. 1675-6.

²⁶⁶ Zib. 1733-4: «Non v'è memoria senz'attenzione. (...) Ma vi sono due specie di attenzioni. Una volontaria, ed una involontaria; o piuttosto una spirituale, un'altra materiale. Della prima non si diventa capaci se non coll'assuefazione (e quindi facoltà) di attendere. E perciò gli uomini riflessivi e generalmente gl'ingegni o grandi, o applicati, hanno ordinariamente buona memoria, e si distinguono assai dal comune degli uomini nella facoltà di ricordarsi anche delle minuzie, perchè sono assuefatti ad attendere. Della seconda specie sono quelle attenzioni che derivano da forza e vivacità delle sensazioni, le quali col- la loro impressione costringono l'anima ad un'attenzione in certo modo materiale.»

This understanding of the material dimension of memory and attention leads Leopardi to criticize the idea of the existence of different faculties of mind, as is clear from the conclusion of the preceding passage:

And these observations serve to confirm just how simple the intellectual fabric of man is in nature. That is, it is composed of very few elements which, variously modified and combined, produce infinite, extremely varied effects. When man looks at these effects superficially, he multiplies the principles, the causes, the forces, the faculties, which are really very few and very simple. And in fact, we have seen that understanding the faculty of memory separately, as is usually the case, and making it out to be one of the three principal powers of the mind, is a dream, and that it is simply a modification or an effect of the intellect and the imagination. "The kind of attention that I have called material may be applied to all other human habituations that are independent of or only dependent to a limited extent on the mind, and on memory itself. For not just the habituation that we call memory, but all habituations need attention in order to be acquired. Attention, however, may be voluntary or involuntary, noticed or not, in short, spiritual or material, like the kind caused (as I have said) by powerful sensations."²⁶⁷

However, a vestige of the differentiation between different faculties of mind is still traceable in this passage, where Leopardi distinguishes between reason (intellect) and imagination. This remnant of the older conception is finally erased in another passage of the *Zibaldone*, where Leopardi takes into account a fundamental similarity between reason and imagination:

The faculty for invention is one of the ordinary, and principal, and characteristic qualities and parts of the imagination. Now, this faculty is precisely that which makes great philosophers and great discoverers of great truths. And one could say that from the same source, the same quality of spirit, differently applied and differently modified and determined by different circumstances and habits, came the poems of Homer and Dante and Newton's Mathematical principles of natural philosophy.¹ The system and order of the human machine is by nature very simple, and its springs and devices, and the principles that compose it, are few, but, reasoning from the effects, which are infinite and infinitely variable according to circumstances, habits, and accidents, we multiply the elements, the parts, the powers of our system, and divide, and distinguish, and

²⁶⁷ Zib. 1736-7: «E da queste osservazioni si conferma quanto la fabbrica intellettuale dell'uomo sia semplice in natura, cioè composta di pochissimi elementi, che diversamente modificati e combinati, producono infiniti e svariati effetti. Ai quali l'uomo superficialmente badando, moltiplica i principii, le cagioni, le forze, le facoltà, che realmente sono pochissime e semplicissime. E infatti abbiamo veduto che la facoltà della memoria distintamente considerata, come si suole, facendone una delle tre principali potenze dell'anima, è un sogno, e ch'ella non è altro che una modificazione o un effetto dell'intelletto e della immaginazione. L'attenzione che ho chiamata materiale, si può applicare a tutte le altre assuefazioni umane indipendenti o poco dipendenti dallo spirito, e dalla stessa memoria. Giacché non la sola assuefazione che chiamiamo memoria, ma tutte hanno bisogno dell'attenzione per esser contratte; bensì questa può essere, volontaria o involontaria, avvertita o no, spirituale insomma o materiale, come quella che cagionano (secondo che ho detto) le forti sensazioni.»

subdivide faculties and principles that are really one and indivisible, although they produce and can always produce not only new, not only different, but directly opposite effects. Consequently, the imagination is the source of reason, as it is of feeling, of the passions, of poetry. And that faculty which we suppose to be a principle, a distinct and fixed quality of the is called intellect, etc. Imagination and intellect are one. The intellect acquires what is called imagination through habits and circumstances, and the analogous natural dispositions. In the same way, it acquires what is called reflection, etc. etc. ²⁶⁸

In this passage, what had once been the overall frame of Leopardi's meditation is finally absorbed into a new point of view. The opposition between imagination and reason, which stood as an *a priori* in the *Theory of Pleasure*, is now historicized: reason has developed from imagination, following a path of successive assuefactions. Imagination is "the source of reason." This discovery produces an overall reorientation of Leopardi's thought. The results of his previous meditation are not abandoned, but rather organically incorporated in this new perspective. This new point of view, however, brings with it a deep change both in the content and the form of Leopardi's thought. The two main consequences of this transformation are on the one hand a reconsideration of the relationship between poetry and philosophy, and on the other a new point of view on the relationship between humanity and nature. These two aspects of the transformation of Leopardi's thought are essential for understanding the contradictory aspects

²⁶⁸ Zib., 2132-4: «La facoltà inventiva è una delle ordinarie, e principali, e caratteristiche qualità e parti dell'immaginazione. Or questa facoltà appunto è quella che fa i grandi filosofi, e i grandi scopritori delle grandi verità. E si può dire che da una stessa sorgente, da una stessa qualità dell'animo, diversamente applicata, e diversamente modificata e determinata da diverse circostanze e abitudini, vennero i poemi di Omero e di Dante, e i Principii matematici della filosofia naturale di Newton. Semplicissimo è il sistema e l'ordine della macchina umana in natura, pochissime le molle, e gli ordigni di essa, e i principii che la compongono, ma noi discorrendo dagli effetti che sono infiniti e infinitamente variabili secondo le circostanze, le assuefazioni e gli accidenti, moltiplichiamo gli elementi, le parti, le forze del nostro sistema, e dividiamo, e distinguiamo, e suddividiamo delle facoltà, dei principii, che sono realmente unici e indivisibili, benché producano e possano sempre produrre non solo nuovi, non solo diversi, ma dirittamente contrarii effetti. L'immaginazione per tanto è la sorgente della ragione, come del sentimento, delle passioni, della poesia; ed essa facoltà che noi supponiamo essere un principio, una qualità distinta e determinata dell'animo umano, o non esiste, o no è che una cosa stessa, una stessa disposizione con cento altre che noi ne distinguiamo assolutamente, e con quella stessa che si chiama riflessione o facoltà di riflettere, con quella che si chiama intelletto ec. L'intelletto acquista ciò che si chiama immaginazione, mediante gli abiti e le circostanze, e le disposizioni naturali analoghe; acquista nello stesso modo ciò che si chiama riflessione ec. ec.» See also Zib., 1650, 2039-40 and 3269-71.

that have emerged from the comparison between the “emblematic” and the “cartographic” interpretations of the Renaissance, as argued in the two preceding chapters. At the same time they help us to understand the symbolic use Leopardi makes of the Renaissance both in his philosophical meditation and his poetry, granting access to the new image of Columbus that Leopardi introduces in his *Operette Morali*.

2. Encyclopedia

The discovery of the continuity between imagination and reason leads Leopardi to reconsider the relationship between poetry and philosophy. Within the frame of the *Theory of Pleasure*, philosophy, and especially modern philosophy, was considered solely as a mortal threat for poetry. Imagination’s encirclement by reason was considered as the origin of poetry’s extraneousness to modernity. The idea that reason and imagination share a common root leads Leopardi to take into account the crucial importance of an association between philosophy and poetry, which is now considered possible:

Despite what I have said about the incompatibility of present-day philosophy with poetry, truly remarkable and lofty minds that scoff at precepts and warnings and scarcely care about the impossible, and consult only themselves, can overcome any obstacle and be supreme modern philosophers able to write perfect poetry.²⁶⁹

In this new perspective, the enmity between reason and imagination remains, and the possibility of transcending this obstacle is defined as “most rare and singular” and even “almost

²⁶⁹ Zib. 1383: «Malgrado quanto ho detto dell’insociabilità dell’odierna filosofia colla poesia, gli spiriti veramente straordinari e sommi, i quali si ridono dei precetti, e delle osservazioni, e quasi dell’impossibile, e non consultano che loro stessi, potranno vincere qualunque ostacolo, ed essere sommi filosofi moderni poetando perfettamente.»

impossible.” Yet, the association between philosophy and poetry is thought to be a condition for accessing both *true* poetry and *true* philosophy:

It is a fact as marvelous as it is true, that poetry, which by its nature and property seeks out what is beautiful, and philosophy, which fundamentally searches for the truth, that is, for what is furthest removed from beauty, should be the faculties that are most similar to each other, so that the true poet is supremely disposed to be a great philosopher, and the true philosopher to be a great poet, indeed, neither one nor the other can be perfect or great among their own kind if they do not also participate, at least to some degree, in the other, in terms of the basic character of the intellect, the natural disposition, the force of imagination. I have spoken of this elsewhere.²⁷⁰

Philosophy needs poetry because illusions are a part of reality itself, and the philosopher would know very little of nature if he ignored what Leopardi calls “the system of beauty”²⁷¹. Poetry, on the other hand, needs philosophy because, in order to move and to arise passion, it has to operate through persuasion, without ever trespassing the border of falsity²⁷². For Leopardi, however, the possibility of the alliance between poetry and philosophy is not simply given by their common origin, or by their reciprocal want for each other. Rather, poetry and philosophy share an essential similarity in the way they operate. The action of both the poet and the philosopher indeed is for Leopardi one and the same, that is to say the “ability of discovering and knowing the relationships”:

The ability to mine a rich vein of similes is proper to the true poet (Homer ὁ ποιητής [the poet] is the greatest and most fertile model). In a state of enthusiasm, in the heat of any passion, etc. etc., the mind discovers most vivid resemblances between things. Even the most fleeting vigor in the

²⁷⁰ Zib. 3382-3: «È tanto mirabile quanto vero, che la poesia la quale cerca per sua natura e proprietà il bello, e la filosofia ch’essenzialmente ricerca il vero, cioè la cosa più contraria al bello; sieno le facoltà le [3383]più affini tra loro, tanto che il vero poeta è sommamente disposto ad esser gran filosofo, e il vero filosofo ad esser gran poeta, anzi nè l’uno nè l’altro non può esser nel gener suo nè perfetto nè grande, s’ei non partecipa più che mediocrementemente dell’altro genere, quanto all’indole primitiva dell’ingegno, alla disposizione naturale, alla forza dell’immaginazione.»

²⁷¹ Cf. Zib. 1838 «Ho detto altrove che non si conosce perfettamente una verità se non si conoscono perfettamente tutti i suoi rapporti con tutte le altre verità, e con tutto il sistema delle cose. Qual verità conosceranno dunque bene quei filosofi che astraggono assolutamente e perpetuamente da una parte essenzialissima della natura?». The wider passage 1833-40 from which this quotation has been excerpted is extremely relevant for this topic.

²⁷² Zib. 285-7, 1557

body, if it exerts some influence upon the spirit, causes it to see relationships between very disparate things, to find comparisons, extremely abstruse and ingenious similes (whether in serious or joking vein), shows it relations it had never thought of, in short gives it a marvelous facility to draw together and compare “objects of the most distinct kinds, such as the ideal with the most purely material, to embody in a very vivid manner the most abstract thought, to reduce everything to image, and to create from it some of the most novel and vivid images you could think of. And not only by means of direct similes or comparisons, but also by means of very novel epithets, very bold metaphors, words containing in themselves a simile, etc. All faculties of a great poet, and all contained in and deriving from the ability to discover relations between things, even the most minimal, and distant, even between things that appear the least analogous, etc.1 Now this is the philosopher through and through: the faculty of discovering and recognizing relations, of binding particulars together, and of generalizing.²⁷³

This tendency towards generalization does not rely on the same principle for poetry and philosophy. Poetry on the one hand, is driven to extend its scope in his search for a relationship with what is distant, because distance, together with vagueness and indefiniteness, is an essential element of everything poetic.²⁷⁴ Philosophy, on the other end, strives to reach a maximum of generalization, in the form of a system, because nothing can be really held for true if it is not known in its relationship with all other things.²⁷⁵

Notwithstanding the difference in the origin of their tendency to generalization, poetry and philosophy act similarly inasmuch as they both strive to find the wider connection in which humanity is implicated. It is because of this very tendency to reach a common horizon through

²⁷³ Zib. 1650: «Proprietà del vero poeta è la facoltà e la vena delle similitudini. (Omero poi ht'w n'è il più grande e fecondo modello). L'animo in entusiasmo, nel caldo della passione qualunque ec. ec. discopre vivissime somiglianze fra le cose. Un vigore anche passeggero del corpo, che influisca sullo spirito, gli fa vedere dei rapporti fra cose disparatissime, trovare dei paragoni, delle similitudini astrusissime e ingegnosissime (o nel serio o nello scherzoso), gli mostra delle relazioni a cui egli non aveva mai pensato, gli dà insomma una facilità mirabile di ravvicinare e rassomigliare gli oggetti delle specie le più distintedistin- te, come l'ideale col più puro materiale, d'incorporare vivissimamente il pensiero il più astratto, di ridur tutto ad immagine, e crearne delle più nuove e vive che si possaposa credere. Nè ciò solo mediante espresse similitudini o paragoni, ma col mezzo di epiteti nuovissimi, di metafore arditissime, di parole contenenti esse sole una similitudine ec. Tutte facoltà del gran poeta, e tutte contenute e derivanti dalla facoltà di scoprire i rapporti delle cose, anche i menomi, e più lontani, anche delle cose che paiono le meno analoghe ec. Or questo è tutto il filosofo: facoltà di scoprire e conoscere i rapporti, di legare insieme i parti- colari, e di generalizzare.»

²⁷⁴ Zib. 4426, 4490, 4495, 4513, 4515.

²⁷⁵ Zib. 1090-1

successive generalizations that poetry and philosophy compete for sovereignty. Even more than because of their difference, they struggle between themselves because of their similarity. This new point of view leads Leopardi to reconsider the encyclopedic tendency of the culture of his time. Such a transformation — as it will become clearer in the *Dialogue of Christopher Columbus and Pietro Gutierrez* — changes the meaning of Leopardi's interpretation of the Renaissance as world-measurement, disclosing the dimension of the return. In view of the return, the possibility of bringing knowledge to conclusion — fulfilling its circle into an encyclopedia — becomes crucial.

From the point of view of the *Theory of Pleasure* Leopardi had judged negatively the encyclopedic tendency of modernity. In a passage written in 1820 he had pointed out the modern pretense to encyclopedic knowledge as one of the reasons for the fact that poetry was more difficult for the moderns than it had been for the ancients.²⁷⁶ The notion of the interdependency between reason and imagination brought by the new doctrine of habituation leads Leopardi to change his mind on this issue, such that he now considers “reasonable” the tendency of his time:

Nobody can boast of being perfect in any human discipline if he is not also perfect in all possible disciplines and forms of human knowledge. Such is the weight and importance of the relationships that exist between the most disparate things that if those relationships are not known, no one thing is known perfectly. (...) But it is certain that, if not perfectly then at least as far as possible, it really is necessary to be an encyclopedic man, not in order to devote oneself to

²⁷⁶ See Zib., 233 «A quello che ho detto p.207. si può aggiungere quello che dice Algarotti dell'immenso studio che bisogna oggidì per divenir letterato di qualche pregio nel mondo, dove non passa più per vero letterato chi non è enciclopedico, studio al quale solo basta appena la vita dell'uomo innanzi di poterlo mettere a frutto coi parti del proprio ingegno, a differenza del poco studio che bisognava agli antichi. (8. settembre 1820.)»

all the disciplines and so not perfect or distinguish oneself in any of them, but to be as perfect as possible in one. In this, the current opinion is reasonable.²⁷⁷

The importance that Leopardi attributes to this encyclopedic tendency implies a positive evaluation of the Encyclopedists' enterprise, understood as an event that has impressed a permanent mark on the culture of his time. Leopardi now justifies this tendency, on the basis of the interdependency that, according to his theory of habituation, connects the different aspects of nature. Not only the philosopher, but every writer, and therefore the poet also, needs to extend his knowledges at least to the disciplines which are strictly related to his discipline: «Anyone who is not at least superficially encyclopedic cannot truly be regarded (and is not regarded today) as a great man of letters, or as outstanding in any intellectual discipline. Above all, you have to be encyclopedic within the ambit of those forms of knowledge, etc., which, though separate and distinct, have a greater and more certain and evident relationship and affinity with the discipline that you profess.»²⁷⁸ In this passage Leopardi seems to stress the possibility of enclosing knowledge into a finite totality. This idea, which is implicit in the notion of encyclopedia, is here recalled by the use of the term *circle* referred to knowledge. In a late fragment, written in 1829, this connection is made even more explicit:

An idea and an example of the encyclopedic knowledge of the ancients (especially the Greeks), and their writing about every branch of knowledge, to which I have referred elsewhere can also be found in the writings of Cicero (between those that survive and those that are lost), who was an imitator of the Greeks in this as in so many other things. In many of his works (philosophical,

²⁷⁷ Zib. 1922: « Non può nessuno vantarsi di essere perfetto in veruna umana disciplina, s'egli non è altresì perfetto in tutte le possibili discipline e cognizioni umane. Tanta è la forza e l'importanza de' rapporti che esistono fra le cose le più disparate, non conoscendo i quali, nessuna cosa si conosce perfettamente. (...) E però certo che se non perfettamente, almeno quanto è possibile, è realmente necessario di esser uomo enciclopedico, non per darsi a tutte le discipline e non perfezionarsi o distinguersi in nessuna, ma per esser quanto è possibile perfetto in una sola. In ciò l'opinione del tempo è ragionevole.»

²⁷⁸ Zib. 1922-3: «Chi almeno nella superficie non è uomo enciclopedico, non può veramente considerarsi (ed oggi non si considera) come gran letterato, o insigne in veruna disciplina intellettuale. Massimamente poi bisogna essere enciclopedico dentro il circolo di quelle cognizioni ec. che sebben separate e distinte, hanno maggiore, e più certo ed evidente rapporto e affinità colla disciplina da voi professata.»

rhetorical, etc.) he was not moved by any particular inspiration, ὁρμή, impulse, attraction toward those arguments, by any particular thought about them, but simply by the wish, the desire (which, however, death or business prevented him from satisfying) to complete the *cycle* (as Niebuhr described that of Aristotle's works) of his writings on every encyclopedic doctrine, etc. See the preface to *De officiis*.²⁷⁹

Here the drive towards encyclopedic knowledge no longer appears as just a “reasonable” feature of modern culture. Rather, this tendency is now traced back to Antiquity, and therefore dignified as an aspect of continuity between the moderns and the ancients.²⁸⁰ Leopardi's change of perspective could not be more radical. The possibility of enclosing knowledge into defined borders appears now explicitly in the syntagm *to fulfill the cycle*, where the word *cycle* is italicized.

3. A philosophical project

As far as it concerns the relationship between humanity and nature, the power struggle between reason and imagination has now to be considered from a higher point of view. In the frame of the Theory of Pleasure, imagination was essentially conceived as the manifestation of nature in the

²⁷⁹ Zib.4486: «Delle cognizioni enciclopediche degli antichi (massimamente greci), e del loro scrivere sopra ogni ramo dello scibile, del che altrove, possono dare un'idea, e sono un esempio, anche gli scritti di Cicerone (fra superstiti e perduti) imitatore in ciò, come in tante altre cose, de' greci: il quale a molte delle sue opere (filosofiche, rettoriche ec.) fu mosso, non da alcuna ispirazione ὁρμή particolare, da impulso, da affezione verso quegli argomenti, da trovarsi aver pensato con particolarità su di essi, ma dalla sola voglia, dal desiderio (che però la morte o gli affari gl'impedirono di soddisfare) di compire il *ciclo* (come Niebuhr chiama quello delle opere di Aristotele) de' suoi scritti sopra ogni dottrina enciclopedica ec. V. la pref. de *Officiis*. »

²⁸⁰ This aspect of continuity is stressed even more in another passage of the same year, where Leopardi observes that the tension towards encyclopedic knowledge that characterized the Greek philosophers was never extinguished, and was operating even at the beginning of the medieval age, in the general shipwreck of the knowledge accumulated by the ancients: «L'uso degli antichi filosofi greci, di abbracciar col circolo dei loro Trattati tutte le parti dello scibile (uso notato da me altrove), onde esso circolo veniva ad essere un'enciclopedia, fu seguito anche, ne' bassi tempi, da' latini: dico da quelli che scrissero, o in più opere separate o in una sola, de 4r o de 7m disciplinis (come Boezio, Cassiodoro, Marziano Capella, Beda, Alcuino) ec.; piccole enciclopedie, dove però si copiavano per lo più tra loro. E dico tra loro: i più antichi o non conoscevano, o non avevano, o non leggevano, o non potevano intendere. (11. Lugl.)», (Zib., 4522).

realm of humanity. Reason was on the contrary understood as a consequence of nature's corruption, and as the cause of the unhappiness of humanity. The horizon of this point of view is the restoration of the human as human, that is to say the restoration of the sovereignty of poetry and the return of the colloquium of imagination with nature. The ideology of the *Theory of Pleasure* can therefore be considered as a form of humanism where the essence of the human is found in imagination, and its value is justified by its belonging to nature. In the new perspective given by the discovery of the role of habituation, reason is now a part of nature itself as well as imagination. Or, more correctly, it is the consideration of the fact that reason *depends on nature* that convinces Leopardi to elaborate this new perspective. This idea, indeed, is already present in a passage of the *Zibaldone* that precedes the statement according to which imagination is the source of reason:

Since nature and reason are, in essence, hostile, one depends on the other or is essentially bound to it, as all opposites are, and one cannot be considered in isolation from the other. Or rather, reason cannot be considered separately from nature (indeed, just the reverse), because reason, though hostile to nature, is posterior to, and dependent on it, and has in nature alone the foundation and object of its existence, and of its mode of being.²⁸¹

The reclamation of the dialogue with non-unveiled nature, which framed the perspective of *Ad Angelo Mai*, becomes unsustainable. The power struggle between imagination and reason is now understood as an aspect of nature itself. This means that it is no longer possible to *take side with* imagination *against* reason, because reason and imagination are only the two faces of the same coin, which is nature. The discovery that there is only one coin — which is Nature — is the fundamental change in Leopardi's thought. Scholarship on Leopardi has usually interpreted this

²⁸¹ Zib. 1842: «Da che natura e ragione sono nemiche per essenza, l'una dipende o è legata essenzialmente coll'altra, come lo sono tutti i contrari; e non si può considerarle l'una separatamente dall'altra. O piuttosto non si può considerarle la ragione staccatamente dalla natura (bensì al contrario) perché la ragione, sebbene nemica, è posteriore alla natura, e da lei dipendente, ed ha in lei sola il fondamento e il soggetto della sua esistenza, e del suo modo di essere.»

change as a transition from a prospective where nature has a positive role, to one where there is a fundamental enmity between humanity and nature (condensed in the incautious appropriation of Leopardi's expression "Nature as step-mother"). This understanding of the transition to the new conception, certainly grasps an aspect of the dynamic of Leopardi's thought. At the same time it hides one of the principal obstacles Leopardi encounters in his meditation. The discovery of the enmity between humanity and nature destroys the fundament of Leopardi's humanism. The reclamation of imagination, that was justified in the former conception on the basis of the primacy of nature, becomes now problematic. Everything that exists belongs to nature, and reason and imagination are one and the same from this point of view. The enmity between humanity and nature leaves Leopardi no ground, no safe place to retreat. Poetry itself, as an aspect of nature, becomes part of the problem, as witnessed by Leopardi's poetical silence through the years 1823-1828. The problem of Leopardi's meditation is now a question that involves everything that exists. In the words of the idealistic philosophy of his times, this question is the question of the absolute, that is to say a question from which nothing that exists can be exceptuated.²⁸² Absolute, which means free (*ab-solutum*, literally *unbounded*), is not something that is separated from our world; such a thing would be dependent on our world in the sense that would be limited by our world in the form of a relationship of negation. Absolute is only the totality of that which exists, because there is nothing that can impose a limit on it. In the words of the philosophy of the Greeks, this is the question of being, or in Aristotle's most precise

²⁸² There is no evidence that Leopardi ever had a particular interest towards the philosophy of German idealism. However, Leopardi's use of the word "absolute" seems to signal at least the awareness of what was happening beyond the Alps. The main intermediary between Leopardi and German culture is usually considered to be De Stael, even if it is not completely excluded that Leopardi's knowledge of the German language was sufficient to grant him access to the original texts. Few attention has been given to the possible role of Victor Cousin and Terenzio Mamiani, two philosophers which Leopardi knew and read, both of which were exposed to German philosophy and influenced by Schelling in particular.

definition, the problem of being as being (τὸ ὄν ἢ ὄν). In the tradition of the West, this question is considered as the object of a discipline called metaphysics.

The use Leopardi makes of the word “metaphysics” in his writings often entails a negative evaluation. In the frame of the Theory of Pleasure, metaphysics is the most essential manifestation of reason²⁸³, and therefore the supreme threat for the restoration of the realm of poetry. The transformation of Leopardi’s thought, however, leads Leopardi to assume a different position. There is evidence that Leopardi considered the transformation of his thought as a transition to Metaphysics. In a long passage dated 12 May 1825, speaking of himself in the third person as often happens in the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi reflects on the transformation of his own thought, in terms of his theory of habituation. He describes the *habit of solitude* as the essential condition for the disclosure of the space for metaphysical thinking:

Every philosopher, but especially the metaphysician needs solitude. A man who thinks and reflects, living today, or even one used to living in society, naturally throws himself into considering and speculating about men and their relations with one another, and about himself in relation to other men. This is the subject which interests him above all others, and from which he is unable to detach his thoughts. So he naturally comes to have a very narrow field of vision, and substantially limited horizons, because in the end what is the whole human race (considered only in its internal relations) next to nature, and the universe? The man on the contrary who is used to solitude is little interested, little moved to curiosity about how men relate to one another, and about himself with other men, which naturally seems a small and trivial subject to him. On the contrary his relations with the rest of nature do interest him very much, and they have first place for him, just as for the man who lives in society the most interesting and almost the only interesting relations are human relations. What interests him is speculation and knowledge about himself as himself; about men as part of the universe; about nature, the world, existence, things that for him (and actually) are much more serious than the deepest questions relating to society. And in fact one can say that the philosopher and the reflective man used to social life can hardly not be a philosopher of society (or a psychologist, or a politician, etc.), and that if he is used to solitude he necessarily turns out to be a metaphysician. And if at first he was a philosopher of society, when he contracts the habit of solitude, he directs his attention in the long run insensibly

²⁸³ Cf. F. D’Intino, *Metaphysics, Theology Philosophy*, in G. Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, cit., *Introduzione*, pp.141-157.

to metaphysics and in the end it becomes the principal, the favorite, and the most agreeable object of his thoughts.²⁸⁴

At first sight, the passage can be taken as a mere autobiographical note under disguise, referring to the biographical circumstances of the transformation of Leopardi's thought. Yet, with the intertwining of different layers which is characteristic of his writings, Leopardi is at the same time drawing a definition of Metaphysics. The solitude of which Leopardi speaks in this passage is not just an actual condition of isolation, but rather a habit which is innerly connected with the perspective given by metaphysical thought. The entire passage rests on the contraposition between the *philosopher of society* and the *metaphysician*. The first is described as a psychologist or a political philosopher, someone who considers the human being from the point of view of its relationship with other human beings. The metaphysician instead considers the human being in the most wide connection, which is the one given by its relationship with the totality of things. The solitude of the metaphysician consists in his being alone in front of the totality of things, including his own relationship with this totality. This totality of things is here designated by Leopardi with the three words *nature*, *world*, and *existence*. These three words

²⁸⁴ Zib. 4138-9: «Ad ogni filosofo, ma più di tutto al metafisico è bisogno la solitudine. L'uomo speculativo e riflessivo, vivendo attualmente, o anche solendo vivere nel mondo, si gitta naturalmente a considerare e speculare sopra gli uomini nei loro rapporti scambievoli, e sopra se stesso nei suoi rapporti cogli uomini. Questo è il soggetto che lo interessa sopra ogni altro, e dal quale non sa staccare le sue riflessioni. Così egli viene naturalmente ad avere un campo molto ristretto, e viste in sostanza molto limitate, perchè alla fine che cosa è tutto il genere umano (considerato solo nei suoi rapporti con se stesso) appetto alla natura, e nella università delle cose? Quegli al contrario che ha l'abito della solitudine, pochissimo s'interessa, pochissimo è mosso a curiosità dai rapporti degli uomini tra loro, e di se cogli uomini; ciò gli pare naturalmente un soggetto e piccolo e frivolo. Al contrario moltissimo l'interessano i suoi rapporti col resto della natura, i quali tengono per lui il primo luogo, come per chi vive nel mondo i più interessanti e quasi soli interessanti rapporti sono quelli cogli uomini; l'interessa la speculazione e cognizion di se stesso come se stesso; degli uomini come parte dell'universo; della natura, del mondo, dell'esistenza, cose per lui (ed effettivamente) ben più gravi che i più profondi soggetti relativi alla società. E in somma si può dire che il filosofo e l'uomo riflessivo coll'abito della vita sociale non può quasi a meno di non essere un filosofo di società (o psicologo, o politico ec.) coll'abito della solitudine riesce necessariamente un metafisico. E se da prima egli era filosofo di società, da poi, contratto l'abito della solitudine, a lungo andare egli si volge insensibilmente alla metafisica e finalmente ne fa il principale oggetto dei suoi pensieri e il più favorito e grato.»

correspond to as many different paths to totality in Leopardi's thought. With the word *nature*, Leopardi nominates the most fundamental experience of totality, one which is not yet mediated by the categories of reflection: it is the poetic name of totality. *World* is on the contrary the totality understood as a system of forces producing certain effects, the totality grasped in its actual functioning: a rational concept of totality. *Existence*, finally, is the metaphysical word which Leopardi employs to designate totality, and it has the value of a technical term: it is the totality of the existing things - as such²⁸⁵. The questions of Metaphysics are evaluated in this passage as more profound, truer, and more important than those of the social philosopher. The disclosure of the space of metaphysical solitude is the condition where the meditation on the questions of Metaphysics becomes rewarding and amiable.

The former passage makes clear that Leopardi conceived the transformation of his thought as a transition to metaphysics. A part from this passage, Leopardi left a few scattered observations on the project of writing a book about metaphysics, which are essential in order to understand the way he conceived himself as a metaphysical thinker. In 1829, general Pietro Colletta requested Leopardi to draft a list of literary projects he could have attended to, had he received some form of financial assistance. In the first place of the list Leopardi put a treatise «on abstract topics»: «The treatise on the nature of men and things would embrace issues related to the abstract topics,

²⁸⁵ It is just the case to notice that, in the context of Leopardi's meditation, these three different names of totality could also be historically connotated. Nature is the word of the auroral Greek thinkers, while world is for Leopardi the word Christ pronounced in a new sense at the beginning of the end of Antiquity. Existence, finally, is among the words that were introduced across the medieval age by the Scholastic philosophers.

to the origins of reason, to the destinies of man, to happiness and other related things: but, maybe, it would not repeat things said by others, neither would lack practical utility.»²⁸⁶.

The title of the treatise to which Leopardi refers in this letter also appears in the indexes of the *Zibaldone* which Leopardi drafted in 1827. We can therefore have an idea of the materials Leopardi meant to employ for this book. There is no doubt that Leopardi meant to gather these materials in a book concerned with metaphysical questions. In a list of literary projects probably written in the same year, Leopardi records the same title adding a few explanatory words: «Of the nature of men and things. It would contain my metaphysics, or transcendental philosophy, but intelligible to everyone. It should be the work of my life.»²⁸⁷ The few lines of this annotation have to be carefully considered. The final statement «It should be the work of my life» has scarcely been taken in consideration, albeit it entails a very strong claim which sheds an unusual light on Leopardi. It tells us that Leopardi considered himself first of all as a metaphysical thinker; he thought that his most important contribution would have been a contribution to metaphysics.

4. “Transcendental philosophy”

The annotation quoted above tells us only two things about the content of the metaphysical book that Leopardi meant to write. Nevertheless, these two things raise a wide number of questions

²⁸⁶ Letter to P. Colletta, Recanati, 1829: «Il trattato della natura degli uomini e delle cose conterrebbe le questioni delle materie astratte, delle origini della ragione, dei destini dell'uomo, della felicità e simili: ma forse non sarebbe oscuro, nè ripeterebbe le cose dette da altri, nè mancherebbe di utilità pratica.

²⁸⁷ G. Leopardi, *Memorie e disegni letterari*, in p.1112: ««Della natura degli uomini e delle cose. Conterrebbe la mia metafisica, o filosofia trascendente, ma intellegibile a tutti. Dovrebbe essere l'opera della mia vita»

regarding the relationship between the project of the metaphysical book, which was never written, and what we know of Leopardi's thought from the writings he has left. The first thing this annotation tells us is that Leopardi conceived Metaphysics in terms of a *transcendental philosophy*. What does Leopardi mean with this term? What do we know about the way Leopardi understood the term *transcendental*?

Since the years of his formation, Leopardi was acquainted with this term, which he had encountered in the context of his scholarly training around the age of fourteen²⁸⁸. Metaphysics indeed constituted one of the disciplines on which he received his last official exam in 1812. A copy of this exam was edited by his father Monaldo with the title *Disputatio*²⁸⁹. During the same year, probably in preparation for the exam, Leopardi composed a number of essays which he collected under the title *Metaphysical Dissertations*. Both the *Dissertations* and the *Disputatio* explicitly mention a number of sources which are extremely relevant in order to understand the metaphysical notions Leopardi employed in these juvenile writings. They amount to a small number of scholastic manuals, which synthesized in a systematic fashion several theses developed through the centuries by a number of philosophers ranging from Aristotle to Leibniz. Such were the treatises of Jean Saury (*Éléments de métaphysique à l'usage des gens du monde*, Paris, 1773²⁹⁰) and Francois Jacquier (*Institutiones Philosophicæ ad studia theologica*

²⁸⁸ Cf. G. Leopardi, *Dissertazioni Filosofiche*, ed by T. Crivelli, Padova, Antenore, 1995.

