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GIACOMO LEOPARDI: SHADES OF BLACK:

MISANTHROPY IN LO ZIBALDONE

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A Dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School-New Brunswick

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Italian

written under the direction of

Professor Elizabeth Leake

and approved by

New Brunswick, New Jersey

January 2009

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION
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The work of Giacomo Leopardi has typically been analyzed by contrasting the noble values of the classical past against his perception of the inferior cultural condition found in the contemporary world. Leopardi believed that modern society at large was in decay as evidenced by the constant use of the word *odio*, hate, in relation to it and its members. *Odio*, and other misanthropic terms, are found so frequently and in such varied contexts in *Lo Zibaldone*, that one quickly understands that his feelings are more raw and less theoretical than past literary criticism would indicate.

Leopardi's hatred is misanthropic, a strong dislike and rejection of humankind itself. It is not that Leopardi dislikes everything, but rather, everyone. His negativity is directed toward people and their selfishness and lack of vision. Previous interpretations of his work focus on Leopardi's pessimism but do not acknowledge that it is not expressed toward life itself, but rather the disappointing and inadequate actions of individuals and groups. Depending on the variety of *odio*, the misanthropy that he is experiencing or

exposing, there is a different motivation behind it. The concept of hate has been considered by some critics to be one-dimensional when in fact for Leopardi *l'odio* has many textures and layers. It is not simply that Leopardi dislikes humanity but instead has a complete methodology of misanthropic thought. The significance of misanthropy in Leopardi's work can not be overstated and is the genesis of his creativity.

The scope of this work is to clearly delineate the three types of Leopardi's misanthropy which until now has been viewed as homogenous: dislike of strangers, dislike of peers, and dislike of self each serve a particular literary purpose. The functions of these variants will subsequently be defined in detail.

An analysis of Leopardi's misanthropy renders the conventional interpretation of poems such as *La ginestra* erroneous and superficial. Specifically the concept of Leopardi as a poet of the fraternity of man and promoter of solidarity in the battle against Nature will be proven incorrect.

DEDICATION

To Lili, Chris and Natalia for your love and support.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Rosemary and Michael Roney for teaching me the importance of culture and humanist philosophy from an early age.

Audrey Eilts for her continuous interest in my studies and for always believing in the quality of my work.

Duncan Macmillan for giving me the opportunity to apply and expand my knowledge and for believing in my ability.

To Steffi and David Britt for the many great conversations and for a great friendship.

To the members of the committee for your interest in my project. I really appreciate the time spent corresponding with me about my work and its progress.

Professor Elizabeth Leake for sharing her time generously and for helping me express myself in writing better than I ever have.

Carol Feinberg for her friendship, exceptional kindness and encouragement.

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Chapter One - An Introduction

La mia filosofia, non solo non è conducente alla misantropia, come può parere a chi la guarda superficialmente, e come molti l'accusano; ma di sua natura esclude la misantropia, di sua natura tende a sanare, a spegnere quel mal umore, quell'odio, non sistematico, ma pur vero odio, che tanti e tanti, i quali non sono filosofi, e non vorrebbero esser chiamati nè creduti misantropi, portano però cordialmente a' loro simili, sia abitualmente, sia in occasioni particolari, a causa del male che, giustamente o ingiustamente, essi, come tutti gli altri, ricevono dagli altri uomini. La mia filosofia fa rea d'ogni cosa la natura, e disculpando gli uomini totalmente, rivolge l'odio, o se non altro il lamento, a principio più alto, all'origine vera de' mali de' viventi ec.¹

The literary work of Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) has typically been analyzed by contrasting the noble values of the classical past against his perception of the inferior cultural condition found in the contemporary world. Leopardi believed that modern society at large was in decay as evidenced by the constant use of the word *odio*, hate, in relation to it and its members.² *Odio*, and other misanthropic terms, are found so frequently and in such varied contexts in *Lo Zibaldone*, that one quickly understands that his feelings were much more raw and less theoretical and distant than past literary criticism would indicate. Leopardi's negativity and strong anti-social stance are actively visceral. It is not simply an academic dislike of modern culture but is rather the cry of a man screaming because he cannot have what he wants, an ideal and unobtainable life.

¹ Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di Pensieri* (Mondadori, 1993), 1167.

² *Zibaldone* 462. "Per l'odio naturale dell'uomo verso l'uomo, inseparabile dall'amor proprio."

Leopardi's apparent focus on ancient culture and the cult of beauty³ are merely an artistic artifice, a shield which belies his personal struggle with life that allows him to directly and indirectly criticize his contemporaries by extolling the virtues of the past.⁴ Because Leopardi is known as well for the themes of brotherhood of man and the unity created by humanity's collective struggle against nature, it is surprising to find so much negativity expressed for others in *Lo Zibaldone*. It is a work which Leopardi continuously added to during his literary career but never published. The poems and vignettes, for which he is known primarily, were written as Leopardi simultaneously added to the *Zibaldone*. Compared to the *Operette morali* and *Canti*, *Lo Zibaldone* is much less interested in brotherly love and in fact rejects it as a concept:

...vera amicizia difficilmente può essere o durare tra giovani ... L'odio verso i simili, che essendo di ogni vivente verso ogni vivente, è maggiore verso quei della specie, ancor nella specie stessa è tanto maggiore, quanto un ti è più simile.⁵

His work, taken as a whole, reveals conflicting feelings of love and hate as regards others. It is the paradox of the misanthrope who shows love, albeit very briefly.

Leopardi's hatred is misanthropic, a strong dislike and rejection of humankind itself. It is

³ Walter Binni, *Lezioni leopardiane* (La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1994), 29. "In questo periodo però, nel 1815, accanto al *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* e all'orazione *Agl'Italiani*, assistiamo a una svolta che lo stesso Leopardi più tardi indicherà, quando nello *Zibaldone*, in un pensiero del 19 settembre 1821, dirà che in lui c'era stato un passaggio dall'erudizione al bello, che questo passaggio era avvenuto in modo non subitaneo ma graduato e che egli era diventato a poco a poco poeta, dopo aver letto e tradotto parecchi poeti antichi."

⁴ Sergio Solmi, *Giacomo Leopardi, Opere* (Ricciardi Editore, 1956), XI. "A ridosso di una modernità decaduta, impotente nelle sue risibili aspirazioni, resiste soltanto il grande mondo della cultura antica, non ancora dissolto dalla critica nel suo faticoso processo di sviluppo, ma sempre intatto e splendente nella sua configurazione di mito e soprastoria, di chiaro specchio e paradigma dei pensieri e delle azioni presenti."

⁵ *Zibaldone* 1174.

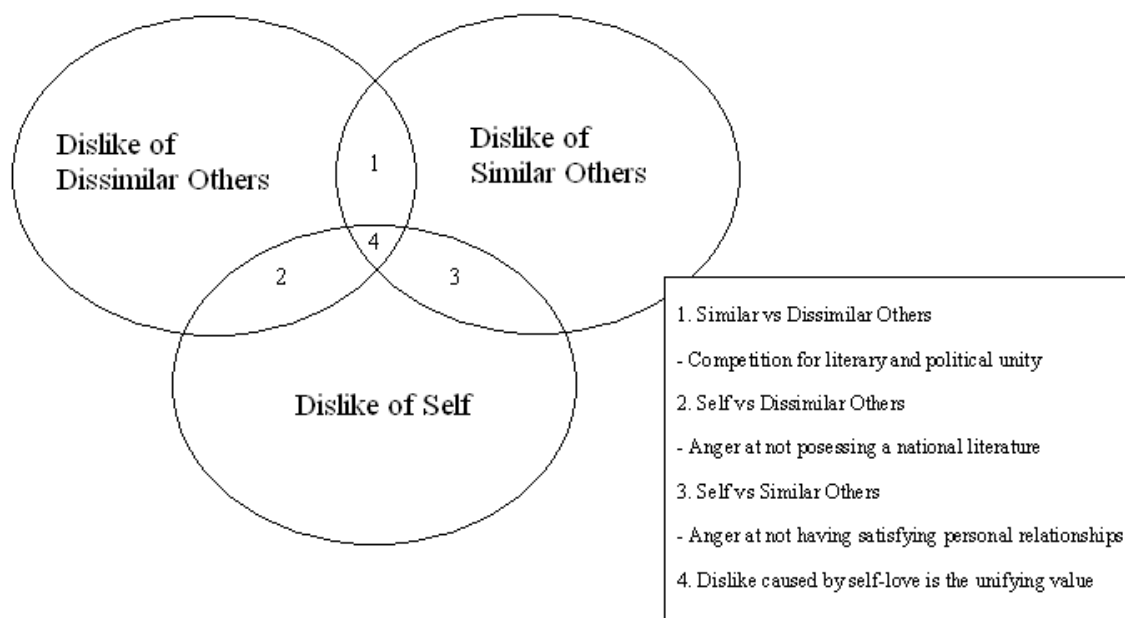
not that Leopardi dislikes everything, but rather, everyone. His negativity is directed toward people and their selfishness and lack of vision. Previous interpretations of his work, such as the criticism of DeSanctis, Croce, Binni and Biscuso, include references to Leopardi's negativity but do not acknowledge that it is not expressed toward life itself, but rather the disappointing and inadequate actions of individuals and groups. Depending on the variety of *odio*, the misanthropy that he is experiencing or exposing, there is a different motivation behind it. The concept of hate has been considered by some critics to be very primal and one-dimensional⁶ when in fact for Leopardi *l'odio* has many textures and layers. Therefore it is not simply that Leopardi hates humanity but instead has a complete methodology of misanthropic thought. The significance of misanthropy in Leopardi's work can not be overstated and is the genesis of his creative stimulus.

The scope of this work is to clearly delineate the three types of Leopardi's misanthropy which until now has been viewed as homogenous: dislike of strangers, dislike of peers, and dislike of self each serve a particular literary purpose. The functions of these variants will subsequently be defined in detail. In short however, the dislike of strangers and foreign *others* serves the purpose of spurring Italians into collective action and entering as a cohesive community into the currents of the European intellectual scene. The dislike of peers highlights Leopardi's isolation from society and his perception that those who are presumably similar to him inspire hatred for either being superior, inferior, or

⁶ Federico DeRoberto, *Leopardi* (Lucarini, 1987) 141. The author incorrectly believes that Leopardi's hatred is based solely on individuals preventing others from obtaining pleasure or objects; "Gli uomini, come tutti i viventi, non si sostengono, si combattono: "Naturalmente l'animale odia il suo simile, e qualora ciò è richiesto dall'interesse proprio, l'offende." Né altro scopo hanno le lotte umane se non "l'acquisto di piaceri che non diletano, e dei beni che non giovano"."

mediocre. The dislike of self underlines the destruction of the childlike illusions young Leopardi once had and the ensuing feelings of self-recrimination and hopelessness.

The three varieties of Leopardi's misanthropy can be viewed thusly:



The three types function in the following ways; the dislike of foreign others is a call to Italians to unite and to create a national literature and thus a national identity. The dislike of similar others is depicted as a reason for Leopardi's rejection of contemporary society and its rejection of him. The dislike of self, which is repeated throughout his work, the *Zibaldone* and elsewhere, emphasizes his alienation and non-participation in the world around him. While Leopardi's alienation has been documented many times before⁷, the variations of misanthropy which serve different purposes, philosophically and poetically,

⁷ Francesco DeSanctis, *Leopardi* (Einaudi, 1960) 562. "Anche Leopardi in un momento della sua vita sente l'incanto della solitudine, e volge le spalle a Recanati, dove odia ed è odiato, e dove maledice la luna, che rivela le facce umane, e desidera star solo ne' campi e separato dagli uomini: gli si sveglia allora il godimento delle bellezze della natura."

have not been differentiated and analyzed. An understanding of these misanthropies, delineated in the *Zibaldone*, greatly enhances the reader's understanding of his other works by establishing limitations as to how the subject is to be perceived.

The interpretation of his other more commonly-read works is greatly changed when viewed through the lens of Leopardi's complex misanthropy expressed in the *Zibaldone*. Each type of misanthropy develops a different central theme in his work. The positive emotions elicited by certain works in the *Canti* and *Operette morali* are virtually negated by the nearly 3,000 page rant against humanity which forms a central part of the *Zibaldone*. For example, *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* demonstrates the fight against nature's effects which unites all humanity of any origin. It is in stark contrast to his feelings espoused in the *Zibaldone* toward members of other groups or foreign *others* in general. The same is true for *A Silvia* wherein the tenderness and concern he reveals for a peer is never approximated in *Lo Zibaldone*. The reader is left to reconcile these disparate approaches toward *others* in his work.

The only vein in which Leopardi maintains his incessantly negative approach, is in regards to himself. In both *Lo Zibaldone* and in poetry relating to his own experiences, his personal thoughts are negative, "Moti del cor, la rimembranza acerba", (*Ricordanze*, line 173). When writing of other similar or dissimilar others, Leopardi expresses himself differently and with more artifice than when referring to himself. There are various reasons that this is the case. When writing poetry about himself explicitly, Leopardi reveals his thoughts more consistently in line with the feelings expressed in the

Zibaldone. In contrast, when writing of other people, Leopardi may hope to be accepted by them and as such does not reveal his negative feelings for them. The reader must remember that he did not ever publish the *Zibaldone* and that it began in 1816 as his personal journal, an “Encyclopedia of Useless Knowledge”. After seventeen years of adding to it, in 1833, Leopardi no longer wrote poems nor did he add to his notebooks which would later become *Lo Zibaldone*. Considering that he was a prolific prodigy and published many times over, there must have been a reason he did not publish the work. It may have been an attempt not to offend his readers or to reveal his motivating thoughts. He may have wanted to let the illusion persist of the fraternity of man and the collective experience of humanity. In spite of his chronic negativity, he may have believed that his literary legacy would be better served by a false, more positive image of the artist himself.⁸

Upon his death, Leopardi would have believed that his tome comprised of bundles of notebooks would not be seen by the public. The informed reader would then know the author only through his poetry and vignettes in the *Operette morali*. Perhaps he did not want to shatter the illusion of solidarity held by his readers by indicating that he harbors alienating feelings with respect to them in his *Zibaldone*. He need not have worried if that was the case. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the dichotomy in his work of positive and

⁸ Patrick Creagh, *The Moral Essays – Operette Morali* (Columbia University Press, 1983) 13. “This skeleton of events in Leopardi’s life gives no idea of the sort of person he was, for in a sense, as he says himself, he did not live. But we find in him what he wrote. Certainly a man of prodigious intellect and hectic sensibility, he was loving to his family, gentle and courteous towards others, mercilessly truthful towards himself, tough-minded in thought and loyal to his tragic vision of life. This vision he acquired early, and in his vast culture and range of interests he found nothing to make him alter it . . . Right to the end he fought for his gospel of despair with terrible courage and vitality, and against all reason forced his work and example, all cowardice and wishful thinking stripped away, to compel a new source of hope. Leopardi may have despaired but he never gave up. His life was a long Thermopylae.”

negative emotions felt toward many kinds of experience, and the clear positioning of the individual as alienated in relation to the rest of society, he is one of the most revered of authors whose work is still highly relevant today.

Leopardi had progressively less hope that he could find personal happiness somehow and could be understood by those he cared about. However he consistently hoped that Italy would unify philosophically and become part of broader European cultural currents, and that humanity would not simply focus on the individual Darwinian struggle for survival but rather on the improvement of the human condition for all.

Prevailing Opinions on Leopardi: An Inaccurate View

The founder of modern Italian literary criticism, Francesco DeSanctis, (1817-1883) touched only slightly upon the theme of Leopardi's misanthropy. DeSanctis merely states, "Lo chiamavano un misantropo, un nemico del genere umano.." ⁹ DeSanctis was a scholastic reformer who was sent to prison on false charges of plotting to kill the king in 1850. Later elected to parliament and appointed Minister of Education, his most widely-read work *Storia della Letteratura Italiana* was initially meant to be a teacher's guide. It became a standard and a model for modern attempts to comprehensively analyze the whole of Italian literature and Leopardi in particular. He has been criticized by some for his lack of interest in details and focus on only major figures and movements. DeSanctis' proponents respect his critical acumen in spite of his non-adherence to any particular system of analysis. ¹⁰ DeSanctis has a positive view of much of Leopardi's sentiment and focuses on the communal feelings of the fraternity of man:

Nella infelicità universale il primo sentimento umano è la compassione reciproca, essendo tutti vittima della matrigna natura, o piuttosto del Fato; perché è da natura che abbiamo le dolci illusioni, che c'incoraggiano a vivere. Onde nasce il concetto della fratellanza universale o della solidarietà umana, l'unione di tutti contro il Fato, nemico di tutti. ¹¹

DeSanctis extracts this positive sentiment from the universal suffering which he feels is a

⁹ Francesco DeSanctis, *Studio su Giacomo Leopardi* (Editori Riuniti, 1983), 241.

¹⁰ Louis A. Breglio, *Life and Criticism of Francesco De Sanctis*. Among the basic tenets of his critical approach are: art is the product of the fantasy of great men; the work of art is absolutely independent of science, morals, history, or philosophy; and art is the appropriate synthesis of content and form."

¹¹ DeSanctis, *Leopardi* 199.

unifying force for humanity. One's illusions are never truly shattered and therefore humanity remains eternally hopeful and united in our collective struggle.¹² DeSanctis' criticism is typified by this broad view of Leopardi's work and overtones of unifying morality. For that reason, DeSanctis assigns universal meaning to the depictions of individual scenarios in Leopardi's poetry:

Ma questa poesia (*Silvia*) oltrepassa il limite di un fatto individuale e prende proporzioni colossali. Non è questa la sorte singolare di due individui ma è la sorte di delle umane genti. La natura non ha ingannato solo quei due ma inganna tutti i figli suoi. Non rende quello che promette. Questo è carattere di tutta la poesia leopardiana; il senso generale fra stacco a modo di sentenza o di riflessione talora raffredda l'impressione che ti viene dal particolare. Ma qui è fusione completa.¹³

DeSanctis explained Leopardi's position that the internal struggle of one contemplating suicide, the manifestation of misanthropy toward oneself, is understandable because the desire to die, derived from the intellect, is in opposition to man's will to live. Life does not belong to the intellect but rather to man's will. Therefore even if man's intellect does not want to live, *la volontà* will keep him alive. This idea is based on Leopardi's concept of man's innate love of life which fights against the intellect.¹⁴ Even when science shatters one's illusions, the will to live is typically stronger than the intellect. It is

¹² Vittoriano Esposito, *Religione e Religiosità nel Leopardi* (Bastogi, 1998), 46. "Spetta, comunque, al DeSanctis il merito di aver meglio definito il valore catartico del pessimismo leopardiano con queste, ormai notissime, osservazioni: "Leopardi produce l'effetto contrario a quello che si propone. Non crede al progresso, e te lo fa desiderare; non crede alla libertà, e te la fa amare. Chiama illusioni l'amore, la gloria, la virtù e te ne accende il petto un desiderio inesausto.""

¹³ DeSanctis, *Studio su Giacomo Leopardi* 371.

¹⁴ DeSanctis 191. "Questo fa la sua differenza da Schopenhauer, suo coetaneo, il quale nel 1819, quando Leopardi scriveva gl'*Idilli*, pubblicava la sua opera principale sulla Volontà. S'incontrano nello speculare; ma nel tedesco la speculazione ha nessunissima influenza sulla vita, dove il Leopardi è tutta la vita in tutte le sue forme."

perceived by Leopardi as a triumph for nature and Darwinism over man-made, intellectual constructs.

DeSanctis examined such themes in *Le Operette morali* and *Canti* but did not substantially address *Lo Zibaldone*. There is little investigation of Leopardi's blatant misanthropy in that work nor does DeSanctis acknowledge that misanthropy is not simply generic and that the concept has variations. There is indeed a hierarchy based on Darwinism, just as in the case of egoism, which is the origin of self-protective actions.

Leopardi states:

L'egoismo nazionale si tramuta allora in egoismo individuale: e tanto è vero che l'uomo è per sua natura e per natura dell'amor proprio, nemico degli altri viventi e se-amanti; in modo che s'anche si conginge con alcuno di questi, lo fa per odio o per timore degli altri, mancate le quali passioni, l'odio e il timore si rivolge contro i compagni e i vicini.¹⁵

DeSanctis' monolithic concept of *odio* does not adequately address its use as a poetic word with nuance nor does he address its use as a term. Depending upon the context in which it is being used and for what effect, *odio* has a complex range of meanings. DeSanctis errs in ascribing a one-dimensional significance to Leopardi's misanthropy and does not begin to investigate the complexity of that topic.

Another Italian literary critic who discussed Leopardi at length is Benedetto Croce (1866-

¹⁵ *Zibaldone* 811. Man did not always hate his neighbor: "Quella fu veramente l'età dell'oro, e l'uomo era sicuro tra gli uomini: non per altro se non perch'esso e gli altri uomini odiavano e temevano" de' viventi e degli oggetti stranieri al genere umano; e queste passioni non lasciavano luogo all'odio o invidia o timore verso i loro simili..." The golden age was brief however and man's misanthropy emerged: "...la nazione umana, per così dire, quasi vincitore de' suoi nemici, e guasta della prosperità, rivolse le proprie armi contro se stessa, e qui cominciano le storie delle diverse nazioni".

1952). Croce clearly defined Leopardi's doctrine of pessimism, study of pain, and his love of life and death. Croce focused on Leopardi's pain and suffering but did not mention the overt misanthropy in Leopardi's work. It is an interesting omission considering that the motif is expressed on many pages of *Lo Zibaldone* and often repeatedly.

For example Croce ignores Leopardi's belief in the natural inclination of humanity to hate that which is dear to it:

“l'odio degli altri oggetti”¹⁶

Fathers disliking sons:

“un certo stimolo a odiarli..”

“..facilmente si convertirà in odio”¹⁷

Mothers against daughters:

“l'odio delle madri brutte verso le figlie belle”¹⁸

Analyzing the poor appearance of others:

¹⁶ *Zibaldone* 462. “Tanto naturalmente l'amor proprio inseparabile dai viventi, produce e quasi si trasforma nell'odio degli altri oggetti, anche di quelli che la natura ci ha maggiormente raccomandati (al nostro stesso amor proprio) e resi più cari (22 Giugno 1821).”

¹⁷ *Zibaldone* 462. “Io credo che un padre storpio difficilmente possa vedere con compiacenza i suoi figli sani, e non provare un certo stimolo a odiarli, o una difficoltà ad amarli, che facilmente si convertirà in odio, e riceverà poi sciocamente il nome di antipatia, quasi fosse una passione innata, e senza causa morale.”

¹⁸ *Zibaldone* 462. “Del che si potrebbero portare infinite prove di fatto, come dell'odio delle madri brutte verso le figlie belle, e delle persecuzioni che bene spesso fanno per tal cagione a giovani innocentissime, senza che nè queste nè esse medesime vedano bene il perchè.”