²⁸⁹ G. Polizzi and V. Sordani, *Uno scritto dimenticato del giovane Leopardi: la "Disputatio" e la sua relazione con le "Dissertazioni Filosofiche"*, «Rivista di Storia della Filosofia», 64, 4, 2009, pp. 653-707.

²⁹⁰ In the library of the Leopardi in Recanati the book appears in an Italian translation of the 1877.

potissimum accommodata, Rome, 1757²⁹¹). The general inspiration of these manuals is that of a conciliation between the Scholastic tradition and modern Empiricism.

The concept of metaphysics which is presented in these writings rests on the distinction between *Metaphysica generalis* and *Metaphysica specialis*, a distinction first established by the German philosopher Christian Wolff. *Metaphysica generalis*, also referred to as *Ontologia*, is the discipline that studies the set of conditions that allows a thing to exist as a thing, or, in other terms, the properties which cannot be separated from existence itself. In the tradition of metaphysical thinking, these most universal properties of being have been designated as *trascendentalia entis*. Their number varies across the history of metaphysics. According to Aquinas for instance the *trascendentalia* are five: *res, aliquid, unum, verum, bonum*²⁹². In Wolff's late systematization, on which the authors studied by Leopardi rely, they are just three: *unum, verum, bonum*.²⁹³

The doctrine of the *trascendentalia* as a *metaphysica generalis*, is the core around which the three branches of the *metaphysica specialis* — *cosmology, psychology* and *theology* — take their respective places. As supreme determinations of the thing — inseparable from the thing itself — the *trascendentalia* are also prominent traits of the totality of the existing things, the *world*, which taken in its unity is a thing as well. According to the doctrine of truth as *adequatio*, in the act of understanding the things of the created world, the *soul* conforms itself to the thing. This

²⁹¹ A 1785 reprint of the book is in the Leopardi library.

²⁹² Cf. T. Aquinas, *De Veritate*, Q.1, Art.1, Milano, 2005, pp.118-20.

²⁹³ Several works of Christian Wolff were on the shelves of the library of the family in Recanati, and particularly an anthology that encompassed the three branches of the *metaphysica specialis*: Christianus Wolfius, *Anthologia: psychologia empirica et rationalis, cosmologia, theologia naturalis, ethica, horae subsecivae marburgenses sive de philosophia generatim*, Veronae, 1768-1779.

agreement is made possible by the fact that *divinity* ensures the *truth*, the *goodness* and the *unity* of both the mind and the thing. Human knowledge is possible because the *transcendentalia* bear in themselves the seal of the divine essence, which is the fundament of the existence of all the beings. *Unum, verum, bonum*, are in the end the three supreme determinations of the divine essence itself²⁹⁴.

The doctrine of the *transcendentalia* therefore tends to be the systematic place that encloses *in nuce* the whole structure the totality of the things. This totality appears in a threefold manifestation: as totality of the perceptions (the human soul) which is the concern of psychology (or *pnemautology*, as it is called in the treatises of Saury and Jacquier); as totality of the things (the world) which is the subject of cosmology; and as the object of theology, that is the totality of the existence in general (the divine essence). Only to the latter, intended as the overarching condition of the other two totalities, applies the name of absolute. The doctrine of the *transcendentalia*, as the fundament for the science of the totality of all totalities — out of which nothing is left — peaks into a doctrine of the absolute. The fact that Leopardi considers his «metaphysics» as a «transcendental philosophy» makes clear, if there were any doubt, that he is in colloquium with the tradition of metaphysical thinking. What remains problematic, however, is that the project of developing a transcendental philosophy seems to go against Leopardi's

²⁹⁴ For this very reason Duns Scoto will conceive his metaphysics in terms of a *scientia transcendens*. Later on, in the context of Kant's transcendental idealism the *transcendentalia* will no longer be considered as determinations of the being, but rather in an idealistic sense, as «universal logical rules for the agreement of knowledge with itself». As such they do not belong to the object, but rather to the transcendental conditions that allow the phenomenon to appear. In this sense the transcendentalia still hold an important systematic position in the particular kind of *metaphysica specialis* that Kant develops in the *Dialectic* of his first Critic, where he follows the necessary illusions of reason in the field of psychology, cosmology and theology. In the context of this idealistic interpretation of the transcendentalia, and particularly in the discussion of the cosmological illusions, Kant hints indeed for the first time to his conception of freedom — a determination of the subject that cannot be assumed at the psychological level — that will be developed in the second Critic, and will open the space for Kant's new theological conception in the postulates of the Practical Reason.

fundamental assumption of the absolute precedence of existence. The idea according to which «nothing precedes the things» and «everything comes after existence» would become equivocal once the transcendentals would be admitted. The transcendentals indeed are precisely that sort of «conditions» of reality that Leopardi had refused with the idea of the absolute precedence of existence. Notwithstanding the postulate of the absolute precedence of existence, in Leopardi's partition of the sciences there is still space for a transcendental philosophy. This fact raises several questions: why a science that goes beyond the empirical realm is still necessary, once the latter has been conceived as a mere state of fact, as the infinite succession of events that happen only once? What is the meaning of the word metaphysics once it no longer designates the science of the pre-existing conditions of reality? These questions, raised by the use of the term «transcendental philosophy» in Leopardi's brief annotation on the project of a metaphysical book, are essential in order to access the vestiges of Leopardi's Metaphysics among the ruins of the *Zibaldone*.

5. “Comprehensible to everyone”

The second thing Leopardi tells us about the content of his metaphysical book in the annotation is that «it would be comprehensible to everyone». With its apparent naiveté, this sentence leads us into the proper atmosphere of Leopardi's thought. It sheds light on Leopardi's refusal to give to his philosophy a technical form. This decision lies on Leopardi's understanding of the nature of technique and also reflects on the linguistic choices of Leopardi's meditation. It is a decision on metaphysics. Leopardi knows that one of the inseparable effects of scientific thinking is the invention of new words and ways of saying. This effect is inseparable from science because there

can be no change in the way of thinking without a linguistic change. This is true for every scientific discipline, but especially for Metaphysics, whose objects are the most remote from everyday experience:

Whenever some discipline or form of knowledge, or human speculation, but philosophy in particular, and metaphysics as it addresses the principles and elements of things that feature either rarely or not at all in ordinary speech and usage, and the intimacies, the secrets, and the parts of things that are removed and separated off from the senses and from vulgar thought, whenever, I say, metaphysics has been added to, or gone down a new path, or sought or found some novelty, a novelty in words has proved necessary in any and every language, and has in fact been adopted.²⁹⁵

In this passage Metaphysics appears as the most radical manifestation of the power of science, which is for Leopardi an essentially linguistic power. Introducing new words, the sciences transform the world. The measure of this transformation does not consist so much in the power made available by technological knowledge, but most of all in the linguistic change which metaphysics and the other sciences produce, results in the introduction of words of a specific nature, which is different from that of the other words. Leopardi calls these words *terms*:

Words (...) 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're 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. Because the appropriate choice of a word and plainness or

²⁹⁵ Zib. 641: «Ogni volta che qualunque disciplina o cognizione, o speculazione umana, ma specialmente la filosofia, e la metafisica che considera i principii e gli elementi delle cose, i quali poco o nulla cadono nel sermone e nell'uso comune, le intimità, i secreti, le parti delle cose remote e segregate dai sensi e dal pensiero dei più; ogni volta, dico, che questa ha ricevuto qualche incremento, o preso qualche nuovo sentiero, o cercata o trovata qualche novità, è stata necessaria, ed effettivamente adoperata la novità delle parole in qualunque lingua.»

dryness are very different things, and if the former gives discourse efficacy and clarity the latter adds nothing but aridity.²⁹⁶

The essence of what Leopardi calls here “term” is the fact that it circumscribes an idea into definite limits. The “term”, taken in this sense, is the fundamental and original form of measurement. Leopardi describes the differentiation between words and terms as the historical product of the process of analysis and distinction between different ideas which has been originated by the development and diffusion of philosophy and the other sciences:

The analysis of things spells the death of their beauty or greatness and the death of poetry. So too with the analysis of ideas, resolving them into their parts and elements and presenting these parts or elements in isolation, bare, without any accompaniment of concomitant ideas. This is precisely what terms do, and herein lies the difference between the precision and the propriety of words. The majority of the philosophical words that have become current today and are lacking in all or almost all the ancient languages do not really express ideas that our ancestors lacked entirely. But the progress of human knowledge consists, as the ideologues have already established, in knowing that one idea contains another (thus Locke, Tracy, etc.) and this one yet another, etc., and consists in drawing ever nearer to the elements of things and in breaking our ideas down ever further so as to discover and define the simple and universal substances (if I may put it like this) of which they are made up (since in any kind of knowledge, or mechanical operations, etc., as well, the known elements are only universal to the degree that they are completely simple and original). And thus the majority of these words simply express ideas already contained in ancient ideas, but ones that are now separated from the other parts of the original ideas by means of the analysis that the progress of the human mind has naturally made of these original ideas, resolving them into their parts, whether elementary or not (since arriving at the elements of ideas is the last frontier of knowledge), distinguishing one part from the other, giving each distinct part its own name and forming a separate idea of it, whereas the ancients merged these parts, or subdivisions of ideas (which for us today are so many distinct ideas), into a single idea.²⁹⁷

The linguistic phenomenon of which Leopardi is speaking in this passage, with the expressions “terms” (*termini*) is the fundamental manifestation of the world’s measurement he has represented with the emblem of Columbus in *Ad Angelo Mai*. New “terms” are the essential

²⁹⁶ Zib. 109-110: «Le parole (...) 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 perchè determinano e definiscono la cosa da tutte le parti. Quanto più una lingua abbonda di parole, tanto più è adattata alla letteratura e alla bellezza ec. ec. e per lo contrario quanto più abbonda di termini, dico quando questa abbondanza nocchia a quella delle parole, perchè l’abbondanza di tutte due le cose non fa pregiudizio. Giacchè sono cose ben diverse la proprietà delle parole e la nudità o secchezza, e se quella dà efficacia ed evidenza al discorso, questa non gli dà altro che aridità. (...)»

²⁹⁷ Zib. 1234-5: «

instrument for the measurement of the world. Therefore, the language of philosophy and the other sciences is the most remote from poetry. The indefinite circle of imagination imaging itself does not operate under the linguistic regime of rigid definitions established by the terms. While excluding the use of “terms” from poetry, Leopardi insists on the importance of allowing their use in other fields. The possibility of introducing “terms” from other languages, for instance, is crucial in order to take part in what Leopardi calls in this passage “the progress of the human spirit”:

You may infer from these observations (...) (1) that those who reject such new words or terms and ban innovation in languages formally claim the right to impede the advance, and disrupt the course, and stop dead forever the progress of the human mind, in light of which language necessarily progresses and is enriched with ever more exact, distinct, subtle, uniform, and universal words, in short with terms. And conversely, without the progress of language (and progress of precisely this kind and not of another that has little influence) the progress of the human mind is null, for it cannot fix and guarantee and perpetuate the enjoyment of its new discoveries and observations, except by means of new words or new and fixed, certain, definite, indubitable, recognized meanings. Meanings, moreover, that are uniform, because, if they are not, the progress of the human mind will inevitably be restricted to whichever nation speaks the language in which the new words were created, or only to those nations which have correctly understood and adopted them. (2) That such words or terms are wholly incompatible with the essence of poetry, and their misuse is the ruination and loss of literature, transforming it into philosophy or scientific discourse, etc.²⁹⁸

Notwithstanding this endorsement of the use of technical words — rigorously out of the field of poetry — the employment of *terms* is extremely limited in Leopardi’s writings. Even in the passages of the *Zibaldone* he thought to include in his metaphysical book, there are no more than

²⁹⁸ Zib. 1237.8: «Da queste osservazioni (...) inferite 1. che quelli i quali scartano tali nuove parole o termini, e vietano la novità nelle lingue, pretendono formalmente d’impedire l’andamento, e rompere il corso, e fermare immobilmente e per sempre il progresso dello spirito umano, posto il quale, la lingua necessariamente progredisce, e si arricchisce di parole sempre più precise, distinte, sottili, uniformi ed universali, e in somma di termini; e vicendevolmente senza il progresso della lingua (e progresso di questa precisa natura, e non d’altra, che poco influisce) è nullo il progresso dello spirito umano, il quale non può stabilire ed assicurare, e perpetuare il possesso delle sue nuove scoperte e osservazioni, se non mediante nuove parole o nuove significazioni fisse, certe, determinate, indubitabili, riconosciute; e di più, uniformi, perchè se non sono uniformi, il progresso dello spirito umano sarà inevitabilmente ristretto a quella tal nazione, che parla quella lingua dove si sono formate le dette nuove parole; o a quelle sole nazioni che le hanno bene intese e adottate. 2. Che tali parole o termini, sono affatto incompatibili coll’essenza della poesia, e l’abuso loro, guasta affatto, e perde e trasforma in filosofia, o discorso di scienze ec. la bella letteratura.»

two or three words that are used in a technical sense. Even in these few cases, we could say, the words assume a technical sense more because of the way Leopardi employs them than because of their meaning. They are *words* and *terms* at the same time. It is probably in relationship with this linguistic choice that in the annotation from 1829 Leopardi defines his metaphysical book as «comprehensible to everyone». The choice of the words appearing in the title of this book gives us an idea of Leopardi's intentions: «Della natura degli uomini e delle cose». With this title Leopardi speaks of the solitude of humanity in front of the totality of the things. It is a title that belongs to the space of metaphysical solitude. Nevertheless, it is a title comprehensible to everyone. Nature, man, and thing are three words whose definition has been among the main concerns of metaphysics all through its history, but they do not sound like technical terms. On the contrary, they are words that we can hardly avoid in our everyday conversations.

The choice of writing a metaphysical book without introducing new technical terms becomes extremely problematic when thought under the light of Leopardi's awareness of the relationship between the development of reason and the invention of terms. It makes clear that Leopardi doesn't aim to contribute to the development and diffusion of reason with his metaphysical book. What is then the purpose of the project of a metaphysical treatise? The following chapters will try to articulate an answer to this question by entering into the iconological level of analysis of Leopardi's symbolism of the Renaissance.

Chapter VI

A hypothesis

Introduction

The transformation of Leopardi's thought which has been drawn in the preceding chapter is extremely partial, and tries to grasp only a few lines of development around which other issues can be gathered. It is nothing more than a sketch of the inner dynamic of Leopardi's thought. The purpose of this exposition is that of making comprehensible certain differences that we have encountered when comparing the "emblematic" representation of the Renaissance in *Ad Angelo Mai* (cf. Chapter III) with the "cartographic" representation of the Renaissance in its linguistic, geographical and chronological dimensions (cf. Chapter IV). The aspects of continuity and complementarity between imagination and reason which have appeared in the latter, become comprehensible once framed in the context of Leopardi's transition to the new conception of reason as an aspect of nature. While the Renaissance appeared in *Ad Angelo Mai* as the paradoxical age of the return of imagination *notwithstanding* the fulfillment of the world's measurement, the idea that emerges from the *Zibaldone* is that the return of imagination goes along *with* the development of reason since the very beginning of the Renaissance. What happens then to the idea of the encirclement of imagination in the process of world's measurement?

In order to answer this question, the research on the symbol of the Renaissance in Leopardi leaves now the dimension of the conventional symbolic use of the word “*risorgimento*” in Leopardi's time. This conventional use has been illustrated in the preceding chapters both with reference to the authors of the *Gabinetto Vieusseux* (Chapter I) and to Leopardi's writings (Chapter III and IV). This conventional level of the interpretation has been described as *iconographical* in the *Introduction*, since it is concerned with a convention which can be historically reconstructed. The research will now move to the *iconological* level: the symbolic use of the Renaissance which the next chapters are concerned with is not conventional, but rather specific to Leopardi's poetry. At this level, as I will try to make clear in the following pages, the historical event of the Renaissance becomes for Leopardi an image of the relationship between poetry and metaphysics which is witnessed in his writings.

A link between these two levels of the symbolism of the Renaissance in Leopardi can be found in the figure of Columbus. As it has been shown in Chapter III, what is at the stake in Leopardi's interpretation of Columbus is the attempt to grasp in all its concreteness the border of the struggle between imagination and reason. Leopardi's interpretation of Columbus in *Ad Angelo Mai*, far from being hagiographical, resolutely points towards the violence which is implicit in the process through which rationality subjugates the globe. In consideration of the sources available to Leopardi, this interpretation of the foundational moment of the history of colonialism appears both original and lucid. The colonial question is promptly understood by Leopardi as the effect of a violence which is intrinsic to rationality. The question about how to design a resistance towards this violence is the central question of Leopardi's meditation. As it will be argued in this chapter, the new interpretation of Columbus that Leopardi advances in the

Dialogue between Christopher Columbus and Pierre Gutierrez can be read in light of this question, as the attempt to draw a line of resistance. For our sensibilities, the fact that Leopardi's strategy of resistance to the violence of rationality passes through the figure of Columbus must appear paradoxical to say the least. However anachronistic, such a paradox cannot be dispelled simply by saying that historiographical awareness of the colonial question was not accessible to Leopardi. Leopardi did not have the historical information that is available today, but nonetheless he was able to understand the destructivity of the colonial phenomenon in line of principle. Precisely because of this, the contradiction of thinking a line of resistance to the violence of western rationality through the figure of Columbus cannot simply be hidden, but rather demands to be weighted carefully. A way to think of it can be that of considering how problematic it is — for Leopardi as well as for us — the idea of jumping off of Columbus' ship — meaning to find strategies of resistance that are not intertwined — at one level or the other and in different degrees — with the history of western rationality. In this sense, more than as a reference to the historical Columbus, the dialogue can be read as a sign of Leopardi's awareness of his own position on the map of globalizing reason, and as the hypothesis of an alternative use of such a map, one able to contrast its destructive effects. The tension that underlies Leopardi's interpretation of Columbus in *Ad Angelo Mai* remains thus operative in the *Dialogue between Christopher Columbus and Pierre Gutierrez*, speaking to questions that can better be heard today perhaps, but certainly have not lost their significance.

1. Boredom and measurement

Portrayed as the ambiguous hero of the world's measurement in *Ad Angelo Mai*, Columbus appears for a second time in the *Dialogo di Cristoforo Colombo e Pietro Gutierrez*, a short prose which is part of the *Operette Morali*. At first sight, in this dialogue Leopardi is no longer concerned with the problems raised in *Ad Angelo Mai*. Taken at its face value, the dialogue is an apology of active life, which is considered desirable because of the distraction it grants from boredom. The indifference between surface and profundity, and therefore their interchangeability, is a characteristic aspect of Leopardi's writing style, so that a flat reading of his pages can never fail. However, the fact that Leopardi returned to the same historical figure a second time, giving a completely different interpretation, has no parallels in the context of Leopardi's writings and raises a number of questions. How do we move from the interpretation of Columbus as the fatal hero of world-measuring reason to that of the hero of active life as distraction? Reason and action are two terms that are often in opposition in Leopardi's writings. As such they also appear in *Ad Angelo Mai*, and precisely in the emblem of Columbus, who, with his heroic enterprise fatally (that is to say against the appearances and against Columbus' own intentions) contributes to the fulfillment of world measuring reason. Columbus' voyage in *Ad Angelo Mai* involves a contradiction between action and reason. A superficial reading of Leopardi's new interpretation of Columbus in terms of an invitation to active life would interpret this dialogue as a regression compared to the emblem of Columbus in *Ad Angelo Mai*. Things change if we read the dialogue without forgetting that for Leopardi Columbus is the fatal hero of world-measuring reason.

Indeed, within the context of Leopardi's thought, the connection between world measurement and boredom, and therefore between *Ad Angelo Mai* and the *Dialogue*, is everything but arbitrary or incidental. The process of world measurement, of which Columbus is the hero in *ad Angelo Mai*, is the process through which the world is subsumed under the sign of identity, that is to say, as a quantity. The fact that everything can be considered from a numerical point of view produces the universal comparability of everything with everything. «*Everything is similar now.*» In a variant of this line from *Ad Angelo Mai*, Leopardi writes «everything equates to everything». The number has made possible the construction of a universal equation where everything becomes comparable. Once everything is universally equatable, the world appears smaller than it was before. The measured world does not appear small because it is quantitatively irrelevant, but because all its manifold differences have been quantified and thus reduced to uniformity. This uniformity is the principle of boredom. This is the reason why, in *ad Angelo Mai*, the measured world is not just a world that becomes smaller, but a world where “*naught grows.*” The whole problem of “naught” (the quantitative measure of nothingness) in Leopardi must be treated without giving into the temptation of considering “naught” as something positive. In the context of Leopardi's mature thought, there is no place for such a hypostatization of negativity. Naught is rather a perspectival illusion, or better, a negative illusion, the perception of the impossibility of illusions. Such an impossibility is grasped in the perception of the uniformity of matter. Boredom is for Leopardi the perception of bare existence, which is existence without the characteristic motility of life. This absence of motility is the cause of an absence of differentiation, whose effect is uniformity. In itself, uniformity is just a moment in the infinite motility of nature, and this is why uniformity can even be useful in dispelling boredom

produced by an excess of motility. However, the kind of uniformity which reason introduces in the world has the characteristic of universality, so that uniformity is grasped as absolute and inescapable. The uniformity that reason unveils is that of matter understood as quantity. It is in this sense that Leopardi had written in the *Zibaldone* that «reason is the most material of all the faculties we possess»²⁹⁹. When compared to imagination, which is concerned with all the material aspects of sound, rhythm, shape, color, figure and so on, reason is certainly not material. What Leopardi is implying is that only reason reveals the absolute uniformity of bare matter, which is existence stripped of all its attributes. Unity, as a quantity, is the image of the absolute uniformity of bare existence, the idea of an object without quality. The measurement of the world is the absolute reduction of everything to the uniformity of bare existence.³⁰⁰

For Leopardi boredom originates from the absolute and inescapable uniformity of world-measuring reason, leading to the experience of naught, which is the experience that nothing exists beyond the uniformity of brute existence. This is why, in the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi can write: «Uniformity is a sure cause of boredom. Uniformity is boredom, and boredom uniformity.»³⁰¹ From this standpoint, we can better understand why Leopardi chooses Columbus to give poetic consistency to his meditation on boredom. We can read the character of Columbus as an ideogram of the question of world measurement, and the *Dialogue of Columbus and Pietro Gutierrez* as a meditation on boredom underpinned by the question of world measurement.

²⁹⁹ Zib. 171.

³⁰⁰ Such a uniformity foreshadows the infinite sequence and recombination of unity and naught which is the foundation of digital technology (0101010). As it will become clearer in the context of the following chapter, if we look at our world from Leopardi's point of view, it is not at all a coincidence that Leibniz, the philosopher who established the principle of the *uniformitas entis* (uniformity of the being) is also the inventor of binary calculus, which is the fundament of our digital civilization.

³⁰¹ Zib. 2599: «L'uniformità è certa cagione di noia. L'uniformità è noia, e la noia uniformità.»

2. Degrees of measurement

Compared with the emblem of Columbus in *Ad Angelo Mai*, the *Dialogue* addresses the question of the world measurement from the wider perspective which Leopardi has meanwhile developed through the pages of the *Zibaldone*. Whereas the emblem of Columbus in *Ad Angelo Mai* still reflected the perspective of a *philosopher of society* (social philosopher), the perspective of the *Dialogue* belongs to the horizon that Leopardi has reached in the meanwhile, which is that of *metaphysics*. This difference of perspective can account for the many differences between Columbus' emblem in *Ad Angelo Mai* and the character of Columbus in the *Dialogue* that will be outlined in this section. Above all, these differences can help us to read the *Dialogue* as Leopardi's poetic understanding of his own transition to metaphysics.

The most noticeable difference with Columbus' emblem in *Ad Angelo Mai*, is that in the dialogue the transformation of the world into naught is not the effect, but rather the cause of Columbus' travel. Columbus does not invent naught: he measures it. The world is no longer nullified *at a certain point*, or at least it is no longer important when and where the world has been measured; the chronology of this nullification is left aside, displaced by the idea that this nullification is rather a continuous event that proceeds through increasing degrees of measurement. In *Ad Angelo Mai* Columbus was departing from a continent where the dominion of imagination was still powerful, where it was still possible to wonder about the Antipodes, and to believe the Ocean was the sun's nocturnal abode. In the *Dialogue*, the land Columbus abandons, old Europe, is a land already dominated by reason and uniformity, a land already full of boredom and naught. This difference in the starting point of Columbus' travel implies that, even before the

geographical measurement of the world, there is an implicit metaphysical measurement, which consists in the fact that life is experienced as naught.

In 1822, in the *Comparison of the last words of Marcus Brutus and Teophrastus*, Leopardi had described the precocious discovery of the valueslessness of life made by Teophrastus and Brutus in Antiquity, that is to say in a world that had not yet been subjugated by the sovereignty of reason. Speaking of Brutus's last words — which according to Cassio Dio were «O miserable virtue! Thou art but a mere phrase, and I have followed thee, as though thou wert a reality» — Leopardi writes: «The utterance of Brutus, (...), was one of those inspirations of misfortune which sometimes open out a new world to our minds, and persuade us of truths that require a long time for the mere intelligence to discover.»³⁰² At the end of the ancient world, at the moment when «the whole of antiquity, that is, the old customs and characteristics of the civilised world, were at the point of death»³⁰³, Brutus discovered a *new world*, where the supreme illusions faded. This new world, which is the world of boredom, is also the world that Columbus and Gutierrez inhabit. The metaphysical insight of the valueslessness of all things does no longer belong to exceptional individuals as Brutus, or to some exclusive intellectual circle as Teophrastus's Peripatus; rather, boredom is a common and unavoidable experience in the land Columbus and Gutierrez have left behind.

³⁰² G. Leopardi, *Comparison of the last words of Marcus Brutus and Teophrastus*, in s. a., *Essays and Dialogues*, tr. by C. Edwardes, Boston, Osgood, 1882, p. 200.

³⁰³ Ivi, pp. 204-205.

3. Science and fear

In fact, it is the voice of Gutierrez, the voice of a man whose knowledge never trespasses the limits of an educated common sense, that pronounces the word *noia* (boredom) for the first time in the dialogue: «(...) I am rather weary of this voyage, which turns out to be so much longer than I expected.»³⁰⁴ As the only remedy for boredom is distraction, Gutierrez asks Columbus to reveal him, «just for the sake of some talk»³⁰⁵, if he is still confident in his project as he was at the beginning of the travel, or if the many negative experiences he had, have finally made him reconsider the idea of finding a land beyond the Ocean. In his answer Columbus discloses his doubts; at an empirical level, several false impressions of having arrived at his destination, raise doubt surrounding the possibility of ever arriving at all. At a higher level of abstraction, Columbus doubts the “conjecture” (*congettura*) based on which he has embarked on the enterprise. He describes this conjecture as scientifically sound, but this is not enough in order to make it certain. Knowledge, and therefore science, is based on a process of abstraction that generalizes particular experiences to a wider context. That is to say, it seeks uniformity in a manifold of individual experiences. This generalization, however, can always fail because of nature’s power of creating what we could call “difformities” (*deformita’*), unforeseen failures of expected regularity. Columbus knows that the conjecture on the basis of which he is traveling, although approved by the most cultivated people of Europe, in the end is nothing more than a “speculative conjecture”, so that its conformity to nature has to be empirically proven. Through

³⁰⁴ G. Leopardi, *Dialogue between Christopher Columbus and Pierre Gutierrez*, in *Essays and Dialogues*, p. 139: «(...) questa navigazione mi riesce un poco più lunga che io non aveva creduto, e mi dà un poco di noia».

³⁰⁵ Ivi.

Columbus words, Leopardi describes the frailty of science in front of the power of difformity of nature.

In this respect, again, the image of Columbus emerging from the *Dialogue* is widely different from the one we have seen in *Ad Angelo Mai*. While Columbus in the *canzone* was the involuntary hero of reason, a man of antiquity who almost by accident accomplished the world-measurement, the Columbus of the *Dialogue* is aware of the meaning of his enterprise, and understands the scientific scope of his journey, along with the fact that he is bringing uniformity into the difformity of nature. A key word of the dialogue is “conjecture”, through which Leopardi describes scientific reasoning. But science here is described, unexpectedly, not as an infallible method, but as a risk consciously taken. In order to clarify the nature of this risk, Columbus stresses the difference between the unknown fancied by the ancients and the unknown he talks about³⁰⁶. At the level of science, the unknown is not the possibility of the encounter with new species, with things that have not yet been brought under the sovereignty of reason. The expansion of the sphere of measurement demands the continual conquering of new territories, and the reduction of novelty to measure is an essential element of the logic of scientific discovery, which is for Leopardi the logic of reason’s sovereignty. The unknown for science is the risk that scientific “conjecture” and “discourse” are proven wrong by “experience”. The true unknown of reason is the failure of its sovereignty. Here Columbus proceeds to enumerate the different levels at which the “discourse” of science could be proven wrong: from geology, to

³⁰⁶Cf. *ivi*, p. 141: «I do not infer that the fables of the ancients regarding the wonders of the undiscovered world and this ocean are at all credible. Annonus, for instance, said of these parts, that the nights were illumined by flames, and the glow of fiery torrents, which emptied themselves into the sea. We observe also, how foolish hitherto have been all the fears of miraculous and terrible novelties felt by our fellow- sailors during the voyage ; as when, on coming to that stretch of seaweed, which made as it were a meadow in the sea, and impeded us so greatly, they imagined we had reached the verge of navigable waters.»

biology, up to anthropology, Columbus describes the possibility that on the other side of the world things could differ from those we are accustomed to:

(...) on the other hand, I remember how seldom reality agrees with expectation. I ask myself, "What ground have you for believing that both hemispheres resemble each other, so that the western, like the eastern, is part land and part water? Why may it not be one immense sea? Or instead of land and water, may it not contain some other element? And, supposing it to have land and water like the other, why may it not be uninhabited? or even uninhabitable? If it be peopled as numerously as our hemisphere, what proof have you that rational beings are to be found there, as in ours? And if so, why not some other intelligent animals instead of men? Supposing they be men, why not of a kind very different from those you are acquainted with; for instance, with much larger bodies, stronger, more skilful, naturally gifted, with much more genius and intelligence, more civilised, and richer in sciences and arts?"³⁰⁷

This description of an unknown "otherness" subtly creates a sense of uneasiness that peaks in the uncanny image of an intelligent species whose intelligence is different from the human one. Here the unknown beyond the ocean reveals itself in all its fearful monstrosity. Not yet determined as a fear of a monster, like that of the ancients, this is fear of monstrosity itself, where the monster is not yet decayed in its fetishized form, but still holds the infinite virtuality of a challenge to the most intrinsic regularities of our experience, up to the very fundamental habits of our thinking and knowing. In its most extreme form, monstrosity dwells in the possibility of discovering oneself as a monster. This possibility can never be grasped directly, but Leopardi gives us an image of it through the mirror of another intelligent species, one that could perceive the monstrosity of our way of thinking. This is the supreme risk for knowledge, the risk of

³⁰⁷ Ivi, p. 141. «Ma da altro canto, considero che la pratica si discorda spesso, anzi il più delle volte, dalla speculazione: e anche dico fra me: che puoi tu sapere che ciascuna parte del mondo si rassomigli alle altre in modo, che essendo l'emisfero d'oriente occupato parte dalla terra e parte dall'acqua, seguiti che anche l'occidentale debba essere diviso tra questa e quella? che puoi sapere che non sia tutto occupato da un mare unico e immenso? o che in vece di terra, o anco di terra e d'acqua, non contenga qualche altro elemento? Dato che abbia terre e mari come l'altro, non potrebbe essere che fosse inabitato? anzi inabitabile? Facciamo che non sia meno abitato del nostro: che certezza hai tu che vi abbia creature "razionali, come in questo? e quando pure ve ne abbia, come ti assicuri che sieno uomini, e non qualche altro genere di animali intellettivi? ed essendo uomini; che non sieno differentissimi da quelli che tu conosci? ponghiamo caso, molto maggiori di corpo, più gagliardi, più destri; dotati naturalmente di molto maggiore ingegno e spirito; anche, assai meglio inciviliti, e ricchi di molta più scienza ed arte?»

discovering itself as not belonging to the uniformity that it tries to impose on the unknown. With his words to Gutierrez, Columbus makes almost perceptible the fundamental fact that knowledge at its core is risk, because it is the ability, the capacity for facing the possibility of a radical monstrosity. At the heart of knowledge dwells a fundamental fear of the unknown.

4. The navigation

At this point of the *Dialogue*, almost surrendering to the fear of the unknown, Gutierrez seems to look at Columbus as a soulless monster. He asks Columbus if he is risking his life and that of his own companion solely on the basis of a speculative hypothesis. What Gutierrez fears in Columbus' words is reason detached from life, the pure consequentiality of logic, an inhuman use of intelligence, in brief, all the symptoms Leopardi has outlined in his diagnosis of the age of the sovereignty of reason. Here Leopardi introduces us to the very heart of the problematic that the dialogue tries to articulate. We can provisionally indicate this problematic as the question of the meaning of science. Only where language is interpreted through the category of meaning, semantically, science becomes possible. The question of science "what is this?" is always a question of meaning, ("what does it mean that this is x ?"), and nothing changes when the question is articulated in the practical form "how does this work?" or "how can I make it work?", except that meaning is now interpreted from the standpoint of its effectuality. Through the voice of Gutierrez, Leopardi turns this question upside down, reflecting it back on science itself: he asks Columbus what is the meaning of his travel. Even more, disquieted by the unknown evoked by Columbus' words, Gutierrez asks him if the travel has any meaning at all. An answer to this question cannot be given in the terms of meaning, because this would imply a definition of the

meaning of meaning itself, and therefore an infinite regress. For Leopardi, this would be a way of misunderstanding the question, or, in his own terms, to follow the *word* and not the *thing*. This is why Columbus does not answer the question immediately, but cautiously prepares the terrain on which his answer can be heard.