“parendo meno brutte”¹⁹

“forse a parer brutte”²⁰

“ci paiono brutti e bruttissimi”²¹

On the mental state of the masses:

“stupidità di spirito...”

“..incapacità di ragionare...”

“..ottusità e tardità di mente”²²

On man's inclination to sin:

“la compassione è contraria all'odio...”

“..spessissimo è odioso”²³

Hatred of crime and criminality:

¹⁹ *Zibaldone* 463. “Non è ella cosa notissima, comunissima, frequentissima, e certa per l'esperienza quasi di ciascuno, che certe persone che da principio, o vedendole a prima giunta, ci paion brutte, appoco appoco, assuefacendoci a vederle, e scemandosi coll'assuefazione il senso de' loro difetti esteriori, ci vengono parendo meno brutte, più sopportabili, più piacevoli, e finalmente bene spesso anche belle, e bellissime?”

²⁰ *Zibaldone* 463. “E poi perdendo l'assuefazione di vederle, ci torneranno forse a parer brutte.”

²¹ *Zibaldone* 463. “Molti de'quali che per una primitiva assuefazione di vederli e trattarli ci parvero belli da principio, cioè prima di esserci formata un'idea distinta e fissa del bello; veduti poi dopo lungo intervallo, ci paiono brutti e bruttissimi.”

²² *Zibaldone* 921. “Ma la fermezza di carattere è di due sorti, che nascono da principii affatto contrarii, l'una da forza d'animo, e da acutezza d'ingegno ec., l'altra da stupidità di spirito, da incapacità di ragionare, di compendere ec. e quindi di mutare opinione, da scarsezza d'ingegno, ottusità e tardità di mente ec.”

²³ *Zibaldone* 922. “Anzi produce un effetto a lui contrario, perchè la compassione è contraria all'odio; e spesso avviene che nel veder punito il delitto, questa superi ogni altro sentimento, e gli spenga, e resti sola; e spesso la pena, benchè giusta ed equa, per più grave del delitto; e spessissimo è odiosa, parte per la pietà, parte perchè alcuni per viltà d'animo e poco stima di se stessi, altri per cognizioni dell'uomo, si sentono, più o meno prossimamente o lontanamente, capaci di peccare; e niuno ama di esser punito, anzi tutti abborrono il gastigo in se stessi ”

“d’ispirare l’odio verso il delitto”²⁴

“tutti gli odi”²⁵

Against favoritism:

“è sempre odiosa”²⁶

For Leopardi, the above varieties of hatred are all the natural consequence of loving oneself:

Come l’amor proprio, così l’odio verso altrui che n’è indivisibile conseguenza, o fratello, si può bensì nascondere...Sotto questo aspetto l’amor proprio, il grado, la forza, la massa di esso può esser maggiore o minore secondo gl’individui e specie, e quindi anche l’odio verso altrui...Per esempio, verso i suoi simili l’odio naturale può talvolta esser maggiore talvolta minore che verso gli altri animali ec. (1 Dicembre 1821).²⁷

Croce does not address the abundance of misanthropic references in the *Zibaldone*. Croce states that Leopardi “ama la morte”²⁸: “Ed è naturale che per questo loro comune aspetto di negazione della vita, Amore e Morte non solo siano fratelli ma si scambino le parti, si

²⁴ *Zibaldone* 922. Il fine dei drammi non è, e non dev’essere, d’insegnare a temere il delitto, cioè di far che gli uomini temano di peccare. Meglio sarebbe una predica dell’inferno o del purgatorio; o meglio ancora una lettura del codice penale che si facesse dalla scena. Il loro scopo si è d’ispirare odio verso il delitto.”

²⁵ *Zibaldone* 922. “Ora la punizione del delitto non ispira odio. Anzi lo scema, perchè sottentra e con lui si mescola la compassione. Anzi lo distrugge, perchè la vendetta spenge tutti gli odi.”

²⁶ *Zibaldone* 462. “Perchè la parzialità è sempre odiosa e intollerabile, quando anche colui che favorisce o benefica alcuno più degli altri, non tolga niente agli altri del loro dovuto, nè di quello che darebbe loro in ogni caso, nè li disfavorisca in nessun modo?”

²⁷ *Zibaldone* 728.

²⁸ Benedetto Croce, *Letteratura Italiana* (Editori Laterza, 1956), 155.

tramutino l'uno nell'altro...".²⁹ He establishes the link between love and death in Leopardi as each yearns for the other. Croce's analysis of the source of pain is purely in relation to the self, to Leopardi the artist in an existential sense. He does not directly examine Leopardi's misanthropy and its variations and does not examine his feelings in relation to the outside world.

Another of the most dedicated and beloved Leopardisti is Walter Binni who enchanted students for forty years with his passionate descriptions of themes and analysis of Leopardi's work.³⁰ He notes the pessimism in Leopardi's *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* which highlights young Leopardi's erudition³¹ and humanity's tendency to repeat the same errors in new contexts:

Qui il Leopardi affaccia un'idea molto diversa da quella che animava la *Storia dell'astronomia*: non più una linea retta, ma appunto un continuo circolo, per il quale l'uomo ricade continuamente nella possibilità degli errori. ... (Il Saggio) poteva in qualche modo influire anche una maggiore considerazione di certi elementi della sua formazione religiosa, che portavano Leopardi anche a spunti di pessimismo sulla natura degli uomini, sulla loro capacità di errore e sui loro limiti.³²

²⁹ Croce 155.

³⁰ *Lezioni leopardiane* XIII. Binni speaks of a lifetime teaching Leopardi; "Infine il 12 maggio del '93, nel compimento dei miei 80 anni, entro i festeggiamenti che l'Università di Roma volle tributarmi, conclusi, penso per sempre, il mio lungo servizio prestato al "poeta della mia vita" con una lezione sulla *Ginestra*."

³¹ *Lezioni leopardiane* 19. "Il *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* è interessante dunque sotto questo punto di vista: ci mostra un Leopardi sicuro del suo dominio del greco, del latino, della letteratura classica, il quale, attraverso le traduzioni di citazioni greche, si avvia all'esercizio del tradurre. E ci mostra d'altra parte, anche dal punto di vista dello sviluppo intellettuale, un Leopardi che adoperava degli schemi più complessi di quelli adoperati nella *Storia dell'astronomia*."

³² *Lezioni leopardiane* 20.

Binni again acknowledges Leopardi's pessimistic outlook as regards the state of humanity in *Sopra il monumento di Dante che si preparava in Firenze*:

Tutta la canzone è dominata da un profondo senso di torpore, di sopore, di grave inerzia in cui si traduce più direttamente quella delusione storica che apre la via al più generale pessimismo leopardiano, a quel prevalente sentimento di infelicità che precorre intuitivamente l'elaborazione più tarda delle precise posizioni pessimistiche consolidate in forma speculativa.³³

Binni's perspective on Leopardi in relation to others is that of an observer gathering information and poetically chronicling what is observed. The subjective and visceral elements of Leopardi's feelings are missing. Although pessimism is explored thoroughly, Binni's analysis of Leopardi does not mention *l'odio* toward others, only Leopardi's dislike of vice itself:

È un pensiero interessante per capire come queste canzoni, e in particolare la prima, tra l'entusiasmo per la virtù e lo sdegno e l'odio per il vizio e la corruzione presente, siano animate e impennate su un forte contrasto, senza di cui per il Leopardi, la vita langue, la poesia stessa langue.³⁴

He does examine Leopardi's forays into grittier subject matter used to illustrate what Leopardi considers the moral decay and lack of virtue in contemporary society:

Alla prospettiva della delusione, riferita soprattutto alla sorte dell'Italia contemporanea, si ricollega, a ben vedere, anche una canzone scritta nella primavera del '19 e destinata inizialmente dal Leopardi alla pubblicazione, risolutamente impedita dal padre Monaldo, allarmato dall'argomento scabroso di quel componimento, e poi, più tardi rifiutata dallo stesso Leopardi (insieme

³³ *Lezioni leopardiane* 83.

³⁴ *Lezioni leopardiane* 177.

all'altra canzone coeva) per evidenti ragioni di gusto.

La canzone di cui parliamo trattava (come ben indica lo stesso lungo e pesante titolo: *Nella morte di una donna fatta trucidare col suo portato dal corruttore per mano ed arte di un chirurgo*) un fatto di cronaca nera, la vicenda realmente avvenuta della morte, in seguito a un tentativo fallito di aborto, di una giovane signora che aveva commesso un fallo extraconiugale ed era stata indotta dal seduttore a tentare appunto l'aborto.³⁵

Another poem from 1819 which emphasizes moral decay, the premature death of a female, and resentment toward the force of nature is *Per una donna inferma di malattia lunga e mortale*. As Leopardi's poetry evolves he will leave such blatantly harsh depictions of individual situations behind and will adopt a more contemplative universal tone. Binni focuses on Leopardi's pessimism and neglects to mention the function of misanthropy in Leopardi's work.

Another well-regarded critic who continues to influence discussion today is Cesare Luporini whose criticism focuses on the feelings of nothingness felt by Leopardi and its effects on his sentiment toward others:

..quel sentimento della propria nullità che taglia alla radice ogni desiderio e speranza, rende inattivi, non compassionevoli verso gli altri ("il sentimento di altrui", cioè l'altruismo, è al contrario sovrabbondanza vitale di se stessi), deboli, apatici. È dunque un sentimento antivitale, il che è già di per sé auto-contraddittorio; la vita ridotta a tale da sentirsi, appunto, come un nulla, indipendentemente dal fatto che essa venga considerata (eventualmente *sentita?*) come un male. Un nulla: qualcosa che anticipa lo stato di morte.³⁶

³⁵ *Lezioni leopardiane*, 87.

³⁶ Cesare Luporini, *Decifrare Leopardi* (Gaetano Macchiaroli Editore, 1998), 227.

To say that Leopardi did not feel compassionate or altruistic toward others is a great understatement and is almost comical. Like most critics, Luporini reiterates the self-centeredness of Leopardi's work and does not posit Leopardi in relation to others in society other than in a generic sense. To Luporini, other individuals in Leopardi's sphere are simply additional elements in the nullifying external world instead of catalysts for visceral emotion as the *Zibaldone* indicates.

Sono invece arrivato alla conclusione che proprio il “nichilismo”, cioè la tematica “nulla-nullità” – l’interrogarsi radicale intorno ad essa – costituisce il filo conduttore che ci consente di cogliere il senso più profondo dell’esperienza di Leopardi, nel suo movimento e nel suo percorso.³⁷

Luporini believes that Leopardi is a nihilist and implies therefore that ethics outside of religion do not exist. This is incorrect however as Leopardi's writing, especially in the early years, was characterized by the desire to return to the ethics of the Romans, irrespective of religion. Luporini's writing is a relatively standard approach of viewing Leopardi as the perennial outsider whose life is consistently devoid of meaning.

While the foundations of literary criticism regarding Leopardi have not probed the depths of his misanthropy, neither has contemporary criticism. Massimiliano Biscuso and Franco Gallo in *Leopardi antitaliano* describe Leopardi's character in terms of his materialism, by which they indicate Leopardi's focus on only that which is physical and terrestrial.³⁸ *Il materiale* consists of pure existence, subordinating that which is spiritual:

³⁷ Luporini, 237.

³⁸ David Alderson, *Terry Eagleton* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 10. “...a materialist statement, a claim that

Leggiamo per esempio: “Che la materia pensi, è un fatto. Un fatto perchè noi pensiamo; e noi non sappiamo, non conosciamo di essere, non possiamo conoscere, concepire, altro che materia” [4288]. Questa grande verità va assimilata all’insieme di tutte quelle “universali e grandi verità” che “niuno forse ancora ha bene osservate, o interam. e chiaram. comprese e concepute”[3878]. L’osservazione comparativa del decorso storico della civiltà conduce poi a credere che “il progresso dello spirito umano dal risorgimento in poi, e massime in questi ultimi tempi, è consistito, e consiste tutto giorno principalmente, non nella scoperta di verità positiva, ma negative in sostanza; ossia, in altri termini, nel conoscere la falsità di quell che p. lo passato, da più o men tempo addietro, si era tenuto per fermo[4192].” L’aridità del vero non è altro, allora, che la percezione di del vero stesso a partire da una sua interpretazione acritica di carattere tuttora chiliastico-religioso: è l’attesa che la verità, con il suo solo notificarsi, salvi e ridima. Ma il carattere della verità, l’irreversibile sua figura nella modernità, è quello della dialettica (della ricostruzione dei nessi di ciascuna conoscenza con tutte le altre, [1090-1]) e della critica: non quello religioso dell’epifania!³⁹

Biscuso believes that the meaning of Leopardi’s work has been homogenized and weakened over time although his contribution to literature was very significant.⁴⁰ As time progresses and the reader becomes more distanced from the author’s contextual framework, one loses the significance and the novelty of the literary work.

In spite of this process of decontextualizing of the author’s work, Biscuso acknowledges that Leopardi’s dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs and the search for the

the activities of people--rather than, say, divine providence, fate or the necessary unfolding of ideas--are the driving force of history.”

³⁹ Biscuso and Gallo 48.

⁴⁰ Biscuso and Gallo 43. “..Leopardi viene decontestualizzato dal suo tempo e separato dalla situazione specifica italiana, per essere ricollocato in una indeterminata modernità e in un altrettanto indistinto Occidente...Le strategie di riconfezionamento del pensiero leopardiano avanzate da una massa imponente di pubblicazioni dell’ultimo decennio sono diverse e di diverso livello, ma tutte omogenee tra loro e, come dicevamo, soprattutto rispondenti agli schemi ben consolidati dell’ideologia italiana, alla ricerca dell’equilibrio, del compromesso, della mediazione.”

“identità alternative”⁴¹ for the nation of Italy is a constant:

Un Leopardi che ci appare, alla luce della costruzione ideologico-politica dell’italianità e della sua riproposizione contemporanea, *antitaliano*. “Ateo materialista, anarchico: questo era Giacomo Leopardi. E la cultura italiana ha sempre avuto un sacro terrore di affrontare davvero questi tre termini. I laici avevano paura di scoprirgli incertezze, incoerenze. I cattolici del suo nichilismo. Da noi si cerca sempre l’equilibrio, il compromesso, la mediazione”(Luporini). Un Leopardi verso il quale invece vogliamo avere un atteggiamento di riappropriazione produttiva, non di mera ammirazione museale, che, di fatto, rende sterile il suo pensiero e la sua poesia.⁴²

As the title *Leopardi antitaliano* indicates, Biscuso and Gallo emphasize Leopardi’s anti-social feelings at the macro level of the country, not against its individuals:

Leopardi non manca tuttavia di segnalare le concomitanza di altre cruciali insufficienze della situazione storico-culturale italiana: l’inesistenza di un pubblico letterario nazionale, a causa della mancanza di un centro politico unitario, che ha come conseguenza l’assenza di un teatro nazionale e di una letteratura nazionale moderna (D132), la “totale mancanza d’industria, e d’ogni sorte di attività, e quella di camere politiche e militari, quella di ogni altro istituto di vita e di professione per cui l’uomo miri a uno scopo, e (...) rilevi il pregio dell’esistenza” (D134-5). In altri termini, gli italiani, “privi come sono di società”, avvertono “più degli stranieri la vanità reale delle cose umane e della vita”; ne sono “più pienamente, più efficacemente e più praticamente persuasi, benché per ragione la conoscano, in generale, molto meno”.⁴³

It is important to understand that Leopardi’s anti-social stance is against the cultural condition of the nation of Italy in a general sense and is not an indictment of its people. In fact he has many friends who keep him abreast of literary movements and trends in other

⁴¹ Biscuso and Gallo 10.

⁴² Biscuso and Gallo 11.

⁴³ Biscuso and Gallo 20.

parts of Italy and Europe. Biscuso and Gallo view Leopardi very differently from the traditional interpretations of the past by not focusing only on his personal suffering. They view him as part of the community in which he lives and demonstrate that Leopardi's writing is not only self-referential but also relates to the collective experience of contemporary Italy which is suffering the effects of a partially effective Restoration and a frustrating Resurgence:

Ma in secondo luogo, ed è la notazione più importante, i problemi di Leopardi sono i problemi della cultura europea del suo tempo: il rapporto uomo-natura, la scissione fra individuo e comunità, la duplice funzione della ragione, inaridite e demistificante ecc., ma come quella cultura è un intreccio di opzioni differenti tra di loro in lotta per l'egemonia, reciprocamente repulsive e pure contaminantesi, così i problemi di Leopardi e le soluzioni che ad essi propose sono anche inequivocabilmente i suoi. Suoi, europei e italiani insieme, cioè calati nel contesto specifico dell'Italia della Restaurazione. Insomma: Leopardi pensatore e poeta europeo, che cerca di offrire al pubblico nazionale una proposta di lettura della modernità, una critica ad essa, specifica per quel pubblico.⁴⁴

Biscuso and Gallo merely cite Leopardi's misanthropy at the broadest level and underline the inherent impossibility of *società*:

Invece la natura dell'amor proprio è tale per cui, quanto più il vivente ama se stesso, tanto più è portato ad odiare gli altri individui che possono opporsi alla sua ricerca del bene. "L'amor proprio dell'uomo, e di qualunque individuo di qualunque specie, è un amore di preferenza. Cioè l'individuo amandosi naturalmente quanto può amarsi, si preferisce dunque agli altri, dunque cerca di soverchiarli in quanto può, dunque effettivamente l'individuo odia l'altro individuo, e l'odio degli altri è una conseguenza necessaria ed immediata dell'amore di se stesso, il quale essendo innato, anche l'odio degli altri viene ad essere innato in ogni vivente." Quindi "nessun vivente, è destinato precisamente alla società"[872]. Al bene comune, che è la regione dell'esistenza di una società, si oppongono l'amore esclusivo di sé e l'odio per gli altri. Due anni più tardi, con maggior nettezza, Leopardi dichiarerà: "Vogliono che l'uomo sia per natura più

⁴⁴ Biscuso and Gallo 38.

sociale di tutti gli altri viventi. Io dico che lo è men di tutti, perchè avendo più vitalità ha più amor proprio, e quindi necessariamente ciascun individuo umano ha più odio verso gli altri individui”[3773].⁴⁵

The above position accurately depicts the attitude of Leopardi toward others, that of self-love as the seed of hate of others. Biscuso and Gallo do not delve further however into what the implications are of that basic premise nor the origins of such visceral dislike. The primary difference between the work of Biscuso and Gallo versus that of DeSanctis and Croce is the focus on the effects of competition⁴⁶ in society and the social stratification which takes place as a result.⁴⁷ The egocentric nature of man is the antithesis of society and therefore his communication with others is unnatural and creates tension. This tension in turn, stimulates action in society as man positions himself in relation to others and also creates depression as the act of socializing is completely contrary to the individual’s natural tendency toward solitude. The concept of hatred as a motivating factor in societal relationships is introduced and applied generally by Leopardi in relation to all others.

While Leopardi’s negative tendencies toward his fellow man have been previously noted to a small degree by DeSanctis, Croce, Binni, and more significantly by Biscuso and

⁴⁵ Biscuso and Gallo 102.

⁴⁶ *Opere* 705. In section XIX of *Pensieri* Leopardi described the tendency for individuals to stratify and to be differentiated according to their abilities and appearance in relation to others; “In qualunque concorrenza sono superati, anche da molto inferiori a loro, non solo d’ingegno o d’altre qualità intrinseche, ma di quelle che il mondo conosce ed apprezza maggiormente, come bellezza, gioventù, forza, coraggio, ed anche ricchezza.”

⁴⁷ Biscuso and Gallo 106. “La società, ogni forma di società, nega dunque l’originaria libertà e uguaglianza dell’uomo, creando forme di divisione e subordinazione che accrescono l’infelicità della condizione umana.”

Gallo, not enough emphasis has been placed on their significance in terms of his artistic production. Criticism focuses on pessimism, the fraternity of man, humanity's relationship to nature and the search for pleasure. Absent is a discussion of Leopardi's contrasting feelings for humanity which alternate between brief moments of pitiful love and virulent hate.

Leopardi's Futile Quest for Satisfaction: The Source of his Disappointment

Among the great Romantic authors, Giacomo Leopardi is known for his pessimism and difficulty finding pleasure in life.⁴⁸ He believed that one can hope for only brief observations of beauty and moments when the pain of living is less acute. For him, happiness can only be attained if one lives in a world of illusions. His numerous poems and prose are characterized thematically by a burning desire to recapture the greatness and virtue of the Greeks and Romans. He wished to escape to an ideal world with no artifice. For Leopardi, individuals have either so distanced themselves from nature to the point that all perspective has been destroyed, or nature has become completely indifferent to the sufferings of humanity and is thus no longer a refuge:

“Tout homme qui pense est un être corrompu” dice il Rousseau “e noi siamo gli tali”. Questo principio può accordarsi con il pessimismo leopardiano nella sua prima fase, il cosiddetto “pessimismo storico”, quando la natura è considerata benefica, avendo il male il suo fondamento nella ragione, nella perfettibilità umana e nello “stato di società” che ne consegue: posizioni da cui presto il Leopardi si distacca, maturando, nella fase del “pessimismo cosmico”, una concezione negativa della natura, indifferente alle umane sorti, e della esistenza, per necessità infelice, in quanto il desiderio di un bene infinito cui il vivente, nella sua finitezza, aspira, è irrealizzabile.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Massimiliano Biscuso and Franco Gallo, *Leopardi antitaliano* (Le Orme, 1999), 101. “L’ultima parola coerente di Leopardi non sembra essere dunque l’esortazione della *Ginestra* a superare le lotte fratricide che lacerano “l’umana compagnia”, esortazione nobilissima ma utopica, se non incongrua con tutte le precedenti riflessioni, bensì la disincantata e amara contestazione della *Palinodia al marchese Gino Capponi*: “Valor vero e virtù, modestia e fede / E di giustizia amor, sempre in qualunque / Pubblico stato, alieni in tutto e lunghi / Da comuni negozi, ovvero in tutto / Sfortunati saranno, afflitti e vinti; / Perché diè lor natura, in ogni tempo / Starsene in fondo. Ardir protervo e frode, / Con mediocrità, regneran sempre, / A galleggiar sortiti. Imperio e forze, / Quanto più vogli o cumulate o sparse, / Abuserà chiunque avralle, e sotto / Qualunque nome. Questa legge in pria / Scrisser natura e il fato in adamante” (69-81).

⁴⁹ Alberto Frattini, *Letteratura e Scienza in Leopardi*, (Marzorati, 1978), 49.

Culturally as well, modern society has distanced itself from Greek and Latin ideals which, to him, embody a natural state. In the glorious past, as now, individuals are motivated fundamentally by self love, *l'amor proprio*. Self-love in the context of a more natural existence leads to heroic actions while in modern society it leads to egoism:

Leopardi dentro lo *Zibaldone* conduce una continua lotta per separare su questa radice comune dell'amor proprio, l'accezione alta, naturale, e cioè l'eroismo, dall'accezione mortificante, e cioè la ragione corrotta, l'egoismo. L'eroismo è la forma in cui l'amor proprio si traduce nell'uomo intero, generoso, poetico ed entusiastico, vicina alla natura; è quindi la caratteristica di un'epoca perduta da rinnovare (soprattutto l'epoca della classicità greca e romana). L'egoismo invece è il vizio, è la sigla più abietta dell'uomo contemporaneo, dell'uomo che, con la sua gretta e calcolatrice ragione, riduce la sorgente così energica e generosa dell'amor proprio al tornaconto individuale, al calcolo gretto, al conformismo vile e interessato.⁵⁰

This self-love which becomes egoism in contemporary society, leads to unhappiness:

Ebbene? Siamo noi felici? Che cosa godiamo noi? Tolto il bello, il grande, il nobile, la virtù dal mondo, che piacere, che vantaggio, che vita rimane? Non dico in genere, e nella società, ma in particolare, e in ciascuno. Chi è o fu più felice? Gli antichi coi loro sacrifici, le loro cure, le loro inquietudini, negozi, attività, imprese, pericoli: o noi colla nostra sicurezza, tranquillità, non curanza, ordine, pace, inazione, amore del nostro bene, e non curanza di quello degli altri o del pubblico ec.? Gli antichi col loro eroismo, o noi col nostro egoismo?⁵¹

Leopardi defined modern individuals by their deep egoism and juxtaposed it with the heroic motivation of the ancients. Classic Roman society represents humanity selflessly working toward common goals; goals which today have been forgotten. His negativity

⁵⁰ *Lezioni leopardiane* 153.

⁵¹ *Tutte le opere* 180.

toward contemporary life is derived from the many sad and disappointing experiences he had as a young man which lead him to understand that recapturing the heroic spirit of the past is impossible. Although his existential angst is focused completely on himself, additional sadness derives from the movement of society at large away from ancient cultures which represent a “zona beata e immaginosa dell’infanzia”⁵². Similarly, the romantic authors as a group have proven disappointing to Leopardi as they have distanced themselves from nature by over-intellectualizing their work:

Mentre, alla luce del suo schema del contrasto natura-ragione, il Leopardi accusava i romantici di un’altra grossa contraddizione; anche essi parlavano di natura, ma in realtà avrebbero allontanato la poesia dalla sensibilità per portarla a farsi metafisica e intellettualistica, poesia di civilizzazione e di ragione invece che di natura. La poesia romantica diventa così per Leopardi poesia della civilizzazione, della ragione, non della natura, come era invece quella dei classici e come può essere quella di poeti contemporanei che sappiano riavvicinarsi, come gli antichi, e con l’arte, alla natura che parla ancora negli animi dei contemporanei, specie attraverso la somiglianza fra la condizione degli antichi e quella dei fanciulli, riserva per noi moderni di una disposizione poetica e di motivi poetici sempre attingibili attraverso il ricordo.⁵³

Just as ancient Greek and Latin civilizations were idealized cradles of civilization so too is nature in relation to humanity. For young Leopardi, nature is a safe, unspoiled locus which we need to return to literally as individuals and figuratively as a society.

⁵² *Lezioni leopardiane* 73.

⁵³ *Lezioni leopardiane*, 73.

Leopardi's Early Formation: The Seeds of Misanthropy

Leopardi was raised in the small town of Recanati ten kilometers from the Adriatic coast in Le Marche. His mother Countess Adelaide was a dominant woman more concerned with material wealth than young Giacomo's happiness. His father Count Monaldo squandered the family money and yet managed to maintain a large library⁵⁴ as well as a strong devotion to the monarchy which at the time ruled Italy. In the mornings Leopardi would invent stories for his siblings before his mother came to dress them all. He created characters and enacted scenes himself. It was a playful time of learning and fun with his family.⁵⁵

This period lasted until Giacomo was fourteen years old and was a source of pleasant memories⁵⁶ which Giacomo would later call upon given that his childhood functions "come sede di una memoria perenne"⁵⁷ where his thoughts and feelings, even as an adult, are reflections of his past and are reactions to it⁵⁸. The misery he felt as an adult derives

⁵⁴ Franco Ferrucci, *Il formidabile deserto* (Fazi Editore, 1998), 13. "La filosofia francese del Settecento è ben rappresentata nella biblioteca di Monaldo, e ha un forte impatto nella formazione del poeta, con propaggini contemporanee che si spingono fino a Chateaubriand."

⁵⁵ Renato Minore, *Leopardi -- l'infanzia, le città, gli amori* (Bompiani), 41. "In quelle occasioni, Giacomo esercitava la funzione di leader naturale. Il piccolo gruppo ruotava intorno a lui che lo animava."

⁵⁶ Minore 43. "Furono momenti magici, indimenticabili. Quella zona dell'infanzia restò impressa nella memoria dei tre fratelli per tutta la vita, come il più caro e struggente dei ricordi."

⁵⁷ Ferrucci 31.

⁵⁸ Prue Shaw, *The Letters of Giacomo Leopardi 1817-1837* (Northern Universities Press, 1998), 91. In a letter to Pietro Giordani discussing his depression in 1819, Leopardi states; "...because the tenor and the habits and the events and the places of this life of mine are still those of my childhood, I cling with both hands to these last remnants and these shadows of that blessed and blissful time, when I hoped for and

from the impossibility of recapturing the happiness experienced as a child. Misanthropy toward himself and others results from the loss and movement away from this idealized childhood happiness.

Leopardi's father was a strict and deeply religious man and wanted Giacomo to be a classical scholar. Unfortunately from Monaldo's perspective, Giacomo was an agnostic and consequently there are few personal religious references in his work⁵⁹. By age fifteen he no longer needed the tutors who were preparing him for the priesthood, already surpassing their level of knowledge.

In 1813, Leopardi's father refused to let him visit his uncle in Rome because he feared losing his only friend for even a short time. Monaldo was so protective that he did not allow his son out of the house unaccompanied until he was twenty⁶⁰. In this stifling environment, Leopardi remained home and spent the next seven years in frantic study. He studied Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, Spanish, English, and German and practiced

dreamed of happiness, and as I hoped and dreamed enjoyed it, and it has gone and will never come back, surely never again; seeing with extreme terror that along with childhood the world and life are finished for me and for all those who think and feel; so that the only people who live until they die are those many people who remain children all their lives."

⁵⁹ *Lezioni leopardiane* 156. "Il sistema leopardiano della natura e delle illusioni vuole reggersi sui soli suoi principi; tuttavia, in questo momento, la religione e il cristianesimo (che potranno dare una specie di surrogato delle illusioni autentiche), sono indicati come via minore e secondaria che altri, ma non Leopardi, potrà percorrere. Per Leopardi la religione cristiana dopo la decadenza dell'epoca greca e romana delle grandi illusioni eroiche, è stata un rimedio tanto meno efficace della natura e della civiltà antica, ma pur tuttavia qualcosa di migliore dell'arida e secca verità. Le religione, cioè, è vista nella sua capacità di sostenere, per quanto debolmente, delle illusioni, di alimentare negli uomini forme di entusiasmo e di fede."

⁶⁰ Minore 10. In spite of his extensive library, Monaldo was exceptionally mentally inflexible; "Senza ombra di scherzo diceva di aspettare la venuta di un antigalileo capace di dare "alla terra l'antica onoe, mettendola al centro dell'universo". Si vantava di non essere mai sedotto dalla lusinga di una qualsiasi novità".

writing in many different poetic forms from sonnets to madrigals to free verse. He studied literature throughout history but focused on the classics in particular. He so admired the vitality of the Romans and Greeks he studied that his own deteriorating physical condition disgusted him. He began to focus all his creative energy on becoming a professional author. He intensified his study of Greek and Latin literature and began to write an ambitious history of astronomy. He published many books and worked every day in the family library studying and memorizing relevant facts⁶¹. By age fifteen, Leopardi was recognized in literary circles as a prolific prodigy. After 1819 he began to write about a unified Italy, a concept which was in direct conflict with the existence of the Papal States. It was also for this political motif that Leopardi increased his following in Italy.⁶² He continued to write in a variety of artistic forms but grew increasingly tired of living in small-town Recanati. His father finally relented and allowed Giacomo to go to Rome in 1821.

For Leopardi, Rome was an important classical symbol of heroic citizenship and a source of inspiration for past glorious achievements. Leopardi hoped the stimulation of living in the big city and the change of physical and intellectual scenery might bring him some new ideas and a positive change of pace. He also wanted very much to flee from his

⁶¹ Francesco DeSanctis, *Leopardi* (Einaudi 1960), 16.

⁶² Achille Tartaro, *Introduzione ai "Canti" di Giacomo Leopardi* (Liguori Editore, 1969), 97. "Ma il tema civile apparteneva a tutta la tradizione di cultura cui il Leopardi si era rifatto fin dagli anni della sua formazione. E corrispondeva ai problemi vitali che lo scrittore era andato chiarendo a se stesso. Perché questo è necessario tenere ben fermo: il sentimento patriottico non è per Leopardi qualcosa che egli si imponga dall'esterno, per l'influenza del Giordani soltanto o per una sorta di tributo pagato alla tradizione letteraria. Esso presuppone il travaglio mentale che abbiamo descritto nei capitoli precedenti. Vi troviamo riuniti l'insofferenza per Recanati e l'ardore di gloria, la smania per una vita integrale e il desiderio di ricongiungersi -- superando ogni barriera di chiuso provincialismo -- con la cultura più rappresentativo del suo tempo." This edition contains a complete biography of Leopardi.

home, his overbearing mother, and a father who would have preferred he become a monk as opposed to a scholar. Unfortunately, other than visiting the tomb of Torquato Tasso, Leopardi did not enjoy his sojourn there⁶³. Of his visit to the grave which left him in tears, he wrote, “Questo è il primo e l’unico piacere che ho provato in Roma” (*Epistolario*, pg. 258). And so he returned to Recanati, reconciled to a life of monotony. To some degree he accepted his solitude and lack of satisfaction from living. He changed his approach from attempting to achieve happiness to simply trying not to suffer. In a letter to A. Jacopssen, a young Belgian scholar, Leopardi expressed;

Ma vie est plus uniforme que le mouvement des asters,
plus fade et plus insipide que les parole de notre Opéra.⁶⁴

His trip to Rome had shattered his remaining illusions:

In truth I have no company at all: I have lost myself; and the other people around me will never ever be able to be company for me...Love me, for God’s sake. I need love, love, love, fire, enthusiasm, life: the world doesn’t seem made for me: I’ve found the devil far uglier than he is painted. Roman women, high class and low, are really stomach-turning; the men arouse rage and pity.⁶⁵

Leopardi left Rome unstimulated both intellectually and physically. The theme of continuing to live once one’s illusions have been destroyed will manifest itself in his later

⁶³ *Lezioni leopardiane* 259. Leopardi’s enthusiasm for Rome quickly diminished upon his arrival; “Le speranze che avrebbe potuto avere il Leopardi più giovane erano certo già diminuite ed egli non nutriva molte illusioni sulle più precise offerte di quella Roma a proposito della quale (specie come sede della cura pontificia) già il 9 aprile 1821 in una lettera al cugino Peticari aveva scritto: “Le corti, Roma, il Vaticano? Chi non conosce quel covile della superstizione, dell’ignoranza e de’ vizi” (*Tutte le opere*).

⁶⁴ DeSanctis 203.

⁶⁵ Shaw 120. This letter was written to his brother Carlo on November 25, 1822, shortly after his arrival in Rome.

work:

Le Operette morali sono dominate dalla concezione della volontà di vivere come trionfo di illusioni che vengono descritte da chi le ha del tutto abbandonate...⁶⁶

He realized that even Rome, cradle of *civitas*, had by then lost its greatness and had become as mediocre and non civic-minded as the rest of Italy. Since Leopardi had no further illusions, his will to live simply vanished after returning home. He continued to isolate himself from the outside world. Leopardi made additional attempts to leave Recanati after the Roman debacle. In the mid-1820's he tried to leave home various times and hoped to live independently and support himself. He went to Milan in 1825 with high hopes, similar to his feelings before going to Rome⁶⁷, but he was left dissatisfied. He found the literary scene in Florence vapid and the city uncomfortable.⁶⁸ He also went to Bologna three times and found it surprisingly enjoyable and even found some friends there who enjoyed his company in spite of his caustic personality and endless pessimism.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ferrucci 34.

⁶⁷ Shaw 122. "Leopardi was already disenchanted with the vast size of Rome when he wrote to (his sister) Paolina ten days after his arrival."

⁶⁸ Shaw 200. In this letter to Francesco Puccinotti written in Florence in 1827, Leopardi states, "I'm tired of life, tired of philosophical indifference, which is the only remedy for misfortunes and for boredom, but in the end is itself boring. I have no plans, no other hopes than to die." Pietro Giordani recommended that Leopardi try to make a living in Florence but he had a myriad of problems during his stay including vision problems, tooth extractions, a constant feeling of coldness, a chronic lack of funds and increasing depression.

⁶⁹ Shaw 246. "I came here (where I do have many friends) for reasons it would take too long to explain: I shall stay for as long as the small amount of money I have lasts; then the dreadful night of Recanati awaits me. I can't write any more. My fondest regards to all of you."

From 1828 to 1830 he wrote poetry dealing with his happy childhood memories such as *Il Risorgimento* and *Le Ricordanze* all the while adding to his *Zibaldone*. In 1833, Leopardi accompanied author and friend Antonio Ranieri to Naples where he hoped the warmer climate would make him feel better. By then Leopardi no longer wrote poems nor did he add to his notebooks which would later become *Lo Zibaldone* which began in 1816 as Leopardi's personal journal.

The Role of Women in Leopardi's Life

Another source of isolation for Leopardi was women's utter lack of interest in him. The gender component in Leopardi's life is notable in the sense that it has four distinct branches: his mother, his sister, his female acquaintances who have no interest in him physically, and unknown women he observes from afar as objects of desire. He dislikes and feels disassociated from his mother due to her obsession with material wealth and lack of interest in her children's well-being. The coldness which characterizes their relationship is apparent as he practically begs her to send him money on which to live:

You can see that all I am asking for in order to live here is the allowance granted to Carlo in Recanati. I will not remind you that I have always tried not to cause you any displeasure, because I do not think that constitutes any merit on my part: I merely point out that I would not want to give you this first bother now, if necessity in the full sense of the word did not compel me to do so.⁷⁰

In contrast to his relationship with his mother, the second type and the most positive female interaction Leopardi had was with his sister Paolina. He identified with her strongly and sympathized with her desire to flee the confines of Recanati. He commiserated with her as various attempts to attract a suitor are fruitless:

I'd like to be able to comfort you, and obtain your happiness at the cost of my own; but as I can't do this, I assure you that at least you have in me a brother who loves you from the heart, who will always love you, who feels the awkwardness

⁷⁰ Shaw 269.

and the anguish of your situation, who feels for you, who in short shares in everything that concerns you.⁷¹

Leopardi's tenderness toward his sister is also expressed in *Nelle nozze alla sorella Paolina*, a celebratory poem which reflected an upcoming event which was never to occur. These two fundamental relationships with women; one cold and unnurturing, the other a true friendship, are the foundation of his interactions with women which will be further examined in Chapter Three. The respect shown for Paola's intelligence and abilities is the only sustained positive depiction of a woman except for women he would at times be infatuated with. Contemporary women are also responsible for the loss of classical values and must work hard to recover them, "Donne, da voi non poco / La patria aspetta" (lines 31-32). There is little incentive to be virtuous today as one may only be lauded after death, "Virtù viva sprezziam, lodiamo estinta" (line 30).

Regarding women who are not relatives, Leopardi had no romantic relationships and often had unrequited feelings of love for the few females he would happen to meet, usually visitors to his home or the spouses of friends or relatives. Fanny Targioni Tozzetti, a married Florentine socialite, was long the object of Leopardi's affection although she showed interest only in his friend Antonio Ranieri. He continued to write her in any case:

Adieu, fair and charming Fanny. I scarcely dare ask you to let me know what I can do for you, knowing that I can do nothing. But if, as they say, desire and will give

⁷¹ Shaw 133.

strength, you can consider me very well able to do your bidding.⁷²

Pathetically, Leopardi justifies her anticipated non-response to his overtures:

...you know that forgetting you is not easy. I think you once said to me that often you did not reply to your best friends, but you did to other people, because you were sure that your best friends would not take offence at your silence, as others would. Do me the great honor of treating me as one of your best friends; and if you are very busy, and if writing tires you, don't reply. I long to have news of you, but I'll be content to get it from Ranieri or from Gozzani, whom I ask for it. I don't think you are expecting any news from me.⁷³

When in Bologna, Leopardi was firmly rejected by Teresa Malvezzi, wife of Count Francesco Malvezzi de' Medici.⁷⁴ He later expressed his rage that some thought he was still attempting to associate with her:

May my nose drop off, if I've been back, or ever will go back, since I've heard the gossip she's been spreading about me; and if I don't speak of her as ill as I can. The other day I ran into her and turned my face to the wall to avoid seeing her.⁷⁵

Giacomo's reaction to Malvezzi's rejection inspired strong misanthropic feelings:

⁷² Shaw 268.

⁷³ Shaw 252.

⁷⁴ Shaw 194. October 1826; "My dear Countess. The last time I had the pleasure of seeing you, you told me so clearly that conversation with me *tetê à tetê* bored you, that you left me no scope for a pretext to venture to carry on calling so frequently. Do not think that I am offended: if I had any cause for complaint, I would complain that your actions, and your words, though clear enough, were not even clearer and franker. Now after all this time I would like to come and take my leave, but I dare not do so without your permission. I request it urgently, as I very much wish to tell you once more in person that I am, as you know very well, your true and cordial friend, Giacomo Leopardi."

⁷⁵ Shaw 197. From a letter to Antonio Papadopoli, Venetian intellectual, written May 21, 1827.

Ferito nel suo orgoglio, sensibilissimo a quanto si sussurrava a Bologna di quel rapporto, al corrente di maldicenze che fosse la stessa Teresa aveva messo in giro, Giacomo elaborò una forma tenacissima di rancore e di odio.⁷⁶

Leopardi attempted to show some control in relation to his non-existent romantic life, an act which he understood to be pathetic:

I'm almost ashamed to tell you that when she saw I'd stopped calling on her, she sent to ask for news of me, and I didn't go; that after a few days, she sent me an invitation to lunch, and I didn't go; that I left for Florence without seeing her; that I've never seen her since you left Bologna. I mean I'm ashamed to tell you these things, because it seems as if I want to prove something to you that you do me a wrong to doubt.⁷⁷

He was aware that his friends correctly perceived him as ill-equipped to navigate a romantic relationship with a woman. For the duration of his life, his only meaningful relationships with women are with his mother and sister. Women who are not related to him are a constant source of frustration, reminding him of a condition of togetherness and possible happiness he cannot attain. After returning from Rome, he composed *Alla sua Donna*. Leopardi discussed the meaning of the poem in the *Nuovo Ricoglitore* in 1825:

La donna, cioè l'innamorata, dell'autore, è una di quelle immagini, uno di quei fantasmi di bellezza e virtù celeste e ineffabile, che ci occorrono spesso alla fantasia, nel sonno e nella veglia, quando siamo poco più che fanciulli, e poi qualche rara volta nel sonno, o in una quasi alienazione di mente, quando siamo giovani. Infine è *la donna che non si trova*. L'autore non sa se la sua donna (e così chiamandola, mostra di non amare altra che questa) sia mai nata finora, o debba mai nascere; sa che ora non vive in terra, e che noi non siamo suoi

⁷⁶ Minore 165.

⁷⁷ Shaw 198. From a letter to Antonio Papadopoli, written July 3, 1827.

contemporanei, la cerca tra le idee di Platone, la cerca nella luna, nei pianeti del sistema solare, in quei de' sistemi delle stelle. Se questa Canzone si vorrà chiamare amorosa, sarà pur certo che questo tale amore non può né dare né patir gelosia, perché, fuor dell'autore, nessun amante terreno vorrà fare all'amore col telescopio.⁷⁸

The impossibility of romantic contact with a female is a constant thread in Leopardi's work. Part of the self-justification on Leopardi's part for such non-contact is that the woman he desired is a platonic ideal, non-existent, as is the society he yearned to live in. This reinforced his misanthropy toward contemporary women who could never embody his impossible model.

⁷⁸ *Tutte le opere* 57.

The Nature and Content of the *Zibaldone*

The *Zibaldone* was published posthumously as a collection of Leopardi's thoughts and feelings on a wide variety of subjects. This motley accumulation, or *zibaldone*, is written at times as if it were a stream of consciousness, and yet there is a gradual development of themes and perspectives which are refined over time. Some sections may have been artistically crafted but for the most part it has a very spontaneous style wherein the author follows tangents of every kind and revisits subjects repeatedly. At 3,000 pages in length, over the course of the *Zibaldone* and thus the passage of time, one can see the development and evolution of many of the ideas central to his work.

The tone of *Lo Zibaldone* is negative in many ways as regards the discussion of his fellow man. This contrasts with the tone in many works in the *Operette morali* and his poetry. It may be that he felt his personal journal was a better forum to express himself in a less structured way. It may also be that both his negativity and apparent optimism are simply two sides of the same coin expressed differently. Leopardi often focused on the inherent negativity of life and the battle between the desire to live and the will to die. Historically, critics have focused on the *Operette morali* and *Canti* for issues dealing with collective humanity and have looked to *Lo Zibaldone* for more personal musings. The *Operette morali*, published in 1827, is a collection of short pessimistic fables that attempt to explain the meaning of life in a broad sense and describe the pointlessness of individual existence. The *Canti* published in 1831 is a collection of his existential poetry and signals the end of his artistic production. Shortly after the *Canti* were published,

Leopardi ceased his studies and writing in his notebooks which were to become *Lo Zibaldone*. When Leopardi stopped publishing he also stopped adding to the *Zibaldone*.

Thematically *Lo Zibaldone* discusses the many relationships in society between others and the author himself, most of which are depicted negatively. In Leopardi's work, the impetus behind all of one's actions is self-love which by necessity leads to the dislike of all others; "l'uomo è per sua natura e per natura dell'amor proprio, nemico degli altri viventi."⁷⁹ Memory fuels his literary production by recalling a past ideal happiness that is now unobtainable and chips away at self-love:

Memoria e scrittura si aiutano a definirsi, muovendosi incontro dai rispettivi reami, che sono il già trascorso per l'una e l'immediato fluire per l'altra.⁸⁰

The conflict of our internal lives is that self-love propels our actions while self-hate is continually produced by our memories. Other creatures, having no Reason, do not suffer as humans do given that they cannot feel self-love and the subsequent negative sentiment that it engenders:

Come dunque la natura ha fatto l'uomo ripugnante e se stessa, cioè a se stesso? E che cos'è questa legge naturale, che gli altri animali (perfetti sudditi della natura) non seguono, nè possono seguire, impediti dallo stesso amor proprio nè conoscono in verun modo?⁸¹

⁷⁹ *Zibaldone* 811.