First he hints at the fact that the tendency to put oneself's life at risk is an extremely common one, and this often happens for reasons of little consequence. Leopardi here touches an argument on which he will return in the *Pensieri*, where he describes the “opprobrious bravery” of merchants and dealers that put their life at risk for money³⁰⁸. Asked by Gutierrez if he is risking his companions' life for frivolous reasons, Columbus answers that his reasons are certainly no less serious than those the crew of the *Santa Maria* is used to.

This argument, however, is rapidly set aside, and Columbus explains that there is a more fearful risk than any risk they will incur in their navigation: it is the risk of boredom. For Leopardi boredom is the absence of risk that generates not from safety (which properly considered does not exist, since it would coincide with pleasure) but from absolute uniformity. In the land that Columbus and Gutierrez have left behind, boredom is not a risk, but a constant fact of life:

If you, and I, and all of us were not now here in this ship, in the middle of this ocean, in this strange solitude, uncertain and hazardous though it be, what should we be doing? How should we be occupied? How should we be spending our time? More joyfully perhaps? More probably, in greater trouble and difficulty; or worse, in a state of ennui ?³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ Leopardi, *Pensieri*, VII: «Havvi, cosa strana a dirsi, un disprezzo della morte e un coraggio più abietto e più disprezzabile che la paura: ed è quello de' negozianti ed altri uomini dediti a far danari, che spessissime volte, per guadagni anche minimi, e per sordidi risparmi, ostinatamente ricusano cautele e provvidenze necessarie alla loro conservazione, e si mettono a pericoli estremi, dove non di rado, eroi vili, periscono con morte vituperata.»

³⁰⁹ Ivi, p. 141.

Boredom can be understood as a risk only from the perspective of the journey, which breaks the uniformity of life under the sovereignty of reason. Yet, the journey is not just a distraction from boredom, since it happens *through* the principle of boredom itself, which is the attempt to introduce uniformity by knowledge. This is why Gutierrez opened the conversation with the fact that the journey is “a bit boring”. Happening through the principle of boredom itself, the journey is an appropriation of boredom, where the sovereignty of reason is shifted to a different terrain, or rather to the perilous waters of the ocean. The meaning of the journey is that it transforms the point of departure. Columbus awakens Gutierrez’s awareness of this transformation, sharing with him the wider horizon wherein the exploration is taking place: «If the voyage be of no other use to us, it is very advantageous, inasmuch as it for a time frees us from ennui, endears life to us, and enhances the value of many things that we should not otherwise esteem.»³¹⁰ To us sailing on the vessel of his philosophical research, Leopardi reveals here the true dimension of his journey through knowledge, entrusting the *Dialogue* with the fundamental image of his thought, the return:

Just as we care nothing for many benefits as soon as we possess them; so sailors cherish and value, very greatly, numerous things that are far from being good, simply because they are deprived of them. Who would think of including a little earth in the catalogue of human benefits? None but navigators; and especially such as ourselves, who, owing to the uncertain nature of our voyage, desire nothing so much as the sight of a tiny piece of land. This is our first thought on awaking, and our last before we fall asleep³¹¹.

The finitude of the world measured by reason appears now in a different light. It is exactly because the world can be measured that a return to *terra firma* is possible. Not just the spatial movement bringing back Columbus to the shores of Europe, return here is more essentially a

³¹⁰ Ivi, 142.

³¹¹ Ivi.

return from boredom, which implies the end of uniformity, and the decline of reason's sovereignty.

5. The jump of Lefkada

How can we understand the end of the encirclement of the world by reason, the end of the age of measurement? How is it possible that reason's sovereignty ends with the fulfillment of the world's measurement? In order to illuminate the return, Leopardi juxtaposes the image of another spatial movement to that of navigation. It is the image of the jump of Lefkada:

You remember perhaps what the ancients say about unfortunate lovers. These used to throw themselves from the rock of St.Maur (then called Leucadia) into the sea; being rescued therefrom, they found themselves, thanks to Apollo, delivered from their love passion. Whether or not this be credible, I am quite sure that the lovers, having escaped their danger, for a short time even with out Apollo's assistance, loved the life they previously hated; or loved and valued it increasingly³¹².

Leopardi had considered for a while the idea of writing a separate piece on the jump of Lefkada, and across his writings there are a number of references to this tradition. Two years before writing the *Dialogue*, Leopardi, following a legend reported in Ovid's *Epistulae*, had written a poem on Saffo's leap from the cliff of Lefkada. The poem marks in Leopardi's poetic itinerary the crisis of the humanistic ideology which Leopardi had proposed in *Ad Angelo Mai*, as return to the dialogue with non-unveiled nature. Through the image of Saffo's suicide, Leopardi suddenly transposed to antiquity the sorrow that before that moment he had interpreted as the trademark of modernity. This poetic turning point corresponds to the beginning of Leopardi's philosophical

³¹² Ivi, p. 142. «Scrivono gli antichi, come avrai letto o udito, che gli amanti infelici, gittandosi dal sasso di Santa Maura (che allora si diceva di Leucade) giù nella marina, e scampandone; restavano, per grazia di Apollo, liberi dalla passione amorosa. Io non so se egli si debba credere che ottenessero questo effetto, ma so bene che, usciti di quel pericolo, avranno per un poco di tempo, anco senza il favore di Apollo, avuta cara la vita, che prima avevano in odio; o pure avuta più cara e più pregiata che innanzi.»

transition from *philosophy of society* to *metaphysics*. In the *Zibaldone* the tradition of the leap of Lefkada appears in connection with the idea of a liberation from a supreme peril. The first mention of the leap of Lefkada appears in an early annotation, where Leopardi connects this tradition with an autobiographical sketch:

I was extremely weary of life, and was by the side of a pool in my garden, looking into the water and bending over it. With a certain shudder, I thought, if I were to throw myself in, as soon as I floated to the surface, I would climb over the side of the pool, and, as I pulled myself out, having feared that I might perish and returning unharmed, I would experience a brief moment of contentment at having saved myself, and of affection for this life which I now disdain so, and which would then seem to me more worthwhile. The tradition about the leap from Lefkada could be based upon an observation such as this.³¹³

A second reference to the leap of Leucades in the *Zibaldone* occurs in a quotation from the *Voyage d'Anakarsis*, where it is given as a different version of the tradition, according to which during the feast of Apollo, a man sentenced to death was thrown from the cliff of Lefkada³¹⁴. Leopardi connects this quotation with a fragment of the *Zibaldone* on the logic of the institution of sacrifice, where he speaks about «the custom of sacrifices originating in the egoism of fear.»³¹⁵ The jump of Lefkada is read here as a form of sacrifice, necessitated by an uncontrollable outburst of fear within the community. According to Leopardi, the fear from which the sacrifice

³¹³ Zib. 82: «Io era oltremodo annoiato della vita, sull'orlo della vasca del mio giardino, e guardando l'acqua e curvandomi sopra con un certo fremito, pensava: s'io mi gittassi qui dentro, immediatamente venuto a galla, mi arrampicherei sopra quest'orlo, e sforzandomi di uscir fuori dopo aver temuto assai di perdere questa vita, ritornato illeso, proverei qualche istante di contento per essermi salvato, e di affetto a questa vita che ora tanto disprezzo, e che allora mi parrebbe più pregevole. La tradizione intorno al salto di Leucade poteva avere per fondamento un'osservazione simile a questa.»

³¹⁴ Zib. 2673: «Alla p.2670. Le peuple de Leucade qui célèbre tous les ans la fête d'Apollon, est dans l'usage d'offrir à ce dieu un sacrifice expiatoire, et de détourner sur la tête de la victime tous les fléaux dont il est menacé. On choisit pour cet effet un homme condamné à subir le dernier supplice. On le précipite dans la mer du haut de la montagne de Leucade. Il périt rarement dans les flots; et après l'en avoir sauvé, on le bannit à perpétuité des terres de Leucade. (Strab. l.10. p.452. Ampel. memorab. c.8.) Voyage d'Anacharsis etc. ch.36. t.3. p.402»

³¹⁵ Zib. 2670: «l'uso de' sacrifici nacque dall'egoismo del timore.»

originates comes from an excess of egoism³¹⁶: in front of an impending peril the community ceases to perceive itself as a community, and egoism threatens the survival of the polis. Sacrifice, as a shared representation of the impending peril, exorcises fear and alleviates egoism, allowing the survival of the community.

These two references read the image of the jump of Leucades at different levels, respectively individual and political. The logic of the image however remains the same: the experience of a supreme peril, even in the mediated form of sacrifice, where peril is only represented, brings to an end a state in which life, communal or individual, does not perceive itself as living. The image of the jump of Leucades is for Leopardi an image of catharsis, interpreted as a moment of liberation from fear which happens through the perception of one's own life in the moment of the exposure to its loss.

³¹⁶ Zib. 2387-9: «Ni sabian que pudiesse haver sacrificio sin que muriesse alguno por la salud de los demàs. Parole di Magiscatzin, vecchio Senatore Tlascalense a Ferdinando Cortès, presso D. Antonio de Solis, Hist. de la Conquista de Mexico, lib.3. capit.3. en Madrid 1748. p.184. col.1. Ecco l'origine e la primitiva ragione de' sacrifici, e idea della divinità. Si stimava invidiosa e nemica degli uomini, perchè gli uomini lo erano per natura fra loro, e per causa delle tempeste ec. le quali appunto si cercava di stornare co' sacrifici. Nè si credeva già primitivamente che gli Dei materialmente godessero della carne o sangue o altro che loro si sacrificava, ma della morte e del male della vittima, e che questo placasse l'odio loro verso i mortali, e la loro invidia. Egoismo del timore, che ho spiegato in altro luogo. Quindi si facevano imprecazioni ed esecrazioni sulla vittima, che non si considerava già come cosa buona, ma come il soggetto su cui doveva scaricarsi tutto l'odio degli Dei, e come sacra solo per questo verso. Quindi quando il timore (o il bisogno, o il desiderio ec.) era maggiore, si sacrificavano uomini, stimando così di soddisfare maggiormente l'odio divino contro di noi. E ciò avveniva o tra' popoli più vili e timidi (e quindi più fieramente egoisti), o più travagliati dalle convulsioni degli elementi (com'erano i Tlascalensi ec.), o ne' tempi più antichi, e quindi più ignoranti, e quindi più paurosi. E nell'estrema paura, si sacrificavano non solo prigionieri, o nemici, o delinquenti ec. come in America, ma compatrioti, consanguinei, figli, per maggiormente saziare l'odio celeste, come Ifigenia ec. Eccesso di egoismo prodotto dall'eccesso del timore, o della necessità, o del desiderio di qualche grazia ec.»

6. The work of genius

The logic of the jump of Leucades — which brings back life through the exposure to its loss — bears an important analogy with the logic of what Leopardi, in an early fragment of the *Zibaldone*, had called the *work of genius*:

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 (whether on account of lofty, powerful passions or something else), 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. And so, while that which is seen in the reality of things grieves and kills the soul, when seen in imitation or any other form in works of genius (e.g., in lyric poetry, which is not, properly speaking, imitation), it opens and revives the heart..³¹⁷

The work of genius of which Leopardi speaks in these lines has a peculiar nature: it is a work of both imagination and reason at the same time. It is a work of imagination because it restores the infinite circularity of imagination imaging itself. Under this respect the work of genius is poetry, and the leap of Leucades can be read as an image of poetry³¹⁸.

A brief look at the context of the sources jump to the leap of Leucades will be of some use here.

The tradition of the leap of Leucades is mentioned in a number of classical sources, such as Strabo (10.2.9, C. 452), Menander (fr. 258 K), Photius (*Bibliotheca* 190, 153 a-b), Ovid

³¹⁷ Zib. 259-60: «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, di singanno, nullità, noia e scoraggiamento della vita, o nelle più acerbe e mortifere disgrazie (sia che appartengano alle alte e forti passioni, sia a qualunque altra cosa); 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. E così quello che veduto nella realtà delle cose, accora e uccide l'anima, veduto nell'imitazione o in qualunque altro modo nelle opere di genio (come p.e. nella lirica che non è propriamente imitazione), apre il cuore e ravviva..»

³¹⁸ On this aspect, cf. T.M. Compton, *Victim of the Muses: Poet as Scapegoat, Warrior, and Hero in Greco-Roman and Indo-European Myth And History* (Washington DC, Center for Hellenic Studies 2006).

(*Epistulae*, 15, 171-2) Statius (*Silvae*, V, 154-5) and in Parthenius lost poem *Leucadiae*³¹⁹. Beyond the explicit mentions of the cliff of Leucades, the story of the unfortunate lover that decides to jump off of a cliff to put an end to the sufferings of love is a *topos* of classical literature. It appears, for instance, in Theocritus (*Idylls*, III), Vergil (*Eclogae*, VII, vv.59-60), Propertius (*Elegiae*, II, V.26) and Ausonius (*Idylls*, VI). As a classical *topos* it reemerges in the Italian poetry of the Renaissance, and we find it for instance in Sannazaro's *Arcadia* (the episode of Carino in the VIII prose), in Lollio's *Aretusa* (a.III, sc.3), in Argentieri's *Sfortunato* (a. III, sc.3) and in Tasso's *Aminta* (a.IV, sc.2)³²⁰. In the frame of an interpretation of the *Dialogue of Christopher Columbus and Pietro Gutierrez*, the episode of Ariodante jumping from the cliff in *Orlando Furioso* (V, 57-60) deserves particular attention for at least two reasons. The first is that, differently from other sources that were equally well known and admired by Leopardi, such as Tasso's *Aminta* and the episode of Carino in Sannazaro's *Arcadia*, the cliff of Leucades is explicitly mentioned here. The second is that, given the polarity of the dyad Columbus-Ariosto in *Ad Angelo Mai*, the possibility of a hint to Ariosto in the *Dialogue* resonates on a wide spectrum of meaning. Above all, such a hint can be read as a solution of the polarity between ancient poetry's enigmatic resurrection drawn in *Ad Angelo Mai's* emblem of Ariosto, and ancient poetry's suicide in *Saffo's last Song*.

In light of this connection with *Saffo's last Song*, the jump of Leucades is not just a poetic image of poetry, but rather an image of poetry's destiny, which is that of facing truth. *Saffo's Last Song* is the beginning of Leopardi's own leap from the cliff of Leucades into the ocean of truth. In the

³¹⁹ Cf. B. Gibson, *Commentary*, in Statius, *Silvae* 5, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p.324.

³²⁰ Cf. G. Crocioni, *Per una fonte dell'Aminta*, «Rivista d'Italia», December 1909, p. 964, n.5.

Dialogue Leopardi clarifies the logic of this leap, which is the logic of the *work of genius*. The *work of genius* is not only a work of imagination, but a work of reason as well: it defines the limits of life representing it for what it is, describing the exact dimensions of suffering, giving a palpable experience of sorrow's entirety. In this sense, the work of genius is measurement.

In the *Dialogue* Leopardi hints at the perfect identity of reason and imagination in the work of genius through the coincidence between navigation and the jump of Lefkada: «Every voyage is, in my opinion, comparable to the leap from the Leucadian rock, producing the same useful results, though these are of a more durable kind.»³²¹ Navigation is understood by Leopardi as one of the most ancient among the inventions which have shaped the path of reason's sovereignty. Together with the discovery of fire, the invention of navigation appears to Leopardi as one of the

³²¹G. Leopardi, *Dialogue of Christopher Columbus and Pierre Gutierrez*, in s.a., *Essays and Dialogues*, cit, p. 142: «Ciascuna navigazione è, per giudizio mio, quasi un salto dalla rupe di Leucade, producendo le medesime utilità, ma più durevoli che quello non produrrebbe; al quale, per questo conto, ella è superiore assai.»

most difficult and influential turning points in the history of humanity³²². In these primitive inventions Leopardi reads the first steps of our technological civilization, and therefore the beginnings of the empire of reason, which at its peak manifest itself in the form of metaphysics. Navigation, in the context of the *Dialogue*, can be read as an image of metaphysics. The similarity between navigation and the Leucades jump — and therefore between metaphysics and

³²²Zib. 3645-6: «Fire is one of those materials, one of those terrifying agents like electricity, which nature appears to have deliberately buried, set aside and removed from the sight, senses, and life of animals and the surface of the planet, where this life and vegetation and the whole life of nature is chiefly played out, so as not to manifest it or leave it manifest, save in convulsions of the elements and in accidental or particular phenomena, such as that of volcanoes, that are outside the general order and the ordinary rule of nature. This is how far nature was from intending to make it a material for ordinary and regular use in the lives of animals or any species of animal and on the surface of the planet, and of subjecting it to the will of man in the same way as fruit, grass, etc., and of destining it to be necessary for the happiness and hence the natural perfection of the principal species of terrestrial beings. — Horace (1, ode 3) treats the invention and use of fire as something daring, as defiant of nature as navigation and its invention; and as the origin, principle, and cause of as many evils and diseases, etc., as navigation; and as equally culpable in the corruption, denaturing, and weakening, etc., of the human species.» «Il fuoco è una di quelle materie, di quegli agenti terribili, come l'elettricità, che la natura sembra avere studiosamente seppellito e appartato, e rimosso dalla vista e da' sensi e dalla vita degli animali, e dalla superficie del globo, dove essa vita e la vegetazione e la vita totale della natura ha principalmente luogo, per non manifestarlo o lasciarlo manifestare che nelle convulsioni degli elementi e ne' fenomeni accidentali e particolari, com'è quello de' vulcani, che sono fuor dell'ordine generale e della regola ordinaria della natura. Tanto è lungi ch'ella abbia avuto intenzione di farne una materia d'uso ordinario e regolare nella vita degli animali o di qualsivoglia specie di animali, e nella superficie del globo, e di sottometterlo all'arbitrio dell'uomo, come le frutta o l'erbe ec., e di destinarlo come necessario alla felicità e quindi alla natural perfezione della principale specie di esseri terrestri -Orazio (1. od.3.) considera l'invenzione e l'uso del fuoco come cosa tanto ardità, e come un ardire tanto contro natura, quanto lo è la navigazione, e l'invenzion d'essa; e come origine, principio e cagione di altrettanti mali e morbi ec. di quanti la navigazione; e come altrettanto colpevole della corruzione e snaturamento e indebolimento ec. della specie umana».

poetry — dwells in their ability to transform the point of departure, through their movement towards an end.³²³

7. An experiment

Navigation, jump of Leucades and work of genius are connected for Leopardi by the subtle thread of the return, the idea of discovering the unknowns of the place where we already are. This return can be thought of as the effect of the work of genius, where life is returned to itself by a living image of the sorrows that are bringing it to death. The work of genius does not unmake the world-measurement, but rather, with its fulfillment, unveils the dimension where every measurement is possible. Encompassing the entire circle of world-measuring reason in an image, imagination breaks reason's sovereignty and leaves the measured world floating in an immeasurable space of meaning. In the *Dialogue*, through the poetical character of Columbus, Leopardi gives us a new poetical interpretation of the Renaissance, far beyond that of the humanism of the return of nature delivered in *Ad Angelo Mai*. Or rather, more than an

³²³ In the framework of Leopardi's thought, the residual difference that Leopardi hints at, that is to say the fact that navigation is more lasting and safe when compared with the jump of Leucades, remains somehow enigmatic. Navigation is safer than the jump from the cliff, since it insures itself from the risks of the ocean through technology. Similarly we can think of metaphysics as a form of knowledge which is safer than poetry. Metaphysics explores the unknown through reflection (thought of thought); therefore it self-insures entrance into the unknown by grounding in itself the dominion of truth as certainty. In this sense, the safeness of which Leopardi speaks about here would be the certainty of the shepherd counting his flock at the end of the day, thanks to the *most metaphysical* discovery of the number. The risk that metaphysics takes in the enterprise of the world's measurement is a risk that appears already moderated in the awareness that the conjecture is *just* a conjecture. Still, it remains obscure, at every level, what it means that the effects of navigation are more lasting than those of the jump from the cliff. One way of reading this greater durability of navigation's effects could be interpreting it as a vestige of the trait of absoluteness and definitiveness of Columbus' navigation in *Ad Angelo Mai*, where it was expressed through the character of punctuality of the world measurement. The navigation that achieves a definitive measurement could maybe also achieve a definitive return. As we have seen, however, in the *Dialogue* Leopardi is no longer concerned with the chronological aspect of the world measurement, and therefore it remains unclear what would confer to the return a trait of definitiveness.

interpretation, the one presented in the *Dialogue* is for Leopardi a conjecture, an hypothesis about what could have made the Renaissance possible. And yet, the word hypothesis does not describe properly the nature of Leopardi's late interpretation of the Renaissance. For Leopardi, what is at stake in the question of the Renaissance is not, if it has ever been, a mere interpretation. The project of ultraphilosophy and the interpretation of the Renaissance become one and the same: the design of modern poetry understood as return after the fulfillment of the world's measurement. In order to bring this project beyond the frontiers of reason's sovereignty, the design itself has to be experienced not just as a speculative hypothesis, but as risk. By committing to this hypothesis, the hypothesis of world-measurement's finitude, Leopardi risks his own poetry through the experience of metaphysics. Under the threat of the ban on imagination in the age of reason's sovereignty, Leopardi jumps into metaphysics from the sacrificial cliff of poetry. In a late passage from the *Zibaldone* Leopardi will report a saying of the Renaissance poet Gabriello Chiabrera³²⁴:

This was his way of joking about his own poetry: "he used to say that he was a follower of Christopher Columbus, his fellow citizen; he wanted to find a new world or drown."³²⁵

As a matter of fact, in 1828, after six years of poetical silence, Leopardi will return to poetry with a composition poignantly titled *The renaissance*.

Since this return happens via the crossing metaphysics' territories, it is necessary now to outline the fundamental guidelines of Leopardi's crossing of metaphysics in order to understand in what

³²⁴ The context of this quotation, a discussion of the limits of Romanticism, can look at first quite remote from the issue at the stake here. Less so, if we consider Leopardi's understanding of Romantic poetry as a failure at entering in a poetic relation with the age of the world's measurement.

³²⁵ Zib. 4479

sense it has made the return become possible, and what part the concept of Renaissance plays in it. The following chapter will attempt to address these two questions through an exposition of the meaning of and the connections between a small number of fundamental concepts of Leopardi's metaphysics.

Chapter VII

The metaphysics of conformability

Introduction

The preceding chapter has introduced the iconological level of Leopardi's symbolism of the Renaissance, which concerns the relationship between metaphysics and poetry witnessed in his writings. The *Dialogue of Christopher Columbus and Pierre Gutierrez* announces this symbolic level through a number of poetic images. Yet, because of its inner structure, the semantic content of this symbolic level can be accounted for only in reference to the process and the results of Leopardi's philosophical research. For this reason, the symbolic hermeneutic with which this dissertation is concerned has to momentarily pause now, leaving space for philosophical hermeneutics. In doing so, this chapter will outline several aspects of the part of Leopardi's thought which he referred to as "metaphysics".

From the indexes of the *Zibaldone*, drafted by Leopardi himself in 1827, we can have an idea of the materials which he meant to gather and rework in his metaphysical treatise under the title "*Of the nature of men and things*". Nevertheless, we ignore the literary and systematic form that Leopardi would have given to this book, which he thought would have been the "work of his life". We do not know the reasons why Leopardi abandoned the project of this book, nor if these were circumstantial or related to the very content of Leopardi's metaphysics. As a matter of fact, Colletta's reply to the letter where Leopardi announced to him the project of a metaphysical book was rather cold on this subject; in it, Colletta politely expressed his disinterest by protesting his

ignorance. Such a dismissal reflected a shared anti-metaphysical stance that characterized the Vieusseux circle, where knowledge was certainly appreciated, but as an instrument for the transformation of reality³²⁶. At the same time, the very transformative aspect of Leopardi's metaphysical research, its explorative nature, would run the risk of becoming incomprehensible, once it were confined to the framework of a published book. On the contrary the fragmentary state of the *Zibaldone*, left in the form of a true philosophical travelog, appears perfectly suited to express the mobility?fluidity? of Leopardi's thought. In fact, it seems likely that Leopardi had the intention to choose a literary form that would have preserved this dynamic aspect of his thought. In a list of literary projects he hints to his metaphysical book by writing «Philosophical fragments *a la Cousin*». And yet, the literary form philosophical meditation takes on should not be confused with its inner structure. For instance Cousin's *Fragments Philosophiques*, however fragmentary, strictly follows the systematic order he had inherited from the authors of German idealism. Rather than getting rid of a systematic order — an achievement whose difficulty is typically underrated — choosing the literary form of the fragment imposes a specific kind of reading, one in which interpretation inevitably plays a relevant role.

Whatever the reason Leopardi renounced publishing his metaphysical book — be it merely circumstantial or rather based on his dissatisfaction with its very content — the form of Leopardi's metaphysics is hidden and difficult to reconstruct. Dealing with such an absence involves much more than a mere formalistic approach. Systematic order is not just an ornament that thinkers spread on their conceptions once these have already been outlined. As an original disclosure of totality, each genuine metaphysical thought lays down its own specific relation to a

³²⁶ Cf. E. Garin, *Gino Capponi, Storico, linguista, pensatore*, Firenze, Olschki, 1977.

systematic order, giving a determinate and specific meaning to the very idea of the system. To access Leopardi's thought without identifying a systematic thread puts us at risk of missing a great part of his philosophical endeavor.

In the following pages, the exposition of a small number of concepts of Leopardi's metaphysics will be attempted by referring to the philosophical systematic order provided by the Wolffian distinction between *metaphysica specialis* and *generalis*. Following this systematic order does not mean reducing Leopardi's thought to Wolff's late scholasticism, but rather taking into account the way in which Leopardi's thought interacts with the received state of metaphysics as a discipline. Wolffian systematic order is the one that, through the partition of Kant's *Critique of the Pure Reason*, was inherited by the philosophy of the German Romanticism. Through the mediation of Schelling, it permeated the philosophical works of Victor Cousin, the aforementioned author whom, as seen above, Leopardi mentioned in connection with his metaphysical book, and one whom he carefully followed as an intellectual point of reference on the European scene.³²⁷

Besides the general influence and authority which Wolffian systematic order enjoyed in the 18th century, a solid reason for referring to it in the exposition of Leopardi's metaphysics, is that Leopardi had become acquainted with it during his education. As mentioned earlier (cf. Chapter V § 4), Leopardi had learned to approach metaphysics from this systematic perspective from the manuals of Jacquier and Saury, which he studied for his exams in the years 1811-1815. Both these authors explicitly rely on the Wolffian distinction between *metaphysica specialis* and

³²⁷ Cf. Carlo Dionisotti, "Preistoria del pastore errante", in s. a. *Appunti sui moderni: Foscolo, Leopardi, Manzoni e altri*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1988, pp. 157-77.

generalis.³²⁸ In this context, nevertheless, they both introduce a slight variation, since they consider *metaphysica specialis* as a *pneumatology*, unifying under this title the three branches of Wolffian special metaphysics (psychology, cosmology, and theology). In this chapter it will be shown how this specific form of the Wolffian system exerts an influence on Leopardi's metaphysics. However, besides the intertextual references, which only have a relative value, the strongest evidence of Leopardi's acquaintance with the Wolffian systematic order is given by the fact that Leopardi intervenes on several of its vital points, deeply transforming their meaning. It would be hazardous to consider this circumstance as a mere coincidence, as if the extreme technicality of the metaphysical discourse could be reproduced just by chance, or, even worse, because of a logic which is not historical but intrinsic.

The way Leopardi confronts the metaphysical systematic order he inherited from tradition can be better understood thinking of his dialectical attitude towards canonical literary forms. As this chapter will help clarify, there is a striking resemblance between the way Leopardi appropriates the structure of the Leibnitian-Wolffian metaphysics and the way he appropriates the forms of the Italian lyrical tradition, as he had done for instance in *Ad Angelo Mai*. In both cases Leopardi

³²⁸ In the brief introduction that opens his *Elementa Metaphysicae*, Saury writes: "Metaphysics is the science of the being in general and of the spirits. (...) We will divide it into general and particular. General Metaphysics, also known as Ontology, deals with the most general properties of the beings; particular Metaphysics deals with God, and the spirits he created and its called Pneumatic, or Pneumatology". Similarly, in the introduction of his *Institutiones Philosophicae*, Jacquier writes: "Metaphysics is the science of the being in general and of the spirit. Therefore, there are two branches of Metaphysics. One is called Ontology, or general metaphysics, and it deals with the most universal notions of existence, essence, possibility, substance, attributes, and the relations between the beings in general. The other is called Pneumatology or particular metaphysics, and it deals with God the greatest and the best, and the spirits he created." ("Metaphysica definiri solet Entis in genere et spiritum scientia. Hinc dua nascuntur Mataphysicae partes. I Quae Ontologia vel etiam Metaphysica generalis appellatur universalissima existentiae, essentiae, possibilitatis, substantiae, attributi, notiones variasque entium relationes generatim considerat. Pars autem altera quae Pneumatologia vel etiam Metaphysica particularis vocatur, Deum Optimum maximum, spiritisque ab eo creatos contemplatur.") F. JACQUIER, *Institutiones Philosophicae*, Simone Occhi, Venice, 1785, pp. III-IV.

transforms the appropriation of a closed form into an occasion for disclosing the possibilities of poetry at a higher level. As the next chapter will show, the appropriation of metaphysical systematic order creates the conditions for Leopardi's return to poetry in 1828. The finitude that systematic order grants to metaphysics makes it possible for it to reach the point where it comes to an end. Leopardi calls this point *the conclusion of metaphysics*.

Although it reveals the finite nature of Leopardi's philosophical research, the thread offered by the question of the systematic order is not determinate enough in order to grasp the specific character of Leopardi's metaphysics. Fortunately, in the *Zibaldone* there are a number of observations that can help us to understand some general tendencies of his metaphysical research. Before exposing the fundamental traits of Leopardi's metaphysics of conformability, in order to understand its connection with the concept of Renaissance, it can be useful to look at these threads. They will help us to understand certain guidelines along which Leopardi's metaphysics develops.

1. Metaphysics and language

There are only two annotations left by Leopardi about the methodology of metaphysics. Because of their rarity, these observations are extremely precious, and have to be carefully considered. For reasons of exposition the second of these annotations — written in 1822 — will be taken into account first. It reads:

Metaphysics without ideology is almost exactly what Astronomy was before it drew on mathematics. An uncertain science, frivolous, inexact, popular, full of dreams and unsupported conjectures. And metaphysics much more so than astronomy. Metaphysics

receives almost as much certitude and exactitude from ideology as astronomy from mathematics, calculus, etc.³²⁹

With “ideology” Leopardi means a science of representations, the same kind of the sensationalist psychology developed by Locke, followed by Condillac and afterwards by Destutt De Tracey who coined the term³³⁰. By considering ideology as the methodological guideline for metaphysics, Leopardi adheres to the fundamental tendency of modern metaphysics, which addresses its object — being — from the point of view of representation. This tendency, already implicit in the late Renaissance metaphysics of Campanella and Descartes, passing through Leibniz, became fully explicit with Kant’s “copernican revolution”.

The *Theory of Pleasure*, which Leopardi developed in the years 1818-1819, is a theory of representation; it is meant to explain the origin of different sorts of representations, belonging to different intellectual faculties. In its late formulation, through the concept of habituation, it becomes a theory of the epigenesis of these faculties. In light of the fragment on the methodological function of ideology for metaphysics, we can understand the *Theory of Pleasure* as the ideology on which Leopardi meant to establish his metaphysics. In the tradition of Western philosophy, the theories of representation can roughly be divided into two main strands: those whose principle is logical (as in the tradition that goes from Plato to German transcendentalism) and those whose foundation is empirical (as in the tradition that goes from Democritus to Scottish empiricism and French sensationalism). While Leopardi’s *Theory of Pleasure* seems in

³²⁹ Zib.2334: «La metafisica senza l’ideologia, è quasi appunto quello ch’era l’Astronomia prima che fosse applicata alla matematica. Scienza incertissima, frivola, inesatta, volgarissima, o piena di sogni e di congetture senz’appoggio. E molto più la metafisica che l’astronomia. Nè molto minor certezza ed esattezza riceve la metafisica dall’ideologia che l’astronomia dalla matematica, dal calcolo ec.»

³³⁰ Cf. E. KENNEDY, “Ideology” from Destutt De Tracey to Marx, «Journal of the History of Ideas», Vol. 40, No. 3, Jul. - Sep., 1979, pp. 353-69.

many respects closer to the latter, his theory of representation relies on a principle of a different kind: the ideology on which Leopardi's metaphysics rests is grounded in the realm of aesthetics. In this section a connection will be outlined between Leopardi's "poetic of vagueness" and his *Theory of Pleasure*, in order to clarify the particular nature of the ideology Leopardi lays out as methodological fundament for his metaphysical research.

In a fragment of the *Zibaldone* Leopardi thinks of ideology as interchangeable with something he calls a "science of language": «Ideology contains the principles of all the sciences and branches of knowledge, and especially of the science of language. But conversely, one can say that the science of language contains all of ideology.³³¹» In this fragment, "science of language" is coextensive with ideology, on the implicit assumption that there can be no representation outside of language³³². The "science of language" of which Leopardi is thinking here, is a philosophical philology of a kind that did not exist in his time, and still has to be found. From the linguistic fragments of the *Zibaldone* we can infer that, besides the history and the systematic order of language, such a science would have also encompassed a *poetics*, meaning a theory of the aesthetic aspects of language. In fact, the most evident connection between the ideology of the *Theory of Pleasure* and Leopardi's linguistic annotations is given by several fragments in the *Zibaldone* in which Leopardi stresses the capacity of ancient languages, notably Greek and Latin, to convey an aesthetic idea of vagueness and indeterminacy:

³³¹ Zib. 1608: «L'ideologia comprende i principii di tutte le scienze e cognizioni, e segnatamente della scienza della lingua. Ma vicendevolmente si può dire che la scienza della lingua comprende tutta l'ideologia.»

³³² Language, however, is not assumed to be "spoken" language. In the fragment of the shepherd counting the flock, for instance, Leopardi raises the hypothesis that spoken language could have been discovered through the mediation of physical signifiers, as rocks that could have been employed for counting.

The Latin language, so exact, so regular and fixed, nonetheless has many phrases, etc., that by their very nature, and that of the language, have a meaning so vague that knowledge of Latin, no matter how great, is not enough to determine it with precision. And being born Latin would not have been enough, because these phrases are vague in themselves, and a particular phrase and the vagueness of its meaning are in essence inseparable, and the former can't exist without the latter. As in *Georgics* 1, 44. "et Zephyro putris se gleba resolvit" [and the crumbling soil is loosened by Zephyr]. This is a very regular phrase, and yet is regularly and grammatically indefinite in meaning, because no one can say if that Zephyro means exposed to Zephyrus, thanks to Zephyrus, with Zephyrus, etc. Likewise the other phrase, "Sunt lacrimae rerum" ["there are tears in things"], etc., which I spoke about elsewhere. And hundreds and thousands of this and similar types, very regular, very Latin, conforming to grammar and Latin construction, entirely, or almost entirely, without figures of speech, and yet vague and indefinable in meaning, not only to us but to the Latins themselves. The Greek language has an even greater abundance of such phrases. You see how the ancient languages had to be poetic, even the most cultured, refined, used, regulated.³³³

The aspect of the ancient languages that Leopardi praises in this passage is their ability to preserve a space for vagueness and indefiniteness in the framework of a fully evolved and regular grammar, where the latter is for Leopardi the fundamental symptom of the diffusion of reason in a certain civilization. Because of this aspect, the ancient languages had the possibility of balancing poetry and reason, something which appears more difficult for modern languages, that tend to lose the ability to express vagueness:

Vedete come dovevano esser poetiche le lingue antiche: anche le più colte, raffinate, adoperate, regolate. Qual è la lingua moderna, che abbia o possa ricevere non dico molte, ma qualche frasi ec. di significato indefinibile, e per la sua propria natura vago, senz'alcuna offesa ec. della gramatica?

In this 1821 passage Leopardi attributes to ancient languages the linguistic and aesthetic property of vagueness. This aspect has to be read in connection with the ideas that Leopardi had

³³³ Zib. 2288-9: «La lingua latina così esatta, così regolata, e definita, ha nondimeno moltissime frasi ec. che per la stessa natura loro, e del linguaggio latino, sono di significato così vago, che a determinarlo, e renderlo preciso non basta qualsivoglia scienza di latino, e non avrebbe bastato l'esser nato latino, perocchè elle son vaghe per se medesime, e quella tal frase e la vaghezza della significazione sono per essenza loro inseparabili, nè quella può sussistere senza questa. Come *Georg.* 1.44. et Zephyro putris se gleba resolvit. Quest'è una frase regolarissima, e nondimeno regolarmente e gramaticalmente indefinita di significazione, perocchè nessuno potrà dire se quel Zephyro significhi al zefiro, per lo zefiro, col zefiro ec. Così quell'altra: Sunt lacrimae rerum ec. della quale altrove ho parlato. E cento mila di questa e simili nature, regolarissime, latinissime, conformissime alla gramatica, e alla costruzione latina, prive o affatto, o quasi affatto d'ogni figura di dizione, e tuttavolta vaghissime e indefinibili di significato, non solo a noi, ma agli stessi latini. Di tali frasi abbonda assai più la lingua greca.»

developed one year before in his *Theory of Pleasure*. There he conceived imagination and reason as faculties representing the unlimited and the limit respectively. At the same time, however, this passage resonates with Leopardi's so-called *poetic of vagueness*, an aesthetic theory which already appears in several fragments of the *Zibaldone* which precede the formulation of the *Theory of Pleasure*. In these passages Leopardi identifies vagueness and indefiniteness as the distinctive and supreme feature of the aesthetic experience.³³⁴ In his late indexes, Leopardi collected some of these fragments on vagueness under the title *Teorica delle arti, della letteratura, etc.*, which would have been divided into *speculative* and *applied* parts. Even if the word *aesthetics* does not explicitly appear in the *Zibaldone*, there are good reasons to think of the fragments collected under this title as designed to compose a treatise of aesthetics.³³⁵ The aesthetic experience of vagueness and indefiniteness is the thread on which, since these early fragments of the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi draws his conception of imagination and reason. The idea of a realm of vagueness distinct from the realm of definitions encloses *in nuce* the distinction between imagination and reason presented in the *Theory of Pleasure*. We can say that Leopardi's understanding of reason as the faculty of representing the limit, is a complement of the aesthetic experience of imagination as the faculty of representing the unlimited.

The fact that Leopardi developed his theory of representation from the ground of aesthetics puts him in a rather solitary position in the philosophical landscape of his age. As Benedetto Croce has argued in his essay *Two mundane sciences: Aesthetics and Economics*, the surfacing of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, together with the appearance of Political Economy, is a

³³⁴ Cf. *Zib.* 26, 61, 75, 100, 170.

³³⁵ Cf. F. CACCIAPUOTI, *Il tempo dell'Entusiasmo*, intr. to G. LEOPARDI, *Teorica delle arti, lettere, ec., parte storica*, Donzelli, Roma, 2002, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

distinctive feature of modernity.³³⁶ And yet, it is hard to find a thinker that has corresponded to this feature of modernity so intimately as Leopardi did. The foundational texts of modern Aesthetics, as Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks*, Burke's *Observations* or Kant's *Critique of the Faculty of Judgment*, all access the realm of aesthetics from a point of view which already presupposes a theory of representation, respectively characterized as innatism, empiricism or transcendental Logic. The opposite happens in the *Zibaldone*, where the theory of representation originates from a number of observations based in the aesthetic realm. The centrality of aesthetics in Leopardi's thought cannot be overstated: it is in this field that he places his fundamental question on happiness. In this respect, in the landscape of the nineteenth century philosophical thought, Leopardi's position appears unique. A comparison with Kierkegaard's aesthetic research would fail to grasp this aspect, since in Kierkegaard's writings aesthetics only appears as a moment of the ethical becoming. In light of Croce's idea of aesthetics and economics as the two mundane sciences defining modernity, the predominance of the aesthetic moment in Leopardi can be better understood as specular to the predominance of the politico-economical moment in Marx. Such a specularity can be seen as the cause of the different determinations which materialism assumes in both of them. Marx's practical materialism, grounded on the appropriation of reality through work, invertedly mirrors the aesthetic materialism of Leopardi, where reality is shaped by desire. Such a desire, however, is considered by Leopardi not so much as an active expression of subjectivity, but rather as a condition of suffering. Where Marx's materialism is energetic, Leopardi's materialism has a pathetic nature, so that suffering here replaces work. However specular, these two materialisms share an

³³⁶ B. CROCE, *Le due Scienze Mondane: l'Estetica e l'Economica*, "La Critica. Rivista di Letteratura, Storia, Filosofia, diretta da B. Croce", 29, 1931, pp.401-12.

important common trait. Both work and suffering are figures of negativity: by the measure in which they are not something substantial, they can be transformative principles of reality. For both Leopardi and Marx, reality cannot be grasped as a given. Its processual nature signals the distance of these two materialisms from those of the Enlightenment, as much as from every form of positivism. In both cases, materialism is conceived in a way that gives a fundamental role to the historical dimension.

The fact that Leopardi's metaphysics develops from an aesthetic core can largely account for the difficulty of finding Leopardi's place in the history of western philosophy. This is a difficulty which is not yet overcome by reducing Leopardi's thought to the bare account of his extremely eclectic sources. Fatally, such an account would run the twin risk of being clear but partial, or complete but confusing. Connecting the question of the sources with the question of the dynamic and the systematic order of Leopardi's thought can be a way to limit these two risks.

2. "The ground of all metaphysics"

It can be argued that not only the "ideology" of the *Theory of Pleasure*, but Leopardi's fundamental metaphysical position itself can be traced back to several aesthetic observations dating from the earliest stages of the *Zibaldone*. On page eight of the *Zibaldone*, at the very beginning of his speculative itinerary, Leopardi writes:

I have two great doubts about the fine arts. First, whether the people can be judges in our times of works of fine art. Second, whether the prototype of beauty is truly in nature, and does not depend upon opinions and habit, which is a second nature. On the first question, if some thought comes to mind, I will write it down later. On the second, I notice that what we regard as proper to a subject (and beauty, one might say, consists entirely in propriety) is what we are accustomed to see as proper, and vice versa with what we regard as improper, etc., and therefore what has such features

seems beautiful to us and what does not seem ugly or defective: even though it does not have them in nature, or vice versa.³³⁷

In this passage the relativity of the aesthetic judgment appears as the offspring of Leopardi's theory of habituation. Both the poetic of vagueness from which the *Theory of Pleasure* develops, and the theory of habituation which so deeply transforms the *Theory of Pleasure* itself, can therefore be traced back to a core of aesthetic problems that Leopardi faces in the earliest stage of the *Zibaldone*. The concept of propriety (*convenienza*) which appears in this fragment plays an important role in this early stage of Leopardi's thought. In this period Leopardi distinguishes between an empty and abstract idea of propriety — which is universal — and the concrete forms of propriety which have been developed through habituation: «The prototype or ideal form of beauty» Leopardi writes «does not exist and is simply the idea of propriety.»³³⁸ From the realm of aesthetics Leopardi rapidly extends to the field of morality his conclusion on the historicity of propriety, writing: «We have what might be called an innate abstract idea of propriety, but what is deemed to be proper in the realm of morals belongs to relative ideas.»³³⁹ It is interesting to observe that while at this stage of his thought Leopardi has already refused an innatist conception — that he refers to as “Platonic” — he still cannot get rid of a certain universal idea of propriety. His attempt to empirically explain the concrete expressions of propriety leaves open the problem of justifying the tendency towards propriety which he found in so many disparate fields. What is most important, however, is that the destruction of an absolute good has the effect of getting rid of an idea of perfection to which the beings should abide. Every existing being is perfect in the

³³⁷ Zib. 8.

³³⁸ Zib. 155

³³⁹ Zib. 209

way it is, and does not need to adhere to an external and superimposed standard of value. This is why Leopardi calls this conception the “system of Optimism”, mistakenly attributing it to Leibniz. Leibniz’s name, however, is not completely out of place here, since it signals Leopardi’s tendency to attribute an ontological meaning to his observations about propriety. Indeed, a few pages later, well before the fragment on his conversion from *philosopher of society* to *metaphysician*, Leopardi appears interested in further extending his observations on the relativity of propriety from the realm of morality to that of metaphysics:

The truth about good and evil, that one thing is good and the other is bad, is believed to be naturally absolute, when in fact it is only relative. This is an immense source of both popular and philosophical errors. This is a vast observation that destroys countless philosophical systems, etc., and resolves and overcomes countless contradictions and difficulties in the broad consideration of things, especially in general, and concerning their relationships. There is almost no other absolute truth, except that All is relative. This must be the basis for all metaphysics.³⁴⁰

This is the other fragment in which Leopardi establishes a methodological guideline for metaphysics as a discipline. A methodological guideline, however, is not yet a metaphysical thesis. About one year later, in September 1821, Leopardi finally lays down the cornerstone of what will later become his metaphysics, with the fundamental metaphysical thesis of the primacy of existence: «Nothing preexists things. Neither forms, nor ideas, neither necessity nor a reason for being, and being thus or thus, etc. etc. Everything is posterior to existence.»³⁴¹

From now on, the residual uncertainty that characterized the earlier stage of Leopardi’s thought will definitely be abandoned, and the conception of the preexistence of ideas will be firmly

³⁴⁰ Zib. 452: «La verità, che una cosa sia buona, che un’altra sia cattiva, vale a dire il bene e il male, si credono naturalmente assoluti, e non sono altro che relativi. Quest’è una fonte immensa di errori e volgari e filosofici. Quest’è un’osservazione vastissima che distrugge infiniti sistemi filosofici ec.; e appiana e toglie infinite contraddizioni e difficoltà nella gran considerazione delle cose, massimamente generale, e appartenente ai loro rapporti. Non v’è quasi altra verità assoluta se non che Tutto è relativo. Questa dev’esser la base di tutta la metafisica.»

³⁴¹ Zib. 1616

refuted.³⁴² While there is no longer place for the conception of a universal idea of propriety, the tendency to propriety remains an open problem that will drive Leopardi to extend his analysis on the role of habituation. What is more important here, however, is that in this stage Leopardi establishes a connection between the problem of the antecedence of the ideas and the question of the absolute. A few days later indeed, Leopardi brings his theory of Optimism so far that he turns the destruction of the absolute into its paradoxical multiplication:

It could be said (but it's a question of names) that my system does not destroy the absolute, but rather multiplies it. That is, it destroys what is considered absolute, and makes absolute what is termed relative. It destroys the abstract and antecedent idea of good and evil, of true and false, of perfect and imperfect independent of all that is. But it makes all possible beings absolutely perfect, that is, perfect in themselves, having the cause of their perfection in themselves and in this, that they exist thus, and are made thus, a perfection independent of any extrinsic cause or necessity, and of any preexistence.³⁴³

The conception of the historical event intended as that which happens only once (cf. Chapter II), here corresponds to the metaphysical project of the multiplicity of the absolutes. Since nothing preexists things, everything that exists is not a case conforming to a pre-established rule, but a unique historical existence. Where there is no antecedent measure of reality, each singularity

³⁴² As it has already been noticed, in this period Leopardi is still interested in finding a compromise with the Church. This passage is immediately followed by a reference to a passage where, according to Leopardi, Augustine would come to his same conclusion, without however supporting it, since it would imply the falsity of the divinity, cf *Zib.* 1616: «Regarding what I have said elsewhere, namely, that once you do away with innate ideas, God is done away with, every truth, every absolute good or evil is done away with, every inequality of perfection, etc., between Beings is done away with, and the system that I call one of Optimism becomes necessary, see a fine passage in St. Augustine, in which, though admitting innate ideas, he acknowledges the truth I mention, in Dutens, Part 1, ch. 2, § 30.2 (3 Sept. 1821.)» Two days later, Leopardi on the contrary refers to two passages from Aquinas that support his conclusions, negating the idea of a perfection antecedent to existence: «Nel tentativo di una transazione tra gli antichi e i moderni aggiunto per terzo tomo dal traduttore Napoletano all'opera del Dutens, Origine delle scoperte attrib. a' moderni, cap. ult. §.2. v. due bei passi di S. Tommaso ne' quali viene ad affermare la perfezione di tutto ciò che è, non rispetto ad alcuna ragione antecedente, ma perciò solo che è così fatto; e la possibilità di altri ordini di cose, diversissimi di perfezione, e infiniti di numero. (25. Sett. 1821.)»

³⁴³ *Zib.* 1791-2: «Si può dire (ma è quistione di nomi) che il mio sistema non distrugge l'assoluto, ma lo moltiplica; cioè distrugge ciò che si ha per assoluto, e rende assoluto ciò che si chiama relativo. Distrugge l'idea astratta ed antecedente del bene e del male, del vero e del falso, del perfetto e imperfetto indipendente da tutto ciò che è; ma rende tutti gli esseri possibili assolutamente perfetti, cioè perfetti per se, aventi la ragione della loro perfezione in se stessi, e in questo, ch'essi esistono così, e sono così fatti; perfezione indipendente da qualunque ragione o necessità estrinseca, e da qualunque preesistenza.»

becomes absolute, because it can be commensurate to the other things only in its own terms, and not on the basis of some external form of measurement. The three relationships of opposition that Leopardi mentions — good and evil, true and false, perfect and imperfect — nominates three essential domains of metaphysics, that is to say ethics, logic and ontology. The word perfection, in this context, has a strictly metaphysical meaning and its use in Leopardi must be understood against the backdrop of the history of metaphysics. The section below outlines this aspect that can help to better understand the dimension in which Leopardi's philosophical research moves.

3. Critique of perfection

In Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, *entelecheia*, together with *energeia* is the concept employed to speak of the unity of matter and form. The Greek word *teleios* which forms the word *entelecheia* can be translated as "end", so that *entelecheia* can roughly be rendered as "completeness". In the successive development of metaphysics, through the Latin translation by the hands of Victorinus and Boethius, *energeia* and *entelecheia* have been thought as *operatio* and *actualitas*, and connected with the notion of *existentia*. When the Renaissance humanist Hermolaus Barbarus rendered *entelecheia* into *perfectihabia*³⁴⁴, by means of an etymological translation he explicated the connection between perfection and existence that was elaborated through the age of the Scholastic. In his *Monadology*, Leibniz refers to Hermolaus Barbarus' translation in a passage in which he indicates the monads as entelechies. Leibniz defines perfection as "the magnitude of

³⁴⁴ H. BARBARUS, *Themistii peripatetici lucidissimi paraphrasis in Aristotelis Posteriora & Physica*, Hyeronimum Scotum, Venetia, 1542, pp. 147-8.

absolute reality”³⁴⁵ according to which each and all the monads come to existence. The intensity of this magnitude varies in the different beings: it is maximum in the divine essence, from where all the created things receive their own perfection and therefore their existence. Perfection as a “magnitude” is the mathematical texture of reality (*ordo*) according to which all things take their respective places in the universe considered as *scala naturae*. The mathematical understanding of perfection of the *Monadology* is the ontological counterpart of Leibniz’s logical project of *calculus ratiocinator*, the project of a universal science modeled on mathematics, first envisaged by Descartes under the name of *mathesis universalis*.

From the standpoint granted by the aesthetic foundation of Leopardi’s philosophical research, Leibniz’s project, together with the mathematical order of the beings according to perfection, appears profoundly problematic. It has been observed that the difficulty of conceiving a space for aesthetics in the frame of Leibniz’s thought has to be connected with the fact that the Leibnitian system tends to exclude contingency³⁴⁶. It is precisely this lack of contingency that Leopardi rejects, moving from the theory of vagueness towards the metaphysics of the multiplicity of the absolutes and the theory of the unicity of the historical event. Leopardi rejects the project of the world measurement on the meter of perfection not as just dangerous but, more fundamentally, as false:

This too is a major source of error in philosophers, especially modern philosophers, who, being used to accuracy and mathematical precision, so routine and so much in fashion nowadays, approach and measure nature with these same norms, and believe that the system of nature should correspond to these principles, and do not believe that anything that is not precise and

³⁴⁵ LEIBNIZ, *Monadology*, XLI.

³⁴⁶ Cf. S. VELOTTI, *Perchè non è possibile un’estetica leibniziana*, in *Le provocazioni dell'estetica. Dibattiti a Gragnano*, a cura di Grazia Marchianò (ed.), Trauben, Torino, 1999, 281-90. As Velotti puts it “è l’impossibilità, nel quadro teorico leibniziano, di lasciare davvero spazio alla contingenza ciò che non permette - come Leibniz stesso sapeva - la possibilità di una riflessione estetica”.

mathematically exact is natural; whereas, on the contrary, it could well be said that everything precise is not natural, that indubitably it is a key attribute of nature not to be precise. But this same error is akin to that entailed by supposing that the true, the beautiful, the good, absolute perfection are to be found in the world of things.³⁴⁷

Leopardi's understanding of Leibniz's metaphysics of perfection is probably mediated by the manuals of metaphysics he had studied. Both Jacquier and Saury devote a paragraph to perfection in the part titled *Metaphysica generalis*, where "*perfectio*" appears as one of the fundamental attributes of the beings, together with "*ordo*" and "*veritas*". Jacquier defines perfection as "*consensus in varietate, sea plurium a se invicem differentium in unum consensio.*"

³⁴⁸ For Saury perfection is "harmony between manifold things, which are meant to attain one and the same good"³⁴⁹. Both the authors also call perfection "*bonitas transcendentalis*", meaning that all the existing beings have been created by the divinity in order to serve a purpose, so that their perfection is a precondition of their existence. In this respect, perfection is strictly related with the doctrine of the transcendentals. The *unum* on which the multiplicity of the *ordo* rests and the *verum* which grants its *veritas* — the fact that of being what it is — to each element of the *ordo*, converge in the *bonum* of the *bonitas transcendentalis*. In this context, perfection appears inextricably related with the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason *omnis ens habet rationem*: the reason of the existence of all the things is perfection, which is their ability to serve a pre-established purpose. This purpose is determined and called into existence by the absolute

³⁴⁷ Zib. 584-5: «Questa pure è una gran fonte di errori ne' filosofi, massime moderni, i quali assuefatti all'esattezza e precisione matematica, tanto usuale e di moda oggidì, considerano e misurano la natura con queste norme, credono che il sistema della natura debba corrispondere a questi principii; e non credono naturale quello che non è preciso e matematicamente esatto: quando anzi per lo contrario, si può dir tutto il preciso non è naturale: certo è un gran carattere del naturale il non esser preciso. Ma il detto errore è fratello di quello che suppone nelle cose il vero, il bello, il buono, la perfezione assoluta.»

³⁴⁸ F. JACQUIER, *Institutiones*, cit., p.51

³⁴⁹ Saury, p.25.

perfection of the divine essence — the *extrema ratio* which justifies itself and in which all the other things are justified. This is why — both in Jaquier and Saury — the structure of the *Metaphysica generalis* peaks in the principle of sufficient reason.

In the passage on the multiplication of the absolutes, leaving aside the dyads good-evil and true-false, Leopardi discusses only the opposition perfection-imperfection, as if the other two could be subsumed under the latter. Subsuming the ethical and logical contraries under the category of perfection, Leopardi gives primacy to the ontological domain, which he addresses from standpoint provided by the aesthetic categories of the *Theory of Vagueness*. The critique of the relationship between the parts and the whole indicated by the word “perfection” thus becomes the crucial point on which the project of the metaphysics of the multiplication of the absolutes rests. This feature of Leopardi’s metaphysical project can be indicated as a *critique of perfection*. Rather than abandoning the concept of perfection for good, in this passage Leopardi appears interested in conferring a new meaning to it. The destruction of antecedent ideas — intended as models according to which the parts should assemble into a whole — produces here a new kind of perfection: each individual is perfect, not because it is adequate to some external form, but because it exists. Perfection is not a standard to which reality has to abide, but rather reality as such is perfect, in the sense that it does not require further reasons.

The effect of this transvaluation of the concept of perfection is that the Leibnitian principle of sufficient reason *omnis ens habet rationem* no longer holds. Things do not exist because of their degree of perfection, but rather they are perfect because they exist. Perfection is not the cause, but the effect of existence. Existence has no reasons. A few months before Leopardi had written: «In short, the principle of things, and indeed of God, is nothingness. Since no thing is absolutely

necessary, that is, there is no absolute reason why it cannot not be, or not be in a specific way, etc.»³⁵⁰ The destruction of antecedent reasons destroys the idea of the necessity of existence. In this sense the existence of all the things is grounded in naught.

Besides the refusal of Leibniz's *principium grande*, the metaphysics of the multiplication of the absolutes leads to a critique of the other supreme principle that both Saury and Jacquier — once more, following Wolff's systematic order — discuss in their *metaphysica generalis*, that is to say Aristotle's principle of non contradiction. In its most comprehensive formulation, this principle states: «It is impossible for the same thing to belong and not to belong at the same time to the same thing and in the same respect» (*Metaph.* IV, 1005b19-20).] According to Leopardi, the destruction of antecedent ideas deprives the principle of noncontradiction of its natural terrain:

Thus all relative perfections become absolute, and absolutes, instead of vanishing, multiply, and in such a way that they can be both diverse and contrary to one another. Whereas hitherto contrariety has been supposed impossible in everything that was absolutely denied or affirmed, everything that was reckoned to be absolutely and independently good or bad, with contrariety, and its possibility, being restricted to relatives, and their ideas.³⁵¹

Where there is a multiplicity of absolutes, the principle of noncontradiction is put into question.

The existence of relationships of contrariety can no longer be regarded as simply relative: if contrariety exists, it is a contrariety between absolutes, and therefore an absolute contrariety.

³⁵⁰ Zib. 1341: «Insomma il principio delle cose e di Dio stesso è il nulla. Giacchè nessuna cosa è assolutamente necessaria, cioè non v'è ragione assoluta perch'ella non possa non essere, o non essere in quel tal modo ec.»

³⁵¹ Zib. 1792: «Così tutte le perfezioni relative diventano assolute, e gli assoluti in luogo di svanire, si moltiplicano, e in modo ch'essi ponno essere e diversi e contrari fra loro; laddove finora si è supposta impossibile la contrarietà in tutto ciò che assolutamente si negava o affermava, che si stimava assolutamente e indipendentemente buono o cattivo; restringendo la contrarietà, e la possibilità sua, a' soli relativi, e loro idee.»

Leopardi's critique of perfection, passing through the fundamental systematic knots of the Leibnizian-Wolffian *metaphysica generalis*, ends by putting into question a fundamental aspect of the corresponding *metaphysica specialis*, which is the idea of the perfectibility of the human being:

Once the idea of absolute perfection, along with innate ideas, has been destroyed, and relative perfection, that is, the state that is perfectly in accord with the nature of each kind of being, has been substituted for it, we start to give up on demented ideas of an increment in perfection, of the acquisition of additional good qualities (which are no longer good in themselves, as used to be believed), of a perfection modeled on false ideas of absolute and of absolutely greater or lesser good and evil, and we conclude that man is perfect as he is in nature, once his faculties have attained the degree of development that nature originally both ordained for him and pointed out to him.³⁵²

4. Transitory nature of the metaphysical fragments of summer 1821

The systematic articulation of the metaphysics of the absolutes's multiplication which has been sketched here shows a number of weaknesses, which Leopardi can hardly have ignored.

The attempt to destroy the principle of noncontradiction, for instance, is severely lacking in various respects. The main one is that Leopardi's multiplication of the absolute and transvaluation of perfection appears here as the presupposition of a conclusion. Stating that things are perfect because, or rather, *as far as* they exist, Leopardi ends up duplicating the concept of existence with that of perfection, without granting the latter a determinate content. In this respect the thesis of the multiplication of the absolutes resolves into a tautology: all the things that exist are existing things. The destruction of the principle of noncontradiction attempted on these premises appears weak, insofar as rather than proving the existence of absolute contradiction, it simply states the compossibility of different existing things, which are

³⁵² Zib. 1618

contrary to each other only because they are different from one another. Most of all, the set of propositions presented in this section appears weakened by the fact that Leopardi in this period tried to avoid exposing his system to the accusation of atheism. A number of passages in which he defined divinity as infinite possibility, show his attempt to open a space for theology in absence of the principle of sufficient reason³⁵³, meaning a theology where the divine essence is not thought of as necessary. The annotations of the first week of September 1821 show intense oscillations in this respect. A long fragment dated September 3, 1821, for instance, opens saying «It is true that nothing preexists things. Necessity therefore does not preexist. But possibility does preexist»³⁵⁴and closes «So infinite possibility is the only absolute thing. It is necessary, and preexists things. This existence is nowhere else but in God. »³⁵⁵ While writing these fragments, Leopardi was probably tempted to think of the infinite possibility of the divinity as naught, following the thread of his annotations written a few months before on naught as the origin of all things. Such a hypostatization of naught, however, ended up reintroducing an antecedent necessity before existence. Once hypostatized into the concept of infinite possibility, naught becomes something which does not only paradoxically “exist”, but most importantly, precedes the existence of all the other things as their transcendental reason. Naught — considered as absolute possibility — becomes in this sense an antecedent condition of reality. Moving from the ontology of the multiplicity of the absolutes to the theology of naught, the antecedent reason that

³⁵³ Zib. 1614-5, 1619-23, 1625-6, 1645-6

³⁵⁴ Zib. 1619: «È vero che niente preesiste alle cose. Non preesiste dunque la necessità. Ma pur preesiste la possibilità.»

³⁵⁵ Zib. 1623: «Dunque l’infinita possibilità è l’unica cosa assoluta. Ella è necessaria e preesiste alle cose.»

Leopardi was trying to eliminate ends up returning to its place. The fundamental hindrance Leopardi meets on this path is the contradiction inherent to the attempt of outlining a science of the universal conditions of reality (*metaphysica generalis*) which rebukes the very notion of condition of reality.

Hesitations, contradictions and a certain lack of consequent treatment characterize the metaphysical annotations of the late summer 1821. These annotations have to be regarded as sketches that Leopardi meant to rework later, refining certain aspects and eliminating other ones. Many of the perspectives that Leopardi opens in these fragments were later to be abandoned. Most notably, the hypostatization of naught will be firmly dismissed by the footnote added in 1824 to the *Sylvan Rooster Chant*, where the eternity of matter is strongly stated. The preexistence of naught becomes unsustainable in the context of Leopardi's mature thought, coherently with the position according to which possibility is not a cause, but rather an effect of existence. Nevertheless, the metaphysical fragments of the late summer 1821 trace a number of threads which are important for interpreting the development of Leopardi's thought. Moving from a critique of the concept of perfection, these fragments try to get rid of antecedent reasons, and therefore of the Leibnizian *scala naturae*, intended as the mathematical order of the perfections of beings. From now on, Leopardi's metaphysical meditation will take the form of an attack to the core of the metaphysical systematic structure he inherited from tradition. Leopardi individuates this core in the concept of perfection, around which the two principles of non contradiction and sufficient reason revolve. Dismantling this systematic articulation implies getting rid of the concept of human perfectibility, which is the corollary of ontological perfection in *metaphysica specialis*. Together with the refusal of the idea of human perfectibility, the

critique of the concept of perfection, and of the principles of sufficient reason and non contradiction are the four fundamental guidelines that will continue leading Leopardi's metaphysical research. Leopardi's later attempt to draft a consequent set of metaphysical propositions will continue to revolve around these four features. In the rest of this chapter, Leopardi's late metaphysical thought will be described as a *metaphysics of conformability*. The discussion of this aspect of Leopardi's thought will outline why and in what sense this can be considered a conclusive stage of Leopardi's philosophical research³⁵⁶.

5. *Metaphysica specialis* as science of the living

In the indexes of the *Zibaldone* Leopardi drafted in 1827 there are only two occurrences of the word *metaphysics*. It is no coincidence that they both can be found under the entry «life». In Leopardi's mature meditation the concept of life becomes the cornerstone for the metaphysical interpretation of reality. In this respect, Leopardi's mature metaphysical meditation appears indebted with the specific variant of the Wolffian systematic structure that he had found in the treatises of Jacquier and Saury. While in Wolff the *metaphysica specialis* embraced the three branches of *psychology*, *cosmology* and *theology*, both Jacquier and Saury unify these disciplines

³⁵⁶ Because of this character of conclusion, the strict criterion of chronology will be abandoned in the rest of this chapter. The metaphysics of conformability will be considered as the point of arrival of Leopardi's meditation, and the aspects of Leopardi's thought that do not contradict its fundamental theses will be assumed to be part of it, independently from their chronological collocation. Leopardi's thought will be regarded as a tree that during the years has lost some branches, but still retains much of its original material. Suppose that we can only take in account the branches that have been lost because of the internal process of growth, and not those lost because of external agents (human or animal intervention or environmental circumstances such as weather or growth of the surrounding vegetation). The description of the tree will obviously result heavily idealized. The violence of this idealization however is by far less pervasive than the attempt of describing the tree taking in account only the parts which are produced in a specific moment, or rather selecting parts of it without taking in account their role in the process of formation.

in their treatises, considering them as part of a science they refer to as *pneumatology*. The name of such a science is derived from the Greek word *pneuma*, which can be rendered in English as “breath”, but also as spirit, following its Latin rendition *spiritus*. From Melancton to Leibniz, the word pneumatology designates a “science of the finite and infinite spirits”, notably a science of the human, angelic and divine spirit. Wolff’s replacement of pneumatology with psychology — in the twofold form of a rational and empirical science of the human soul — operated a disciplinary distinction between the study of the divine and the human spirit, which granted the latter a wider autonomy, distinguishing it from natural theology. Jacquier’s and Saury’s choice of interpreting *metaphysica specialis* as pneumatology can probably be interpreted as a resistance to the deist tendencies implicit in the Wolffian system. Both Saury and Jacquier embrace Wolff’s general partition of metaphysics, but they try to limit the extent to which Wolff reshaped the disciplinary boundaries of the study of the created world, in order to reinforce the connection between metaphysics and revelation.

What is more interesting however, is that both Jacquier and Saury reserve a section for dealing with the question of the soul of the animals in their pneumatology. Polemicizing against the cartesian notion of the animal as machine, they argue in defense of the existence of the animal's soul.³⁵⁷ The question widely appealed to the young Leopardi, who devoted one of his 1811

Metaphysical Dissertations to this topic, again elaborating on the position of Saury and Jacquier.