⁸⁰ Ferrucci 29.

⁸¹ *Zibaldone* 527. In the same section Leopardi indicates that other creatures are not repulsive to Nature because they do not have the ability to reason. "Non hanno ragione. Hanno però istinto, secondo voi altri, e la legge naturale, secondo voi altri, e la forza stessa del termine, è istinto innato ec. indipendente dalla riflessione e quindi dalla ragione. Dunque la legge naturale sarebbe tanto più conveniente agli animali che

Leopardi's *Zibaldone* is filled with misanthropic references even in relation to himself.

Io sono, si perdoni la metafora, un sepolcro ambulante, che porto dentro di me un uomo morto, un cuore già sensibilissimo che più non sente ec.⁸²

Although his pessimism has been attributed to society's move away from the purity and beauty of the classics and the world of nature, Leopardi's negativity has a much more personal source: his feelings of dislike for himself and those around him. His misanthropy is the driving force behind his literature. The vein of misanthropy in *Lo Zibaldone* is so strong that it renders the traditional understanding of Leopardi false. For example, Binni believes that, for Leopardi, individuals' tendency is to be happy; "...l'uomo per il Leopardi ha una tendenza fondamentale, la felicità e la felicità in terra."⁸³

This is incorrect and there is no evidence to support the concept that a modern citizen can achieve happiness.⁸⁴ Leopardi's poetry is much more in line with the ideas expressed in the *Zibaldone* when describing the negative side of humanity as opposed to the positive. His expressions of the themes of nature and collective humanity are among the classics of

non hanno ragione da suppirvi; siccome sarebbe quasi una qualità animalesca nell'uomo libero e ragionevole."

⁸² *Zibaldone* 1091. Bologna, November 3, 1825. This entry was written during a particularly difficult time for Leopardi who had been hoping to move to Rome to accept a teaching position but had to refuse it. He had neither the money to make the trip nor the physical stamina.

⁸³ *Lezioni leopardiane* 152.

⁸⁴ For modern individuals, happiness is impossible. In *Pensieri* Leopardi states; "Tutte pertanto, le infinite osservazioni e prove generali o particolari, ch'io adduco per dimostrare come l'uomo fosse fatto primitivamente alla felicità, come il suo stato perfettamente naturale (che non si trova mai nel fatto) fosse per lui il solo perfetto, come quanto più si allontaniamo dalla natura, tanto più diveniamo infelici ecc. ecc. Tutte queste, dico, sono altrettante prove dirette di uno dei dogmi principali del Cristianesimo, e, possiamo dire, della verità dello stello Cristianesimo" *Pensieri* LXXXIV e LXXX.

Italian literature but only reveal a small and artificial part of Leopardi's feelings.

The goal of this work is to differentiate the three types of misanthropy in *Lo Zibaldone* and their previously unexamined literary functions. The first kind to be explored is misanthropy toward foreign others, a kind of dislike which Leopardi utilizes in order to galvanize the spirit of Italians into collective action. The second variety is the dislike of similar others which is employed when Leopardi emphasizes the egotistical nature of humanity and the impossibility of sincere feelings between individuals. In both dislike of foreign others and the dislike of similar others, Leopardi demonstrates many contrary examples in his poetic production. The reasons for this are two-fold: the first is to inspire Italians to strive to be better than the negative image he has painted, and secondly, to show the sadness and alienation he experiences in his own life. The third kind of misanthropy in *Lo Zibaldone*, directed toward the author himself, differs from the first two in that it is always present. The poet does not waver in presenting unflattering and hateful descriptions of himself which speaks to the alienation and bitterness he feels as a result of the collapse of his childhood illusions.

Methodology

The methodology used to differentiate and identify the types of misanthropy in *Lo Zibaldone* and to define their function is a form of Reception Theory. The approach of Stanley Fish will be employed: that of letting the reader him/herself create meaning during the reading process, to be led by the text to some extent while at the same time realizing that the reader's interpretive response to the work itself is fundamental in the extraction of "meaning" from the work.⁸⁵ This approach implies that there is no absolute or inherent meaning to any text, but rather an acceptable range of interpretations dictated by the critical limitations imposed upon the text by the reader.⁸⁶ The reader imposes his/her cultural background and previous literary experience upon the text as well:

Fish's whole enterprise can be seen as an attempt to account for how change can occur within dominant paradigms of understanding and how this can even change the paradigms themselves.⁸⁷

A reception theory reading of the *Zibaldone* changes the parameters, the filter which is used, to view the other work of Leopardi. The range of acceptable interpretation of his other work becomes in some regards more narrow and yet richer and more complex. Most previous critical interpretations no longer hold once the vein of misanthropy in the

⁸⁵ Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1988) 36. "Stanley Fish was only the first to equate the meaning of a literary work with the reader's experience of it. Hesitations, erroneous conjectures, moments of puzzlement, and so on, are part of a reader's experience and hence inseparable from the work's meaning."

⁸⁶ Gregory Castle, *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory* (Blackwell Publishing, 2007) 178. "Fish offers a powerful hedge against subjectivism with his argument that the "informed" reader's response is not arbitrary or random, that there are 'regularizing' constraints on response."

⁸⁷ Peter Baker, *Deconstruction and the Ethical Turn* (University Press of Florida, 1995) 30.

Zibaldone is understood. The range of interpretation is further calibrated by an improved understanding of Leopardi's fundamental beliefs and sentiments, especially toward others. Understanding the *Zibaldone* assists the reader⁸⁸ in contextualizing the misanthropy encountered in Leopardi's other work:

..it is impossible even to think of a sentence independently of a context, and when we are asked to consider a sentence for which no context has been specified, we will automatically hear it in the context in which it has been most often encountered.⁸⁹

This paper will establish a framework that will isolate distinct types of misanthropy which once understood, alter the reading of his other works. The reader who happens across a poem for the first time will, after reading and understanding the *Zibaldone*, come across it again with a new set of rules he/she can follow. The experience of the *Zibaldone* cannot be undone as the reader encounters other of Leopardi's work. To a degree it is somewhat an approach of the "doppia immagine" of Leopardi himself. That is, all subsequent experiences of a given type are colored indelibly by previous instances of the same event. The reader will come to understand how strong Leopardi's negative feelings are toward his fellow man by the repetition of the word *hate* and other motifs. The effect of Leopardi's misanthropy contained in *Lo Zibaldone* will be examined as well in terms of its effect on the conventional reading of his other work. Specifically, *A Silvia*, *L'infinito*, *La Ginestra*, *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* and *Canto notturno di un*

⁸⁸ Culler 203. "The implied reader functions as a fictional character in a story of reading. In many cases, reference to the reader is an attempt to ground interpretations upon a supposed experience."

⁸⁹ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Author of Interpretive Communities* (Harvard University Press, 1980) 310.

pastore errante dell'Asia seen through this misanthropic lens, have a different sense and cause the informed reader to question the artistic motives and past interpretations of the works themselves.

For example, *A Silvia* is a semi-autobiographical work which deals with the themes of the loss of childlike illusions, humanity versus inevitable death, and tragedy. It expresses sadness for dreams unachieved and the collective concern and love of a community for one of its members. Reception theory will aid the reader's understanding of the work as the degrees of Leopardi's misanthropy are fully investigated. Without a basis of knowledge gleaned from *Lo Zibaldone*, reasonable interpretation of his other works is not possible. A clear understanding of the misanthropy in the *Zibaldone* will change the experience of reading the *Canti* and *Operette morali*⁹⁰. A re-examination is also needed of *La ginestra*, a work emblematic of humanity's struggle against nature:

È madre in parto, ed in voler matrigna.
 Costei chiama inimica, e incontro a questa
 Congiunta esser pensando,
 Siccom'è il vero, ed ordinata in pria
 L'umana compagnia,
 Tutti fra se confederati estima
 Gli uomini, e tutti abbraccia
 Con vero amor, porgendo
 Valida e pronta ed aspettando aita
 Negli alterni perigli e nelle angosce

⁹⁰ Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer, *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (University of Oklahoma, 1993) 181. Fish states; "In the procedures I would urge, the reader's activities are at the center of attention, where they are regarded, not as leading to meaning, but as *having* meaning. The meaning they have is a consequence of their not being empty; for they include the making and revising of assumptions, the rendering and regretting of judgements, the coming to and abandoning of conclusions, the giving and withdrawing of approval, the specifying of causes, the asking of questions, the supplying of answers, the solving of puzzles."

Della guerra commune.⁹¹

An understanding of misanthropy will again challenge some of the premises the reader is asked to accept in the literary analysis of critics including DeSanctis, Croce, Binni, Biscuso, and Gallo. Among them are the ideas that humanity can be united as a group against an external force and that of concern for the well-being of his peers. A reception theory analysis will demonstrate that the perception of humanity's collective experience attributed to Leopardi needs to be redefined. The supposed leopardian group experience is actually a collection of individual ones. The group is thus defined by the shared attribute of a particular individual condition but shares no connecting bond otherwise. The sweet solace sought by Leopardi in *L'infinito* acquires a new misanthropic meaning once one understands what precisely he is seeking escape from. The three varieties of misanthropy toward dissimilar others, similar others and oneself can be viewed in contrast to Leopardi's poems, dialogues and essays. From within the *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*, *A Silvia* and *L'infinito*, one can compare the contrasting viewpoints expressed therein versus those in *Lo Zibaldone*. The informed reader may then draw the conclusion that much of Leopardi's writing is fueled by a strong dislike of others and not by his futile search for happiness as is commonly represented.

To aid in the understanding of the multi-faceted concept of misanthropy, Leopardi's written words can be perceived as a constant in the mathematical sense while the reader's response to the text is variable from the reader response perspective. It is the reader's

⁹¹ Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti* (Mondadori, 1987), 226.

responsibility to decode these static words in a meaningful way⁹². In this sense reader response theory is an interactive process and a form of social constructionism whereby meaning is attributed based upon mutually accepted terms⁹³. This work will refine the definition of misanthropic language used by Leopardi in his poetry. One cannot take Leopardi's poetic language at face value, or for that matter, certain other interpretive values once *Lo Zibaldone* is introduced into the reading experience.

The type of reader-response analysis employed by Stanley Fish has two general phases; the first focusing upon the impossibility of extracting meaning from a work⁹⁴ and the second hinging upon our disjointed relationship with the work itself. Fish declares that the reader cannot assume neither the context nor the author's intent in any real objective sense since doing so would be in itself an act of interpretation. Fish claims that there is nothing objective whatsoever in the work itself and that meaning is attributed by the reader.⁹⁵ Fish speaks to the variability of defining concepts, and the dynamism that it

⁹² Davis and Schleifer 177. Fish states; "In other words, it is the structure of the reader's experience rather than any structures available on the page that should be the object of description."

⁹³ Davis and Schleifer 174. This reader-oriented approach, however, is marked by its "inability to say how it is that one ever begins" to read and interpret. Fish's answer is that readers are guided by "interpretive communities" of readers. Second, Fish asks, "how can any one of us know whether or not he is a member of the same interpretive community as any other of us?" His answer is that we can never be sure, but that our commonsense experience tends to confirm the existence of such reading communities.

⁹⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (The University Of Minnesota Press, 1983), 85. Eagleton speaking of Fish; "Everything in the text -- its grammar, meanings, formal units -- is a product of interpretation, in no sense 'factually' given; and this raises the intriguing question of what it is that Fish believes he is interpreting when he reads. His refreshingly candid answer to this question is that he does not know; but neither, he thinks, does anybody else."

⁹⁵ Castle 178. "Fish argues that the meaning derived from literary texts is the product of a "joint responsibility." Meaning is thus "redefined as an event rather than an entity": The reader's response is not *to* the meaning; it *is* the meaning"...The "informed reader" learns the appropriate reading responses by being a member of an interpretive community "made up of those who share interpretive strategies" that "exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around."

conveys to the act of reading thusly:

I wanted my students to see that while the moral life cannot be anchored in a perspicuous and uncontroversial rule, golden or otherwise, we must nevertheless respond to its pressures; and indeed it is only *because* the moral life rests on a base of nothing more than its own interpretations that it can have a content; for were there a clearly marked path that assured the safety of pilgrims and wanderers, we would have no decisions to make, nothing to hazard, nothing to wager.⁹⁶

While agreeing with the notion of the absence of inherent meaning, there are very strong signs contained within *Lo Zibaldone* which have a relatively consistent meaning in a literary sense, even beyond Leopardi's cultural context. In that sense there is a relative objectivity within the literature and one cannot dismiss entirely the attempt to contextualize the work and the words contained therein. The "interpretive communities", though their agreed-upon meanings are arbitrary, serve an important purpose of creating a set of premises one can use as a point of departure. In that sense this study will look upon the words within *Lo Zibaldone* as might Roland Barthes who, "...developed a theory of 'codes'...(which) represent systems of meaning which the reader activates in response to the text".⁹⁷ The language of the *Zibaldone* has been studied by Gaspare Polizzi extensively and specifically on the use of words versus terms:

La riflessione sulla razionalità scientifica e filosofica moderna si interseca nello *Zibaldone* con le notazioni più propriamente linguistiche, che ne occupano una larga parte. Il punto più rilevante di intersezione consiste nell'indagine sulla lingua della conoscenza e della scienza, in corrispondenza con la più generale

⁹⁶ Stanley Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech* (Oxford University Press, 1994) 272.

⁹⁷ Raman Selden, *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature* (The University Press of Kentucky, 1989) 119.

ricognizione su storia e caratteri della lingue antiche e moderne, e sulle peculiarità della lingua letteraria e poetica. Si tratta di un punto straordinario rilievo teorico nel pensiero leopardiano, in quanto consente di distinguere nettamente la sfera semantica della lingua poetica e letteraria da quella della lingua scientifica e razionale, dando luogo a una vera e propria teoria estetica del linguaggio. Per quanto ci riguarda, la distinzione appare rilevante anche sul versante della teoria della conoscenza e della concezione della scienza.⁹⁸

Leopardi was very interested in language with nuance and is one of the reasons he abandoned scientific writing during his teenage years. He found the lack of variability of interpretation very limiting. In science, guided exclusively by reason, the words used are terms with a decisively limited meaning whereas in poetry he could express himself more completely with words of potentially fluid meaning:

Leopardi non ha dubbi sul carattere definitorio e determinato del linguaggio scientifico, costituito da ‘termini’ e non da ‘parole’: “Le voci scientifiche presentano la nuda e circoscritta idea di quel tale oggetto, e perciò si chiamano termini perché determinano e definiscono la cosa da tutte le parti”, scrive riflettendo sul lessico della lingua francese, esempio principe di lingua analitica e rigorosa, che rischia di “diventar lingua al tutto matematica e scientifica, per troppa abbondanza di termini in ogni sorte di cose, e dimenticanza delle antiche parole”, e la più “geometricamente nuda ch’esista oramai” (*Zib*, 109-10 giugno 1820). La lingua francese viene assunta a paradigma di lingua scientifica moderna, poco a punto alla trattazione di temi letterari (*Zib*, 1253/30 giugno 1821): essa viene definita indistintamente geometrica o aritmetica, in quanto il suo lessico è costituito da termini scientifici, “formati sullo sterile modello della ragione” e rigorosamente deduttivi (*Zib*, 323/13 novembre 1820). Una lingua di tal genere è da rigettare, specie per gli amanti del bello della poesia: “brutissima e inanimata quella lingua che è definitivamente matematica” (*Zib*, 643/11 febbraio 1821); la lingua bella e poetica è invece contrario allo spirito matematico, non è né esatta, né uniforme come la ragione scientifica (*Zib*, 2417-8/5 maggio 1822). La riflessione sulla lingua scientifica appare dunque speculare rispetto a quella, più ampia e significativa, sulla lingua letteraria e poetica, e si focalizza sull’identificazione del linguaggio caratterizzante della scientificità con il linguaggio matematico, rigoroso e deduttivo, ma proprio per questo sterile e arido.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Gaspare Polizzi, *Leopardi e le ragioni della verità* (Mondadori, 2003) 68.

⁹⁹ Polizzi 70.

Polizzi correctly identifies Leopardi's attempt to separate poetic language from that which is rational and/or scientific. While Leopardi was interested in the differences between poetic and scientific expression, he was a perpetual poet and even when theorizing in a quasi-scientific tone in the *Zibaldone*, his language elicits strong emotions from the reader. In fact, Leopardi's guise of scientific analysis and detachment in relation to society further highlights the hurt he experienced for not being a participant. All of Leopardi's words have variable meaning as Reader Response theory rejects outright any attempt to separate poetic and scientific language:

Moreover, there can be no point in separating poetic from non-poetic styles. In his theory of "affective stylistics," he (Fish) underscores the anti-formalist orientation of Reader-Response theory and argues, against critics like I.A. Richards and Michael Riffaterre, that the distinction between poetic and non-poetic language, and the consequent privileging of the former, limits the interpretive potential of language and texts.¹⁰⁰

This work supports the contention that attempts to determine intentionality based on the use of language are futile, contrary to structuralist positions such as that of Ralph Freedman:

One of the basic problems of criticism, then, still focuses on the work within the poet and on the poet within the work. Can we actually think of the poet's mind as separate from his work or are they both part of the same consciousness? ...how do the poet's intentions correspond to those distinct (and perhaps autonomous) intentions in the work? Clearly, intention as a crucial part of the literary meaning is reflected in the poem's language, but it may also make itself known through other nonverbal conventions--actions and images not reducible to verbal expressions or forms.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Castle 178.

¹⁰¹ Murray Krieger and L.S. Dembo, *Directions for Criticism: Structuralism and its Alternatives* (The

Indeed it would be extremely useful to have a sense of authorial intent but even if one were explicitly provided, how such intent is manifest in the work is a separate question altogether and does not necessarily confer additional meaning. It is not useful to attempt to determine intent much less the consciousness of the author. This work allows for a fluid interpretation of language in Leopardi's work and does not speak to its intent. In his poetry Leopardi attempted to use *words* which allow for interpretation versus *terms* which are strictly defined. He avoids mathematical precision which he feels the French language has fallen prey to and instead utilizes a vocabulary which leaves room for the imagination.¹⁰² In this sense his poetry differs substantially from the *Zibaldone* in that his journal is less ambiguous. The *Zibaldone* is where Leopardi expresses himself freely and with less artifice than his other work. The *Zibaldone* itself is a field journal of sorts which Leopardi uses to document his observations and musings about society. Its language is clear and direct and the sentiments are often in contradiction with the feelings he expresses in his other work.¹⁰³ In any case however, the language of the *Zibaldone* can and should be interpreted poetically with words of variable meaning.

In relation to the theme of misanthropy, the expression of *odio* has a wide range of

University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 138.

¹⁰² *Zibaldone* 214. "La letteratura francese si può chiamare originale per la sua somma e singolare inoriginalità."

¹⁰³ *Lezioni leopardiane* 150. Lo *Zibaldone*, inizialmente (tra la fine del '17 e il principio del '18) configurato in appunti poetici e successivamente come serie di osservazioni e di meditazioni di carattere più schiettamente letterario confluite nel *Discorso di un italiano intorno alla poesia romantica*, a poco a poco, soprattutto nel '19, accoglie sollecitazioni di carattere più generale, più filosofico, fra le quali in particolare spunta il contrasto (nel *Discorso di un italiano* ancora visto soprattutto in prospettiva letteraria) fra natura e ragione. Massimo slancio e una più intensa e più complessa e impegnata alacrità in direzione soprattutto filosofico-morale, lo *Zibaldone* prende proprio con gli appunti tra il '20 e il '21 che costituiscono la metà dell'intero "libro segreto" leopardiano."

meanings depending on its context, whether in poetry or the prose of the *Zibaldone*. The *Zibaldone*, while more “rational” and less poetic than his other work, still uses language open to interpretation.¹⁰⁴ It does not have a one-dimensional meaning but rather varies depending on the context. *Odio* has such distinctions depending on whether the word is directed toward oneself, similar others, or dissimilar others. Leopardi was certainly interested in such linguistic matters and studied them at length. He often theorized about the kind of language used in different contexts and has elaborated thoughts on scientific language in particular. He was very interested in evolutionary biology, taxonomy and the scientific method in general. The precise use of language is part of Leopardi’s measured approach where every meaning serves a purpose and no word is excessive or superfluous. In spite of insisting on the use of poetic language in his writing, he does so even when attempting to express himself in a more ‘rational’ manner. Polizzi demonstrates the concept of science and its language for Leopardi as an integrated system. As such, Polizzi constantly studies its various component parts:

Se, a conclusione della nostra ricognizione relativa alle *Dissertazione*, vogliamo richiamare i principali punti di riferimento della formazione scientifica leopardiana riconoscibili a questa data (1812) e indicativi di persistenze problematiche nel pensiero maturo, possiamo così schematizzarli:

- l’adesione al sistema newtoniano della natura e al metodo scientifico newtoniano, rigorosamente sperimentale e, attraverso la sua progressiva espansione, tendenzialmente esplicativo di tutti i fenomeni naturali, fonte principale della conoscenza ‘vera’ della natura;
- l’interesse per il rapporto tra scienza e tecnologia, espresso nei settori emergenti della scienza moderna (idrodinamica, chimica, elettricità);
- l’interesse, anche metodologico, per la scienza sperimentale e la curiosità per gli esperimenti scientifici più nuovi e originali (come quelli chimici ed

¹⁰⁴ Castle 176. “According to Umberto Eco, the open text makes available possibilities within a “given *field of relations*.” The result of such openness is not chaos but an “organizing rule which governs these relations.”

- elettrici);
- l'attenzione, anche linguistica e metodologica, alla nascita della chimica moderna;
- la scarsa dimestichezza con il linguaggio matematico, specie dell'analisi;
- la predilezione per il sapere astronomico (segnata anche dalla comparsa della due figure concettuali di Copernico e di Galilei e della riflessione sull'infinità dei mondi);
- l'acquisizione del ragionamento silogistico come unica espressione della logica della scienza e della conoscenza.¹⁰⁵

Leopardi's language endeavors to show logical bases for both scientific and poetic observation. There is a giant step toward utilizing the empirical method in relation to emotions and to viewing the emotions of human existence in a more rational manner.