³⁵⁷ On this point Jacquier and Saury seem to follow Leibniz’ anti-cartesian stance. Leibniz addresses the problem of the soul of the animals in relation to his conception of the *scala naturae* as the order of perfections. Writing to Wagner in 1710, Leibniz says: «those who deny souls to brutes and all perceptions and organism to other parts of matter, do not sufficiently recognize divine majesty, introducing something unworthy of God and uncultivated, namely a vacuum of perfections or forms, which you may call a metaphysical vacuum and which must be rejected no less than a vacuum of matter or a physical vacuum» (G VII 531/W508). Quoted in *Leibniz reinterpreted*, L. STRICKLAND, Continuum, London, 2006, pp.55-6.

The inclusion of the souls of the animals in pneumatology tended to transform *metaphysica specialis* into a science of the living beings. Such a perspective could still hold true after Leopardi's transition to a strictly materialistic point of view. Under this respect, Leopardi's only pronouncement on the methodology of metaphysics becomes clearer. Ideology, that is to say the science of the origin and the development of representations, is the methodological guideline of metaphysics understood as the science of the living being. That is to say, the thread for the metaphysical interpretation of the living being has to be given by representation, understood as the distinctive feature of life. Indeed, in his juvenile dissertation on the soul of the animals, Leopardi went as far as to maintain that not only animals, but even plants were capable of perceptions. Something of this perspective still holds true for his late metaphysical thought. However, the reformulation of the ideology of the *Theory of Pleasure* as a theory of habituation leads Leopardi to understand representations as the effect of a more essential characteristic of the living being.

6. The theory of conformability as *metaphysica specialis*

The first of the only two occurrences of the word metaphysics in Leopardi's indexes of the *Zibaldone* reads: «metaphysical definition of life». The corresponding passage in the *Zibaldone*, dated September 8, 1823, is the conclusive section of a wider fragment where Leopardi exposes the general results of his theory of habituation in a scholastic fashion. Habituation, Leopardi writes, develops in human beings on the basis of certain *dispositions*. These dispositions can be distinguished in *dispositions to be* or *dispositions providing the potential to be*. Individually, that means taken for themselves, these two kinds of disposition are the same, but they can be

distinguished as far as the first develops in ordinary circumstances (*natural circumstances*, according to the eighteenth-century usage of the word “natural”), while the second develop only in certain extraordinary circumstances. Since for Leopardi no circumstance is strictly speaking “ordinary”, these two kinds of disposition can be considered as two different energetic levels of the tendency towards habituation. Their distinction does not regard the essence but the function of the disposition. The first kind of disposition operates as a centripetal force, tending to preserve and maintain the conditions of the individual, and can therefore be considered as a *quality*, in the sense of a comparatively stable trait of the individual. The second kind of disposition, on the contrary, operates as a centrifugal energy, that tends to dismantle the ordinary configuration of the individual, leading towards new habituations and therefore new dispositions. If we now look retrospectively to the path of Leopardi’s thought on the basis of this passage, we can read the development of reason as an effect of habituation on that general “disposition providing the potential to be” which Leopardi calls *memory* (cf. Chapter V § 1). Most importantly, the dialectic between the two kinds of dispositions allows Leopardi to think of the relationship between law and exception without recurring to preexistent ideas or transcendent models of reality (cf. Chapter II § 2). With the theory of habituation Leopardi does not simply provide a more refined version of his *Theory of Pleasure*, but also creates a theoretical framework that allows understanding of nature’s regularities as the result of a “historical” process, based on events which happens only once. From this point of view, regularities appear as a moment of relative stability in the continuous gradations of exceptions given by the process of habituation. In fact, the passage goes further, extending the idea of the two kinds of dispositions from the human being to the totality of nature:

Similar things can be said of other animals and by degrees applied to other types of creatures, albeit in proportion and with the proviso that in other animals, the inborn dispositions are more to be than potential to be. This means that animals are naturally less adaptable than man is; that as a result of their natural dispositions, not only can they not acquire qualities other than those which nature has reserved to them, which is a property of man too, but they cannot acquire qualities much different from these, unlike man is able to do; that they cannot acquire so many and such varied qualities as man, because man is so supremely adaptable; finally that their natural dispositions do not make possible such a variety of results, and may therefore not be applied and used so variously as those of man may be. Hence animals acquire virtually no qualities other than those reserved to them by nature, become only what nature wanted them to be, what it intended them to become in giving them these dispositions. (...) In the same way, and again in due proportion, coming now to the plant kingdom and hence descending the whole chain of being, you will find that gradually the dispositions are increasingly dispositions to be rather than dispositions of the potential type, that is, they become more and more limited, until we arrive gradually at those beings in which nature has placed neither dispositions to be nor the potential to be, but only qualities. In truth I do not believe there is anything in this category absolutely and strictly speaking, but in broad terms we may say that this planet of ours, considered in its entirety and compared to the solar system or universe, fits in this category, and similarly also the planets and the sun and the stars and other celestial bodies.³⁵⁸

Inanimate matter — corresponding to a minimum of conformability — occupies the inferior limit in the universe understood as a continuous gradation of conformability encompassing all beings, from the human kind to the celestial bodies. At the extreme opposite of inanimate matter — occupying the superior limit of this gradation — stands the “moral or spiritual” part of man:

Climbing back up to man from this category of beings, we will find a gradual decrease according to the order of species and genera in the number, effectiveness, and importance of “the qualities engendered by nature in each of those genera or species, and a parallel increase in the number or extensiveness, the variety or rather the variability or adaptability of the dispositions engendered in them by nature; we will find that from the beginning these dispositions are almost entirely dispositions to be, and later on also with the potential to be, increasingly so as we ascend from

³⁵⁸ Zib. 3377-8. «Similmente si discorra degli altri animali, e di mano in mano degli altri generi di creature, con quest'avvertenza però e con questa proporzione, che negli altri animali, le disposizioni [3377]ingenite sono più ad essere che a poter essere; il che vuol dire che gli animali sono naturalmente meno conformabili dell'uomo; che essi per le loro naturali disposizioni, non solo non debbono acquistare altre qualità che le destinate loro dalla natura, il che è proprio anche dell'uomo, ma non possono acquistarne molto diverse da queste, come l'uomo può; non possono acquistar tante e così varie qualità, come l'uomo può, per essere sommamente conformabile: in fine che le loro naturali disposizioni non rendono possibile tanta varietà di risultati, non possono esser così diversamente applicate e usate come quelle dell'uomo. (...) In questo modo e con questa proporzione passando ai vegetabili, e quindi scendendo per tutta la catena degli esseri, troverete che le naturali disposizioni sono di mano in mano sempre maggiormente ad essere che a poter essere, cioè si restringono, finché gradatamente si arrivi a quegli enti ne' quali la natura non ha posto disposizioni nè ad essere nè a poter essere, ma solo qualità. Del qual genere io non credo che alcuna cosa si possa in verità trovare, esattamente e strettamente parlando, ma largamente si potrà dire che di tal genere sia questo nostro globo tutto insieme considerato e rispetto al sistema solare o universale, e similmente i pianeti e il sole e le stelle e gli altri globi celesti.»

plants to polyps and from these through the various species of animal until we reach the monkey, and savage man, and from these species man himself. In the part of man described as being moral or spiritual, we will find, as I have said, that nature by its own hand has placed virtually no fixed qualities whatsoever, or hardly any, and these being very simple, all the rest being dispositions not merely to be but with the potential to make man become many different things and acquire various different qualities, so many more than any other kind of creature known to us.³⁵⁹

While drawing the general lines of his theory of habituation, Leopardi stressed a certain similarity between his attempt and the path traced by Leibniz towards the construction of an overall order of the beings in the form of a *scala naturae*. In a note of the *Zibaldone* written in September 1821, he interpreted the theory of habituation as an explanation of the Leibnizian principle “la nature ne fait jamais des sauts”³⁶⁰:

“The Leibnizians’ axiom (if I am not mistaken) nihil in natura fieri per saltum [nothing in nature proceeds by leaps], the continuous gradation by which nature habituates things to very different states, and conceals the passage from winter to summer, etc. etc. etc., of which Xenophon speaks, does it not all show that nature is a system of habituation? Gradation entails habituation, and vice versa.³⁶¹

Although retaining this aspect of continuity, the 1823 fragment quoted above construes a *scala naturae* which is incompatible with the Leibnizian one. For Leibniz, the classificatory principle of the *scala naturae* was perfection. Consistently with his critique of the concept of perfection,

³⁵⁹ Zib. 3379-80. «Da questo genere di esseri rimontando indietro per insino all’uomo, troveremo sempre di mano in mano decrescere secondo l’ordine delle specie e de’ generi, il numero e l’efficacia e importanza delle qualità ingenerate in ciascun di essi generi o specie dalla natura, e crescere altrettanto il numero o l’estensione, la varietà o piuttosto la variabilità o adattabilità delle disposizioni in esse dalla natura ingenerate: e queste disposizioni esser da principio solamente, o quasi del tutto, ad essere, poscia eziandio a poter essere, e ciò sempre più, salendo pe’ vegetabili ai polipi, indi per le varie specie d’animali fino alla scimia, e all’uomo salvatico, e da queste specie all’uomo. Nella cui parte che si chiama morale o spirituale, troveremo, come ho detto, che la natura non ha posto di sua mano quasi veruna qualità determinata, se non pochissime, e queste, semplicissime: tutto il resto disposizioni, non solo ad essere, ma a poter essere tante cose, ed acquistare tanto varie qualità, quanto niun altro genere di enti a noi noti.»

³⁶⁰ G. Leibniz, *Nouveaux essais sur l’entendement humain*, IV, 16:[2]

³⁶¹ Zib. 1658. «L’assioma de’ Leibniziani (se non erro) nihil in natura fieri per saltum, quella gradazione continua con cui la natura assuefa le cose a diversissimi stati, e nasconde il passaggio dall’inverno all’estate, ec. ec. ec. del che parla Senofonte, tutto ciò non dimostra egli che tutta la natura è un sistema di assuefazione? La gradazione importa l’assuefazione, e viceversa.»

Leopardi refuses this point of view. Quite surprisingly, however, he construes an alternative model for ordering the totality of the beings according to a quantitative principle. The quantitative principle of the classification presented in this passage is the mathematical proportion between qualities and dispositions, that can be considered the degree of propension to assume new habituations. Such a proportion between qualities and dispositions, indicated with the term *conformability*, is for Leopardi the defining characteristic of life:

(...) life, based on the considerations I have made hitherto, may be defined as a greater or lesser degree of adaptability, a number and value of dispositions prevailing in some way (more or less) over the number and value of innate qualities. Particularly with respect to the spiritual, to the intrinsic, to that which may be said, properly speaking, to live; to that which is properly found and expresses itself in life, in which the vital principle resides, and the faculty of action, internal and external, that is, the faculty of thought and sensory operation, etc. In which faculty life itself properly lies.³⁶²

The word *conformability* does not appear in the main vocabularies of the time. This circumstance can hardly have been ignored by Leopardi. Thus, he must have used the word *conformability* with the strong awareness of creating a new *term*, meaning a word which is employed in a technical sense, expressing a new idea which would otherwise remain vague and undefinable. With this term, the theory of habituation passes from the realm of physiology to that of metaphysics. In order to weigh carefully the dimension in which Leopardi moves with the introduction of this word, it is important to consider the way it is composed. The Italian *conformabilità* is made by the juxtaposition between the prefix *-con* (with), the word *-forma* (form), and the adjectival deverbal suffix *-abilità* (ability). The semantical core of this word is the word *form*. The word *forma* was used by Cicero to translate the Greek word *morphe*. Since

³⁶² Zib. 3381. «(...)la vita si può, secondo le fin qui dette considerazioni, definire una maggiore o minore conformabilità, un numero e valore di disposizioni naturali prevalente in certo modo (più o meno) a quello delle ingenite qualità. Massime rispetto allo spirituale, all'intrinseco, a quello che, propriamente parlando, vive; a quello in che sta propriamente e si esercita la vita, in che siede il principio vitale, e la facoltà dell'azione sia interna sia esterna, cioè la facoltà del pensiero e della sensibile operazione. ec. Nella qual facoltà consiste propriamente la vita ec.»

the very foundation of metaphysics, Plato and Aristotle have used the word *morphe* in order to indicate the correlative of the question «what is this?». The form, understood as the answer to the question «what is this?», is the “essence”, the reason why a thing is what it is. Through the entire history of metaphysics, from Aristotle’s “separate forms” to Marx’s “value-form”, the word “form” nominates both the appearing and the remaining stable of things, in the measure in which they offer themselves to knowledge. *Conformability*, the fundamental word of Leopardi’s metaphysics, can be thought of as a transvaluation of the word form. The form is for Leopardi never left alone to itself, rather it always develops in relation to something else, it is always *with*: the prefix *-con* expresses the fact that the form is always *relative*. Since it develops only in relationship with something else, the form is never something given once and forever. Rather, the form remains just potential until the moment when the circumstances call it into existence, and it perishes when the circumstances no longer allow it to exist: the deverbal adjectival suffix *-ability* expresses the fact that the form is always *contingent*. It is important to observe that Leopardi’s definition of life as conformability is not meant to make a distinction between living and non-living beings: conformability is here considered as the trait that, at different degrees of intensity, characterizes each and all the beings. The passage commented above appears in the indexes of the *Zibaldone* under the entry *metaphysical definition of life*. In the language of metaphysics the term *definition* is closely related with the term *essence*, since the definition is true only if it expresses what the defined thing is, that is to say, only if it is able to grasp the essence of the thing.³⁶³ Leopardi calls *metaphysical* the definition of life as conformability not just because it is

³⁶³ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, VII, 5: «Clearly, then, definition is the formula of the essence, and essence belongs to substances either alone or chiefly and primarily and in the unqualified sense.» (Kessinger Publishing, 2010, tr. by W. D. Ross).

given in the mathematical terms of reason: most of all because it is a definition that encompasses the totality of the beings, subsuming this totality under the point of view of *conformability*. In the traditional terms of metaphysics, Leopardi is thinking here of *conformability* as the essence (*ousía*) of all the beings. *Conformability* is Leopardi's metaphysical word, the word that in Leopardi's thought nominates the totality of beings. The word conformability grasps this totality in its indefinite openness towards the possibility of assuming different and new configurations. As a formula of the informal and a definition of the undefinable, the concept of conformability captures in itself all the contradictions of the essence of that which is without an essence. With such a formulation Leopardi reaches the terrain of the philosophical question which, prepared by the Kantian notion of *reflective judgment* in the third Critique, has been entrusted to the contemporary debate under the name of *form of life* through Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.³⁶⁴ Leopardi's metaphysics of conformability is an attempt to think of the totality of beings from the standpoint of the "form of life", that is to say from the standpoint of a content which finds in itself its own form, and of a life which — following no rules — appears as a rule for itself. The universal — the form — and the particular — the content — become one and the same here, so that the rule does not apply to the case, but it rather stems from it.

We have seen that Leopardi's attempt to construct a general metaphysics through the multiplication of the absolutes had encountered serious hindrances. The difficulties which Leopardi met on this path were related to the inevitable contradictions intrinsic in the attempt to refute the preexistence of every condition of reality through a science of the universal conditions

³⁶⁴ On the notion of *reflective judgment*, cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Faculty of Judgment*, "Analytic of the Judgment of Taste". On the notion of *form of life* in Wittgenstein, Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 19; 23; 241; 485; 539.

of reality. Flipping upside down the systematic structure he studied on the treatises of Saury and Jacquier, Leopardi now gives to the pneumatology of conformability the role of establishing the principles of reality. The replacement of *metaphysica generalis* with pneumatology dispenses of every transcendental condition on which the *metaphysica specialis* of the form of life would have to be grounded. In the metaphysics of conformability, life is interpreted through itself, on the basis of a complete immanence, which is the continuous tension to surpass the sphere of immanence which Leopardi had exposed in the *Theory of Pleasure*. The immanence of the form of life indeed never constitutes itself as an accomplished and perfect totality, but rather remains always unstable and lacking, because of the contingency and the relativity that conformability steadily ensures to it.

Leopardi's conceptual clarification of conformability passes through the self-enlightenment of the form of life provided by the ideology of the *Theory of Pleasure*. The pneumatology of conformability stems from the ideology of the *Theory of Pleasure*, thanks to the form the latter took on with Leopardi's integration of his research on memory and habituation. Retrospectively, we can say that, deriving the concept of *conformability* from his theory of habituation, Leopardi has put into practice and fulfilled the idea that ideology has to be the methodological guideline for metaphysics. The reason why ideology is assumed as the guideline for metaphysics is that metaphysics has been preventively designed as a science of the form of life, a specific kind of pneumatology which refuses every pre-existing model to which the form of life should abide.

7. Conformability as motion, delicacy, and self-love

In the context of Leopardi's meditation on the form of life, the metaphysical determination of conformability subsumes three fundamental levels of characterization, which can be respectively indicated as *kinetic*, *morphologic*, and *egoic*.

On a physical level, Leopardi considers movement as the fundamental aspect of life. The «faculty of movement» according to Leopardi «is the principal distinction that nature has put between animate and inanimate things»;³⁶⁵ «motion and activity» he writes «are what distinguishes the living from the dead»;³⁶⁶ Conformability, which is strictly speaking the possibility of changing from one form to another, can be considered as the general form of motility: a concept of movement that abstracts from the spatial dimension.

As such, on a biological level, conformability can be identified with the inner motility of life, which expresses itself in the morphological differentiation of the organs. For Leopardi conformability «is nothing but greater or lesser delicacy (*delicatezza*) of organs and structure»³⁶⁷.

“Delicacy” in this context certainly means adaptability and susceptibility to take on new forms. The adjective, however, adds something more to the general concept of conformability, bringing with itself the idea of something complex and composed of a variety of elements, something inwardly differentiated according to manifold functions. Conformability appears in this respect as a principle of differentiation among and within the organisms. From the standpoint of this biological understanding of conformability, Leopardi considers the development of faculties in

³⁶⁵ Zib. 1608

³⁶⁶ Zib. 2381

³⁶⁷ Zib. 2599

the living in terms of a morphological development. «Strictly speaking» he writes «no faculty develops in man or animals. Rather it is man's and animal's organs that develop, and with the organs, naturally, their natural dispositions or qualities»³⁶⁸.

Finally, on a psychological level — that is to say on the level of ideology or pneumatology — the degree of morphological differentiation of the living finds a correspondence in the intensity of the proprioceptive function, which Leopardi calls self-love. «The more the organs of a creature» Leopardi writes «are receptive, sensitive, mobile, keen, in short, the greater the natural life of a living being is, the more sensitive and keen is its self-love»³⁶⁹. The connection between conformability considered as the degree of morphological differentiation and the intensity of self-love leads Leopardi to understand life as coextensive with the proprioceptive function: «self-love and life» he writes «are almost one thing, the feeling of one's own existence (which is what is meant by life) being inseparable from love of the one who exists»³⁷⁰. As a fundamental expression of conformability, self-love is «conformable, modifiable, capable of being cultivated and developed, subject to growth and to greater or less activity»³⁷¹.

8. The theory of conformability as *metaphysica generalis*

Considered as a quantity, in the sense of a degree of intensity, conformability must be capable of decreasing to a minimum and eventually disappear. Given the wide determination of

³⁶⁸ Zib. 1802-3

³⁶⁹ Zib. 1382

³⁷⁰ Zib. 2411

³⁷¹ Zib. 2490. Cf. also Zib. 2412-13

conformability he is adopting under the minimal requisite of movement, Leopardi considers the condition of a total lack of conformability as simply hypothetical. Although merely hypothetical, the condition conformability = 0 emerges as a residue:

(...) the things which have least part in life are the ones which by nature have fewest qualities and the greatest number of dispositions, that is, the ones which are least adaptable naturally. And if there is something which is not at all naturally adaptable, such a thing has no part in life but merely exists, it should properly be said to be purely and simply existing.³⁷²

Leopardi calls *existence* what is left of the beings once they are stripped of conformability:

where the grade of conformability is 0, things are no longer living, but merely existing. Existence can be identified with matter, in order to differentiate what is life and what is not in the living beings themselves:

(...) the material, and matter (that is that part of things and of man which we more particularly call matter) is not alive, and the material cannot be alive, and has nothing to do with life, but only with existence (...)³⁷³

The distinction between life and matter is not meant to acknowledge the existence of something which is not material, but rather to indicate two distinct aspects of the material things. The general relationship between life considered as conformability on the one hand and matter considered as mere existence on the other, is the subject of Leopardi's philosophical short prose

³⁷² Zib.3381-2: «(...) le cose che meno partecipano della vita sono quelle che per natura hanno meno di qualità e più di disposizione, cioè le meno conformabili. E se v'ha cosa che non sia punto conformabile naturalmente, quella niente partecipa della vita, ma solo esiste; quella è che si dee propriamente chiamare semplicemente e puramente esistente.»

³⁷³ Zib. 3924: «(...) la materia (cioè quella parte delle cose e dell'uomo che noi più peculiarmente chiamiamo materia) non vive, e il materiale non può esser vivo, e non ha che far colla vita, ma solo colla esistenza (...)»

Apocryphal Fragment of Strato from Lampsacus, which Leopardi wrote in 1825³⁷⁴. The *Fragment* opens with a distinction between the perishability of material things — which is the fact that they all «begin and come to an end» —and the imperishability of matter, which is «by its own force since eternity³⁷⁵». The overall configuration of matter is perishable, as well as each of the material things that are part of it. Therefore, the overall configuration of things must have a beginning, while matter does not. The beginning of the present configuration of the totality of things is due to certain forces that agitate matter, which form through movement a great variety of beings. These beings can be considered «as distributed in certain genres and species, and connected between themselves by certain orders and relationships» which are all effects of the movement which the primitive forces impress on matter. Genres, species, orders and relationships give form to an overall configuration which can be properly called a *world*. The differentiation among the species, and among the individuals in the species themselves, is here considered as the effect of the movement that natural forces impress on matter. Even more, the order and the relationships between the material things themselves do not depend on transcendental laws of nature, but are rather an effect of the movement of matter produced by the primitive forces. The fragment raises the hypothesis that these forces can be reduced to a fundamental one, in the same way that in the living beings different forces can all be considered

³⁷⁴ The absence of the word conformability in the context of Leopardi's most comprehensive metaphysical writing must not surprise. Notwithstanding its metaphysical subject, the *Fragment* is a literary writing, where Leopardi outlines his philosophical conception in a poetic form, under disguise of a manuscript found in the library of mount Athos. As the very "term" of Leopardi's metaphysics, the word "conformability" is not allowed to enter in his poetic vocabulary. And yet, even if it does not appear explicitly, the concept informs the entire conception presented here. Or, to better say, it is only under the light of Leopardi's conception of conformability — and keeping in mind that these terms defines life from the point of view of metaphysics in the *Zibaldone* — that the *Fragment* can be properly understood in metaphysical terms, rather than just as a curious cosmological conception.

³⁷⁵ Frammento Apocrifo di Stratone di Lampsaco

as manifestations of the fundamental force of self-love. The true nature of these forces, however, is said to be unknowable. Finally, the same process that gives birth to a certain overall configuration of things causes its end. Because of the eternity of matter, however, once a world comes to an end, a new one, entirely different, must take its place.

The *Fragment* condenses the results of Leopardi's extensive metaphysical research in a handful of pages. It exposes a cosmology from the point of view of the unicity of the historical event. Every single instant in the life of things and of the world itself appears as absolutely unique and unrepeatable. There is no pre-existing law that determines the way things are or have to be, no state of perfection to which things should tend or conform. The infinite multiplication of the worlds achieves the result Leopardi aimed for with the metaphysics of the multiplication of the absolutes. What is more important, the fragment adds something crucial to the systematic structure of Leopardi's metaphysics of conformability. We have seen that Leopardi's meditation on the form of life can be considered as a *metaphysica specialis* determining the essence of all beings, preliminarily understood as living beings. It is on the very grounds of this *metaphysica specialis* that Leopardi develops the cosmology of the *Fragment*. Here, however, Leopardi deals with two entities that are not living beings: they are matter and the primitive forces. They cannot be considered as individual beings, and therefore they are not *a thing*. Rather, from a metaphysical point of view, they can be considered as universal conditions of individual things, that is, as transcendentals. And yet, the nature of these transcendentals is completely different from that of the classical transcendentals *unum, verum, bonum*. They do not preexist reality, but rather are two aspects of reality that can always be found in each and every thing at every moment. Taken for themselves, they do not even have a definite form, and therefore do not

constitute something determinate. Because of this lack of form, they do not impose a form on reality, but rather their forms are reciprocally determined *in* reality, always assuming from time to time different and new configurations. The dichotomy forces-matter mirrors the dyad life-matter that we have seen at play in the *Zibaldone*: the essential characteristic of these primitive forces is movement, which there Leopardi assumed as the minimum requisite of life metaphysically defined as conformability. The relationship between matter and the primitive forces can therefore be considered as a polarity between a maximum and a minimum (=0) of conformability, a process wherein these two extremes reciprocally conform to each other. Conformability taken in this sense is not just the fundamental characteristic of the living, but a quantitative relationship between different gradations of a continuum. This relationship can be thought of as conformability's inner relationship with itself. Such a relationship is the fundamental relativity that encompasses all the possible forms of existence, so that no existence can be thought of which is exempted from it. Understood as a continuum which goes from 0 to ∞ , conformability can be regarded as the fundamental trait of being itself. Here the metaphysics of conformability appears completed in the form of a *metaphysica generalis*. Such an understanding of being does not achieve the result Leopardi aimed for in the fragments of summer 1821 — the multiplication of the absolute. On the contrary, far from being absolute, things appear here as the ephemeral expressions of a fundamental tension which transcends them and constitutes reality. Leopardi's late metaphysics thus reinstates the absolute in the form of conformability. And yet, this is an absolute of a specific kind, one that suits the methodological guideline Leopardi had taken for his metaphysical research: «everything is relative». Although it fails to multiply the absolute, the metaphysics of conformability achieves the result of conceiving

it in relative terms. The absolute of Leopardi's metaphysics is not relative in the sense that it exists together with other absolutes, but in the sense that it is relative in itself: the concept of conformability is the concept of something which is intrinsically relative. Because of the very relative nature of this absolute, the cosmos which the metaphysics of conformability shapes is not the copy of some kind of model, but the universe of things which happen only once.

9. The metaphysics of conformability as dualism or monism

The materialistic foundation of Leopardi's cosmology has often been compared with Spinoza's system.³⁷⁶ Besides the similarity given by the eternity of matter, however, there is a fundamental difference that it is worthy to outline here in order to let the specificity of Leopardi's metaphysical conception emerge. It has been argued that the polarity between forces and matter in Leopardi's system can be considered as a variation of intensity of the same principle: motion and inertia in this sense would be the two extreme manifestations of the same substance, in the same way *res cogita* and *res extensa* are two *modes* of the same substance in Spinoza. In this respect, Leopardi's metaphysics could be considered a simple variation of Spinoza's monism. However, even considering Leopardi's system from this point of view, what is characteristic of it, is that the relationship between the two modes of the substance is thought of as conformability. Even considered as a form of monism, Leopardi's thought rests on an irreducible dualism, as a unity which constantly tears itself apart. The specific nature of this monism can be grasped

³⁷⁶ Cf. Antonio Negri, "Between infinity and community: Notes on materialism in Spinoza and Leopardi", *Studia Spinozana: An International and Interdisciplinary Series* Vol. 5, 1989, pp.151-176.

considering the fact that for Leopardi the limit is inherent to existence³⁷⁷, and therefore substance is finite, where Spinoza considers existence as having no limits and substance as infinite. This is why, to Spinoza's metaphysics of necessity, Leopardi can oppose a coherent metaphysics of contingency. As an eternity without necessity³⁷⁸, the universe of conformability contradicts both the Leibnizian and the Spinozian cosmologies, and does not find any real precedent in the tradition of Western metaphysics.

At the methodological level, the progression from ideology to *metaphysica specialis* and from *metaphysica specialis* to *generalis* appears to be adequate to the assumption that nothing

³⁷⁷ Zib. 4177-8: «Niente infatti nella natura annunzia l'infinito, l'esistenza di alcuna cosa infinita. L'infinito è un parto della nostra immaginazione, della nostra piccolezza ad un tempo e della nostra superbia. Noi abbiam veduto delle cose inconcepibilmente maggiori di noi, del nostro mondo ec., delle forze inconcepibilmente maggiori delle nostre, dei mondi maggiori del nostro ec. Ciò non vuol dire che esse sieno grandi, ma che noi siamo minimi a rispetto loro. Or quelle grandezze (sia d'intelligenza, sia di forza, sia d'estensione ec.) che noi non possiamo concepire, noi le abbiam credute infinite; quello che era incomparabilmente maggior di noi e delle cose nostre che sono minime, noi l'abbiam creduto infinito; quasi che al di sopra di noi non vi sia che l'infinito, questo solo non possa esser abbracciato dalla nostra concettiva, questo solo possa essere maggior di noi. Ma l'infinito è un'idea, un sogno, non una realtà: almeno niuna prova abbiamo noi dell'esistenza di esso, neppur per analogia, e possiam dire di essere a un'infinita distanza dalla cognizione e dalla dimostrazione di tale esistenza: si potrebbe anche disputare non poco se l'infinito sia possibile (cosa che alcuni moderni hanno ben negato), e se questa idea, figlia della nostra immaginazione, non sia contraddittoria in se stessa, cioè falsa in metafisica. Certo secondo le leggi dell'esistenza che noi possiamo conoscere, cioè quelle dedotte dalle cose esistenti che noi conosciamo, o sappiamo che realmente esistono, l'infinito cioè una cosa senza limiti, non può esistere, non sarebbe cosa ec. (Bologna 1. Maggio. Festa dei SS. Filippo e Giacomo. 1826.). Pare che solamente quello che non esiste, la negazione dell'essere, il niente, possa essere senza limiti, e che l'infinito venga in sostanza a esser lo stesso che il nulla. Pare soprattutto che l'individualità dell'esistenza importi naturalmente una qualsivoglia circoscrizione, di modo che l'infinito non ammetta individualità e questi due termini sieno contraddittorii; quindi non si possa supporre un ente individuo che non abbia limiti.» (2. Maggio 1826.). V. p.4181. e p.4274. capoverso ult.

³⁷⁸ Alla p.4178. fine. L'ipotesi dell'eternità della materia non sarebbe un'obiezione a queste proposizioni. L'eternità, il tempo, cose sulle quali tanto disputarono gli antichi, non sono, come hanno osservato i metafisici moderni, non altrimenti che lo spazio, altro che un'espressione di una nostra idea, relativa al modo di essere delle cose, e non già cose nè enti, come parvero stimare gli antichi, anzi i filosofi fino ai nostri giorni. La materia sarebbe eterna, e nulla perciò vi sarebbe d'infinito. Ciò non vorrebbe dire altro, se non che la materia, cosa finita, non avrebbe mai cominciato ad essere, nè mai lascerebbe di essere; che il finito è sempre stato e sempre sarà. Qui non vi avrebbe d'infinito che il tempo, il quale non è cosa alcuna, è nulla, e però la infinità del tempo non proverebbe nè l'esistenza nè la possibilità di enti infiniti, più di quel che lo provi la infinità del nulla, infinità che non esiste nè può esistere se non nella immaginazione o nel linguaggio, ma che è pure una qualità propria ed inseparabile dalla idea o dalla parola nulla, il quale pur non può essere se non nel pensiero o nella lingua, e quanto al pensiero o [4182] alla lingua. (Bologna. 4. Giugno. 1826. Domenica.)

preexists things. Since nothing preexists things, there are no conditions of reality that can preventively ensure the relationship between knowledge and its objects, such as the principle of noncontradiction and the principle of sufficient reason. On the contrary, it is only from within the being, and therefore from within life as conformability that the universal character of being can be unveiled: the opposition between the two forms of representation — the aesthetic and rational — reproduces the contradiction between life and matter, offering a point of access to the structure of reality.

The metaphysics of conformability is such that it leaves no space for the fixity of an absolute origin, nor for the closure of a given end. The universe appears in it as an infinite series of unpredictable worlds, an everlasting chain of apocalypses and rebirths that constantly moves through the continuous gradation of infinite ephemeral forms. As the general form of the universe, the polarity between apocalypse and rebirth is also the structure of each world, of each single part and of each single instant of it. Everything in the universe is always in transition between the destruction of the form and its rebirth in a new figure. From this metaphysical point of view, the Renaissance appears as the historical figure of one of the two sides of conformability, the epiphenomenon of a constitutive character of reality which is immanent in every single instant of the universe's life, together with the shadow of its inseparable twin, the apocalypse.

10. Algebra of the living

From the metaphysical standpoint outlined in the *Fragment*, the totality of the beings can be regarded as intrinsically historical. Conformability is the dynamic principle that differentiates the

individuals of the same species one from the other, as well as the different species between themselves. History of conformability is the history of the living, a science of *those who happen only once*. In the pages of the *Zibaldone*, however, this historical perspective is accompanied by a static one, in the form of a taxonomy which Leopardi develops in a mathematical fashion.

From this point of view, the metaphysics of conformability appears as an algebraic computation of the living, where conformability is eminently understood as an intensive quantity.

Differences between species can be regarded as variations in the respective amount of “primitive conformability”, which is the general level of conformability shared by a species; differences among the individuals of the same species can be regarded as those in the quantity of «acquired conformability»³⁷⁹, which is the level of conformability that the individual achieves through habituation.

Different degrees of conformability, both among the species and the individuals, correspond to different amounts of self-love, given that self-love is in itself a kind of conformability. In light of Leopardi’s *Theory of Pleasure*, the quantity of self-love in turn measures the distance from the fulfillment of happiness. «From my theory of pleasure» Leopardi writes « it follows that, as a result of the natural and unchangeable essence of things, the greater and more lively the power, feeling, and action, and internal activity of self-love, the greater necessarily is the unhappiness of the living creature, or the more difficult it is to achieve any sort of happiness.»³⁸⁰ Unhappiness, or sorrow, as a constitutive impossibility of achieving happiness, is the subjective expression of the essential lack of form which characterizes the living. From this broader perspective, a lower

³⁷⁹ Zib. 1452-3.

³⁸⁰ Zib. 2410.

degree of conformability corresponds to a tendency towards stability, while a higher degree of conformability, opening to a wider spectrum of possibilities, is the signal of a higher propensity to lose the present form in order to acquire a new one. The degree of conformability can therefore be understood as a degree of tendency towards disruption:

(...) the lower the number and value of the innate and natural qualities in each genus and species, and the more dispositions there are, also natural, and the more of these dispositions are such as to provide the potential to be (or to become), then the greater by exactly the same amount, in each of these kinds and species and hence in their existence and the effects which they have above and beyond themselves, is the number and magnitude of the disorders, irregularities, diseases, cases, accidents, and outcomes which occur that are unnatural, unwanted, or expressly not wanted by nature, contrary to what were the intentions and purposes of nature in forming such genera and species, and in arranging them as it arranged them, both with respect to themselves, and to the other genera and species to which they are related, and to the entire universe of things.³⁸¹

The exact computation of the degree of conformability relies on the difference between two different aspects of vitality as force: «(...) we must distinguish carefully» Leopardi writes «between the strength of the spirit and the strength of the body. Self-love dwells in the spirit.»³⁸² The difference between body and spirit here is nothing other than a difference between different levels of conformability. Bodily force tends to direct the power of conformability towards the external, while the spiritual force directs it towards the internal. In order to determine the amount of self-love in the living, neither the internal nor the external force can be considered in terms of their absolute value, but rather they have to be taken into account in terms of their proportion:

³⁸¹ Zib. 3380-1: «(...) quanto minore in ciascun genere o specie è il numero e il valore delle qualità ingenite e naturali, quanto maggiore quello delle disposizioni altresì naturali, e quanto maggiormente queste disposizioni sono a poter essere (ossia divenire), tanto maggiore esattamente in ciascuno d'essi generi o specie, e nell'esistenza loro, e negli effetti loro sopra se stessi e fuor di se stessi è il numero e la grandezza de' disordini, delle irregolarità de' morbi, de' casi, degli accidenti, de' successi non naturali, non voluti o espressamente disvoluti dalla natura, contrarii alle intenzioni e destinazioni fatte dalla natura nel formare quei tali generi o specie, e nel così disporli com'essa li dispose, sì rispetto a se stessi, sì riguardo agli altri generi e specie a cui essi hanno relazione, ed all'intera università delle cose.»

³⁸² Zib. 3922: «(...) bisogna accuratamente distinguere la forza dell'animo dalla forza del corpo. L'amor proprio risiede nell'animo.»

(...) if the lion has more strength of body than the polyp, it is not therefore less alive than the polyp. For at the same time it is much more organized than the polyp, and therefore has much more life. Hence it would be as false to conclude from its greater corporeal strength that it has more life, and is therefore more unhappy, than the polyp, as it would be to conclude that it is more unhappy than man, as we would have to conclude if life was to be measured merely by strength, or by extrinsic strength (in which the lion far surpasses man) and not by organization, etc., in which man is far superior to the lion.³⁸³

The equation expressing the degree of conformability has to take into account the distinction between these two forces; therefore the absolute value of conformability in the living being can be expressed as an inverse function of the sum of life as conformability and bodily force:

“Now it happens, speaking generally and naturally, that in those who are the strongest in body their life is indeed greater, but the feeling of life is less, and as much less as the total of life and strength is greater. Vice versa in the weaker in body. Or if we can express ourselves in a different way, and perhaps more clearly, in those who are stronger in body their external life is greater, their internal less; and the opposite in those weaker in body.³⁸⁴

The proportion between the amount of bodily matter and conformability can be considered as a proportion between existence and life, where the two variables appear inversely correlated:

Existence can be greater without life being greater. One could describe the existence of the lion as greater than that of man. Life the opposite. The existence together with the life of the lion are greater with respect to the oyster, the tortoise, the snail, the beast of burden, the polyp. The life of the lion is greater than that of plants which are much bigger, than the heavenly spheres, etc. Existence the opposite.³⁸⁵

³⁸³ Zib. 3925-6: « (...) voglio dire, se il leone ha più forza di corpo che il polipo, non per questo egli è men vivo del polipo. Perocchè egli è nel tempo stesso assai più organizzato del polipo, e quindi ha molto più vita. Onde tanto sarebbe falso il conchiudere dalla sua maggior forza corporale che egli abbia più vita, e quindi sia più infelice, del polipo, quanto il conchiuderne ch'ei sia più infelice dell'uomo, come si dovrebbe conchiudere se la vita si avesse a misurare dalla forza comunque, o dalla forza estrinseca (nel che il leone passa l'uomo d'assai) e non dalla organizzazione ec. in cui l'uomo è molto superiore al leone.»

³⁸⁴ Zib.3922-3: «Ora accade, generalmente e naturalmente parlando, che ne' più forti di corpo la vita sia bensì maggiore, ma il sentimento della vita minore, e tanto minore quanto maggiore si è e la somma della vita e la forza. Ne' più deboli di corpo viceversa. O volendoci esprimere in altro modo, e forse più chiaramente, ne' più forti di corpo la vita esterna è maggiore, ma l'interna è minore; e al contrario ne' più deboli di corpo.»

³⁸⁵ Zib. 3927: «L'esistenza può esser maggiore senza che lo sia la vita. L'esistenza del leone può dirsi maggiore di quella dell'uomo. La vita al contrario. L'esistenza insieme e la vita del leone è maggiore rispetto all'ostrica, alla testuggine, alla lumaca, al giumento, al polipo. La vita del leone è maggiore che non è quella delle piante anche più grandi, de' globi celesti ec. L'esistenza al contrario.»

In the specific *scala naturae* that Leopardi outlines, based on the calculation of conformability, humanity occupies an apical position, since its amount of conformability is defined by Leopardi as summit, supreme, perfect. The human being can be defined as «the most living of the beings».³⁸⁶ This means that between the human species and the other living there is no other difference than the quantitative one given by the respective degrees of conformability.³⁸⁷ What is more important, however, these quantitative differences imply a dynamic aspect that transforms the taxonomic principle into a historical one: in each living being, the specific amount of conformability activates a circular movement of habituation which develops at an exponential rate. Leopardi describes this process in terms of a geometrical progression asymptotically

³⁸⁶ Zib. 3381

³⁸⁷ Zib. 1762-3: «Dunque, (e queste osservazioni si potrebbero moltiplicare e variare in infinito) anche fra gli animali i diversi individui di una medesima specie sono suscettibili di diversissime assuefazioni, come lo sono gli stessi individui di variare assuefazione, il tutto secondo le circostanze. Qual è dunque la nostra superiorità sugli animali fuorché un maggior grado di assuefabilità e conformabilità, come fra le diverse specie di animali altre hanno queste qualità in maggiore altre in minor grado; alcune, come le scimie, poco meno dell'uomo? Dimostrato che tutte le facoltà umane ec. ec. ec. non sono altro che assuefazione, è dimostrato che la natura dell'animo umano, come quella del corpo, è la stessa che quella dell'animo dei bruti. Solamente varia nella specie, ovvero nel grado delle qualità, come pur variano in questo i diversi animi delle diverse specie di bruti. Il bruto è più tenace e servo dell'assuefazione. Ciò viene appunto da minore assuefabilità della nostra, perché questa, quanto è maggiore per natura, e resa maggiore per esercizio, tanto più rende facile il cangiare, deporre, variare, modificare assuefazione, come ho spiegato altrove. Gli animali sono tanto più servi dell'assuefazione quanto meno sono assuefabili proporzionatamente alla natura diversa delle specie e degli individui; vale a dire quanto minor talento hanno, cioè disposizione ad assuefarsi. V. p.1770. capoverso 2. Quindi il mulo difficilissimo ad assuefarsi, è tenacissimo dell'assuefazione e suo schiavo. Egli è un animale stupido. Gli animali stupidi sono servi dell'assuefazione più de' vivaci ec. ec. Paragonate su queste teorie l'asino al cavallo, la pecora [1763] al cane ec. ec. gli animali indocili (cioè poco assuefabili, e però tenacissimi dell'assuefazione o contratta da loro, o comunicata loro) ai docili ec. ec. (21. Sett. 1821.)»

tending to infinite³⁸⁸, and compares it with the Galilean law of falling bodies³⁸⁹. Because of this exponential dynamic, when it comes to the human species it is impossible to consider the amount of conformability from a static perspective: the essence of the human species can only be described by its history. The entire history of civilization appears in Leopardi's mature thought as an expression of this geometrical progression of conformability. Self-love, the most fundamental disposition of the living, follows the exponential formula of conformability³⁹⁰, together with its innumerable modifications: language, sexual desire, culinary taste, sentiments, aesthetics, morality, commerce, technology, politics and theology, all the aspects of human life are as many

³⁸⁸ Zib. 1923-5: «La differenza è dunque veramente menoma, e perfettamente gradata, fra l'uomo in natura, e l'animale il più intelligente, come fra questo e l'altro un po' meno intelligente ec. Ma di menoma, diventa somma, coll'esser coltivata, cioè col porre in atto e in esercizio quella alquanto maggiore disposizione che l'uomo ha ad assuefarsi. Un'assuefazione cella ch'egli può acquistare, e l'animale no, perchè alquanto meno disposto, ne facilita un'altra. Due assuefazioni (se così posso esprimermi) già acquistate, mediante quel piccolissimo mezzo di più, che la natura ha dato all'uomo, gliene facilitano altre sei o otto, ed accrescono nella stessa proporzione la facilità di acquistarle. Ecco che l'uomo viene acquistando mediante le sole assuefazioni la facoltà di assuefarsi. La quale da una piccolissima disposizione naturale, quasi dal grano di senapa, cresce sempre gradatamente, ma con proporzioni sempre crescenti, in modo che a forza di assuefazioni acquistate, e della facoltà di assuefarsi, l'uomo arriva a differenziarsi infinitamente da qualunque animale e dall'intera natura. E similmente col progresso delle generazioni arriva colla stessa proporzione crescente, a sempre più differenziarsi dal suo stato naturale, dagli uomini primitivi, dagli antichi ec. ec. L'andamento, o il così detto perfezionamento dello spirito umano rassomiglia interamente alla progressione geometrica che dal menomo termine, con proporzione crescente arriva all'infinito. Siccome appunto l'uomo da una menoma differenza o superiorità di naturale disposizione arriva ad una interminabile differenza dagli altri animali. (15. Ott. 1821.)»

³⁸⁹ Zib. 1767: La forza e la facilità e varietà dell'assuefazione si nel- l'individuo, che nel genere umano, cresce sempre in proporzione ch'ella è cresciuta, appunto come il moto de' gravi. Ecco tutto il progresso e dello spirito umano. Questo pensiero è importantissimo, e in matematica o fisica non si può trovare più giusta immagine di detti progressi, che il moto accelerato. (22. Sett. 1821.)

³⁹⁰ 2489-90: «Di più l'amor proprio essendo una qualità del vivente, e queste qualità, come ho provato in più luoghi, essendo disposizioni, e queste disposizioni conformabili, e che possono fruttificare e produrre delle facoltà, e questo massimamente nell'uomo, ne segue che l'amor proprio, specialmente nell'uomo, è conformabile e coltivabile come le altre qualità. Anzi tanto più quanto egli abbraccia tutte le qualità dell'animo del vivente. Quindi anche l'amor proprio fa progressi, come ne fa lo spirito umano, ed è maggiore non solo in una specie o individuo naturalmente più vivo e sensitivo, ma anche in un individuo colto rispetto ad uno non colto, in un secolo colto rispetto ad un altro meno colto, in una nazione civile rispetto a una barbara, e in uno individuo medesimo, è maggiore dopo lo sviluppo delle sue qualità o disposizioni sensitive, sentimento, vitalità, ingegno, è maggiore, dico, che non era prima».

expressions of the exponential growth of conformability. At its highest level, human conformability turns into its opposite: reason is at the same time the most conformable and «the most material of all our faculties». Through the metaphysical representation of quantity, reason unveils the uniformity of matter as brute existence. Existence, so to speak, is now both *outside* and *inside* life, so that uniformity occupies the very heart of conformability, under the emotional sovereignty of boredom.

The maximum of conformability ($=\infty$) which humanity achieves, as a maximum amount of self-love, corresponds to a maximum of unhappiness. For this very reason, the *scala naturae* based on the intensive quantity of conformability can be interpreted in a twofold way. In a first sense, taking the amount of conformability in absolute terms, humanity occupies the highest place of the «chain of the animals»³⁹¹, since «in relation to the order of earthly things, man, as the being more able than all others to conform, is the most perfect of all.»³⁹² Following Leopardi, however, perfection properly considered is always relative, so that there is a more proper way to look at the order of the beings on the *scala naturae* of conformability:

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

³⁹¹ Zib. 1924

³⁹² Zib. 2899: «relativamente all'ordine delle cose terrestri, l'uomo come l'essere più di tutti conformabile, è il più perfetto di tutti.»

the last and lowest degree of the scale man, the most organized, sensitive, and able to conform of all earthly creatures.³⁹³

Besides substituting the taxonomic principle of perfection with that of conformability, this *scala naturae* displays a structure that Leopardi thinks of as «unfolded» or «doubled», where the higher point is in the middle. In this *scala naturae*, the human kind find itself at the very bottom of the order of things:

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.³⁹⁴

The mathematical calculation of the living beings according to their degree of conformability leads to the determination of humanity as the most imperfect form of life.

Leopardi's statement of the maximum imperfection of man appears as a reversal of Pico's thesis of the nobility of humanity in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. And yet, at the same time, there is a strong element of continuity: the lack of a proper essence which identifies human nature in Pico is precisely what Leopardi defines with the concept of conformability.³⁹⁵ At the very

³⁹³ Zib. 2899-900: «Se però nel detto ordine delle cose terrestri, considerando la perfezione di ciascheduna specie in modo comparativo, cioè relativamente l'una all'altra, non vogliamo immaginare 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 della organizzazione, della sensibilità, della conformabilità. E di questi farne il sommo grado della scala, cioè della perfezione comparativamente considerata, 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.»

³⁹⁴ Zib.2900: «Discorrendo in questo modo, e raddoppiando o ripiegando così la scala, troveremmo che l'uomo è veramente nella estremità non della perfezione (come ci parrebbe se facessimo una scala sola o semplice e retta), ma della imperfezione; e in una estremità più bassa ancora di quella che è dall'altra parte della scala. Perocchè dalla comparativa imperfezione degli esseri posti in quel grado, non ne segue ai medesimi alcuna infelicità laddove all'uomo grandissima.»

³⁹⁵ On the importance of this negative conception of the human essence in the Italian philosophical tradition cf. Stefano Velotti, "Notes on the Predicament of Humanist Culture", *Carte Italiane*, Vol. 2 No. 9, 2013, pp. 1-16.

midday of the Renaissance, Pico considered this lack of essence as freedom. Later rationalist philosophies of modernity, notably Leibniz and his followers, considered freedom as an expression of perfection. Leopardi, on the contrary, considers conformability as an imperfection, the quantitative measure of the *indignity* of the human species. More than a simple reversal of Pico's thesis, Leopardi's *scala naturae* can be read as the attempt to disentangle the idea of the dignity of humanity from the idea of perfection, in order to return to Pico's insight and liberate it from its rationalistic interpretation. The problem of conceiving the nobility of humanity without relying on the idea of perfection — and on the mathematical project of which it is expression — is in a certain sense the very crux of Leopardi's meditation, since for him the feeling of this nobility is the foundation on which the possibility of poetry rests:

The first foundation of any noble, great, sublime imagining or feeling (and such are poetic and sentimental feelings of any kind, including those that are sweet, tender, pathetic, etc.: all uplift the soul) is the conception of one's own nobility and dignity. (...) At that moment when we find ourselves habitually or momentarily scorned by those around us, the conception of our own nobility seems ridiculous, is painfully rejected as a lost illusion. Consequently, in such cases, the experience of that half-temptation to feel, etc., is painful, because it brings back to you the thought of your abjection. Certainly, it is proper to and the essential effect of every imagining and feeling of a poetic nature to uplift the soul: to which that state of disdain, etc., that conception, that feeling about itself which depresses it, is directly opposed.³⁹⁶

The “indignity” of man which Leopardi outlines in the *scala naturae* of conformability has to be read in light of Leopardi's awareness of the connection between poetry and the sentiment of one's own nobility. Only the dynamic of the “work of genius”, which offers to the living a mirror of its sorrows, can awaken a true sense of nobility (cf. Chapter VI § 6). In this sense, the demonstration of the imperfection of humanity takes on a fundamental role not only in the

³⁹⁶ Zib. 4493: «Certainly, it is proper to and the essential effect of every imagining and feeling of a poetic nature to uplift the soul: to which that state of disdain, etc., that conception, that feeling about itself which depresses it, is directly opposed.»

context of Leopardi's thought, but even more for his poetry. The true target of Leopardi's critique of perfection can be understood as the rationalistic interpretation of the dignity of the human species. Every attempt to establish the nobility of humanity on the ground of reason must fail, because it does not grasp the sovereignty struggle between imagination and reason as a moment in the cosmic vicissitude of conformability. In this respect, the possibility of conferring a new meaning to the sentiment of nobility is the horizon towards which Leopardi's philosophical and poetic meditation moves. The final point of this trajectory can be found in the poetical definition of «noble nature» which Leopardi will provide in his last lyric *The Wildbroom* (cf. *La Ginestra* v. 111-117).

11. The *conclusion* of metaphysics

The *scala naturae* which Leopardi draws following the degree of conformability of the beings is a measurement of the universe. Such a measurement is made possible by the fact that the metaphysics of conformability has understood the being from a quantitative point of view, considering differences among species and individuals in terms of differences in the respective amounts of conformability. In doing so, Leopardi substitutes the mathematical constitution of reality based on perfection with an analogous calculus based on the intensive quantity of conformability. The meaning of this move can be fully appreciated only in consideration of the historical relevance of Leibniz's conception of perfection in the development of metaphysics: considering reality as a function of perfection, Leibniz unifies finality and existence, the sphere of action and that of being. In doing so, Leibniz moves along a fundamental guideline of the Aristotelian metaphysics, which connects teleology and ontology in the divine nature considered

as the final cause. Leibniz's mathematical conception of perfection details and clarifies the connection between the sphere of being and that of the ends. By considering existence an effect of perfection, Leibniz furthers the modern point of view of reality as effectuality: perfection is here considered essentially as a magnitude of effectuality.³⁹⁷ In the divine essence the intensity of this magnitude is such that it necessarily produces the existence of the universe, considered as the wider possible unfolding of effectuality. Although insisting in the direction of thinking reality as effectuality, through the concept of conformability, Leopardi's metaphysics operates a radical disjuncture at the very foundation of the mathematical constitution of reality: substituting the concept of perfection with that of conformability, Leopardi's metaphysics unifies teleology and ontology in a way which is innerly fragmented, so that the universe can be considered as the absolute effect of a conflictuality which in metaphysical terms can be said *simple*, that is to say one that cannot be resolved through further analysis. The demonstration of this conflictuality — the fact that the supreme principle of reality is internally fragmented and cannot be unified — occupies the final stage of Leopardi's philosophical research.

Once the systematic structure of the metaphysics of conformability is completed, the measurement of the universe also comes to an end. In the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi expresses the result of such a measurement in several passages that aim to determine the value of the universe. The concept of value is the representation of something that takes place in a certain teleological order of things. It is only because something is understood as an end that other things can be interpreted as values, that is, means to achieve the end. Every value must finally refer to an absolute value, which is an end in itself. In the same way it refuses the existence of an absolute

³⁹⁷ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *From the last Marburg Course (1928)*, in Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. and trans. by W. McNeil, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, (pp. 63-81).

origin, the metaphysics of conformability also refuses the existence of such an end in itself. This refusal, however, does not proceed from the disavowal of the existence of a teleological structure in nature. On the contrary, the fact that there is no absolute end in the universe is understood as the result of the struggle between two different teleological structures. On the basis of the metaphysics of conformability, Leopardi distinguishes between the teleological structure of life and the teleological structure of existence. Commenting on a passage from Volney³⁹⁸, he draws the lines of this struggle:

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

³⁹⁸ «D. Le plaisir est-il l'objet principal et immédiat de notre existence, comme l'ont dit quelques philosophes? R. Non: il ne l'est pas plus que la douleur; le plaisir est un encouragement à vivre, comme la douleur est un repoussement à mourir. D. Comment prouvez-vous cette assertion? R. Par deux faits palpables: l'un, que le plaisir, s'il est pris au-delà du besoin, conduit à la destruction: par exemple, un homme qui abuse du plaisir de manger ou de boire, attaque sa santé, et nuit à sa vie. L'autre, [4128] que la douleur conduit quelquefois à la conservation: par exemple un homme qui se fait couper un membre gangrené, souffre de la douleur, et c'est afin de ne pas périr tout entier.» Volney, *La loi naturelle, ou Catéchisme du citoyen français*, chap.3. à la suite des *Ruines (Les Ruines) ou Méditation sur les Révolutions des Empires*, par le même auteur, 4me édition. Paris 1808. p.359- 360. In Zib. 4128.

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.³⁹⁹

The struggle between the two teleological structures of life and existence depends on the fact that they do not resolve in a superior unity. In the measure in which they pursue irreconcilable ends, they are contrary one to the other. The relation between these two teleological structures is therefore a relation of opposition, which Leopardi tends to think in logical terms, as a relationship of 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].⁴⁰⁰

Leopardi resembles the contradiction between the teleological structure of life and that of existence with the contradiction entailed in the *magnum mysterium* of incarnation. In order to accept the presence of both the divine and human nature in the divine son, theology requests to abandon the principle of non contradiction. In the metaphysics of conformability, similarly, the

³⁹⁹ Zib. 4128-9: «Il fine naturale dell'uomo e di ogni vivente, in ogni momento della sua esistenza sentita, non è nè può essere altro che la felicità, e quindi il piacere, suo proprio; e questo è anche il fine unico del vivente in quanto a tutta la somma della sua vita, azione, pensiero. Ma il fine della sua esistenza, o vogliamo dire il fine della natura nel dargliela e nel modificargliela, come anche nel modificare l'esistenza degli altri enti, e in somma il fine dell'esistenza generale, e di quell'ordine e modo di essere che hanno le cose e per se, e nel loro rapporto alle altre, non è certamente in niun modo la felicità nè il piacere dei viventi, non solo perchè questa felicità è impossibile (Teoria del piacere), ma anche perchè sebbene la natura nella modificazione di ciascuno animale e delle altre cose per rapporto a loro, ha provveduto e forse avuto la mira ad alcuni piaceri di essi animali, queste cose sono un nulla rispetto a quelle nelle quali il modo di essere di ciascun vivente, e delle altre cose rispetto a loro, risultano necessariamente e costantemente in loro dispiacere; sicchè e la somma e la intensità del dispiacere nella vita intera di ogni animale, passa senza comparazione la somma e intensità del suo piacere. Dunque la natura, la esistenza non ha in niun modo per fine il piacere nè la felicità degli animali; piuttosto al contrario; ma ciò non toglie che ogni animale abbia di sua natura per necessario, perpetuo e solo suo fine il suo piacere, e la sua felicità, e così ciascuna specie presa insieme, e così la università dei viventi.»

⁴⁰⁰ Zib. 4129: «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 rinunciando in certo modo anche al principio di cognizione, non potest idem simul esse et non esse.»

grand mystery consists in the fact that each being belongs at the same time to the order of existence and to that of life, and that these two orders are in opposition among themselves. Each individual thing is at the same time two different things, in the measure in which it is both life and existence.

The linguistic spectrum of this passage, however, does not not exclusively refer to the theological sphere. Translating in Italian the Latin expression *magnum mysterium*, Leopardi writes *misterio grande*. Such a phrasing oddly resonates with the expression *principium grande*, which Leibniz employed to indicate his principle of sufficient reason. In Leibniz' metaphysics this *principium grande* is the capstone that turns the arch between divine existence and the perfection of the universe. Conversely, Leopardi's *misterio grande* is the missing capstone that let the arc ruin, leaving the imperfect universe eternally floating, in absence of a reason granting the necessity of its existence.

In the following of the passage Leopardi elaborates on the two teleological structures of life and existence. The end of existence is that of the preservation of matter, which is achieved at the price of sacrificing every form of individuality. The quantitative computation of the destruction of individuality proves that the end of existence is in direct opposition to life:

(...) 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"),¹ 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).⁴⁰¹

Because of this quantitative predominance of the destructive aspect, the teleological structure of existence is in a position of direct contrariness towards life. The teleological structure of life instead is not directly opposed to existence in line of principle. Rather, such a structure is *independent* from existence, so that the end of life does necessarily involve existence:

(...) 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

⁴⁰¹ Zib. 4130: «(...) il fine della natura universale è la vita dell'universo, la quale consiste ugualmente in produzione conservazione e distruzione 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, in quanto si vede che sono più assai quelle cose che cospirano alla distruzione di ciascuno animale che non quelle che favoriscono la sua conservazione; in quanto naturalmente nella vita dell'animale occupa maggiore spazio la declinazione e consumazione ossia invecchiamento (il quale incomincia nell'uomo anche prima dei trent'anni) che tutte le altre età insieme (v. Dial. della natura e di un Islandese, e Cantico del Gallo silvestre), e ciò anche in esso animale medesimo indipendentemente dall'azione delle cose di fuori; in quanto finalmente lo spazio della conservazione cioè durata di un animale è un nulla rispetto all'eternità del suo non essere cioè della conseguenza e quasi durata della sua distruzione. Similmente mille cose e mille animali che non hanno in niun modo per fine la conservazione di un tale animale, hanno bensì una tendenza assoluta a distruggerlo, o per la conservazione propria o per altro. E ciò s'intenda di individui e di specie. E il numero di tali individui o specie animali o no, tendenti naturalmente alla distruzione di una qualsivoglia specie o individuo di animale (siccome di quelle tendenti al suo dispiacere) è maggiore di quello tendente alla sua conservazione (siccome al suo piacere).»

innate (because it comes after the experience of the senses, and derives from it), nor true, because in fact the opposite is the case.⁴⁰²

The idea of a necessary connection between life and existence is the illusion that Leopardi's metaphysics dispels, following the methodological example given by Galileo's discovery of the revolution of the Earth. This passage has to be read in connection with an earlier fragment of the *Zibaldone* where Leopardi rebukes Aristotle's idea that the state of "bare existence" can be considered as a value in itself.⁴⁰³ Leopardi denies to bare existence any value, rather considering how, from the point of view of life, existence is evil in itself for all the existing things, for each and all the steps of the *scala naturae* of conformability:

What is certain and no laughing matter is that existence is an evil for all the parts which make up the universe (and so it is hard to think it is not an evil for the whole universe as well, and even harder to make, as philosophers do, "Des malheurs de chaque être un bonheur général" ["Of the misfortunes of each being a general happiness"]. Voltaire, *Épître sur le*

⁴⁰² Zib. 4131-32: «L'uomo ama naturalmente e immediatamente solo il suo bene, e il suo maggior bene, e fugge naturalmente e immediatamente solo il suo male e il suo maggior male: cioè quello che per tale egli giudica. Se gli uomini preferiscono la vita a ogni cosa, e fuggono la morte sopra ogni cosa, ciò avviene solo perchè ed in quanto essi giudicano la vita essere il loro maggior bene (o in se, o in quanto senza la vita niun bene si può godere), e la morte essere il loro maggior male. Così l'amor della vita, lo studio della propria conservazione, l'odio e la fuga della morte, il timore di essa e dei pericoli di incontrarla, non è nell'uomo l'effetto di una tendenza immediata della natura, ma di un raziocinio, di un giudizio formato da essi preliminarmente, sul quale si fondano questo amore e questa fuga; e quindi l'una e l'altra non hanno altro principio naturale e innato, se non l'amore del proprio bene il che viene a dire della propria felicità, e quindi del piacere, principio dal quale derivano similmente tutti gli altri affetti ed atti dell'uomo. (E quel che dico dell'uomo intendasi di tutti i viventi). Questo principio non è un'idea, esso è una tendenza, esso è innato. Quel giudizio è un'idea, per tanto non può essere innato. Bensì egli è universale, e gli uomini e gli animali lo fanno naturalmente, nel qual senso egli si può chiamar naturale. Ma ciò non prova che egli sia nè innato nè vero. P.e. l'uomo crede e giudica naturalmente che il sole vada da oriente a occidente, e che la terra non si muova: tutti i fanciulli, tutti gli uomini che veggano da prima il fenomeno del giorno e che vi pongano mente, (se non sono già preoccupati dalla istruzione) concepiscono questa idea, formano questo giudizio, ciò immantinente, ciò immancabilmente, ciò con loro piena certezza: questo giudizio è dunque naturale e universale, e pure non è nè innato (perocchè è posteriore alla esperienza dei sensi, e da essa deriva), nè vero, perocchè in fatti la cosa è al contrario.»

⁴⁰³ Cf. Zib. 3568. The passage of Aristotle which Leopardi comments on can be found in Aristotle, *Politics*, 1278b, 28-30. The full passage reads: «The good life then is the chief aim of society, both collectively for all its members and individually; but they also come together and maintain the political partnership for the sake of life merely, for doubtless there is some element of value contained even in the mere state of being alive, provided that there is not too great an excess on the side of the hardships of life, and it is clear that the mass of mankind cling to life at the cost of enduring much suffering, which shows that life contains some measure of well-being and of sweetness in its essential nature» (the latinized section is the one Leopardi quotes).

désastre de Lisbonne. It is incomprehensible how out of the suffering of every individual without exception, can come a universal good; how from the whole of many misfortunes and nothing else, a good can come). That is made manifest when we see that everything in its own way necessarily suffers, and necessarily does not enjoy any pleasure, because pleasure does not exist strictly speaking. Now given that that is the case, how can you not say that existence is in itself an evil?

Not only individual men, but the whole human race was and always will be necessarily unhappy. Not only the human race but the whole animal world. Not only animals but all other beings in their way. Not only individuals, but species, genera, realms, spheres, systems, worlds.⁴⁰⁴

Everything that exists — be it the individual, the celestial globe or one of the worlds in their infinite series — must suffer, since everything is torn apart by the tension which conformability establishes between life and existence. The opposition of the teleological structure of existence towards life is recapitulated in a crucial passage of the *Zibaldone*, where Leopardi expresses it in the form of a thesis he calls the *proposition and conclusion of all metaphysics*:

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.⁴⁰⁵

In the context of this passage the word «proposition» refers to the *propositio* of Scholastic philosophy, which is not just a proposition in a grammatical sense, but rather the statement of a doctrine, what we would call a *theses*. Similarly, the word «conclusion» here does not mean just

⁴⁰⁴ Zib. 4175: «Cosa certa e non da burla si è che l'esistenza è un male per tutte le parti che compongono l'universo (e quindi è ben difficile il supporre ch'ella non sia un male anche per l'universo intero, e più ancora difficile si è il comporre, come fanno i filosofi, Des malheurs de chaque être un bonheur général. Voltaire, épître sur le désastre de Lisbonne. Non si comprende come dal male di tutti gli individui senza eccezione, possa risultare il bene dell'universalità; come dalla riunione e dal complesso di molti mali e non d'altro, possa risultare un bene.) Ciò è manifesto dal veder che tutte le cose al lor modo patiscono necessariamente, e necessariamente non godono, perchè il piacere non esiste esattamente parlando. Or ciò essendo, come non si dovrà dire che l'esistere è per se un male? Non gli uomini solamente, ma il genere umano fu e sarà sempre infelice di necessità. Non il genere umano solamente ma tutti gli animali. Non gli animali soltanto ma tutti gli altri esseri al loro modo. Non gl'individui, ma le specie, i generi, i regni, i globi, i sistemi, i mondi.»

⁴⁰⁵ Zib. 4169: «Spaventevole, ma vera proposizione e conchiusione di tutta la metafisica. L'esistenza non è per l'esistente, non ha per suo fine l'esistente, nè il bene dell'esistente; se anche egli vi prova alcun bene, ciò è un puro caso: l'esistente è per l'esistenza, tutto per l'esistenza, questa è il suo puro fine reale. Gli esistenti esistono perchè si esista, l'individuo esistente nasce ed esiste perchè si continui ad esistere e l'esistenza si conservi in lui e dopo di lui.»

the end in a generic sense, but more specifically the last proposition in a chain of syllogisms, what Scholastic philosophy called a *conclusio*. The fundamental thesis of the metaphysics of conformability is that *existence is not for the existent*. Such a thesis is a *conclusion* because it recapitulates into a sentence the entire syllogistic chain of the metaphysics of conformability.

This sentence is a judgment of value: existence does not constitute a value for life.

The conclusion of metaphysics, as the result of the quantitative computation of the universe in the form of a *scala naturae* of conformability, states that the value of the universe is 0. The contradiction between the teleological structures of life and existence simply annihilates the possibility of instituting any kind of value. Such a result can be considered conclusive because it brings to an end the world-measurement in which metaphysics consist. What is represented in the conclusion of the metaphysics of conformability is a completely measured universe, like a vast amount of mathematical operations is contained in the brief solution of an equation.