The intent of this study therefore is to separate the monolithic term of *odio*, as defined by past literary criticism, into distinct variations where it functions as a word used poetically both inside and out of the *Zibaldone*. While Leopardi's misanthropy has been examined, it has not been differentiated within the contexts of self, peer, and other. The relevance of the context is that it imbues the word *odio* with a multi-dimensional poetic meaning it did not have before. Differentiating the three types of misanthropy in Leopardi's work is essential in order for the reader to understand its use as a literary device.

The connection between Leopardi's misanthropy and his concern for the shift in societal values is relevant because it brings to the fore the great negativity he felt toward his fellow man. There are three distinct types of misanthropy in *Lo Zibaldone*; dislike of strangers, dislike of peers, and dislike of self. The distinct variations are important and perform different functions in the *Zibaldone*. Literary criticism has consistently viewed

¹⁰⁵ Polizzi 17.

Leopardi's *odio* as if it were a scientific term, with a monolithic one-dimensional meaning. This study will prove that such is not the case. In the *Zibaldone* and his other works, *Odio* is a *word* and not a *term* and as such can indicate a wide range of meanings:

... solo lo sforzo congiunto dell'autore e del lettore farà nascere quell'oggetto concreto e immaginario che è l'opera dello spirito. L'arte esiste per gli altri e per mezzo degli altri. La lettura, quindi, sarebbe una sintesi della percezione e della creazione.¹⁰⁶

The next chapter will identify the first of the three types of misanthropy defined by Leopardi. The dislike of foreign others is a consistent theme in the *Zibaldone*. Yet even as he criticized those outside of Italy, he also demonstrated admiration for the national unity that some other nations enjoy. France and the French language are common targets for Leopardi's wrath and yet he aspired for Italy to create a similarly unique national literature. He did not desire to imitate the great work of the past as Madame de Staël might advise¹⁰⁷ but instead wants to encourage Italians to move, to create; encouraged by the hatred of other nations¹⁰⁸ and their presumptions of superiority.

The nascent fields of evolutionary biology and economics were great influences upon

¹⁰⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Che Cos'è La Letteratura?* (Mondadori, 1990) 55.

¹⁰⁷ From *Opere* pg.770, *Lettera in Risposta a Madame de Staël*, written in 1816; "Che conoscere non porti seco necessità d'imitare è proposizione che benché paia vera così a prima giunta, esaminata con maturità di riflessione potrebbe non parer tale in tutta la sua ampiezza....Non vo' già dir io che sia necessario ignorare affatto quello che pensano e creano gl'ingegni stranieri, ma temo assaissimo la soverchia imitazione alla quale Italia piega tanto, che parmi faccia d'uopo a levarle il mal vezzo usar maniere che sentano dell'eccessivo. Conoscere non porta seco assoluta necessità d'imitare, ma se non costringe, muove, e giunge a tanto da rendere il non imitare poco men che impossibile, ond'è che Metastasio non volle mai leggere Tragedie Francesi."

¹⁰⁸ *Zibaldone* 393. "... la società non può sussistere senz'amor patrio, ed odio degli stranieri."

Leopardi's thought. The late 1700's were characterized in part by ideologies based on nationalist goals. These goals, in turn, were defined by competition for scarce resources. Leopardi's misanthropy toward others is the necessary byproduct of biologically-driven reactions to individual and group struggles. He defined the dislike of others as a natural behavior. These forms of externally-focused misanthropy will be examined in subsequent chapters. The aberration which Leopardi discovered within himself, from a biological point of view, is self-hatred which should not occur as it has no biological benefit. From an artistic perspective however, he felt that it gave him the advantage of being able to love others and of being able to have empathy for them, something which the self-lovers could not do.¹⁰⁹ Misanthropy is thus tied inextricably to human biology. In Leopardi's work misanthropy toward others is an artifice utilized in service of his literary and social goals whereas his self-hatred is real and based on his deep-seated feelings of depression and inertness.

¹⁰⁹ Zibaldone 385. "...l'odio degli altri è una conseguenza necessaria ed immediata dell'amore di se stesso, il quale essendo innato, anche l'odio degli altri viene ad essere innato in ogni vivente."

Chapter Two - Dislike of Those Dissimilar to Us: Foreign Others and Nationalism

Vogliono che l'uomo per natura sia più sociale di tutti gli altri viventi. Io dico che lo è men di tutti, perché avendo più vitalità, ha più amor proprio, e quindi necessariamente ciascun individuo umano ha più odio verso gli altri individui sì della sua specie sì dell'altre, secondo i principii da me in più luoghi sviluppati. Or qual altra qualità è più antisociale, più esclusiva per sua natura dello spirito di società, che l'amore estremo verso se stesso, l'appetito estremo di tirar tutto a se, e l'odio estremo verso gli altri tutti? ¹¹⁰

Leopardi yearned for Italy to be part of the intellectual and literary community of Europe. His poetry, such as *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* and *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* as well as his letters indicate that he desired to communicate and understand foreign *others* and in fact admired them greatly for their individual fortitude and their literary innovation. His letters to A.M. Jacopssen, Carlo Bunsen, Luigi DeSinner and Carlo Lebreton show a deep desire to participate in the international fraternity of the men of letters of his time. This appears to be diametrically opposed to his negative feelings expressed in the *Zibaldone*. However, the dislike of foreign *others* repeatedly mentioned therein applies only to an analysis of successful governments of the past and the mechanisms employed to create unity. Leopardi's true goal was not to create a dislike of foreign *others*, but rather to create national unity. He frequently referred to the greatness of ancient societies and their dislike of outsiders, which led to increased cohesion:

Ma trovate o scavate le spelonche, per munirsi contro le fiere e gli elementi,

¹¹⁰ *Zibaldone* 981.

trovate le armi ed arti difensive, fabbricate le città dove gli uomini in compagnia dimoravano al sicuro dagli assalti degli altri animali, mansuefatte alcune fiere, altri impediti di nuocere, tutte sottomesse, molte rese tributarie, scemato il timore e il danno degli elementi, la nazione umana, per così dire, quasi vincitrice de' suoi nemici, e guasta dalla prosperità, rivolse le proprie armi contro se stessa, e qui cominciano le storie delle diverse nazioni; e questa è l'epoca del secolo d'argento, secondo il mio modo di vedere; giacchè l'aureo, al quale le storie non si stendono, e che resta in balia della favola, fu quello precedente, tale, quale l'ho descritto.¹¹¹

Humanity's bellicose nature is a constant whether directed toward the elements or other natural enemies. Once those basic safety requirements are satisfied, humans unleash their aggression upon each other. When societies began to form, they unified, in part, to more efficiently direct their aggression and misanthropy toward *others*. The military cohesion of the ancient Romans was what Leopardi strived for but in a purely literary vein.

Tutti gli imperi, tutte le nazioni ch'hanno ottenuto dominio sulle altre, da principio hanno combattuto con quelli di fuori, co' vicini, co' nemici: poi liberati dal timore esterno, e soddisfatti dell'ambizione e della cupidigia di dominare sugli stranieri e di possedere quel di costoro, e saziato l'odio nazionale contro le altre nazioni, hanno sempre rivolto il ferro contro loro medesime, ed hanno per lo più perduto con le guerre civili quell'impero e quella ricchezza ec. che aveano guadagnato colle guerre esterne.¹¹²

This statement from the *Zibaldone* indicates the destructive effects of nationalistic hate that initially unite one group against another are eventually directed against one's compatriots. Thus Leopardi believed that man is fundamentally egotistical and that once an individual has used the group for one self-serving purpose, will simply abandon it and

¹¹¹ *Zibaldone* 811.

¹¹² *Zibaldone* 811.

return to satisfy one's immediate and personal needs. Leopardi's description of human nature reveals his belief that individuals desire to control others, acquire material possessions and are fearful and mistrusting of those seen as different. This chapter will define the scope of misanthropy toward *others* in Leopardi's work, the *Zibaldone* in particular, as it relates to foreign others. The novelty of this argument is that it defines misanthropy as a natural and fundamental motivating force in human behavior which is rooted in then-emerging studies of natural selection, a discipline that was quickly diffusing among the scientific and literary communities in the late 1700s.

Unifying Effects of Xenophobia

Leopardi indicated that in order for a society to thrive, it must position itself against other different-seeming cultures. According to Leopardi, people tend to stay with and support members of their own kind and react adversely to those perceived as outsiders. Leopardi applied these behavioral concepts in an extreme, nationalistic way. He often referred to the collective negative feelings of the nation toward foreign others:

“l’odio nazionale contro l’altre nazioni”¹¹³

“l’amor nazionale”¹¹⁴

“l’antico sistema di odio nazionale”¹¹⁵

“altro esempio e conseguenza dell’odio nazionale”¹¹⁶

“l’antico sistema di odio nazionale”¹¹⁷

“odio di stranieri”¹¹⁸

These observations were made by Leopardi as simple points of fact without any editorializing or rebuttal. He indicated that society feels this way but did not offer any alternate view suggesting that his own opinion was different. If ever there were an appropriate forum to do so, his personal journal would be ideal. And yet he chose not to

¹¹³ *Zibaldone* 811.

¹¹⁴ *Zibaldone* 395.

¹¹⁵ *Zibaldone* 424.

¹¹⁶ *Zibaldone* 436.

¹¹⁷ *Zibaldone* 438.

¹¹⁸ *Zibaldone* 448.

and instead utilized stories of *gli antichi* to inform the readers' perception of the world, especially in relation to feelings of nationalism. His adoration of ancient Rome and his repeated references to the xenophobia of that culture, without any rebuttal, imply support for that position. The shared dislike of foreign others experienced by the early Romans served to unite them and for that reason alone, Leopardi emulated that approach in his work:

Quando tutto il mondo fu cittadino Romano, Roma non ebbe più cittadini; e quando cittadino Romano fu lo stesso che Cosmopolita, non si amò nè Roma nè il mondo: l'amor patrio di Roma, divenuto cosmopolita, divenne indifferente, inattivo e nullo: e quando Roma fu lo stesso che il mondo, non fu più patria di nessuno, e i cittadini Romani, avendo per patria il mondo, non ebbero nessuna patria, e lo mostrarono col fatto.¹¹⁹

For Leopardi, contemporary Rome, especially during the early Restoration, was also unfortunately contaminated by modernity:

Roman literature, as you are well aware, is so wretched, base, stupid and worthless that I regret having seen it and seeing it, because these wretched men of letters give me a distaste for literature, and the contempt and pity I have for them works in my mind to the detriment of the great conception and the great love I had of literature.¹²⁰

Even when writing to his father, who had a vested interest in keeping his son home and who consistently hoped his son's travels would end unsuccessfully, Leopardi could not restrain his negative feelings about contemporary Rome:

¹¹⁹ *Zibaldone* 283.

¹²⁰ Shaw 135. In this letter to Pietro Giordani from February 1, 1823, Leopardi discards modern Romans completely and states his predilection for interacting with foreigners, "For the most part I don't bother with Romans and Italians; I talk with foreigners: we now have some who are very distinguished and famous."

La prima lettera che ... venne spedita al padre Monaldo da Roma il 30 gennaio 1823, dopo poco più di due mesi dall'inizio del soggiorno del poeta nella capitale dello Stato pontificio. Sono noti i giudizi estremamente negativi che Leopardi diede della città nelle sue lettere al padre e soprattutto al fratello Carlo. La desolata situazione disegnata dal poeta rispecchia con buona approssimazione il vuoto culturale che caratterizzò i primi anni della Restaurazione romana: anni nei quali la città offre un'immagine di grande povertà intellettuale, con la presenza di pochissimi uomini di lettere di valore (soprattutto stranieri) sommersi da una pletera di mediocri occupati nelle Accademie, nei gionali locali, nelle miscellanee "per nozze" e "per maternità". In più il soggiorno leopardiano non venne certo allietato dalla permanenza in casa Antici, disordinata e trascurata, né favorito dal clima, in quei mesi particolarmente rigido.¹²¹

Leopardi realized that his positive perceptions of Rome relate only to ancient society and that contemporary Rome is distant from its former grandeur. The trip marked the destruction of young Leopardi's illusions about Rome and removed the solace he had found in dreaming about living there¹²². From this point on, Leopardi began to seek other sources of solace, in nature or simply by distancing himself from others in society. He needed to find another illusion to make life tolerable and needed something to believe in.¹²³

¹²¹ Marco Dondero, *Autografi di Lettere Leopardiane* (Edizioni CNSL), 14.

¹²² In a letter to his brother Carlo on January 22, 1823, Leopardi indicated that one advantage of living in Rome was that it allowed him to examine his life somewhat objectively; "... Rome has at least given me the advantage of perfecting my insensitivity towards myself, and making me look at my whole life, for better or worse, as if it were the life, for better or worse, of some other person." Shaw 130.

¹²³ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 137. In a Darwinian sense, all actions committed by an individual serve a positive purpose so there is no need for despair; "Darwin offers two sources for solace. First, the struggle, however fierce, usually brings no pain or distress to organisms (humans, with their intrusive consciousness, have introduced a tragic exception into nature). "When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply"(p. 79). Second, the struggle does lead to general improvement, if only as an epi-phenomenon, and whatever the cost: "As natural selection works solely by and the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress toward perfection" (p. 489)."

His references to *l'odio nazionale* are generally in relation to the society of the ancients which is superior to that which exists now. There was a call for modern society to resurrect those negative feelings toward *others* as it will reinforce one's own feelings of patriotism and individual superiority, "E conchiudo che senza amor nazionale non si dà virtù grande".¹²⁴ Leopardi's desire is to create a strong national identity in relation to other countries.

Gl'italiani non hanno costumi: essi hanno delle usanze.
Così tutti i popoli civili che non sono nazioni.¹²⁵

A strong national identity is a key component of great civilizations of the past and is something Leopardi would like to help recreate in present-day Italy which has lost the "morale eroica" described by DeSanctis and has been overcome by egoism. The egoism, in turn, leads to an unfortunate pursuit of individual goals and leisure:

È ovvio che se per Leopardi l'ozio "è un'abdicazione dell'umana dignità, una vigliaccheria", come annota il grande critico [DeSanctis], egli dovette pure apprezzare qualche bene della vita, dovette pure possedere un qualche ideale di virtù ... tanto che, tra il suo dolente pensare, non venne mai meno al vivere operoso.¹²⁶

For Leopardi, individual egoism and the many negative behaviors it engenders are at the

¹²⁴ *Zibaldone* 395.

¹²⁵ *Zibaldone* 829.

¹²⁶ *Esposito* 47.

root of the decay in modern society. In contrast, at the national level, individual self-centeredness is a unifying force which brings the organism of the nation together to work against others.¹²⁷ There is a particular kind of ego-based contempt reserved for those from other countries based on nationalist and political motives. It is such dislike that is the root of the other varieties of misanthropy.

Although Leopardi often mentioned his “odio di stranieri”¹²⁸ he related closely to the personal struggles of foreign individuals who are components of other groups. Beyond the competitive struggles which are more theoretical than actual, Leopardi was indifferent to groups of others. Real comprehension and compassion enter his writing relating to a foreign individual whom he envisioned struggling just as he did himself. When discussing society at large, many of Leopardi’s sweeping generalizations about the perception of foreign *others* by society seem not to apply to him when one compares his prose to the perceptions he indicated in the *Zibaldone*, “l’odio nazionale contro l’altre

¹²⁷ David Livingstone Smith, *Human Nature and the Origins of War* (St. Martin’s Press, 2007), 163.

Much of the motivation for such behavior is the individual’s need to solidify his/her role in the community. This holds true even when the community is imagined and abstract. “Unlike chimpanzees, who interact on a more-or-less daily basis, most members of these large human communities never encounter one another at all. They are what Cornell University sociologist Benedict Anderson calls *imagined communities* that occupy conceptual rather than geographical space. Imagined communities are sustained by symbolic rather than genetic kinship.”

¹²⁸ *Zibaldone* 424. “Un effetto dell’antico sistema di odio nazionale, era in Roma il costume del trionfo, costume che nel presente sistema dell’uguaglianza delle nazioni, anche delle vinte colle vincitrici, sarebbe intollerabile; costume, fra tanto, che dava sì gran vita alla nazione, che produceva sì grandi effetti, e sì utili per lei, e che forse fu la cagione di molte sue vittorie, e felicità militari e politiche.”

Zibaldone 436. “Altro esempio e conseguenza dell’odio nazionale presso gli antichi. Ai tempi antichissimi, quando il mondo non era sì popolato, che non si trovasse facilmente di cambiar sede, le nazioni vinte, non solo perdevano libertà, proprietà ec. ma anche quel suolo che calpestavano.”

Zibaldone 438. “Stante l’antico sistema di odio nazionale, non esistevano, massime ne’ tempi antichissimi, le virtù verso il nemico, e la crudeltà verso il nemico vinto, l’abuso della vittoria ec. erano virtù, cioè forza di amor patrio.”

nazioni”.¹²⁹ The reason for describing that particular kind of misanthropy in *Lo Zibaldone* is in part to illustrate the political currents in the non-unified Italy of that time and to explain the politically-motivated actions of his compatriots. Leopardi’s writings against foreign *others* and supporting a unified Italy, in conflict with the existence of the Papal States, increased his following in Italy.

¹²⁹ *Zibaldone* 811.

Contrasting Imagery of Foreign Others

L'egoismo nazionale si tramuta allora in egoismo individuale: e tanto è vero che l'uomo è per sua natura e per natura dell'amor proprio, nemico degli altri viventi e se-amanti; in modo che s'anche si congiunge con alcuno di questi, lo fa per odio o per timore degli altri, mancate le quali passioni, l'odio e il timore si rivolge contro i compagni e i vicini. Quel che è successo nelle nazioni è successo ancora nelle città, nelle corporazioni, nelle famiglie ch'hanno figurato nel mondo ec. Unite contro gli esteri, finchè questi non erano vinti, divise e discordi e piene d'invidia ec. nel loro interno, subito sottomessi gli estranei.¹³⁰

After such a statement of negativity of hatred and fear toward others, a strong contrast is presented by a work such as *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* (1834) from the *Operette morali* in which the image of the foreigner is positive. In contrast to the aforementioned misanthropy, *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* demonstrates that man and indeed all of humanity is locked in an eternal struggle against Nature. There is no hope of happiness and the character of Nature is completely indifferent to his pain and in fact his very existence. The character of the Icelander is a device used by Leopardi to indicate a person who lives far removed from the disappointments of modern society and lives more closely to the relentless power of Nature.

Ma dalla molestia degli uomini mi liberai facilmente, separandomi dalla loro società, e riducendomi in solitudine: cosa che nell'isola mia nativa si può recare ad effetto senza difficoltà. Fatto questo, e vivendo senza quasi verun'immagine di piacere, io non potevo mantenermi però senza patimento: perché la lunghezza del verno, l'intensità del freddo, e l'ardore estremo della state, che sono qualità di quel luogo, mi travagliavano di continuo..¹³¹ (*Dialogo*, lines 49-56)

¹³⁰ Zibaldone 811.

¹³¹ Solmi 528.

Because of this proximity and the harshness of Nature, the Icelander desires a refuge. The individual in the work symbolizes humanity at a universal level, especially one who has rejected modernity, not dissimilar to Leopardi. There is no sense of nationality having any particular meaning in the poem other than to indicate distance from modern or industrial society. The essence of humanity supercedes any supposed national characteristics. The perceived relationship of humanity with Nature is a constant which unites all its members. Nature is neither *la matrigna* nor even misanthropic. Nature does not actively dislike humanity as our existence is irrelevant and is not a consideration. Nature has no interest in the happiness of humanity, neither the individuals nor the group:

Immaginavi tu forse che il mondo fosse fatto per causa vostra? Ora sappi che nelle fatture, negli ordini e nelle operazioni mie, trattone pochissime, sempre ebbi ed ho l'intenzione a tutt'altro che alla felicità degli uomini o all'infelicità. Quando io vi offendo in qualunque modo e con qual si sia mezzo, io non me n'avveggo, se non rarissime volte: come, ordinariamente, se io vi diletto o vi benefico, io non lo so; e non ho fatto, come credete voi, quelle tali cose, o non fo quelle azioni, per dilettrarvi o giovarvi. E finalmente, se anche mi avvenisse di estinguere tutta la vostra specie, io non me ne avvedrei. (*Dialogo*, lines 92-101)

In contrast to the *Zibaldone* where foreign others are viewed negatively, *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* demonstrates the fight against Nature's effects which are experienced by all humanity of any origin. It is not a unifying force but rather a common experience. When writing of national interests Leopardi displayed extreme negativity toward people from other countries but at the individual level recognized that they, like him, are simply seeking an absence of pain and an end to suffering. While the actions of groups of modern *others* were detestable to him, Leopardi showed empathy toward

individuals even when members of an undesirable group. Leopardi was in continuous conflict between the desire to hate groups of others while seeking redeeming qualities in an individual. The dichotomy between his negative personal feelings toward individuals expressed consistently in the *Zibaldone* versus the positive sentiment expressed in his poetry is even more stark:

Il titolo *Canti*, che le poesie leopardiane hanno ricevuto nel '31 e successivamente conservato, si spiega alla luce di una ben precisa concezione della poesia, che il Leopardi maturò e illustrò nello *Zibaldone* fra il '26 e il '29. Secondo questa concezione la poesia vera è “espressione libera e schietta di qualunque affetto vivo e ben sentito dell'uomo”: ed è propria “d'ogni uomo anche incolto, che cerca di ricrearsi o di consolarsi col canto, e colle parole misurate [cioè poste in versi] in qualunque modo, e coll'armonia”.

Il Leopardi, pertanto, definendo *Canti* le sue poesie vuol dirci che esse esprimono direttamente lo stato d'animo dell'artista (rispondono quindi ad un'ispirazione lirica, cioè soggettiva), in cui si riflettono i sentimenti elementari di ogni uomo; e che si propongono di conseguire l'effetto precipuo della poesia, quello di confortare il poeta e il lettore mediante una loro intrinseca musicalità, schietta e immediata, che trascende gli schemi della metrica tradizionale.¹³²

In his poetic work Leopardi endeavors to communicate with the common man by enabling him to find an articulation of his own thoughts therein. The distance between Leopardi and “ogni uomo anche incolto” is vast and suggests that the poet must employ an artifice, an alter-ego of sorts, to identify with and capture the reader. Leopardi's poetry and prose therefore often do not reflect his personal beliefs:

Non stupisce quindi che non solo la cultura liberale e cattolica o più generalmente

¹³² Tartaro 6.

moderata, ma lo stesso pensiero democratico avesse inteso Leopardi, individualistica ... e materialista, come un'anomalia, un'eccezione, un elemento difficilmente collocabile nell'Italia romantica e risorgimentale: epigono del secolo dei Lumi o intellettuale isolato e infelice, sepolto in una remota provincia delle retrograde Italia della Restaurazione. L'imbarazzo dinanzi alla sua opera si è così tradotto in una estraneazione di Leopardi dal suo tempo e in una drastica separazione della sua posizione ideologico-filosofica dalla sua poesia. Con il risultato, voluto o meno, di un depotenziamento dell'anomalia leopardiana.¹³³

Leopardi's apparent dislike of foreign others is an artifice although it can be incorrectly interpreted as sincere. Theories developing during his lifetime support this concept of a biological basis for national and racial hatred¹³⁴. Leopardi in fact respects foreign individuals because they have the unity that he desires for himself and Italy. Examples abound of the contrast between the negative sentiment toward foreign *others* in the *Zibaldone* and optimistic prose centered on humanity's universal experience against the destructive power of nature. One such example is found in the *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* (1835). Here Leopardi emphasizes again the victimization of humanity at the hands of Nature which occurs from the moment of birth:

Nasce l'uomo a fatica,

¹³³ Biscuso and Gallo 27.