VIII

The return

Introduction

In the *Canzone ad Angelo Mai* the Renaissance appeared as both the time of the fulfillment of the world measurement and of poetry's return (cf. Chapter III). In the preceding chapter Leopardi's metaphysical research has been interpreted as an attempt to reenact the measurement of the

world symbolized by the figure of Columbus in his 1824 *Dialogue* (cf. Chapter V). Leopardi's metaphysical measurement of the world reaches its conclusion with the thesis of the opposition between life and existence, which he calls «the proposition and conclusion of the entire metaphysics». Once the measurement of the world has been completed, it is time to understand if the return is possible. What place remains for poetry in the space of truth measured by the metaphysics of conformability? The conclusion of metaphysics, which, in the form of a measurement of the universe, repeats the historical content of the symbol of the Renaissance, has a twofold meaning in respect to Leopardi's poetry. In the first sense, it systematically destroys the possibility of every value and every end. In a universe where nothing constitutes a value, poetry has nothing to praise. Having nothing to praise, poetry becomes valueless and purposeless; in this respect the meaning of poetry is radically put into question. In the second sense, the conclusion of metaphysics represents a universe that has no reason to exist. Existence cannot be justified, in the sense that it does not answer the question "why?". The measurement of the world unveils the groundlessness of the universe and at the same time implies the groundlessness of reason, which is nothing but its contingent product. The fulfillment of the world-measurement shakes reason's uniformity at its foundation by unveiling what Leopardi calls "the relativity of truth", that is to say truth's absolute contingency. To Leibniz' question «why is there something rather than nothing?» (*cur aliquid potius existerit quam nihil?*) the metaphysics of conformability answers: «without a reason» (*sine ratio*). The uniformity which reason imposes on everything does not apply to reason itself: reason has no reasons to reclaim. Therefore reason's pretense of constituting itself into an empire appears unjustified.

This rebuke of reason's pretense to constitute itself as a self-grounded totality implies, first and foremost, the fact that the emotional tonality of the return can no longer be boredom: the spell of absolute uniformity has been broken. As Leopardi had foreseen in the *Dialogue of Christopher Columbus*, the journey has transformed the point of departure. The affect of the return has to be one that embraces both the aspects of the conclusion of metaphysics, meaning the impossibility of every value and the groundlessness of existence. Such a twofold emotional tonality is the one Leopardi nominates in his late poem *Sopra un bassorilievo sepolcrale*, where existence is called «unpraisable wonder» (*illaudabil maraviglia*). The unpraising wonder of poetry, to which the unpraisable wonder of existence corresponds, is the affect of the return. The universe of conformability is unpraisable because it has no value, nothing in it can claim to be an end. At the same time, it has no reason to be, it cannot be explained, and therefore it raises wonder. This last chapter follows the path of the return in the landscape of the “unpraisable wonder”. Such a path goes along the lines of Leopardi's meditation on suicide and grace, passing through his confrontation with Stoicism and Neoplatonism up to the abandoned stanza of *Angelica* — the very threshold of the return — which paves the way for the 1828 lyric *The renaissance*. Through the symbol of the Renaissance, Leopardi foreshadows the unity of poetry and metaphysics in his writings. Such a unity is of a poetic kind, as far as it is expressed in a symbolic form. The material of the symbol, on the contrary, is a historical truth, the fulfillment of the world-measurement. The meaning of the symbol is given by the specific relationship that unifies its poetic use and the truth of its content: the symbol of the Renaissance is poetry grasping the historical event of metaphysics and diving into it to bring it back home. The balance of the symbol requires that poetry commits itself to truth as science, taking the form of an

experiment. It is only because poetry sacrifices itself in the experience of science that it can dare to bring science back home. If there will ever be a return, truth will find its place in the realm of poetry — albeit such realm will never again be outside of the jurisdiction of truth. For this very reason, the path of the return belongs to truth, and can be found following the threads of Leopardi's philosophical meditation.

1. Stoicism

The metaphysic of conformability has revealed the struggle for sovereignty between reason and imagination as a moment, perhaps the final one, in the wider conflict between existence and life. The tactical problem with which Leopardi was concerned in respect to the former, through the figure of the encirclement (cf. Chapter III § 2, A), has found a solution in the groundlessness of reason. The struggle between life and existence, however, poses now a wider strategic problem. The metaphysics of conformability has disentangled life from existence, unveiling the valuelessness of bare existence. Such a disentanglement implies on the one hand the autonomy of the teleological structure of life from that of existence: life constitutes itself as an independent sovereignty in respect to existence. On the other hand, existence makes the actualization of the teleological structure of life impossible, so that such an independence can become actual only if life secedes from the existence's dominion. From the conclusion of metaphysics the question arises whether or not life should remain in the circle of production and destruction of existence. The conclusion of metaphysics has proven existence to be evil for life, since it is a necessary cause of sorrow for the living. The decision to remain in the circle of existence seems to imply a complicity with the existence's alien power, or at least a renunciation to the sovereign

prerogatives that life can claim, based on the independence of its teleological structure from that of existence. After the metaphysics of conformability has reached its conclusion, Leopardi's meditation faces this conundrum in search of an ethical position.

A first attempt to address the question is given by Leopardi's endorsement of stoic ethics in his *Preamble* to the translation of Epictetus' *Manual*. Leopardi's interpretation strips Stoicism of the idea of conformity to reason, and reads the morality of Epictetus as a morality of weakness, that advises avoiding everything that can reinforce self-love and the sentiment of life, in order to resist the suffering of existence. According to Leopardi, Epictetus recommends «a state of peace, calm subjection and almost quiet servitude». The only way to limit the damage of existence is to keep life to a minimum, in order to bring it close to bare existence. By obeying the sovereignty of existence, life can almost get rid of sorrow. The price to pay, however, is that in doing so, life renounces itself. In this respect, the stoic proposal comes close to that of suicide, since it amounts to making life the least lively possible. The connection between Stoicism and suicide helps clarify what is at the stake in Leopardi's meditation on suicide, a meditation which becomes unavoidable with the conclusion of metaphysics. The question of suicide is for Leopardi not just the problem of the individual renunciation of life, but also the question of the decision about humanity's destiny. Can humanity stay human beyond the fulfillment of the world-measurement? And how? Is it worthy? Reducing life to bare existence, Leopardi's Stoicism tries to answer this question with a disquieting philosophical figure: that of an intermediate condition between life and death — a living dead destiny for humanity. What is certain, such a moral position is incompatible with the return of poetry, at least as envisioned in the idea of the work of genius. Where — in order to reanimate life — the work of genius strove

to create an image of the totality of sorrow, Epictetus' moral of weakness endeavors to de-
animate life in order to conceal sorrow.

Leopardi's endorsement of Epictetus' moral has often been taken as a definitive ethical
assessment. On the contrary, the few words closing the *Preamble*, where Leopardi endorses
Epictetus' moral «as far as it regards the well being of each one's spirit» allows one to think of
Leopardi's praise of stoicism as a transitional stage. In his later *Dialogue of Plotinus and
Porphyry*, Leopardi advances a different ethical proposal. The difference between these two
proposals does not lie so much in the content but rather in the fact that while the first only
concerns the individual, the second trespasses such a narrow measure.

2. Neoplatonism

Written in 1827, the *Dialogue of Plotinus and Porphyry* recapitulates the conclusive stage of
Leopardi's philosophical research. The seriousness, the simplicity and the profundity of this
dialogue surpass the possibility of an interpretation. It is a supreme moment of Leopardi's
thought, immersed in the aura of an arcane ritual, where interpretation risks entering as a spy
who ignores having been invited. It is a ritual of re-initiation, which is meant to heal the wounds
of those who have been deadly injured by the initiation of reason. A few words will be said here
on this ritual, in the measure in which they can contribute to shedding light on the path of the
return. The philosophical character of Plotinus is different from all the others who impersonate
different aspects of Leopardi's thought in the *Small Moral Works*. Plotinus is not a mask that

Leopardi wears to speak of himself.⁴⁰⁶ If there is a mask of Leopardi in the dialogue, he has to be Porphyry, who recapitulates the results of the metaphysics of conformability. The dialogue starts from where Leopardi had left Columbus and Gutierrez, that is to say, from the problem of boredom, at the very instant of the fulfillment of the world-measurement. The connection between the two dialogues is also reinforced by the quotation from the book *Vita Plotini* opening the *Dialogue*, where Porphyry recalls that Plotinus' advised him «to change land» in order to avoid suicide. The journey that Plotinus suggests to Porphyry recalls the journey that Columbus explains to Gutierrez, a journey that brings the traveller away from the valuelessness of life. In the dialogue, Porphyry's secure understanding of the metaphysics of conformability proves that he has already accomplished his circumnavigation around the world. In the discontinuous time of the history of lives which happen only once, Porphyry speaks from the instant beyond the fulfillment of metaphysics. Yet, Porphyry is not Columbus; more similar to Gutierrez, he has not yet understood the meaning of the journey.

According to Porphyry, boredom is a good enough reason to abandon life, as he has decided to do. He refutes all the arguments against the voluntary departure from life, basing his argument on life's own sovereignty and on its independence from existence. Following the logic of the conclusion of metaphysics, Porphyry proves the refusal of suicide to be an error in judgment, and not an intrinsic tendency of life.

⁴⁰⁶ The theme of the ancient man, which the dialogue elaborates, would encourage to think of Plotinus as a mask of younger Leopardi. There are, however, good reasons to think of the dialogue as a response to the invite with which Giordani addressed Leopardi in his review of the first edition of the *Small Moral Works*. There Giordani, a «sweet fatherly figure» to Leopardi, asked his younger friend — with gentle and persuasive words which much recall those of Plotinus in the dialogue — to not indulge in desperation. It is only in the protective sphere of friendship that the ancient man can return, breaking the solitude of reason.

Finally, after letting Porphyry answer his gentle questions, after helping him to elaborate his argument with the most expedient comments, Plotinus says a few words. The voice of Plotinus is not Leopardi's voice, but the philosophical voice of the master, a poetic invention and a figure of philosophy. Plotinus masters every single part of the universe traced by the metaphysics of conformability, but not all the words he says can be found in the pages of the *Zibaldone*. When he agrees with everything Porphyry has said, and still adds something beyond, his voice comes from the boundaries of Leopardi's metaphysics:

That is true, dear Porphyrius. But nevertheless, let me advise, nay implore, you to listen to the counsels of Nature rather than Reason. Follow the instincts of that primitive Nature, mother of us all, who, though she has manifested no affection for us in creating us for unhappiness, is a less bitter and cruel foe than our own reason, with its boundless curiosity, speculation, chattering, dreams, ideas, and miserable learning. Besides, Nature has sought to diminish our unhappiness by concealing or disguising it from us as much as possible. And although we are greatly changed, and the power of nature within us is much lessened, we are not so altered but that much of our former manhood (*uomo antico*) remains, and our primitive nature is not quite stifled within us.⁴⁰⁷

This is the point where Leopardi's thought reaches its limits. Plotinus moves not outside of, but to the extreme border of the metaphysics of conformability. He puts the entire content of the metaphysics of conformability in question, by mentioning the necessity of taking responsibility for world-measurement. Plotinus knows that reason — which he defines more «cruel» than nature — is nothing but a part of nature, a specific formation of conformability which has been

⁴⁰⁷ G. Leopardi, *Dialogue of Porphyry and Plotinus*, in *Essays and Dialogues*, tr. by Charles Edwardes, Boston, Osgood, 1882, p. 193: «Così è veramente, Porfirio mio. Ma con tutto questo, lascia ch'io ti consigli, ed anche sopporta che ti preghi, di porgere orecchie, intorno a questo tuo disegno, piuttosto alla natura che alla ragione. E dico a quella natura primitiva, a quella madre nostra e dell'universo; la quale se bene non ha mostrato di amarci, e se bene ci ha fatti infelici, tuttavia ci è stata assai meno inimica e malefica, che non siamo stati noi coll'ingegno proprio, colla curiosità incessabile e smisurata, colle speculazioni, coi discorsi, coi sogni, colle opinioni e dottrine misere: e particolarmente, si è sforzata ella di medicare la nostra infelicità con occultarcene, o con trasfigurarcene, la maggior parte. E quantunque sia grande l'alterazione nostra, e diminuita in noi la potenza della natura; pur questa non è ridotta a nulla, né siamo noi mutati e innovati tanto, che non resti in ciascuno gran parte dell'uomo antico.»

shaped through habituation. He also knows, nevertheless, that its use belongs to the human species. Metaphysics is not fate: it is an experiment. Through metaphysics humanity deliberately experiments the fate of conformability, appropriating it and bringing it to a conclusion. Forgetting this aspect, the metaphysics falls into a deadly vicious circle: it judges existence on the basis of the distinction between life and existence which metaphysics herself has introduced into nature. The truth of metaphysics cannot be undone, but neither should it be taken for an absolute fundament, since it has been done. In the name of the “ancient man”, who has witnessed the sunset of the ancient world, Plotinus takes on himself the responsibility for the transformation operated by the world-measurement, and claims one last time the innocence of *primitive nature*. The appeal to primitive nature is the reclamation of a trace which rebukes the claim of metaphysics to constitute itself into a self-grounded totality. Such an appeal has a negative role, it is an instrument of critique, and it bears not being turned into a positive fundament. In fact, this is the last time Leopardi hints towards a nature which is different from the one unveiled by the metaphysics of conformability. Even after his return to poetry, up to his very last lyrics, the concept of nature to which Leopardi refers will remain the one outlined in the metaphysics of conformability — that is to say nature as existence — which he calls «stepmother». In Plotinus’ mysteric language, on the contrary, nature is called «mother of us and of the universe». The primitive nature of which Plotinus speaks is not perfect, but it is at least

“good enough”⁴⁰⁸, since it conceals and hinders the truth of metaphysics, manifesting itself as the non-unveiled nature with which the ancients were in colloquy.

It is not because of some sort of indecision that Leopardi let Plotinus pronounce a word that does not belong to his mature thought. The ancient man of which Plotinus speaks, the one who keeps memory of non-unveiled nature, is Plotinus himself. Coming from the crepuscule of antiquity, he is the last of the ancients. But, as a witness of the disappearance of primitive nature, he is the first of the moderns as well. As a Janus bifrons, he looks backwards to his master Plato, to whom he declares his allegiance in front of Porphyry’s accusations; and at the same time he looks forward to his disciple Plethon, who turns towards him from the dawn of the new world. With the philosophical figure of Plotinus, the master, Leopardi reads the humanistic myth of *prisca sapientia*, the uninterrupted stream of wisdom — beginning with Zoroaster, Orpheus, and Moses — which flows up to our world through the never-ending rebirths of Platonism. The myth of *prisca sapientia*, the myth of an original wisdom passing through the ages, precisely because it is a myth, truly is antiquity knocking on the doors of the present. At the edge of the metaphysics of conformability, Neoplatonism appears as the eternal return of the ancient man, who comes from the conclusion of metaphysics with his most wise mixture of truth and myth, poetry and reason, apocalypse and rebirth. From the fulfillment of the world-measurement the master returns bringing a vanishing trace of the origin. It is the truth of the relativity of the world-measurement that Plotinus delivers to Porphyry, in order to fulfill his ritual of rebirth:

⁴⁰⁸ The role which primitive nature plays in the economy of the dialogue bears a strong resemblance with Winnicott’s idea of the “good enough” mother. According to Winnicott the good enough mother is the condition preserving the “continuity of being”. It is precisely such a continuity which is at stake in the dialogue, where the interruption of life is discussed in response to the traumatic experience of reason. Cf. D. Winnicott, *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World*, London, Penguin, 1973.

And I assure you that neither disgust of life, nor despair, nor the sense of the nullity of things, the vanity of all anxiety, and the insignificance of man, nor hatred of the world and oneself, are of long duration; although such dispositions of mind are perfectly reasonable, and the contrary unreasonable. For our physical condition changes momentarily in more or less degree ; and often without any especial cause life endears itself to us again, and new hopes give brightness to human things, which once more seem worthy of some attention, not indeed from our understanding, but from what may be termed the higher senses of the intellect (*senso dell'animo*). This is why each of us, though perfectly aware of the truth, continues to live in spite of Reason, and conforms to the behaviour of others ; for our life is controlled by these senses, and not by the understanding. ⁴⁰⁹

It belongs to the nature of life as conformability to be able to heal, to take a new form once the old one has been destroyed by adverse circumstances. The form can be destroyed by minor circumstances, and for minor reasons it can rise again. The same power of conformability that exposes life to death, even in the extreme form of the conclusion of metaphysics, exposes it to the possibility of rebirth. With such a doctrine, Plotinus still moves within the limits of the metaphysics of conformability, where the unsteady equilibrium between force and matter creates a continuous cycle of deaths and rebirths. Albeit such an argument is consistent with the metaphysics of conformability, and thus can be easily understood by Porphyry — who has already reached the end of the world-measurement — it is not sufficient to move the latter from abstaining from his intentions. Death and rebirth are just the same for the intellect, which sees that nothing good will ever come from either of them. This is why Plotinus mentions here another faculty besides intellect, one which inclines to stay in life rather than not. Leopardi calls this faculty the *sense of the soul*. The expression occurs only once in the *Zibaldone*, in an early

⁴⁰⁹ Ivi, p. 193-4: «E credi a me, che non è fastidio della vita, non disperazione, non senso della nullità delle cose, della vanità delle cure, della solitudine dell'uomo; non odio del mondo e di se medesimo; che possa durare assai: benché queste disposizioni dell'animo sieno ragionevolissime, e le loro contrarie irragionevoli. Ma contuttociò, passato un poco di tempo; mutata leggermente la disposizione del corpo; a poco a poco; e spesse volte in un subito, per cagioni menomissime e appena possibili a notare; rifassi il gusto alla vita, nasce or questa or quella speranza nuova, e le cose umane ripigliano quella loro apparenza, e mostransi non indegne di qualche cura; non veramente all'intelletto; ma sì, per modo di dire, al senso dell'animo. E ciò basta all'effetto di fare che la persona, quantunque ben conoscente e persuasa della verità, nondimeno a mal grado della ragione, e perseveri nella vita, e proceda in essa come fanno gli altri: perché quel tal senso (si può dire), e non l'intelletto, è quello che ci governa.»

passage where Leopardi discusses the difference between the desperation of the ancients and that of the moderns. Describing the latter, Leopardi writes:

The consequence of the second is heedlessness, contempt, and indifference toward things, and toward oneself a certain listless love (because man no longer has enough self-love to have the strength to hate himself), which resembles heedlessness but is still love, though not such as would cause a man to be distressed, to grieve, to feel compassion for his own misfortunes, and even less to strive, and to undertake anything for himself, for he considers things to be indifferent, and has all but lost any feeling or sense of the mind (*il tatto e il senso dell'animo*), and has covered with a callus the whole of the sensitive, desiring, etc., faculty, in short, the passions and affects of every kind, has practically worn out almost all the elasticity of the springs and forces of the soul through long use and intense, enduring pressure.⁴¹⁰

The desperation of the moderns is described in this passage as an atrophy of the soul's sense, in terms which are much like those Leopardi employs to describe the state of insensitivity which is broken by the work of genius. The hendiadys "tact and sense of the soul" reinforces both the sensible nature of this faculty and its intimacy. The expression "sense of the soul" sounds like a translation from the Latin *sensus animi*, which can be found in several classical authors, such as Lucretius, Seneca and Juvenal. *Anima* is what makes life living in the *animal*. In Leopardi's metaphysics what makes life living is called conformability. We have seen that self-perception is one of the fundamental aspects of conformability: the expression "sense of the soul" seems therefore to contain a meaningful redundancy, that could be expressed by translating it as "soul of the soul" or "sense of the sense". In terms of Leopardi's metaphysics, *sensus animi* could be thought of as the faculty through which conformability perceives itself as mere conformability. Such a faculty appears not only more fundamental than reason or intellect — these late

⁴¹⁰ Zib. 619-20: «Della seconda, la noncuranza e il disprezzo e l'indifferenza verso le cose; verso se stesso un certo languido amore (perchè l'uomo non ha più tanto amor proprio da aver forza di odiarsi) che somiglia alla noncuranza, ma pure amore, tale però che non porta l'uomo ad angustiarsi, addolorarsi, sentir compassione delle proprie sventure, e molto meno a sforzarsi, ed intraprender nulla per se, considerando le cose come indifferenti, ed avendo quasi perduto il tatto e il senso dell'animo, e coperta di un callo tutta la facoltà sensitiva, desiderativa ec. insomma le passioni e gli affetti d'ogni sorta; e quasi perduta per lungo uso, e forte e lunga pressione, quasi tutta l'elasticità delle molle e forze dell'anima.»

assuefactions of memory — but even more than self-love, which represents the individuality of the self as a determined reality. *Sensus animi* seems to differ from self-love, as a simple and still undetermined sentiment of conformability. The fact that the sense of the soul is more fundamental than the other faculties is not meant to elevate it at a higher dignity, but to justify in what sense it has the ability to keep «governing us» against the conclusions of reason. Leopardi sees reason as just a part of life, which exists only as the refinement of a more fundamental faculty, through which life perceives itself. Every representation, including those of reason, is a determined habituation of conformability. But in order to have habituations, conformability has to be conformable to itself. Sense of the soul can be considered as what makes life conformable to itself; not just one of the many habituations of the living, but rather the condition of habituation. From this standpoint, the soul's sense resembles the faculty which elsewhere Leopardi calls «memory», which is the fundament of habituation and therefore of every form conformability can take (cf. Chapter V, § 1). Memory, taken in this fundamental sense, is the essence of the living, the soul of the soul and the sense of the senses. Reason — oblivious of the living — does not have anything to object to the voluntary abandonment of life. The sense of the soul instead remembers and takes sides with the living, as Plotinus, master of memory, teaches to his disciple Porphyry:

He is a barbarian, and not a wise man, who takes no account of the grief experienced by his friends, relations, and acquaintances. He who scarcely troubles himself about the grief his death would cause to his friends and family is selfish; he cares little for others, and all for himself. And truly, the suicide thinks only of himself. He desires nought but his personal welfare, and throws away all thought of the rest of the

world. In short, suicide is an action of the most unqualified and sordid egotism, and is certainly the least attractive form of self-love that exists in the world.⁴¹¹

The supreme judgement on the abandonment of humanity is not a judgment of value; rather it is an aesthetic one. Life which abandons life is the least beautiful form of life. The act of killing oneself is «barbaric» not in the sense of a lack of civilization, but on the contrary, in the sense of an extreme abuse of reason. Following the the soul's sense, Plotinus urges Porphyry to take sides with the living, in the fragile interstice of resistance — between existence and reason — which is friendship:

Let us live, dear Porphyrius, and console each other. Let us not refuse our share of the sufferings of humanity, apportioned to us by destiny. Let us cling to each other with mutual encouragement, and hand in hand strengthen one another better to bear the troubles of life. Our time after all will be short; and when death comes, we will not complain. In the last hour, our friends and companions will comfort us, and we shall be gladdened by the thought that after death we shall still live in their memory, and be loved by them.⁴¹²

The last words Plotinus delivers to Porphyry are not meant to transform again life into a value.

On the contrary, Plotinus invites Porphyry to consider life as the territory where the absence of values, which is truth, can be shared as sorrow. Such a sharing belongs to the inner nature of conformability, which is the ability to get acquainted. Friendship and memory are the essential

⁴¹¹ Ivi, p. 194-5: «Aver per nulla il dolore della disgiunzione e della perdita dei parenti, degl'intrinsechi, dei compagni; o non essere atto a sentire di sì fatta cosa dolore alcuno; non è di sapiente, ma di barbaro. Non far niuna stima di addolorare colla uccisione propria gli amici e i domestici; è di non curante d'altrui, e di troppo curante di se medesimo. E in vero, colui che si uccide da se stesso, non ha cura né pensiero alcuno degli altri; non cerca se non la utilità propria; si gitta, per così dire, dietro alle spalle i suoi prossimi, e tutto il genere umano: tanto che in questa azione del privarsi di vita, apparisce il più schietto, il più sordido, o certo il men bello e men liberale amore di se medesimo, che si trovi al mondo.»

⁴¹² Ivi, p. 195-6: « Viviamo, Porfirio mio, e confortiamoci insieme: non ricusiamo di portare quella parte che il destino ci ha stabilita, dei mali della nostra specie. Sì bene attendiamo a tenerci compagnia l'un l'altro; e andiamoci incoraggiando, e dando mano e soccorso scambievolmente; per compiere nel miglior modo questa fatica della vita. La quale senza alcun fallo sarà breve. E quando la morte verrà, allora non ci dorremo: e anche in quest'ultimo tempo gli amici e i compagni ci conforteranno: e ci rallegrerà il pensiero che, poi che saremo spenti, essi molte volte ci ricorderanno, e ci ameranno ancora.»

forms in which life gets acquainted respectively with itself and with death. Grounded on the soul's sense and tending towards memory, the community of friendship which Leopardi envisions is a funerary civilization where, under the *pathos* of existence, the living preserve the feeble flame of life that once has been. For such a funerary friendship, taking sides with the mortals, poetry refuses to indulge in suicide. It no longer praises, because it has followed life and existence till the horizon where all the values fall; but, having learned how to be groundless, it returns home from the end of the world-measurement.

3. Grace

The unveiling of reason's groundlessness dissipates the solid uniformity of boredom, opening a space where the unpraisable wonder floats ungrounded. It is in such a space, thanks to the freedom of movement that it allows, that the words of *Plotinus* can resonate and prepare for the return of poetry. Such a space, which is the dimension wherein Leopardi's late style flourishes, is named in his thought by the word *grace*.

Leopardi's meditation on grace starts on the forty-seventh page of the *Zibaldone*'s manuscript, and stops after more than four thousand pages. The adverb *in sum* — which in the *Zibaldone* often signals the conclusion of a long chain of thoughts scattered in the pages before — introduces the last annotation on the matter. Dated October 1828, this annotation does not belong to the very final stage of the *Zibaldone* — which interrupts only in December 1832 — as if at that point the meditation on grace had reached a level which Leopardi considered sufficient. Significantly, the annotation comes just a few months after Leopardi's return to poetry with the poem *The Renaissance*. The annotation reads:

Grace in short is generally none other than ugliness in beauty. Ugliness in ugliness, and pure beauty, are both alien to grace.⁴¹³

Isolated from the context, this brief topological description of the aesthetic categories of grace, beauty and ugliness can sound a bit empty and slightly paradoxical. In order to clarify in what sense it can be considered as a point of conclusion of Leopardi's meditation on grace, it is helpful to look back at the path that has taken Leopardi to this point.

Since the very beginning of the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi has understood grace in opposition to beauty. Beauty and grace are for him two different kinds of relations between the parts and the whole. Where «beauty is simply harmony and propriety»⁴¹⁴ on the contrary «grace cannot come except from nature, and nature never works according to the compass of grammar, geometry, analysis, mathematics»⁴¹⁵. While beauty follows rules which are up until a certain point understandable, grace seems to defy every regularity, so that «pure beauty with respect to grace, (...) is, in the category of the beautiful, what reason is to nature in the system of human things.»⁴¹⁶ Where beauty is convenience, grace can be considered as “un-convenience”, and therefore as a kind of “contrast” which does not disrupt what Leopardi calls *the beautiful* — the aesthetic experience as such — but rather reinforces it with its “extraordinariness”.⁴¹⁷

⁴¹³ Zib. 4416: «La grazia in somma per lo più non è altro che il brutto nel bello. Il brutto nel brutto, e il bello puro, sono medesimamente alieni dalla grazia.»

⁴¹⁴ Zibaldone, 1999 «Bellezza non è altro che armonia e convenienza».

⁴¹⁵ Zibaldone, 46 «La grazia non può venire altro che dalla natura, e la natura non istà mai secondo il compasso della gramatica della geometria dell'analisi della matematica ec.».

⁴¹⁶ Zibaldone, 270 La semplice bellezza rispetto alla grazia ec. è nella categoria del bello, quello ch'è la ragione s alla natura nel sistema delle cose umane.

⁴¹⁷ Zibaldone, 1523: Il bello è convenienza, la grazia un contrasto, cioè una certa sconvenienza, o almeno un certo straordinario nelle convenienze. (...) Dalla grazia si può dunque argomentare alla bellezza, per una ragione e in un modo simile a quello in cui dal brutto si argomenta al bello, e dalla teoria dell'uno risulta quella dell'altro; e così accade in tutti i contrarii.

The “unpropriety”, “contrast”, and “extraordinariness” of grace is considered by Leopardi in two fundamental respects, which correspond to as many fundamental aspects of conformability. The first one is the morphological dimension. From this point of view, the representation that elicits the sentiment of grace appears characterized by a certain «delicacy».⁴¹⁸ To such a morphological definition corresponds the physiological interpretation of the effects of grace as «a certain irritation in things that pertain to beauty and pleasure».⁴¹⁹ As Leopardi writes: «The effect of grace is usually as I described, to shake, tickle, and sting».⁴²⁰ Such an irritation «is pleasant, like the physical irritation of taste or touch».⁴²¹ Its intensity varies depending on the subjects, so that «just as the more sensitive or delicate palates or constitutions are more susceptible and discerning with regard to these physical sensations, so is the spirit with respect to grace».⁴²² The irritation of grace is given by the fact that its representation is the cause of a pleasure that cannot be grasped all at once: «The effect of grace — Leopardi writes — is not to exalt the soul, or to fill it up or to leave it amazed, as beauty does, but to shake it, the way tickling shakes the body, not powerfully, like an electric shock. It is true that little by little it can produce excitement and a

⁴¹⁸ Cf. Zib. 3178.

⁴¹⁹ Zibaldone, 203, my translation. The original reads: «In somma non saprei che dire. Si potrebbe conchiudere che la grazia consiste in un certo irritamento nelle cose che appartengono al bello e al piacere.»

⁴²⁰ Zib. 203

⁴²¹ Zib. 212, my translation: «L’irritamento della grazia è piacevole come un irritamento corporale nel gusto nel tatto, ec.»

⁴²² Zib. 212: «come una maggiore irritabilità e dilicatezza del palato, fibre ec. rende più suscettibili e di più fino discernimento rispetto a questi irritamenti corporali, così nella grazia riguardo allo spirito.»

raging fire in the soul, but not all at once». ⁴²³ While the beautiful can be represented all at once by grasping the regularity which orders the parts into a whole, grace — lacking such a regularity — imposes to progress again and again all through the parts in order to have a representation of the whole. This is why « grace reveals itself bit by bit, in fact you cannot have grace without this succession. So that, having seen part of it, you desire and hope to see more». ⁴²⁴ Grace, considered as irritation, is nothing but this desire to come back to a representation that can never be fully grasped. The progressive disclosure of the parts on the one hand, and the iterated return on the representation on the other, can both be described as a sort of movement. In this respect, according to Leopardi, «grace usually consists in movement». ⁴²⁵ With a characteristic move of his thought, Leopardi grounds the morpho-physiological interpretation on a more fundamental level, which is given by the kinetic dimension. The kinetic dimension in turn unveils the connection between grace and temporality, so that Leopardi can concisely write «we might say beauty belongs to the moment, grace to time.» ⁴²⁶ What does it mean, however, that *grace belongs to time*? How does this belonging happen? The dimension of temporality appears to be crucial in order to interpret Leopardi's last annotation on grace. But, what is time for Leopardi? The anti-transcendental orientation of the metaphysics of conformability leads Leopardi to reject both Kant's notion of time as a transcendental condition of knowledge as well as Newton's

⁴²³ Zib. 198: «L'effetto della grazia non è di sublimar l'anima, o di riempierla, o di renderla attonita come fa la bellezza, ma di scuoterla, come il solletico scuote il corpo, e non già fortemente come la scintilla elettrica. Bensì appoco appoco può produrre nell'anima una commozione e un incendio vastissimo, ma non tutto a un colpo».

⁴²⁴ Ibi: «la grazia ha successione di parti, anzi non si dà grazia senza successione. Quindi veduta una parte, resta desiderio e speranza delle altre».

⁴²⁵ Ibi: «la grazia ordinariamente consiste nel movimento».

⁴²⁶ Ibi: «e diremo così, la bellezza è nell'istante, e la grazia nel tempo».

realistic conception of “absolute time”. In Leopardi’s mature thought time will be defined, together with space, as an «aspect (...) of our consideration of things», a mere way of looking at reality, not something real in itself. This formulation must not be taken in the sense which Kant’s transcendental idealism conferred to it: on the very contrary, for Leopardi duration precedes time in the same way that locality precedes space.⁴²⁷ Locality and duration in turn are not preexisting conditions of reality, but the simple lack of hindrances to the existence of a certain thing. Reversing Leibniz’s question on the universal cause of existence, Leopardi seems to ask: «why nothing should exist, rather than something?» From this standpoint, space and time are just the names we give to the absence of hindrance to existence. This nominalistic view on space and time appears mainly polemic, in the sense that its function is to bring to completion the destruction of the preexisting forms of reality. However, a richer account of time — complementary to this formal notion of temporality — can be found in Leopardi’s *Theory of Pleasure*, where desire appears as the dimension that discloses the structure of temporality.

⁴²⁷ Zib. 4233: «Time is not a thing. It is an accident of things, and independently of their existence it is nothing; it is an accident of this existence; or rather it is an idea of ours, a word. Time is the duration of things. In the same way, 7,200 ticks of a clock pendulum make an hour; but that hour is a product of our mind, and does not exist, either in itself, or in time, as a part of it, any more than it existed before the clock was invented. In short, the existence of time is none other than a mode, an aspect, so to speak, of our consideration of things that are, or may be or are supposed to be. The same in relation to space. Nothingness does not prevent a thing that is from being, existing, remaining. Where there is nothingness, there is nothing to prevent a thing from being, or being created, there. Therefore nothingness is necessarily place. It is therefore a property of nothingness to be place: a negative property, since the existence of place is purely negative and nothing else. Thus, in the same way that time is a mode or an aspect of considering the existence of things, so space is none other than a mode, an aspect of our consideration of nothingness. Where there is nothingness, there is space, and there cannot be nothingness without space. It is therefore clear that there is space even beyond the very last confines of the existing universe, since there is nothing there. And if something could be created or pushed beyond those extreme confines, it would find place; which is the same as saying that it would find nothing to prevent it going and remaining there. The conclusion is therefore that time and space are, in substance, none other than ideas, names.» Albeit not strikingly original, this doctrine allows Leopardi to get rid of the problem of the substance’s infinity. If time were something real, the eternity of the substance of the stratonian cosmos would imply matter’s infinity, and therefore some kind of divinity. Leopardi discusses the argument opposing the views of “the spinozists”.