¹³⁴ Roots of an emerging proto-fascist philosophy and concepts of inherent superiority and inferiority of others can be found in section XIX of *Pensieri*; "In qualunque concorrenza sono superati, anche da molto inferiori a loro, non solo d'ingegno o d'altre qualità intrinseche, ma di quelle che il mondo conosce ed apprezza maggiormente, come bellezza, gioventù, forza, coraggio, ed anche ricchezza. Finalmente qualunque sia il loro stato nella società, non possono ottenere quel grado di considerazione che ottengono gli erbaiuoli e i facchini. Ed è ragione in qualche modo; perché non è piccolo difetto o svantaggio di natura, non potere apprendere quello che anche gli stolidi apprendono facilissimamente, cioè quell'arte che sola fa parere uomini gli uomini ed i fanciulli: non potere, dico, non ostante ogni sforzo. Poiché questi tali, quantunque di natura inclinati al bene, pure conoscendo la vita e gli uomini meglio di molti altri, non sono punto, come talora paiono, più buoni di quello che sia lecito essere senza meritare l'obbrobrio di questo titolo; e sono privi delle maniere del mondo non per bontà, o per elezione propria, ma perché ogni loro desiderio e studio d'apprenderle ritorna vano."

Ed è rischio di morte il nascimento.
 Prova pena e tormento
 Per prima cosa; e in sul principio stesso
 La madre e il genitore
 Il prende a consolar dell'esser nato.¹³⁵ (lines 15-20)

After birth, the parents' fears are substantiated:

Questo io conosco e sento,
 Che degli eterni giri,
 Che dell'esser mio frale,
 Qualche bene o contento
 Avrà fors'altri; a me la vita è male. (lines 100-104)

Given Leopardi's persistent "odio di stranieri" in the *Zibaldone* one might not expect him to identify so closely with the foreign others in the above examples. From a proto-Darwinist perspective however, he recognized that they are simply creatures trying to survive. His negative feelings toward generic *others* in the *Zibaldone* apply to the group not the individual:

Tutti gli imperi, tutte le nazioni ch'hanno ottenuto dominio sulle altre, da principio hanno combattuto con quelli di fuori, co' vicini, co' nemici: poi liberati dal timore esterno, e soddisfatti dell'ambizione e della cupidigia di dominare sugli stranieri e di possedere quel di costoro, e saziato l'odio nazionale contro l'altre nazioni, hanno sempre rivolto il ferro contro loro medesime, ed hanno per lo più perduto colle guerre civili quell'impero e quella ricchezza ec. che aveano guadagnato colle guerre esterne.¹³⁶

Contextualizing the feelings toward foreign others in *Lo Zibaldone*, it is apparent that the

¹³⁵ *Canti* 164.

¹³⁶ *Zibaldone* 811.

misanthropy expressed for them serves the purpose of galvanizing the members of Italian society into a functional unit which can then work together in relation to and in competition with others. Leopardi understood that at the individual level, foreign others are like him, surviving in their niche.¹³⁷ When one views the individuals which comprise these *other* groups, one understands the universal struggle against nature and the fundamental unhappiness of life itself which unites all humanity:

NATURA: Va, figliuola mia prediletta, che tale sarai tenuta e chiamata per lungo ordine di secoli. Vivi, e sii grande e infelice.

ANIMA: Che male che no ho commesso prima di vivere, che tu mi condanni a cotesta pena?

NATURA: Che pena, figliuola mia?

ANIMA: Non mi prescrivi tu di essere infelice?

NATURA: Ma in quanto che io voglio che tu sii grande, e non si può questo senza quello. Oltre che tu sei destinata a vivificare in un corpo umano; e tutti gli uomini per necessità nascono e vivono infelici.¹³⁸

This beginning passage of the *Dialogo della natura e di un'anima* from the *Operette morali* highlights “l’infelicità comune degli uomini”.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ When in Rome, Leopardi sought foreign contacts for their wealth: “...i committenti migliori restavano sempre gli stranieri. Giacomo coltivava la speranza di essere portato via “da qualche forestiero o inglese o tedesco o russo.” Sapeva che l’incetta di letterati italiani era consueta.” Minore 96.

¹³⁸ Besomi 93.

¹³⁹ Besomi 94.

Critical Views on Leopardi and Foreign Others

There have been no critics who have examined the variety of *odio* in the *Zibaldone* which relates to foreign *others* in particular. The general position is that of acknowledging Leopardi's general misanthropy, such as DeSanctis, Croce and Binni, but not delving into why it is expressed and depicted against *other* groups. DeRoberto's position that, "Né altro scopo hanno le lotte umane se non "l'acquisto di piaceri che non diletano, e dei beni che non giovano"¹⁴⁰ is one-dimensional and ignores that once basic human needs are met, individuals tend to desire additional intangible rewards such as respect, control of others, and social status. Biscuso and Gallo also oversimplify Leopardi's position toward others; "...la natura dell'amor proprio è tale per cui, quanto più il vivente ama se stesso, tanto più è portato ad odiare gli altri individui che possono opporsi alla sua ricerca del bene."¹⁴¹ While correct, there is no definition in either of the preceding examples of the objective of such competition. The precise nature of the competitive goal defines the social interaction and misanthropy in relation to it.

Understanding the genesis of this particular subset of misanthropy is important in that it addresses the competitive driving force behind man's behavior. Specifically, when one society harbors hatred for another, it creates a perverted form of unity and a distorted version of happiness. Understanding the dislike of others enables one to differentiate

¹⁴⁰ DeRoberto 141.

¹⁴¹ Biscuso and Gallo 102.

between Leopardi the individual and Leopardi the member of a group competing for survival against another.

Leopardi argued that Italy should be engaged in the competition for literary prestige with other countries of Europe but is instead a non-participant. Similar to Italy's non-participation in international literary discourse, Leopardi is a non-participant in society around him. Italy's difficult evolution as a nation¹⁴² and Leopardi's belief that it is a non-entity in international literature is paralleled by his individual search to find friendship and intelligent discourse with others. There are however conflicting emotions at both the individual and societal level in relation to foreign *others*. Biology supports an inclination for individuals to stay away, as will be discussed later, and Italy's distance from and mistrust of foreign others has roots in its Roman heritage. At the same time Leopardi desired to communicate with others and to learn from them:

In questo secolo presente, sia per l'incremento dello scambievole commercio e dell'uso de' viaggi, sia per quello della letteratura, e per l'enciclopedico che ora è d'uso, sicché ciascuna nazione vuol conoscere più a fondo cho può le lingue, letterature e costumi degli altri popoli ... E cresciuto il gusto di conoscerli insieme colla stima de' medesimi e colla equità del giudicarli, infiniti sono i volumi pubblicati in ciascuna nazione per informarla delle cose dell'altre.¹⁴³

Throughout Europe, individuals examined themselves in relation to foreign others with great interest, to define and position oneself and one's culture in a relativistic sense.

¹⁴² *Zibaldone* 983. "Il che insomma vuol dire che una società perfetta, e niente più perfetta che nel modo spiegato di sopra, senza il quale l'idea della società è contraddittoria ne' termini; una società, dico, perfetta fra gli uomini, anzi pure una società vera è impossibile. Or come può star che sia impossibile, se la natura ce l'avesse destinata, e se l'uomo fuor di una tal società non potesse conseguire la sua perfezione e felicità naturale?"

¹⁴³ *Opere* 844. From the *Discorso sopra lo stato presente del costumi italiani*.

Leopardi sought to identify the Italian character which he felt was less-defined than that of other countries. Reflecting on theories of evolutionary biology developing at that time, one can view the parallels between organismic and societal development and the relationship of Leopardi to Italy. Specifically, Leopardi utilizes the concept later explicitly articulated by natural selection theorists that “ontology recapitulates phylogeny” whereby the development of the embryo parallels the evolution of the species.¹⁴⁴ That is, the embryo passes through an abbreviated mini-evolution process ending with the current organism, passing through the phases of multi-cellular organism, to fish-like organism respirating osmotically, to simple mammal with limbs and so on. The concept of embryological recapitulation was first proposed in 1866 by German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, a contemporary of Charles Darwin. On a societal scale the same laws apply--the development of society is continuously evolving and briefly reflects the stages of the past.

For Leopardi, the stage of infancy for the contemporary individual and early childhood¹⁴⁵ is a simpler, purer state which recalls the naturalness of classic Rome, analogous to the pure, embryonic state.¹⁴⁶ As one ages, illusions are stripped away and consciousness

¹⁴⁴ Gould 208. “[Ernst] Haeckel’s later notoriety rested almost entirely on the second volume, with its celebrated evolutionary trees (so often reproduced in modern textbooks), based largely on his “biogenetic law”, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny (Gould, 1977b).”

¹⁴⁵ *Opere* 749. For Leopardi, Roman society represented the infancy and childhood of Italy. “Gli anni della fanciullezza sono, nelle memoria di ciascheduno, quasi i tempi favolosi della sua vita; come, nelle memoria delle nazioni, i tempi favolosi sono quelli della fanciullezza delle medesime.”

¹⁴⁶ *Zibaldone* 410. “E la causa per la quale i Greci e i Romani soprastanno a tutti i popoli antichi, è in gran parte questa, che i loro errori e illusioni furono nella massima parte conformissime alla natura, sicchè si trovano egualmente lontani dalla corruzione dell’ignoranza, e dal difetto di questa.”

begins to grow.¹⁴⁷ An individual's serenity is progressively contaminated and then destroyed, akin to contemporary society's movement away from the Roman ideal. He felt that Italy was dying in literary terms and needed to unite, intellectually speaking, to survive. In *All'Italia* from *Canti* he expressed shame and despair for Italy's current literary condition which had moved so far away from the sensibilities and naturalness of classic Rome:

O patria mia, vedo le mura e gli archi
 E le colonne e i simulacri e l'erme
 Torri degli avi nostri,
 Ma la gloria non vedo,
 Non vedo il lauro e il ferro ond'eran carichi
 I nostri padri antichi. Or fatta inerme,
 Nuda la fronte e nudo il petto mostri.
 Oimè quante ferite,
 Che lividor, che sangue! Oh qual ti veggio,
 Formossissima donna! Io chiedo al cielo
 E al mondo: dite dite;
 Chi la ridusse a tale? E questo è peggio,
 Che di catene ha carche ambe le braccia;
 Sì che sparte le chiome e senza velo
 Siede in terra negletta e sconsolata,
 Nascondendo la faccia
 Tra le ginocchia, e piange.
 Piangi, che ben hai donde, Italia mia,
 Le genti a vincer nata
 E nella fausta sorte e nella ria. (*All'Italia*, lines 1-20)

In the case of hate toward *others* expressed in the *Zibaldone*, one suspects that it is primarily artifice and that Leopardi did not truly harbor such strong feelings on a personal level. Dislike for foreign *others* is instead a tool to stimulate literary innovation needed

¹⁴⁷ Parallels between the development of a person and that of a country are also found in the function of memory: "Gli anni della fanciullezza sono, nella memoria di ciascheduno, quasi i tempi favolosi della sua vita; come, nella memoria delle nazioni, i tempi favolosi sono quelli della fanciullezza delle medesime." *Opere* 749.

desperately by Italy in order to recapture what Leopardi defines to be its rightful position in the literary world. His misanthropic references speak to the collective struggle of man while individual foreign group members highlighted in *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* and *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* underline the existential struggles the group members are faced with:

Dimmi, o luna: a che vale
 Al pastor la sua vita,
 La vostra vita a voi? dimmi: ove tende
 Questo vagar mio breve,
 Il tuo corso immortale? (*Canto notturno*, lines 16-20)

Only the individual free to contemplate in nature, such as the herdsman, can question existence and the direction and purpose of one's life. Forces which draw humanity further away from nature are consistently depicted negatively because they lead to the corruption of our most primal thoughts.

Perocchè l'uomo potrebbe conservarsi nello stato suo primitivo puro, come gli altri esseri si conservano nel loro, e conservandocisi, sarebbe così non infelice, come gli altri esseri sono felici o non sono infelici durando nel naturale stato.¹⁴⁸

Leopardi believed that group actions have a tendency to draw one further away from the natural state. Individual contemplation and examining one's existence brings one closer to the platonic ideal of Rome and of heroic thoughts and actions. Therein lies one of the

¹⁴⁸ Zibaldone 828.

many paradoxes in Leopardi's belief system; while he admired the collective group actions exemplified by the more natural Roman state, such group actions take one away from individual contemplation. Leopardi consistently expressed tenderness toward the contemplative individual and sought solitude himself.¹⁴⁹ This strengthens the assertion that the misanthropy toward foreign others is not real but rather artifice. His true goal was literary and intellectual, not bellicose.

¹⁴⁹ Canti 109. From *Il passero solitario*, "Io solitario in questa / Rimota parte alla campagna uscendo ... Che di questi anni miei? Che di me stesso? / Ahi pentirommi, e spesso, / Ma sconcolato, volgerommi indietro." (lines 36-37 and 57-59)

Roman Society and Humanity's Fall From Grace

In addition to their proximity to the ideal natural state, Leopardi looked to the ancient Romans as examples of strength and virtue in a moral society. The *Zibaldone* frequently contrasts the weak moral and physical condition found in contemporary society to the strength of the Romans. Leopardi perceived a relationship between the progressively distorted attitudes of modern individuals and the movement of society away from ancient ideals. Rome represented a perfect condition of ideal social behavior. Individuals and collectives have steadily moved away from that which is good and moral in Leopardi's judgment. He applied the prevailing evolutionary theory and projected it upon the social development of humanity as was the tendency of both scientists and pseudo-scientists of that period, exemplified in the over-extrapolation of Lamarck. Humanity's physical and social evolution has been mirrored by the devolution away from the Roman ideal, away from the Garden of Eden. The fall of man from an ideal state, as Leopardi viewed the Romans, is echoed in his thoughts about Christianity:

Uno dei principali dogmi del Cristianesimo è la degenerazione dell'uomo da uno stato primitivo più perfetto e felice: e con questo dogma è legato quello della Redenzione e si può dir, tutta quanta la Religione *Cristiana*. Il principale insegnamento del mio sistema, è appunto la detta degenerazione.¹⁵⁰

Leopardi believed man to be in a constant downward spiral, in a flight away from goodness and purity. So begins his obsession with Rome, emblematic of an ideal state

¹⁵⁰ Esposito 16.

which can never be attained and which modern society has forgotten. Much of Leopardi's misanthropy is directed toward foreign others much as the Romans did, if for no other reason than to stimulate social and military unity> social unity is what Leopardi struggled to achieve.

Leopardi's obsession with Rome began during his first stage of *pessimismo storico*, where the Romans are lauded not only for their superior sense of community and physicality, but also for their primal view of the world around them. Leopardi's initial thoughts regarding the Romans were greatly influenced by French literature.

Opere come le *Considérations sur les Causes de la Grandeur des Romains et de leur Décadence*, il *Dialogue de Sylla e d'Eucrate*, il *Temple de Gnide*, l'*Essai sur le goût* erano presenti nella biblioteca paterna e Giacomo le lesse e ponderò con interesse particolare, come mostrano le numerose note dello Zibaldone.¹⁵¹

As a result, they were much happier without the many distractions and resentments experienced today. The unnatural conditions and overly-developed sense of consciousness found in contemporary society make such simplicity of thought impossible:

Non si può bene intendere il rapporto che si costituisce nel pensiero di Leopardi tra letteratura e scienza se non si risale a quella serrata diagnosi delle facoltà e dei limiti dell'umano conoscere che impegna a lungo il Leopardi, soprattutto nella fase del suo cosiddetto pessimismo storico: allorché, proprio in odio della ragione (non la ragione primitiva, preziosa dote dell'uomo nello stato di natura, ma una ragione

¹⁵¹ Esposito 74.

per così dire snaturata dall'uomo corrotto), afferma che, al contrario di quanto accadeva per la sapienza antica, oggi il massimo dei beni deve considerarsi la ignoranza, il massimo dei mali la conoscenza.¹⁵²

Rome represents the fresh, childlike condition of happiness and ignorance at the dawn of society's development. The knowledge which infuses modern life has led to sadness and disappointment. Additionally, Leopardi felt that it was important to clarify modernity's perception of the ancients. To that end, his *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi*, which Leopardi revised more than once, serves to explain common misconceptions of ancient society as well as the relationship between science and nature:

Il *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* (del 1815), il cui avvio bandisce come una sorta di crociata contro errori e pregiudizi. "Mio intendimento--scrive più avanti il giovanissimo autore--fu di presentare un quadro delle false idee popolari degli antichi, e di descrivere colla possibile esattezza qualcuno di loro errori volgari intorno all'Ente Supremo, agli esseri subalterni e alle scienze naturali. Per eseguire questo disegno giudicai di dovere attenermi alla scorta dei poeti". Può sembrare ingenua o paradossale questa decisione di ricorrere alla parola dei poeti per far luce sui problemi attinenti alle scienze, naturali o soprannaturali che fossero.¹⁵³

The ancients lived very closely to nature and were also very influenced by their belief in a Supreme Being. Leopardi believed religiosity to be a natural state, not one borne of modern reason. Leopardi described the ancients' constant fear of the destructive and punitive power of the Supreme Being:

¹⁵² Esposito 17.

¹⁵³ Esposito 14.

Gli antichi tremarono al solo immaginarsi di poter vedere un Essere di cui non conoscevano la figura, e del di cui potere aveano una spaventosa idea.¹⁵⁴

Fear of punishment and of the unknown was an important factor in the life of the ancients. The leopardian modern man, having lost such beliefs, and such fears, has become completely self-absorbed in ego-based behavior. Since modern-day misconceptions about the role of God in ancient society persist, some superficial vestige of those erroneous ideas will always remain:

È dunque evidente che gli antichi aveano del tempo del meriggio una grande idea, e lo riguardavano come sacro e terribile. Noi abbiamo a rallegrarci che di un pregiudizio una volta sì comune, e di cui si trovano vestigi nei libri più antichi, rimanga ora appena la rimembranza, essendo esso totalmente cancellato dalla mente dei popoli. Ciò non sembrerà assai ordinario a chi conosce quale influenza eserciti tuttora l'antichità sopra i costumi e gli errori del volgo. Si deridono ora i pregiudizi che si aveano anticamente intorno allo sternuto, ma la consuetudine di salutar chi sternuta susiste anche al presente, e sussisterà sempre nelle nazioni civilizzate.¹⁵⁵

While humanity has distanced itself greatly from the morality of ancient Rome, there is much to be learned from them in terms of how they relate to each other and those outside their community. Leopardi's misanthropy toward foreign others is a figurative call to arms for Italians to unite and engage in the intellectual struggles confronted by the rest of the Continent. Misanthropy is a catalytic force which generates action between one populace and another.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Solmi 757. From *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi*.

¹⁵⁵ Solmi 764. From *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi*.

¹⁵⁶ D.L. Smith 33. One hundred years later, Sigmund Freud, at the invitation of Albert Einstein, engaged in

Biological Foundations of Misanthropy

Leopardi's work contains many elements which show his close connection to the physical sciences. His interpretation of contemporary biological writings is one of the primary influences upon the development of his various misanthropic perspectives. At age fourteen he published *Saggio di chimica e di storia naturale* in 1812. In 1813 he wrote *Storia dell'Astronomia* and *Dissertazioni fisiche*¹⁵⁷. Young Leopardi quickly gained the respect of the Italian scientific community. As a voracious reader with a massive family library of 25,000 volumes, Leopardi came into contact with one of the central scientific themes of the 1700s, namely the theory of evolution and natural selection. The concepts had been developing for at least one hundred years¹⁵⁸ by the time Leopardi would encounter it. British adaptationist William Paley was one of its strongest proponents:

The hypothesis teaches, that every possible variety of being hath, at one time or other, found its way into existence (by what cause or in what manner is not said), and that

discussions on humanity's inherently negative qualities; "Freud had thought that sexual desire is the most potent of these motivational powerhouses, but the unprecedented carnage of World War I caused him to reconsider his position. While continuing to embrace the idea that sex is an extremely important moving force in human behavior, Freud reluctantly came to believe that our destructive urges are equally significant, and that these twin conflicting forces drive our lives from birth to death."

¹⁵⁷ As an adolescent, his writing ability and erudition were clear. Giacomo Leopardi, *Storia dell'Astronomia* (1813), 310. "Newton si elevò sopra le congetture e le scoperte de' suoi antecedenti. Ma questi, insieme colle verità più sublimi e più utili, avean lasciati degli errori considerabili. Newton separò dalle immondezze quest'oro impuro, lo fe' comparire in tutto il suo splendore, e rimossi dalle verità quegli errori, che ne offuscavano la bellezza, giunse a costruir quel sistema, che, distrutta l'antica Filosofia trionfò de' vortici di Descartes, e fu adottato dalle universalità dei sapienti."

¹⁵⁸ Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) published *Systema Naturae* in 1735 and espoused a form of natural theology in which organisms are stratified based on divine order. He often revised and republished his pamphlet which eventually became a tome, classifying whales as mammals, and assigned organisms a binominal nomenclature, consisting of a genus and species.

those which were badly formed, perished” (Paley, 1803, pp. 70-71)¹⁵⁹

Although natural selection is commonly associated with Charles Darwin, the concept had been accepted long before by the scientific and pseudo-scientific community. Darwin’s innovation in the field was the concept of “the creativity of natural selection”:

Darwin’s theory therefore cannot be equated with the simple claim that natural selection operates. Nearly all his colleagues and predecessors accepted this postulate. Darwin, in his characteristic and radical way, grasped that this standard mechanism for preserving the type could be inverted, and then converted into the primary cause of evolutionary *change*. Natural selection obviously lies at the center of Darwin’s theory, but we must recognize, as Darwin’s second key postulate, the claim that natural selection acts as *the creative force* of evolutionary *change*. The essence of Darwinism cannot reside in the mere observation that natural selection operates--for everyone had long accepted a *negative* role for natural selection in eliminating the unfit and preserving the type.¹⁶⁰

This citation is relevant in that it adds further evidence that theories of natural selection were firmly established in the scientific community long before Charles Darwin began to write.

Leopardi would not have known of the concept of natural selection as a catalyst for *positive* organismic change, as Darwin’s work was first published in 1839, two years after Leopardi’s death. However he would have known of the general concept, especially in its original and persistent form as that of removing genetically undesirable and weaker organisms within groups. The continuing emergence of evolutionary biology during

¹⁵⁹ Gould 139.

¹⁶⁰ Gould 139.

Leopardi's lifetime had a profound effect upon his work and forms the basis for the leopardian idea that misanthropy is a natural and necessary inclination. These theories were established but still being debated in the early 1800s. Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) offended many by indicating that the development of organisms is not directed by a divine force but rather by the needs of individual organisms:

It is chiefly among the living, and most notably among Animals, that some have claimed to glimpse a purpose in nature's operations. Even in this case the purpose is mere appearance, not reality. Indeed, in every type of animal organism, there subsists an order of things . . . whose only effect is to lead to what seems to us to be a goal, but it is essentially a necessity. The order achieves this necessity through the progressive development of parts, which are [also] shaped by environmental conditions (1815, in *Corsi*, 1988, p. 190).¹⁶¹

Evolutionary biology examines the development of individual organisms over time in their environment, a process which produces incremental and minimal variations that eventually yield a significantly different species. Although evolution deals with change at the level of the species, the catalyst for such change is the survival-based actions of individuals within the group:

...we should not be surprised that Darwin's theory of natural selection rests upon the same central paradox that fueled Adam Smith's system: postulate a cause based on individuals ruthlessly pursuing their own benefits; an ordered polity will then arise as an incidental side consequence.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Gould 172.

¹⁶² Gould 596.

Adam Smith, at that time fundamental to the study of economics and human behavior¹⁶³, addressed the need to be allowed to follow one's interests unfettered which in turn will produce a social order and unity:

To prohibit a great people, however, from making all that they can of every part of their own produce, or from employing their stock and their industry in the way that they judge most advantageous to themselves, is a manifest violation of the most sacred rights of mankind.¹⁶⁴

Smith first gained fame as a philosopher¹⁶⁵ but by the time Leopardi began to write he had become even more well-known for his revolutionary ideas on the motivations behind human behavior:

In a way, the 1776 publication of *The Wealth of Nations* brought forth a declaration of independence for economists. The full title reveals the key to Smith's masterpiece: *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Notice that Smith focuses on a particular goal: to uncover causal laws that explain how to achieve wealth. The title alone places him in the Enlightenment tradition. The text confirms the suspicion by explaining the laws that guide "economic actors" and then drawing the implications of the behavioral laws for society. "Economic actors" may sound somewhat technical, but Smith simply means people, for everyone at some point in the day is an economic

¹⁶³ "Inspired by his reading of ancient philosophy, and by the achievements of the modern natural scientists such as Isaac Newton, Adam Smith sought to organize our experience of the world into a series of interlocking systems." James Buchan, *The Authentic Adam Smith: His Life and Ideas* (WW Norton & Company), 9. Leopardi had also been greatly affected by Newton, "Newton dixit e, come vuole Pope, *all was light*. Anche per Leopardi, certo. Ma solo per un momento, non per sempre." Negri, 45.

¹⁶⁴ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (Everyman's Library), 518.

¹⁶⁵ Todd G. Buchholz, *New Ideas from Dead Economists: an Introduction to Modern Economic Thought* (New American Library), 15. "Even before Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations*, he gained fame in 1759 with his book on ethical behavior, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*. As sales burgeoned, he became known as "Smith the Philosopher." *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* followed in the Enlightenment tradition. Just as scientists searched for the origin of the solar system, Smith searched for the origin of moral approval and disapproval."

actor.¹⁶⁶

Smith consistently correlates individual actions with the goals of society as the ideals of the French Revolution would dictate. Leopardi, greatly influenced by Enlightenment philosophy¹⁶⁷, believes that more innovation by individual Italian authors will create social unity and define the nation. *La Casa Leopardi* confirms that the following works by Rousseau, the leader of the illuminists, are present in the family library: *L'arte di renderci felici* (1766), *Sugli affari domestici* (1768), *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1797), *Du contrat social* (1797), and *Diritto pubblico* (1797). The first edition of *Du contrat social* was published in 1762, fourteen years before Smith's revolutionary work in economics. It cannot be verified whether Leopardi read Smith's work as it is not present in the family library although many of the seminal works used by Smith are also indexed in the family archives.

Many authors immediately preceding Leopardi during this period of romantic individualism extrapolated and applied the concept of ego-based behavior to individuals' interactions in society. They believed that all human behavior is self-centered in a biological sense and that individuals can be agents of sweeping social change although their motives are ultimately self-serving. In the late 1700's, Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), grandfather of Charles Darwin¹⁶⁸, studied natural selection and inter-species

¹⁶⁶ Buchholz 20.

¹⁶⁷ Ferrucci 13. "La filosofia francese del Settecento è ben rappresentata nella biblioteca di Monaldo, e ha un forte impatto nella formazione del poeta, con propaggini contemporanee che si spingono fino a Chateaubriand."

¹⁶⁸ Gould 595. "The perceived excesses of the French Revolution may have sapped English enthusiasm for

competition, formulating one of the first theories of evolution. His studies regarding interspecies struggle were fast emerging in science¹⁶⁹. Darwin built upon the research of several other scientists such as Lamarck (1744-1829), Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707-1788), and Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778). Discussing the motivation of living creatures Erasmus Darwin states;

The final course of this contest among males seems to be, that
the strongest and most active animal should propagate the
species which should thus be improved¹⁷⁰

Francesco Fabretti, librarian at *La Casa Leopardi* in Recanati, has verified that Erasmus Darwin's 1805 edition of *The Loves of the Plants* is present in the family library and that Leopardi even catalogued it himself, indicating with certainty that he had read it. Darwin's work sought to entertain¹⁷¹ while educating the public of the fundamental aspect of evolution namely the passing of traits in the natural world by reproduction.

Biological fitness is thus hinted at in Erasmus Darwin's early research and his most noted

the tenets of Enlightenment Rationalism--the faith of Darwin's grandfather Erasmus. The subsequent romantic movement stressed opposite themes of emotion vs. logic, and national variety vs. universal reason. Charles Darwin, who revered his grandfather but also loved Wordsworth's poetry, received a firm grounding in both great philosophical and aesthetic traditions. He also--and perhaps as a direct result--maintained strong fascination for a central theme common to both movements, but for different reasons: the role of individuals as agents of change in larger systems."

¹⁶⁹ Kenneth Korey, *The Essential Darwin* (Little, Brown and Company), 236. Not all were pleased with this vein of investigation however, especially the Bishop of Oxford who set out to discredit Charles Darwin; "Not only did the Bishop lengthily revile Darwin for the errancy of his theology, but also for the evolutionary sins of his grandfather, Erasmus Darwin."

¹⁷⁰ Erasmus Darwin, *Zoonomia, or, The Laws of Organic Life* (1794-1796), 135.

¹⁷¹ After a successful career as a doctor, inventor and scientist, "... Dr. Erasmus turned his literary talents to composing an encyclopaedic poem in which he presented the whole of botanic knowledge in sparkling and polished couplets." John Bowlby, *Charles Darwin: A New Life* (WW Norton & Company), 29.

work, *Zoonomia*, led the way to many further investigations into the behavior and development of creatures in relation to others.¹⁷² Natural selection dictates that ideally only the most fit creatures should reproduce. Leopardi's distance from that ideal highlights his feelings of physical inferiority as does his contemplation and frequent comparison of his life to that of the powerful ancient Romans. Additionally, theories of evolutionary biology emphasizing the strength and durability of the ideal man serve in contrast to his weak condition.¹⁷³

During this period intellectuals began to think much more about the inheritance of traits; physical, social and communal. Leopardi was strongly influenced by the proto-Darwinists, many of whom were British empiricists, as well as the work of Lamarck.¹⁷⁴ Lamarck had a profound effect on Erasmus Darwin's research and on many other scientists in Europe. Lamarck's work influenced the European scientific scene for years in terms of his ideas in reference to evolution and the taxonomy and lineage of various

¹⁷² Carl Zimmer, *Evolution: The Triumph of an Idea* (Harper Collins), 13. Although Erasmus Darwin died seven years before Charles Darwin was born, he exerted a strong influence. "A doctor by trade, he was also a naturalist, an inventor, a botanist, and a best-selling poet. In one of his poems, entitled *The Temple of Nature*, he argued that all plants and animals now living were originally derived from microscopic forms: Organic life beneath the shoreless waves / Was born and nurs'd in Ocean's pearly caves; / First forms minute, unseen by spheric glass, / Move on the mud, or pierce the watery mass; / Then as successive generations bloom, / New powers acquire and larger limbs assume."

¹⁷³ Shaw 192. In this letter to publisher and printer Antonio Stella, Leopardi indicates that he will return to the much-hated Recanati in order to avoid the cold winter weather in Bologna; "While you have been passing the time agreeably in the Gaggiano, I have been fighting off a rheumatic pain in my head, throat and chest, which made me feverish for several days, and which still gives me no peace even though the fever is gone". That he would rather be tended to at home by his difficult parents indicates just how poor his health was and how much assistance he needed.

¹⁷⁴ Zimmer 14. "In 1800, Lamarck shocked Cuvier and the rest of Europe by declaring that the fixity of species was an illusion. Species had not all been created in their current form at the dawn of time, Lamarck proposed. Throughout the course of Earth's history, new species formed through spontaneous generation. Each came into existence equipped with a "nervous fluid" that gradually transformed it, over the course of generations, into new forms. As species evolved, they achieved higher and higher levels of complexity."

species.¹⁷⁵ Lamarck also had a unique writing and investigative style in relation to his peers, a style which Leopardi himself adopted:

He [Lamarck] continued to practice the old style of speculative system building in an increasingly empirical climate. He was combative, and so self-assured, that affirmation without any documentation became his principal style of argument.¹⁷⁶

This style of non-empirical research without any factual support led Lamarck to over-extrapolate, as did Leopardi, resulting in erroneous far-reaching conclusions for which he was criticized by other early evolutionary theorists such as Georges Cuvier:

He [Cuvier] castigated Lamarck for reaching too far without foundation, and for building all-encompassing systems in the speculative mode. (This criticism reflected Cuvier's main unhappiness with Lamarck's science. Cuvier viewed himself as a modernist, committed to rigorous empirical documentation, and no extension beyond direct evidence in the search for explanations--as opposed to Lamarck's unfruitful, comprehensive speculation in the antiquated esprit de système, or spirit of system).¹⁷⁷

Leopardi's writing in the *Zibaldone* has a more scientific slant, as would a field journal, when compared to his more explicitly artistic works like the *Canti* and *Operette morali*. Yet Leopardi makes very broad generalizations about people and society and how they

¹⁷⁵ Korey 52. "Better remembered by our own century is the evolutionary theory of Lamarck, who posited a continual and recurrent progression of organisms up an ascending chain-of-being; ascent in this case owed to the inner needs arising in response to environmental flux, leading in turn to inherited change."

¹⁷⁶ Gould, 173.

¹⁷⁷ Gould 171.

perceive and relate to foreign *others* as if such statements were proven axioms¹⁷⁸. In a period when such over-generalization was acceptable for some in the scientific community, such as Lamarck, Leopardi felt it acceptable to take some artistic license when needed to prove his points.¹⁷⁹ In fact, for Leopardi, using artistic language to illuminate scientific concepts is not a paradox because poetry, being an act close to nature, can reveal and explore the essential nature of everything--from the natural world, the scientific, or even the supernatural. In fact, only poetic license can inspire true innovation as purely empirical scientific writing is devoid of creativity:

La ragione ch'a ogni poco la mette in fuga e la perseguita e l'assalisce e quasi la sforza a confessare ch'ella sogna, l'esperienza che l'assedia e la stringe e le oppone al volto la sua modestissima lucerna, la scienza che le contrasta e le sbarra tutti i passi col vero, queste cose alimenteranno e conforteranno l'immaginativa? ... il vero conosciuto e il certo hanno per natura di togliere la libertà d'immaginare.¹⁸⁰

Like Lamarck, Leopardi supported his scientific ideas non-empirically. Leopardi for that matter felt that poetry was the language of science and that it was acceptable for it to be used to describe scientific phenomena. Indeed, the flights of fancy and speculation resulting from such creative processes could lead one, socratically, on a path to substantiate and materialize one's scientific vision.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ *Zibaldone*, 811. "L'egoismo nazionale si tramuta allora in egoismo individuale."

¹⁷⁹ *Zibaldone* 987. "La società stretta, ponendo gl'individui a contatto gli uni degli altri, dà necessariamente l'essor all'odio innato di ciascun vivente verso altrui, il qual odio in nessuno animale è tanto, neppur verso gli individui di specie diversa e naturalmente nemica, quanto egli è negl'individui di una società stretta verso gli altri individui della medesima società! "

¹⁸⁰ *Opere* 482. From *Discorso di un italiano attorno alla poesia romantica*.

Another very influential author during Leopardi's lifetime who greatly shaped perceptions of an individual's role in relation to others was Thomas Robert Malthus¹⁸² (1766-1834). The English clergyman wrote about the limited resources on earth and humanity's struggle with others to secure them for himself:

Competition in every kind of business is so great that it is not possible that all should be successful ... (there is) the perpetual struggle for room and food.
(from *Essay on the Principle of Population*, chap. iii. p. 48, 1798).

It is a logical extension of the above individual struggle for power and finite resources that such competition is present among and between societies as well. In *Lo Zibaldone* Leopardi acknowledges the competitive struggles occurring at the individual organismic level and at a broader cultural level¹⁸³. The result of the intra-species struggle is social darwinism which produces anti-social behavior as members of society battle their competitors. Leopardi defines the fundamental inclination of humanity to be anti-social

¹⁸¹ Gould 1297. Many modern scientists and theorists argue that self-serving methodologies still permeate research today. Gould states, "...the empirical ethos of our profession leads us to underplay, or never to recognize in our own mental processing at all, this reverse flow from the expectations of theory to the preception and interpretation of factuality".

¹⁸² Buchholz 48. Malthus is notable for his consistent pessimism and fear of overpopulation, pestilence and famine. He directly contradicts the philosophy of his father's friend [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#), with its presumptions of perfectibility of the natural man: "What are the positive forces that can "save" us from geometric ratios? War, famine, and plagues. The black death lurks in every alley ready to rescue us. Infant mortality liberates us from overpopulation. And famine haunts us always..."

¹⁸³ "The influence of Malthus' essay on population has been immense, and not just among social scientists. The founder of modern evolutionary theory, Charles Darwin, credited Malthus for his theory of natural selection and survival of the fittest. In his *Autobiography*, Darwin freely expressed his indebtedness Remarkably, Alfred Russell Wallace, who independently discovered the theory of organic evolution, also credited Malthus' book." Mark Skoussen, *The Making of Modern Economics* (ME Sharpe), 71. Francesco Fabretti of *La Casa Leopardi* library confirms that Malthus' work *La pratica della guerra* is in the family library in a room with books Leopardi shared with his siblings.

and therefore the realization of a perfect society is impossible although his standards are quite minimal:

Per società perfetta non intendo altro che una forma di società, non noccano gli uni agli altri, o se noccono, ciò sia accidentalmente, e non immancabilmente; una società i cui individui non cerchino sempre e inevitabilmente di farsi male gli uni agli altri. Questo è ciò che vediamo accadere fra le api, fra le formiche, fra i castori, fra le gru e simili, la cui società è naturale, e nel grado voluto della natura.¹⁸⁴

Modern human society is living in an unnatural state of egoism where the goals of the individual have completely dominated those of the community. The only Italian society where that was not the case was ancient Rome:

La più gran nemica della barbarie non è la ragione ma la natura: (seguita però a dovere) essa ci somministra le illusioni che quando sono nel loro punto fanno un popolo veramente civile, e certo nessuno chiamerà barbari i romani combattenti i cartaginesi nè i Greci alle Termopile quantunque quel tempo fosse pieno di ardentissime illusioni, e pochissimo filosofico presso ambedue i popoli. Le illusioni sono in natura, inerenti al sistema del mondo, tolte via affatto o quasi affatto, l'uomo è snaturato; ogni popolo snaturato è barbaro, non potendo più correre le cose come vuole il sistema del mondo.¹⁸⁵

Leopardi believed that one who lives more simply and closer to nature has a life which is more ideal than the typical contemporary existence governed by distorted ego-driven reason. Much “natural behavior” in the leopardian viewpoint, is rooted in illusions such as altruism and religion, both of which stimulate unity and discourage egotistical actions.

¹⁸⁴ *Zibaldone* 982.

¹⁸⁵ *Zibaldone* 27.

Leopardi despaired that man was devolving away from the Roman ideals which symbolize an ideal existence based on natural order. The misanthropy expressed toward foreign others is meant to encourage unifying behavior which will benefit the collective. The influence of the theory of natural selection is its tendency to highlight the biological origins of individual and group behavior in terms of survival. Leopardi struggled to inspire his compatriots to evolve, in order to survive and forge an identity in a post-Napoleonic world.

The Body Politic

Just 19 months before Giacomo's first letter to Giordani, the Congress of Vienna, in June 1815, had decided on Europe's destiny in the aftermath of Napoleon's campaigns and his defeat. Italy was restored to something close to her pre-Napoleonic, pre-revolutionary state: a collection of politically independent units, with Austria in control of the Lombardo-Veneto, the papal State restored to the Pope, Tuscany a grand Duchy, Piedmont with Genoa annexed to it under the house of Savoy, Parma and Modena small independent Duchies, Lucca an independent republic, and Naples a part of the kingdom which included the Southern mainland and Sicily.¹⁸⁶

Leopardi's apparently xenophobic stance supporting a unified Italy, inherently supported the Resurgence, a movement which sought to politically and socially unite the disparate states of the Italian peninsula in the early 1800s after Napoleonic rule had ended.¹⁸⁷

Initially it was only partially successful:

Come è noto, Luporini interpretava la posizione ideologico-filosofica leopardiana come reazione alla "delusione storica", il fallimento del ciclo rivoluzionario e dei primi moti risorgimentali del '20 e la conseguente chiusura reazionaria della sua epoca, giungendo a riconoscere la genesi ultima di quei fallimenti nella "contraddizione storica" di una filosofia che al tempo stesso suscita e paralizza l'azione.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Shaw 15.

¹⁸⁷ In spite of the continuous violence during Napoleon's rule, the immediate post-Napoleonic era found some nostalgic for military campaigns. In Carl von Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege*, or *On War*, he recalled the exhilaration and pride military actions inspired in combatants like himself; "He served throughout the wars of the French Revolution and of Napoleon, from 1792 until 1815, the most prolonged and violent series of conflicts to assail Europe between the Thirty Years War (1618-48) and the First World War (1914-18), and for many commentators (including Clausewitz himself) the foundation of modern war. 'My entry to the world was to an arena of great opportunities, in which the fate of nations would be decided ... Thus my gaze fell not on the temple in which domesticity celebrates its quiet good fortune, but on the triumphal arch through which the victor passes when the fresh laurel wreath cools his glowing brow'". Hew Strachan, *Clausewitz's on War* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), 30.

¹⁸⁸ Biscuso and Gallo 34.

The goal of the movement was to generate feelings of patriotism and a national state as had occurred in France, Spain and Great Britain. Italy had been united previously during the Roman Empire which Leopardi looked to poetically as a time of ideal purity and balance. In a more contemporary context for Leopardi, the relative unity of Italy during the rule of Napoleon, King of Italy from 1805 to 1814, and the accompanying positivism of the Enlightenment, was a deep inspiration as well even though it was not very successful from an Italian perspective:

Napoleon may have desired philosophically and perhaps emotionally to unify the Italian peninsula and develop it into an independent state at some distant time. He reportedly made numerous statements to this effect from his exile on St. Helena, and some of his proclamations and rhetoric in the first years of the nineteenth century seem to support this notion. It is clear nevertheless, that any time the interests of an Italian state came into potential conflict with those of France, Napoleon favored France. He thus failed on several occasions to join small territories bordering the nascent republic or kingdom of Italy to that state, sometimes even preferring to annex those territories directly to France instead.¹⁸⁹

In spite of some of the social advances made during Napoleon's reign, Italy remained disorganized and unprepared for unity. After Napoleon's defeat, the Congress of Vienna reinstated the pre-Napoleonic governments in the *Restaurazione*. The ideals of the French Revolution would remain and have a profound effect on the culture of all Europe:

What the French Revolution really did change was politics. With amazing speed the revolutionaries created a whole new political culture, quite different in theory and practice from even the most liberal polities of Europe. Underpinned by the principle of national sovereignty, it was an ideology with a short past but a great future, for it wrapped into one explosive package the three great abstractions of

¹⁸⁹ Frederick W.Kagan, *The End of the World Order* (Da Capo Press, 2006), 128.

modern politics—the state, the nation, and the people. The impact was heightened by the accompanying emphasis on mass participation. Through electoral assemblies, demonstrations, marches, lynchings, clubs, pageants, and civic ceremonies of every kind, the French people announced its arrival as the main actor in the nation’s political life. Moreover, the studied universality of the concepts and language employed assured that the rest of Europe had to sit up and take notice too.¹⁹⁰

The French Revolution taught the world about the power of individuals to effect change in the dynamic organism of the state by working collectively.¹⁹¹ This collective action is what Leopardi was attempting to encourage in the literary *milieu*--the expected result being the formation of a national literature and subsequent national identity. The misanthropy demonstrated toward foreign others in *Lo Zibaldone* refers to those outside the territory of Italy. This apparent dislike of dissimilar *others* is an artifice employed by Leopardi with the goal of galvanizing the Italians into action. Leopardi hoped that the literary individuals in the Italian city-states perceive themselves as members of a whole and contribute to a collective literature. A national literature which effects and enhances the collective consciousness of the citizenry is fundamental according to Leopardi if Italy is to exist as a coherent nation. Literature is a way to unify the masses:

¹⁹⁰ Euan Cameron, *Early Modern Europe – An Oxford History* (Oxford, 1999), 372.

¹⁹¹ P.J. O’Rourke’s comments regarding Adam Smith illustrate that the state’s ability to improve the quality of life and one’s sense of identity is limited by humanity’s collective weaknesses and limitations: “Small doses of politics can make life better, in the way that taking small doses of poison every day was said to make King Mithradates of Pontus immune to poisoning. But politics, as an enterprise, does not lend itself to being part of a project for the betterment of human life. Politics is a different project altogether. Smith knew this. He argued for the distinction between morality and politics in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*: “What institution of government could tend so much to promote the happiness of mankind as the general prevalence of wisdom and virtue? All government is but an imperfect remedy for the deficiency of these.”” P.J. O’Rourke, *On the Wealth of Nations* (Atlantic Monthly Press), 160.