Desire is the tension towards a state of pleasure, which opens the cosmos of conformability to all the living. The pleasure towards which the living strive consists in nothing but the representation of future: «Human pleasure (likewise probably that of every living being, in the order of things as we know them) can be said to lie always in the future, to be only in the future, to consist purely in the future.»⁴²⁸ While pleasure is nothing but future, future in turn substantiates the past, which receives its meaning in relation to it:

I have felt pleasure; I have had a stroke of good luck. This is pleasurable only in that it gives us a positive idea of the future, offers promise of some lesser or greater enjoyment, opens up a new field of hope, convinces us that we are capable of enjoyment, tells us of the possibility of attaining certain desires, puts us in a better position as concerns the future, whether with regard to fact and reality, or with regard to our thoughts and convictions, to the successes and prosperity that we promise ourselves following upon that test, that trial we have made of it, etc.⁴²⁹

Past discloses a prospective representation of pleasure, which consolidates, specifies and refracts the representation of the future into a multiplicity of connected representations. The disclosure of this manifold perspective of pleasure is a circle in which imagination moves imagining its own past on the base of its tension towards the future; at the same time it imagines its future through the contents given by the representation of the past. Such a circular movement is something pleasurable in itself, and therefore it is desired as such, so that the past in the end consists in a sort of future:

(...) once that act is over, you ponder it piece by piece, and another act of pleasure returns, formed in this same fashion, and founded either upon the simple enjoyment of recollection or on the bearing that that so-called pleasure has upon the future, upon those pleasures or

⁴²⁸ Zib. 532: «Il piacere umano (così probabilmente quello di ogni essere vivente, in quell'ordine di cose che noi conosciamo) si può dire ch'è sempre futuro, non è se non futuro, consiste solamente nel futuro».

⁴²⁹ Zib. 532-3: «Io ho provato un piacere, ho avuto una buona ventura: questo non è piacevole se non perchè ci dà una buona idea del futuro; ci fa sperare qualche godimento più o meno grande; ci apre un nuovo campo di speranze; ci persuade di poter godere; ci fa conoscere la possibilità di arrivare a certi desideri; ci mette in migliori circostanze pel futuro, sia riguardo al fatto e alla realtà, sia riguardo all'opinione e persuasione nostra, ai successi, alle prosperità che ci promettiamo dietro quella prova, quel saggio fattone. ec.»

benefits which you (as you believe) are thereby able or destined to feel, upon the idea that it gives you of your future life, your plans, your idea of yourself, your capabilities, etc., your hopes, whether they are real or derive from your own opinion and imagination—all future, in short, with regard both to the act of the new present pleasure and to the objects of this pleasure.⁴³⁰

In this regard, hope and memory — respectively opening the dimensions of future and past — appear extremely similar: a space for the imagination of a pleasure which is not restricted by the limits of the present. «The memory of pleasure» Leopardi writes «may be likened to hope and it produces more or less the same effects.»⁴³¹

Such a temporal structure of desire is the one that substantiates the aesthetic experience of what is beautiful. The past and future themselves can be considered from an aesthetic point of view.

«The past» Leopardi writes «in our remembering of it, is more beautiful than the present, as is the future in our imagining of it.»⁴³² On the contrary, for Leopardi, the present is the dimension of time that falls under the rule of reason, which hinders the circular movement of imagination.

The present therefore can never be beautiful: «the present alone has its true form in human conception. It is the only image of the truth, and everything true is ugly.»⁴³³ The ugliness of truth consists in the fact that it measures things, representing reality within the defined limits of

⁴³⁰ Zib. 534-5: «L'atto di quel piacere è stato quale l'ho descritto: ma finito l'atto, lo vai ruminando a parte a parte, e torna un altro atto di piacere composto alla stessa guisa, e fondato o sul semplice gusto della ricordanza, o sulla relazione che quel preteso piacere ha col futuro, con quei piaceri o beni che tu (come credi) puoi dunque o devi provare, coll'idea che ti dà della futura vita, coi disegni, coll'idea di te stesso, delle tue forze ec. colle speranze o reali, o rispetto all'opinione e immaginazione tua; insomma tutto futuro, tanto riguardo all'atto del nuovo piacere presente, quanto agli oggetti di esso piacere.»

⁴³¹ Zib. 1044: «La rimembranza del piacere, si può paragonare alla speranza, e produce appresso a poco gli stessi effetti.»

⁴³² Zib. 1522: «Il passato, a ricordarsene, è più bello del presente, come il futuro a immaginarlo.»

⁴³³ Zib. 1522: «il solo presente ha la sua vera forma nella concezione umana; è la sola immagine del vero; e tutto il vero è brutto.»

matter. On the contrary, for Leopardi, «the poetic, in one way or another, always consists in the distant, the indefinite, the vague»⁴³⁴.

Leopardi's late definition of time as a mere relationship between things enlightens the earlier account of temporality implied in the *Theory of Pleasure* and in the poetic of vagueness as seen in these fragments. Time does not precede things. The temporal distance that creates the prospective illusion of indefiniteness and vagueness is not a datum, a positive aspect of reality, but rather a dimension opened by the intrinsic dynamism of conformability.

In the *Zibaldone*, the analysis of the connection between aesthetic experience and temporality mainly focuses on the past; such a past, however, always contains an inner reference to the future. Memory of the past is not a static dimension, but a moment in the circularity of desire.

The aesthetic experience, for Leopardi, is fundamentally an experience where the temporal structure of desire becomes perceivable. The “images of poets” are those that are able to elicit the process of refraction of desire:

Whatever awakens a host of memories for us, where thought grows uncertain, is always pleasurable. The images of poets, words that are called poetic, etc., do this. Among them, it is noteworthy that images of domestic life in poetry, novels, paintings, etc. etc. etc., are always very pleasurable, gratifying, agreeable, elegant, and give some beauty and sometimes reconcile us to the silliest compositions, and to writers who are the least able to present them well. So, too, with images of rural life, etc., whose powerful effect derives in large part from the host of memories or ideas they evoke because they are commonplace things that are known and belong to everyone.⁴³⁵

⁴³⁴ Zib. 1522: «e il poetico, in uno o in altro modo, si trova sempre consistere nel lontano, nell'indefinito, nel vago.»

⁴³⁵ Zib. 1777-8: «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. fra le quali cose, è notevole che le immagini della vita domestica nella poesia, ne' romanzi, pitture ec. ec. ec. riescono sempre piacevolissime, gratissime amenissime elegantissime e danno qualche bellezza, e ci riconciliano talvolta alle più sciocche composizioni, ed agli scrittori i più incapaci di ben presentarle. Così quelle della vita rustica ec. il cui grand'effetto deriva in gran parte dalla folla delle rimembranze o delle idee che producono, perocchè elle son cose comuni, a tutti note, ed appartenenti.»

In order to elicit a poetic sentiment, something has to be familiar to us, so that it can awaken our memories. For Leopardi, the ability to awaken memories «is the essential and principal constituent of poetic feeling»⁴³⁶, at the point that the aesthetic object can be considered as entirely constituted by memories: «Any kind of object, for example, a place, a setting, a landscape, though it may be beautiful, is in no way poetic to the eye if it does not awaken any memory. That same landscape, and a setting too, any kind of object, utterly unpoetic in itself, will be highly poetic in the remembering.»⁴³⁷

Grounded upon memory, the nature of the beautiful appears historical to Leopardi. Things become beautiful because we have become acquainted with them. The beautiful does not depend on some transcendent rule, but is something relative to the circumstances. In this respect, the *Theory of Pleasure* and the poetic of vagueness can be considered as parts of Leopardi's theory of habituation. The aesthetic experience is an aspect of the process of habituation through which the conformability of the living takes its determinate form. Thus Leopardi can write: «(...) it is plain that harmony, that is, beauty, is the pure work and creature of habituation, and so much so that if habituation does not exist then the idea of harmony does not either, not even where it would seem most natural.»⁴³⁸ Beauty, from this point of view, can be thought of as a footprint of the history of conformability, a sediment of the immemorial process through which life

⁴³⁶ Zib. 4426: «La rimembranza è essenziale e principale nel sentimento poetico»

⁴³⁷ Zib.4426: «Un oggetto qualunque, p.e. un luogo, un sito, una campagna, per bella che sia, se non desta alcuna rimembranza, non è poetica punto a vederla. La medesima, ed anche un sito, un oggetto qualunque, affatto impoetico in se, sarà poetichissimo a rimembrarlo.»

⁴³⁸ Zib. 1945: « Da tutto ciò si rilevi come l'armonia cioè il bello sia pura opera e creatura dell'assuefazione tanto che se questa non esiste non esiste neppur l'idea dell'armonia, neanche dov'ella parrebbe più naturale.»

habituates to matter in the neverending succession of the worlds. Given Leopardi's definition of grace as contrast, the relativity of beauty must imply the relativity of grace as well:

From all this we deduce again that since the sense and idea of propriety, rule, and beauty is relative, so the sense and idea of grace that follows on from the idea of what is extraordinary, irregular, etc., in the proper and the beautiful, etc., is entirely relative. So that the graceful is relative neither more nor less than the beautiful, on the idea of which it depends, etc.⁴³⁹

For Leopardi, grace, as beauty, is relative and therefore historical. It remains however unclear how the historicity of grace can be considered in the light of the theory of habituation. Grace in respect to beauty is a sort of contrast. If beauty is the *creature of habituation*, does it mean that grace has to be thought of as a creature of de-habituation? And what would this mean? From the point of view of Leopardi's metaphysics, habituation is the process and the act through which conformability assumes a determinate form. Beauty, which is an effect of habituation, can be thought of as "conformed conformability", a form that has already been assumed by conformability and to which conformability returns. The return to such a form is pleasurable because in it conformability finds an image of herself. Beauty however, does not show conformability as such, but just as conformed conformability, that is to say something limited, defined and still.

On the contrary, grace can be thought of as an "un-conformed conformability", an image of conformability in the act of conforming herself, where the intrinsic motility and liveliness of conformability can be fully grasped. The contrast of grace shows conformability facing the un-

⁴³⁹ Zib. 1326: «Da tutto ciò si deduce ancora che siccome il senso e l'idea della convenienza, regola, e bellezza è relativa, così quella della grazia che risulta dall'idea di ciò ch'è straordinario, irregolare ec. nel conveniente e nel bello ec., è interamente relativa. Sicchè il grazioso è relativo nè più nè meno, come il bello, dalla cui idea dipende ec.»

conformed. The wonder for the fact that contrast does not destroy the beautiful is the arcane of the grace-effect:

(...) grace very often (perhaps always) comes from the extraordinary in the beautiful, an extraordinary that does not destroy beauty. Now I will add the cause of this effect. And it is, not only that the extraordinary generally surprises and therefore pleases us, which is something that does not pertain to the discussion of grace, but also that it gives us greater surprise and pleasure to see the extraordinary not harming the beautiful, not destroying the proper and regular, even while it is indeed extraordinary and in itself irregular, even while its being irregular and extraordinary throws that beauty and propriety into relief—to see, in short, a beauty and propriety which is not ordinary in things that do not seem able to fit together, a beauty and propriety that is different from others, different from the everyday (...)⁴⁴⁰

Since grace is historical, the wonder of grace can vanish, as soon as conformability appropriates the irregularity of grace as a new form of regularity:

If the thing that is extraordinary or irregular in the beautiful, and within the limits of the beautiful, becomes ordinary and regular, it no longer produces the sense of grace. Once the sense of the extraordinary is lost, so is that of the graceful. The same thing is graceful in one time or place, not graceful in another.⁴⁴¹

There is however one kind of contrast which cannot disappear: the one between beauty and the true. In the same way conformability can never absorb matter, beauty cannot appropriate truth. Truth, which in itself is the absolute uniformity of reason, interrupts the temporal structure of desire, creating an insuperable hindrance. Truth cannot be remembered, because it always belongs to the present, and therefore it cannot be turned into a poetic image. It is in this sense that for Leopardi «*everything true is ugly*».⁴⁴² Truth is the eternally present un-memorable: it can never become a memory, but on the contrary, in the form of present, it eternally opposes beauty.

⁴⁴⁰ Zib. 1322: «(...) la grazia deriva bene spesso (e forse sempre) dallo straordinario nel bello, e da uno straordinario che non distrugga il bello. Ora aggiungo la cagione di questo effetto. Ed è, non solamente che lo straordinario ci suol dare sorpresa, e quindi piacere, il che non appartiene al discorso della grazia; ma che ci dà maggior sorpresa e piacere il veder che quello straordinario non nuoce al bello, non distrugge il conveniente e il regolare, nel mentre che è pure straordinario, e per se stesso irregolare; nel mentre che per essere irregolare e straordinario, dà risalto a quella bellezza e convenienza: e in- somma il vedere una bellezza e una convenienza non ordinaria, e di cose che non paiono poter convenire (...)

⁴⁴¹ Zib. 1325

⁴⁴² Zib. 1522.

Yet, the memory of this insuperable opposition can become familiar to us. Leopardi seems to hint at this acquaintance and familiarity with the struggle between beauty and truth in his last definition of grace: «Grace in short is generally none other than ugliness in beauty. Ugliness in ugliness, and pure beauty, are both alien to grace.»⁴⁴³ With this topological description of the relationship between grace and ugliness, Leopardi reverses the image of reason's encirclement of imagination. Grace can now be thought of as the appropriation of truth's unfolding. In the form of grace, world-measuring reason — which is a part of life as conformability — can be contained by life, without disrupting it.⁴⁴⁴ Such a re-embrace of truth does not mean that something changes in the relationship between life and existence, so that the teleological structure of existence would now harmonize with that of life. Grace does not appropriate existence, it does not transform it into a value for the living. The re-embrace of truth does not erase the object of truth, which is the «ugliness» of mere existence. On the very contrary, grace reaffirms the untrascendable alterity of existence. Only, it provides the living with the possibility to keep standing the difference between itself and mere existence. Grace allows the individuality of life to remain before existence, without letting the first be absorbed in the undifferentiated unity of the latter.

In this specific sense, *grace* is the word that can explain the unresolved dialectic between world-measurement and enhancement of life that Leopardi had outlined in the emblems of Columbus

⁴⁴³ Zib. 4416: «La grazia in somma per lo più non è altro che il brutto nel bello. Il brutto nel brutto, e il bello puro, sono medesimamente alieni dalla grazia.»

⁴⁴⁴ Massimo Riva has written of Leopardi's grace as «difficile padroneggiamento del tempo» (the difficult project of mastering time) which can be realized in the «rimembranza del più in-attuale, il presente» (memory of the most un-timely, the present). Cf. M. RIVA, *Malinconie del Moderno*, op. cit., p. 110. The idea of a “memory of the present” can define Leopardi's concept of Renaissance as outlined in these pages.

and Ariosto. There is a passage of the *Zibaldone* where Leopardi establishes an analogy between the Greek use of the word beauty and the Italian use of words connected with the concept of grace. As the Greeks did, the Italians extend the use of words which originally belonged to the aesthetic lexicon to morality:

I have said elsewhere about how the Greeks' *καλὸς κἀγαθὸς* [the beautiful and the good] demonstrates the feeling and the power that beauty had in that nation and the sublimity they attributed to it, considering beauty to be a part and name of virtue. Add the custom in their language of calling all good, honest, virtuous, useful things *καλά*. See, among others, Xenophon *Ἀπομνημονεύματα* [Memorabilia], bk. 3, ch. 8.1 To the imagination of the Italians should be attributed (as the above-mentioned things to that of the Greeks), under the same guise, the use that they make of the words signifying external *grazia* [grace] to denote probity, honesty, kindness, etc., of habits: uomo DI GARBO [well-mannered man], GALANTuomo [gentleman].⁴⁴⁵

Notably, the similitude taken in account in this passage entails a difference: while both employed an aesthetic concept to speak of morality, the Greeks used the concept of beauty, and the Italians that of grace. Such a difference is not so much geographical, as rather chronological. What the passage implies is not just the similarity between the Greeks and the Italians but, more importantly, the difference between Antiquity and Modernity.⁴⁴⁶ Grace is for the moderns what beauty was for the ancients. The word grace can be understood as the name that Leopardi gives to poetry beyond the world measurement: the poetic re-comprehension of the historical event of metaphysics. Leopardi's poetry after the return will be in this specific sense, a poetry of grace.

⁴⁴⁵ Zib. 2486: «Ho detto altrove del *kalòn kagathòn* de' greci, come dimostri il sentimento e la forza ch'aveva in quella nazione la bellezza, e la sublimità che le attribuivano, pigliandola per parte e nome di virtù. Aggiungi l'uso della loro lingua di chiamar *kala* tutte le cose buone, oneste, virtuose, utili. V. fra gli altri, Senof. Apomn. b. g. kef. h. Alla immaginazione degl'italiani (come le sopraddette cose a quella de' greci) si deve sotto lo stesso aspetto attribuire l'uso che fanno [2487]delle parole significanti la grazia esterna per dinotare la probità, onestà, bontà ec. de' costumi: uomo DI GARBO, GALANTuomo. (21. Giugno. 1822.)»

⁴⁴⁶ In another passage of the *Zibaldone* Leopardi observes that when we read ancient greek poetry many things appear to us graceful, which for the Greeks were probably just beautiful. They are graceful for us because of the ancient that we find in them. Their antiquity creates for us a sort of contrast which the Greeks could not perceive.

4. Inside Angelica's room

The fragment *Angelica*, probably a canzone stanza, appears at the bottom of the same sheet on which Leopardi drafted the unfinished *Song of the maid*. It does not present variants or corrections, and it ends precisely where the sheet ends, as if Leopardi already knew the exact number of lines he was to write. The sheet is of the same type Leopardi used for writing *The Renaissance* and *To Sylvia*, the two poems he wrote in Pisa in April 1828, heralding his return to poetry. The evident thematic similarities between the *Song of the Maid* and *To Sylvia* have inclined the scholars to consider the former as a prelude to the latter, and to trace the date of its composition back to the spring 1828. The fragment *Angelica* on the contrary is usually assumed to have been written later by Leopardi. According to this interpretation, the fragment is a fair copy that would have been added to the sheet on which Leopardi had already drafted the *Song of the Maid*. The main reason supporting this hypothesis is that the title *Angelica* appears in a list of literary projects dated September 1828. The scholars supporting September 1828 as terminus post quem assume that Leopardi had no reasons to write the title of a poem he had already abandoned in a list of literary projects. The *lectio faciliior*, however, is not always the true one; other interpretations remain open. For instance, it cannot be excluded that a few months after drafting the fragment Leopardi could still have had in mind the possibility of completing it, and wrote it in the list as a reminder. Or he could have considered leaving it as a fragment, and inserting it, together with the *Song of the Maid* in the sequence of the *Canti*. The different treatment of the fragment *Angelica* and of the *Song of the Maid* is probably due to the strong elements of continuity between the *Song of the Maid* and *To Sylvia*, which have led these two poems, together with *The Renaissance*, to be considered as part of a cluster that marks

Leopardi's return to poetry. The lack of immediate connections between *Angelica* and this cluster has increased the importance of the fragment's mention in the list. As it has been noticed, nevertheless, even accepting September 1828 as terminus post quem, it still has to be explained why Leopardi decided to write *Angelica* on the same sheet with the *Song of the Maid*, thus establishing a material connection with the cluster of the return.⁴⁴⁷

In light of the symbolism of the Renaissance which has been outlined in the preceding pages, the fragment, independently from its chronological position, becomes a crucial trace of Leopardi's return to poetry. Because of Ariosto's importance for Leopardi's reading of the Renaissance in *Ad Angelo Mai*, the decision of portraying Ariosto's fugitive heroine bears wide symbolic implications. This fragment somehow introduces a new interpretation of Ariosto, just as Leopardi's 1824 *Dialogue* presented a new interpretation of Columbus. Even more so, because this new interpretation of Ariosto's poetry appears intertwined with an implicit reference to Columbus. As the Columbus of the *Dialogue* — in the image of the leap of Lefkada — hinted to Ariosto's poetry, the *Angelica* of this fragment hints at Columbus' voyage: like Columbus, she has travelled all around the world. Notwithstanding its incompleteness, or rather thanks to that, *Angelica's* fistful of verses holds the enigmatic grace of a rapidly sketched portrait:

*Angelica, tornata al patrio lito
Dopo i casi e gli errori onde cotanto
Esercitata in ogni strania terra
E in ogni mar la sua beltà l'avea,
Otto lustri già corsi, e bella ancora,
Là, ne le stanze ov'abitò fanciulla,
Sede soletta, e seco
Favellando veniva il suo pensiero.*

⁴⁴⁷ M. RESIDORI, *L'Angelica di Leopardi*, in *Leopardi a Pisa*, ed. by F. Ceragioli, Milano, Electa, 1997, p. 119-123.

The well balanced structure of the stanza gathers manifold contrasts into the calibrated arch of one single sentence. Proximity and distance appear in one glance, one next to the other. «Homeland» and «foreign lands»; the image of the vast world Angelica has crossed and that of the rooms where she now comes back; the restless wandering and the silent quietude of reflection; the beauty of her youth and the beauty she still has now. Contrast does not stop the movement, but rather tightens these verses almost in the form of a chiasmus. The equilibrium between the intertwining contraries — one surfacing from the other — resembles the movement of the two drops in the *Taijitu*, the Chinese emblem of the black and white. The first line and the closure draft the image of present Angelica; the aside in the middle evokes Angelica's past and her vicissitudes. The end of the journey is where it began. Time passed, but the place is the same, and spatial proximity brings everything closer. The vast world where Angelica has wandered gathers in her room; the temporal distance between her childhood and her maturity is just an instant. Angelica is now forty years old, but she is «still beautiful». Not just beautiful, but *still* beautiful, beautiful notwithstanding. Against plain beauty withstands now her long wanderings, the many years that have gone, and, most of all, her experience of the world. Leopardi condenses this latter point in the participle «exercised». Exercised here is not just — following the latin root of the Italian “esercitata” — “tormented”, “afflicted”, “persecuted”. It is certainly all of this, but it is also something else. Exercise is for Leopardi the voluntary assumption of new habituations. Through exercise, humanity forges conformability. According to Leopardi exercise — provided to humans by nature — is «in an absolute sense superior to nature».⁴⁴⁸ Thanks to exercise, the

⁴⁴⁸ Zib.1633.

human species surpasses nature not by going against it, but rather through understanding it. Exercise can be seen as the fundamental form of rational knowledge, which transforms the involuntary experience of habituation into a voluntary experiment. As such, exercise is the origin of technique and the trademark of civilization. In this sense, the voyage of Columbus can be seen as a sort of “exercise”. In *Ad Angelo Mai* in fact, Columbus’s travel — fulfilling the world-measurement — «breaks the contrast of nature». Through measuring the world, reason surpasses nature. Containing the entire world in its limits, knowledge becomes somehow wider than the world itself. Similarly to Columbus, the Angelica Leopardi portrays in the fragment is someone who has traveled all across the world. But, differently from the Columbus of the *Dialogue* — who was captured in the climatic moment right *before* the fulfillment of the world-measurement — Angelica is portrayed right *after* the return. At the very opposite extreme of the western shores where Columbus lands, Angelica’s room — following Ariosto’s *Furioso* — lies on the extreme oriental edge of the inhabited world, on the shores of *Cathay*. Somehow, the land where Angelica returns already belongs to the ancestral landscape of Leopardi’s later *Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia*. According to a theory which was common in Europe at the time, and which Leopardi was certainly acquainted with — one that appears well tuned with his idea of the unicity of the historical event — the human species had appeared at a certain point in the steppes of central Asia.⁴⁴⁹ Far from fixating the Orient in the immutability of a super-historical essence, Leopardi’s endorsement of this historiographical myth embraces the imaginary of ancestral Asia in a way which appears ultimately dialectical. A number of passages from the *Zibaldone* written in 1821 witness Leopardi’s curiosity for Chinese culture, focusing on the philological problems

⁴⁴⁹ On the reconstruction of Leopardi’s acquaintance with this theory cf. Carlo Dionisotti, “Preistoria del Pastore errante”, in *Appunti sui moderni*, cit.

connected with the writing system and their influence on the language. In one of these fragments, paraphrasing a passage from Sir George Leonard Staunton's introduction to the translation of *Ta Tsing Leu Lee* — a legal treatise from the Qing era — Leopardi calls China a land of «marvelous and strange immobility and immutability».⁴⁵⁰ Such an immobility appears to Leopardi due to the nature of the writing system, which «does not really represent words but things».⁴⁵¹ Language and writing appear therefore completely detached, so that «(...) someone could be found who fully understood the meaning of Chinese writing without knowing a syllable of the language». According to Leopardi, this gulf between writing and language grants to Chinese literature a specific kind of immortality: «The Chinese language can perish without its characters perishing, the language can perish and the literature be preserved because it has almost nothing to do with the language, rather, it is intimately bound up with the characters».⁴⁵² The effect of this imperishability of the Chinese literature appears duplicitous: on the one hand, the literature remains fixed to the characters; on the other, the language is left completely free to develop as if there were no writing. The paradoxical result is that ancient literature would still be understandable even if in the meanwhile the language had completely changed:

(...) in China, because the use, form, and meaning of the ancient characters has been preserved, so too has a complete understanding of the ancient scripts, even if today they were to be read with words and in a language altogether different from that in which the Ancient Chinese read them.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵⁰ Zib. 942. The translation, originally appeared in the *Edinburgh Review*, ("Ta Tsing Leu Lee: being the fundamental Laws, and a selection from the supplementary Statutes, of the Penal Code of China," *Edinburgh Review*, tome 16, issue 32, August 1810, pp. 476–99) was read by Leopardi in the Italian rendering appeared in *Annali di scienze e lettere*, vol. 8, no. 24, December 1811, pp. 289–304.

⁴⁵¹ Zib. 944.

⁴⁵² Zib. 1019.

⁴⁵³ Zib. 1180.

The image of a language where everything both changes and remains the same resembles very much the room where Angelica returns. Here too everything is the same and different. The room is the same of her childhood, but Angelica is now a woman who has traveled around the world. At the same time, her journey looks different now that it is seen from here. From the room of her childhood, the “exercise” that has made Angelica wander all across the world no longer appears just as suffering — the sorrowful experience of truth — but also as remembrance. She brings back home with her all the knowledge she has gathered in the years of her wanderings. All the lands and all the seas she has seen, all the vicissitudes she has gone through, all the times she has been lost and mistaken, all these memories surround her while she sits in there. All the violence of her experience is brought back to the intimacy of her quiet room. From this room, truth — the vast world Angelica has crossed — is now a memory of her life. Angelica’s image shines like a perfect effigy of grace: *ugliness in beauty*. After going through so many sufferings, she is still beautiful. What is she thinking, while she silently sits in her room? We are going to hear her voice. In the next stanza certainly her lips will open up and she will tell of her wanderings, of her sufferings, and of the path that brought her back home. Angelica will teach us the return. Or she will just say, as Columbus expected in the *Dialogue*, how delightful it is just to have some land beneath one’s feet. And yet, the fragment does not go further. Leopardi’s portrait of Angelica interrupts at the precise moment when she is going to open up her lips and break the silence. Angelica’s thought remains hidden to us, her lips are left ajar. The image remains an image, without the gift of language.

The renaissance, the lyric which heralds Leopardi’s return to poetry, will be a monologue that tells the story of how poetry was lost and found again. There Leopardi will tell with simple

words the history of his journey across truth. The words Angelica would have said would probably have been the same Leopardi sings in the metastasian canzonetta *The renaissance*. We can imagine the stanza of *Angelica* as a prelude to *The renaissance*, the final step before the return. And we can suppose that Leopardi wanted to preserve this fragment, together with the *Song of the Maiden* — another prelude — as a ruin, an enigmatic trace of his passage along the path of the return.

Conclusions

On the basis of the symbolic importance which the debate on the interpretation of the Renaissance took on in Italy in the first half of the 19th century — as it has been shown in

Chapter I — this dissertation has posed the question of the symbolism of the Renaissance in Leopardi's writings.

Since Leopardi's meditation on the Renaissance appears in the form of a philosophical history, Chapter II clarifies Leopardi's methodological conception of history as the science of things which happen only once. Such a conception starkly differs from the coeval positivistic or idealistic interpretations of history, and appears strongly consistent with the anti-transcendental tendency of Leopardi's mature metaphysics of conformability (cf. Chapter VII, § 8).

Leopardi's appropriation of the conventional symbolic use of the Renaissance has been reconstructed in Chapter III, in the context of his attempt to integrate among the cultural elites of the Papal State. In this chapter Leopardi's symbolic use of the Renaissance has been studied through the dialectical image provided by the central stanzas of 1820 *Canzone ad Angelo Mai* with the "emblems" of Columbus and Ariosto. Read on the backdrop of the *Theory of Pleasure* and the philosophical history which Leopardi develops in the *Zibaldone*, these two stanzas are shown to be an interpretation of the Renaissance as a crucial moment in the sovereignty-struggle between *the empire of reason* and poetry's claim to *reign*. From this standpoint the Renaissance has appeared as an ambiguous phenomenon, encompassing both the fulfillment of reason's encirclement of the world and the inexplicable return of poetry.

The unresolved dialectic between these two aspects of the Renaissance has appeared distempered in the wider context of the Renaissance's map according to Leopardi which is provided in Chapter IV: here, on the basis of Leopardi's linguistic understanding of the Renaissance as the process of creation of vernacular literature, aspects of compatibility between reason and poetry have emerged.

In Chapter V, the differences between the image of the Renaissance offered in Chapter III and IV have been accounted for in light of the transformation of Leopardi's thought in the crucial years 1821-23. In the context of Leopardi's transition from *philosophy of society* to *metaphysics*, the essential opposition between reason and imagination presented in the *Theory of Pleasure* becomes simply historical thanks to Leopardi's development of the concept of *habituation*.

In light of the aspects of compatibility between reason and imagination provided by this new theoretical perspective, in Chapter VI I've read the new interpretation of Columbus which Leopardi offers in his 1824 *Dialogue of Christopher Columbus and Pierre Gutierrez* as the transition to a different symbolism of the Renaissance. At this stage, through the image of Columbus, the Renaissance appeared as the experiment of the fulfillment of the world's measurement, aimed at discovering if the return of poetry is at all possible. The imagery of the jump of Lefkada — in connection with the concept of «work of genius» — has allowed to read Columbus's journey as a symbol through which Leopardi envisions the return to poetry beyond the measurement of the world.

On the basis of: 1) Leopardi's 1825 interpretation of his philosophical itinerary as a transition from «philosophy of society» to «metaphysics» (cf. Chapter V, § 3); 2) the 1823 definition of life as conformability which appears in the entry *metaphysical definition of life* in Leopardi's 1827 indexes of the *Zibaldone* (cf. Chapter VI, § 6); 3) the 1827 list of literary projects where Leopardi refers to «a treatise of metaphysics or transcendental philosophy» which would have been «the work of his life» (cf. Chapter V, § 3); and 4) the 1828 letter to Pietro Colletta where Leopardi refers again to the project of his metaphysical book, Chapter VII has demonstrated that in the *Zibaldone* there is a set of consistent propositions which can be understood against the

backdrop of the systematic structure of metaphysics which Leopardi got acquainted with in the years of his education. Such a systematic order has made it possible to understand in what sense Leopardi calls his thesis of the opposition between life and existence «the proposition and conclusion of the entire metaphysics».

Chapter VIII has followed the path of Leopardi's meditation beyond the «conclusion of the entire metaphysics», in order to show how the *Dialogue of Porphyry and Plotinus* is the point of transition between Leopardi's metaphysical research and his return to poetry in 1828 with the poem *The renaissance*. Finally, Leopardi's meditation on suicide and grace allows to understand this transition from a philosophical point of view, which takes the form of a poetical image in the undated sketch *Angelica*, which portrays Ariosto's heroine returning to the rooms of her childhood.

By reading Leopardi's metaphysical investigations through the poetic symbol of the Renaissance, this dissertation has made possible a new understanding of Leopardi's return to poetry from the point of view of his philosophical meditation. In light of the results of this research, new questions arise regarding Leopardi's late poetical production and its implications within the historical context of the movement towards national independence. Establishing a strong connection between the period of the patriotic *Canzoni* and Leopardi's late poetical production, the symbol of the Renaissance allows to read Leopardi's return to political engagement in terms of continuity — both in the negative form of the ideological polemic of *Palinodia al Marchese Gino Capponi* and in the positive form of his poetic testament *La Ginestra*. Passing through the ideological conundrum of the *Canzone ad Angelo Mai*, the transformation of Renaissance symbolism signals the transformation of Leopardi's thought and prepares his late political

proposal. In order to throw light on this aspect, it becomes important to understand from the point of view of grace — in the specific sense which the metaphysics of conformability gives to this word — the forms which Leopardi's poetry takes on *after* the return. If we think of Leopardi's poetry after 1828 as a poetry of grace, then this poetry belongs to a community situated beyond the conclusion of metaphysics. Is it possible to understand the form of this community through the forms that Leopardi's poetry takes after the conclusion of metaphysics? The interpretation of the fragment *Angelica* as an image of grace, further developed in the images of dead women which appear in Leopardi's late poetical production (*A Silvia*, *Le ricordanze*, *Sopra un bassorilievo antico sepolcrale*, *Sopra il ritratto di una bella donna*) can possibly throw light on this aspect. These images of a lost grace returning as the voice of poetry can perhaps embody the symbolic renaissance of a community that, without the illusion of a foundation, accepts the frail nobility of that which happens only once.