To my mind it (unification) is not something Italy can hope for until she has books suited to the times, read and understood by the common reader, and available from one end of the country to the other; a thing as frequent among foreigners as unheard of in Italy. And it seems to me that the very recent example of other nations shows us clearly how much truly national books can do in this age to rouse the slumbering spirits of a people and produce great events. But to crown our ills, from the seventeenth century on a wall has arisen between men of letters and the people, and it grows higher and higher, and is a thing unknown in other nations. (Letter 24)¹⁹²

You are all too well aware of the difference between circumstances in Italy and those in other European countries. Foreign Journals are useful when they carry reports, because they always have worthwhile works to analyze, or things that are worth reporting on. But the books published nowadays in Italy are just foolish, uncouth, and above all stale rubbish, copies and repetitions. (Letter 75)¹⁹³

In responding to Giampietro Vieusseux, he again underlines the poor quality of Italian journals:

I come to your kind invitation to write for your Journal, which I always praise, not just as the only Italian Journal, but as one that in many respects has the honour of not seeming to be a thing produced in Italy. (Letter 101)¹⁹⁴

Leopardi respectfully declined the invitation to contribute regularly to the Italian journal, ostensibly for health reasons, but was so interested in creating a national literature that he

¹⁹² Shaw 75. Leopardi had two of his patriotic canzoni published in Rome in 1818, hoping that such a success would somehow lead to his leaving Recanati. This letter is a response written to Giuseppe Montani who read the canzoni and himself wrote a letter to Leopardi praising him for his work.

¹⁹³ Shaw 149. This letter was written in 1824 to Giampietro Vieusseux, founder of the *Antologia*, a presumably sophisticated literary journal, published from 1821 to 1832. Although Leopardi appreciates Vieusseux's endeavor, he will not contribute to it because its goal to report on Italian literature is futile since Italy currently has nothing to report. He feels that the journal should have the goal of teaching, not simply reacting to stale events.

¹⁹⁴ Shaw 180. In this same letter Leopardi asks G. Vieusseux to cease printing any of his work in the *Antologia* and to return any copies or manuscripts he may have.

offered to do much of the work in sending translated articles about Italian literature published in an English journal to another Italian publication. The reason for doing so is for Italians to understand how their work is perceived by the outside world, by the foreign *others*:

A short while ago in England they began to publish an English Journal exclusively devoted to *Italian literature*. This Journal is unknown in Italy, and yet you know how curious Italians are about the judgments of foreigners on our books. I think that if the *Ricoglitore* were to include a selection of the best articles from this Journal translated into Italian, with a few notes, comments etc. by the translator where necessary, and where Italian literature might need to be defended impartially; the *Ricoglitore* would acquire a very high degree of interest, and also a great usefulness, from the civilized discussions it would give rise to between one nation and another, from comparing the literary opinions of the two nations etc. I will shortly be able to obtain and I shall send you the title of this Journal, with the necessary particulars. I am offering to take on both the selecting and the translating of the articles, and any notes that may be necessary. (Letter 109)¹⁹⁵

A new understanding of misanthropy in the *Zibaldone* toward foreign *others* changes the reading experience of his other works and is a byproduct of Leopardi's frustration with his fellow Italians for their lack of participation in the intellectual currents affecting the rest of Europe. His expression of such negativity is an artifice, thinly disguising his jealousy which allows the author to indirectly criticize those around him. Leopardi felt that his compatriots were not interested in the intellectual movements taking place on the Continent, especially those derived from the ideals of the French Revolution. Additionally Leopardi believed that the identity of Italy itself is dependent upon the

¹⁹⁵ Shaw 190. This letter to Antonio Stella, a Milanese publisher, reiterates Leopardi's goal of opening Italian culture to foreign influence. He also mentions the difficult task of organizing the *Zibaldone*, "...it is all jotted down in words and phrases that are barely intelligible, except only to me. And what is more it is scattered through several thousand pages containing my thoughts..."

creation of a national literature which again involves the sharing of ideas. An integrated literary movement will aid Italy in unifying its loose confederation of regions, especially necessary at the end of Napoleonic rule. Leopardi's goal is twofold: to use literature to aid in the unification of Italy and to subsequently make Italian literature a greater participant in the intellectual movements of the Continent as opposed to being marginalized and stagnant.

Having identified the unifying function of misanthropy toward foreign *others*, the next chapter will investigate misanthropy toward similar others; family, peers, and the women who were objects of his affection. Leopardi's dislike of those closest to him was due to myriad kinds of disappointment. The lack of caring he experienced in his life from his parents, the Italian public's disinterest in culture and creating a national identity, the rejection of his amorous advances by various females--these all combine to form a general sentiment of misanthropy toward those presumably closest to him. The objectification of women he repeatedly indicates in the *Zibaldone* and in his letters is not reflected in his poetry such as *A Silvia*, a semi-autobiographical work in which the subject embodies all the positive attributes that the author himself dreamed of possessing.

Chapter Three - Dislike of Those Similar to Us: Family, Peers, and Lovers

The dislike of familiar *others* and peers is less theoretical and much more direct and personal than misanthropy toward foreign *others*. As a result, the contrast between what is written in the *Zibaldone* and the content of some of Leopardi's most well-known poetry and other prose is even more stark; "Lo stato dell'egoismo puro, e quindi di puro odio verso altrui (che ne segue essenzialmente) è lo stato naturale dell'uomo."¹⁹⁶

However Leopardi claimed he was not subject to that rule:

Io ho lungamente ricusato di creder vere le cose che dirò qui sotto perché, oltre che la natura mia era troppo rimota da esse, e che l'animo tende sempre a guidicare gli altri da se medesimo, la mia inclinazione non è stata mai d'odiare gli uomini ma d'amarli. (*Pensieri*, I)

In the *Canti* and *Operette morali* Leopardi did not address the concept of misanthropy in a direct sense yet in the *Zibaldone* he mentioned it hundreds of times and defined it as a fundamental motivator of individuals and groups in society.¹⁹⁷ The above citation from *Pensieri* indicates that he was well aware of the distinction between his artistic production and his personal stance. "There are two Leopardis: the poet and the man."¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ *Zibaldone* 771. Leopardi's hatred was especially acute when observing others enjoying something which he could not; an act which offended his natural egoism: "Tanto è vero che l'uomo odia naturalmente l'uomo. Eccetto se quel gusto che ho detto è stato procacciato a quella persona da noi stessi *volontariamente*, nel quel caso egli ridonda in certo modo su di noi, e serve alla nostra ambizione, ec. insomma ne partecipiamo." *Zibaldone* 601. Public displays of affection irritated Leopardi because he received no pleasure from watching others interact romantically and such displays were of no other benefit to him.

¹⁹⁷ *Zibaldone* 981. "...necessariamente ciascun individuo umano ha più odio verso gli altri individui sì della sua specie sì dell'altre, secondo i principi da me in più luoghi sviluppati."

¹⁹⁸ Iris Origo, *Leopardi* (Hamish Hamilton), XIV. Origo continues; "The man, as he revealed himself in

This correctly suggests that either the abundant misanthropy in the *Zibaldone*, or his positive depictions of others in much of his other work is artifice. Much of his negativity is a reaction to his sense of complete intellectual isolation from others.¹⁹⁹ It is not that society rejected him, but rather a sense of complete alienation and non-participation. The first time he left home:

Lontano dalla famiglia Giacomo viveva in uno stato continuo “di timore o di timidezza continua”. Si sentiva come solo “in mezzo a nemici, cioè in mano alla nemica natura, senza alleati”.²⁰⁰

An understanding of Leopardi’s misanthropy renders the reading of his poetry more poignant when one realizes the positive sentiments expressed therein are idealized feelings which the author has never known.²⁰¹ His prose in the *Operette morali* also describes the idealized world in which Leopardi dreamt to live. In the conclusion of *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, Leopardi employed Plotinus himself to describe the

many of his letters and his diaries, was a querulous, tortured invalid, mistrustful of his fellow-men, with a mind sometimes scornful and cantankerous, and a heart intolerably sad and lonely. But to this unhappy man was granted the poet’s gift: a capacity for feeling so intense and an imagination so sensitive and lively that he could perceive, in the most common sights of daily life, the ‘heavenly originals’ of which, according to Plato, all earthly objects are but copies. ‘To a sensitive and imaginative man’, he wrote, ‘who lives, as I have lived for a long time, constantly feeling and imagining, the world and its objects are, in a way, double. He sees with his eyes a tower, a landscape; he hears with his ears the sounds of a bell; and at the same time his imagination sees another tower, another bell, and hears another sound.’ And it is of these sights and sounds that poetry is made.”

¹⁹⁹ Shaw 36. “Do you think that a great mind would be appreciated here? Like a jewel in a dung heap. You were quite right to say (and you know where) that the rarer literary studies are, the less they are held in esteem, because the less their value is recognized. That is precisely what happens in Recanati and in these provinces where intelligence is not counted among nature’s gifts.” From a letter to Pietro Giordani dated April 30, 1817.

²⁰⁰ Minore 74.

²⁰¹ Ghidetti 176. Leopardi’s occasional expressions of happiness, relief or contentment are artificial; “E la felicità ed il piacere è sempre futuro, cioè non esistendo, né potendo esistere realmente, esiste solo nel desiderio del vivente, e nella speranza, o aspettativa che ne segue [*Zib* 647-648]”.

caring emotional interaction with similar others that he yearned for:

Viviamo, Porfirio mio, e confortiamoci l'un l'altro. Non rifiutiamo di portare quella parte dei mali della nostra specie che il destino ci ha assegnato. Attendiamo a tenerci compagnia l'un l'altro; e andiamoci incoraggiando, e dando aiuto e soccorso scambievolmente; per compiere nel miglior modo questa fatica della vita. La quale vita senza alcun dubbio sarà breve. E quando verrà la morte, allora non proveremo dolore; e anche in quell'ultimo tempo gli amici e i compagni ci conforteranno...²⁰²

The repeated use of reflexive pronouns highlights the need for individuals to support each other and to face the challenge of life as a unified group. An analysis of Leopardi's misanthropy in the *Zibaldone* toward others changes the reader's view of the author in relation to the material. No longer can the *Zibaldone* be interpreted as a collection of semi-scientific observations²⁰³ but instead emerges as passionate expressions of emotion from someone who has been hurt repeatedly by those closest to him:

Il testo merita di essere incalzato ermeneuticamente. In primo luogo, perché la "natura analizzata" si può considerare l'oggetto di una scienza che, come quella stessa "scienza dell'animo" contro la quale insorgono le più gravi preplexità di Leopardi, si mostra "già certa e quasi matematica e risolutamente analitica".²⁰⁴

²⁰² Nino Giordano, *Il Passero e la Ginestra* (Franco Cesati Editore, 2002), 180.

²⁰³ Antimo Negri, *Leopardi e la Scienza Moderna* (Sprioli, 1998), 7. "È un fatto che gli studiosi di Leopardi mostrano di privilegiare, sempre di più, tematicamente, gli interessi profondi del poeta-filosofo per le scienze, soprattutto per le scienze della natura, in un primo momento accettate nella loro ambizione, tutta moderna, a essere esatte o matematiche, e, in un secondo momento, quando in lui prevalgono le istanze, tutte postmoderne, di una lettura inedita, personalissima, poetica del mondo delle cose, avvertite e anche respinte, a un certo punto, come quelle che questo stesso mondo stringono nelle maglie rigide di una visione deterministica, analitica, parziale, che ne offende i colori incantevoli e ne consuma il fascino stupendo, dovesse questo coincidere, da ultimo, con l'"arcano mirabile e spaventoso dell'esistenza universale"."

²⁰⁴ Negri 97.

The *Zibaldone* is a fusion of nature, science and sentiment. His analytical style belies the raw emotions he experienced and yet it is this semi-detachment that allows him to investigate such painful themes in relation to his own experience. It is the same reason that he proposes his misanthropic axioms in relation to others and not himself. By distancing himself from his continuous pain and disappointment, he is able to examine them thoroughly.

Negative feelings toward others are generated spontaneously by proximity to them yet are dissolved just as quickly simply by isolating oneself.²⁰⁵ In contrast to these negative feelings toward social interaction espoused in *Lo Zibaldone* which are purely artifice, his personal life is nourished by friendships:

Leopardi's evident desperation inspired his Tuscan friends to organize an income to support him for a year in Florence: it is to them – ‘Agli amici suoi di Toscana’ – that he would dedicate the *Canti*. His capacity for friendship, for inspiring affection and loyalty in those who knew him well, seems to have been great. It was not much in evidence in Recanati – there are eye-witness accounts of active hostility and taunting by local youths when he was an adolescent. But elsewhere the story was different. The foreign contacts he made in Rome remained in some cases friends for life. ... He made many friends in Bologna, where Antonietta Tommasini and Adelaide Maestri, and their respective husbands, came to seem like a second family to him [141]... In Florence he had a large circle of friends: in one letter he names eleven of them to whom he particularly asks to be remembered.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ DeRoberto 142. “No, la concordia non regna tra gli uomini; non se ne trovano due che si comprendano; anzi “l’odio verso i propri simili è maggiore verso i più simili”. Invece che cercarli, converrà piuttosto, per consolarsi, fuggirli e rifugiarsi in seno alla natura.”

²⁰⁶ Shaw 17.

The misanthropy and friendlessness expressed in the *Zibaldone*²⁰⁷ do not match his personal experience even remotely. He applied his observations to members of society at large and not to himself as was the case with the dislike of foreign others. The purpose of such a negative depiction was to emphasize the communal loneliness felt by all humanity. The artifice of the positive sentiments expressed in some of his poetry is matched to a degree by his apparent dislike of others expressed in the *Zibaldone*.²⁰⁸ The misanthropy in the *Zibaldone* does not apply to him. It is an observation of how others in society interact.

²⁰⁷ *Zibaldone* 987. “Ora, checchè si voglia dire, e in qualunque modo (anche sotto l’aspetto di amore) si mascheri l’odio verso altrui ... egli è così vero che l’uomo è odioso all’uomo naturalmente, comè vero che il falcone è odioso naturalmente al passero.”

²⁰⁸ *Lezioni leopardiane*, 144. “Naturalmente non si tratta di un raccordo meccanico: cioè, da una parte, il pensiero che si svolge nello *Zibaldone*, e, dall’altra, poi, la traduzione in poesia. Si tratta piuttosto di una forma di collaborazione tra il pensiero leopardiano documentato dallo *Zibaldone* e la poesia di questi canti, un rapporto denso, assai duttile, tutt’altro che meccanico, con a volte anche delle rotture e degli avanzamenti nel pensiero stesso del Leopardi a opera della poesia. ... Dunque non si tratta, in questo rapporto fra pensiero e poesia, di un qualcosa di meccanico in cui la poesia sia sempre un *dopo* rispetto al pensiero, una semplice traduzione delle posizioni consolidate del pensiero, ma piuttosto di un vivo ardente ricambio, in cui spesso l’intuizione poetica appoggiata già dalle meditazioni filosofiche apre come degli spiragli ardenti, compie anche delle vere e proprie rotture estremamente feconde e che più tardi Leopardi riprenderà anche al livello di pensiero per un consolidamento e un lavoro di approfondimento successivo.”

Familiarity Breeds Contempt

Much of the negativity Leopardi experienced was generated by the painful experiences he had as a young man living in Recanati under his parents' extreme control²⁰⁹. Leopardi's parents were noteworthy for their complete lack of understanding and disinterest in Leopardi's literary success. His father Monaldo wanted him to be a religious scholar²¹⁰ and was very happy when his literary sojourn in Rome was a failure.²¹¹ His mother on the other hand was obsessed only with recapturing the family wealth and good name. When young Giacomo was born;

Il conte Monaldo, suo padre, aveva allora appena ventidue anni, ma, essendo rimasto orfano fin da bambino, ed essendo diventato, in età troppo giovanile, capo di famiglia, aveva avuto già il tempo di commettere parecchi errori: sicchè il patrimonio familiare era andato rapidamente a rotoli, e, sposatosi nel '97 con la marchesina Adelaide Antici, di tre anni più giovane di lui, le aveva dovuto cedere ben presto tutta l'amministrazione. Ed essa la terrà, di fatto, per tutta la vita, riuscendo, dopo inauditi sforzi, e sacrifici quasi crudeli, a restaurare, nel giro di

²⁰⁹ Origo 22. "This unceasing parental control, this semi-divine parental omni-presence, strikes the reader of today with a sense of unbearable oppression.... And indeed Giacomo himself has left a record of his feelings. 'The most beautiful and fortunate age of man', he wrote in his notebook many years later, 'is tormented to such a degree with a thousand anxieties, fears, and labours of education and instruction, that a grown-up man, even in the midst of all the unhappiness caused by the disillusionment and tedium of life, and the deadening of the imagination, would yet not accept to return to childhood, if he had again to suffer what he suffered then.'"

²¹⁰ Esposito 12. "All'età di sette anni ha fatto la prima confessione, a undici anni ha avuto la prima comunione, a dodici ha indossato l'abito di abatino e ricevuto la tonsura. Tra i suoi primi lavoretti, figurano numerose prose e poesie di argomento religioso, purtroppo ancora inedite in gran parte."

²¹¹ Shaw 126. "I still have not managed to meet a Roman man of letters who understands by the term literature anything other than archeology. Philosophy, ethics, politics, knowledge of the human heart, eloquence, poetry, philology: all this is foreign to Rome, and seems child's play, compared with finding out whether some bit of copper or stone belonged to Mark Anthony or Mark Agrippa. The joke is that a Roman who has a real mastery of Latin or Greek is not to be found; without a perfect knowledge of those languages, you are well aware what the study of antiquity can amount to."

lunghi anni, il patrimonio.²¹²

His mother was so focused on money that she was pleased when one of her children died, ascending to heaven directly and thus reducing expenses.²¹³ Within this atypical non-nurturing environment²¹⁴, Leopardi formed his early ideas on familial relations, examples of which are numerous in *Lo Zibaldone*:

Io credo che un padre storpio difficilmente possa vedere con compiacenza i suoi figli sani, e non provare un certo stimolo a odiarli, o una difficoltà ad amarli, che facilmente si convertirà in odio, e riceverà poi scioccamente il nome di antipatia, quasi fosse una persona innata, e senza causa mortale. Del che si potrebbe portare infinite prove di fatto, come dell'odio delle madri brutte verso le figlie belle ... Così de' padri di poco ingegno o in qualunque modo sfortunati, verso i figli di molto ingegno, o in qualche modo avvantaggiati su di loro... Tanto naturalmente l'amor proprio inseparabile dai viventi, produce e quasi si trasforma nell'odio degli altri oggetti, anche di quelli che la natura ci ha maggiormente raccomandati (al nostro stesso amor proprio) e resi più cari.²¹⁵

²¹² Luigi Tonelli, *Leopardi* (Dall'Oglio, 1987) 44.

²¹³ The non-nurturing behavior and attitude of Leopardi's mother damaged him deeply. As a result of the pain of being rejected emotionally by her and by other women he attempted to relate to, Leopardi engaged in few friendships with women and increasingly objectified them. His maladjusted views on females have roots in his early life. Critic Renato Minore exaggerates this argument however by turning a typical arrangement into something sinister. Minore 24. "Giacomo, intanto, faceva le sue prime fondamentali esperienze. Visse sicuramente in modo traumatico l'allontanamento dall'oggetto amato: per decisione di Monaldo, non fu allattato dalla madre, ma da una balia, Maria Patrizi Rovello, che ricevette come ricompensa un fazzoletto di terra. E il rapporto con Adelaide non fu, fin dai primi mesi, dei più intensi ed effusivi. Lei era piuttosto fredda, senza grandi chance emotive." Minore's mention of the arrangement as a negative factor highlights his misogyny and lack of cultural and historic knowledge more than any maternal neglect.

²¹⁴ Minore 47. Giacomo was consistently monitored during his youth to make sure he was behaving properly and following the structured plan his parents had established for him; "Era di nuovo nelle mani di Adelaide e del suo Dio muto, severo e intransigente che non lasciava mai i cattivi senza pena e imponenza sacrifici, pesanti rinunzie. Tornava a essere osservato, frugato, spiato da domestici e sacerdoti, senza aver diritto a un suo spazio di autonomia, di riflessione, di immaginazione." The result of such extreme control was the destruction of his self-esteem: "Forse intuì che non c'era scampo. Quell'occhio fissato su di lui, per sapere quelle poche essenziali cose che ancora non sapeva, era il segno di una soggezione totale, senza possibilità di riscatto. Gli faceva perdere la sensazione di ciò che poteva diventare. Lo metteva in balia di una volontà arbitraria nel suo inumano rigore che lo guidava passo passo, inflessibilmente, anche contro i suoi desideri. Capì che l'umiliazione non avrebbe avuto fine." Minore 48.

²¹⁵ *Zibaldone* 462. Leopardi begins this observation with yet another relating to jealousy; "Ho già detto

The force of self-love, of ego-driven behavior within the parent can override what should be the natural inclination to protect and promote the interests of one's offspring. Leopardi's misanthropic discourses on parent/child relationships were inspired greatly by the competitive atmosphere between father and son, both of whom sought the respect of the literary community. Monaldo Leopardi went so far as to use his son's fame to advance his own struggling literary ambitions but eventually was asked to stop writing by the very establishment that he steadfastly supported.²¹⁶

A constant source of frustration for Leopardi was the belief by some members of the public that the poor-quality work written by his father Monaldo was actually his. Finding that again his father's *Dialoghetti* were being attributed to him in an anthology:

Leopardi era esasperato: “lo stesso mio padre troverà giustissimo che io non usurpi l'onore ch'è dovuto a lui. D'altronde io non ne posso più, propriamente non ne posso più. Non voglio più comparire con questa macchia sul viso, d'aver fatto quell'infame, infamissimo, scelleratissimo libro. Qui tutti lo credono mio ec.”²¹⁷

In spite of his father's substandard writing and irritating personality, Leopardi

altrove di una donna sterile che bastonava una cavalla pregna dicendo: [1206] *Tu gravida, e io no?*”

²¹⁶ *Lezioni leopardiane* 4. “Chi voglia poi avere una più precisa idea di Monaldo, delle sue posizioni fanatiche e paradossalmente retrive (che finirono per infastidire persino il governo pontificio e per far vietare la continuazione della sua personale rivista, *La Voce della Ragione*, provocando un ironico e amaro commento del figlio in una lettera al padre del 19 febbraio 1836) potrà rivolgersi alla *Autobiografia* di Monaldo caratteristica per la mentalità di questo nobile altezzoso e tutto chiuso nella difesa dei privilegi della sua classe, pieno di rimpianti per le scoperte di Keplero, Copernico e Galileo (che hanno minacciato l'ordine celeste e terrestre, come i moderni liberali sconvolgono l'ordine del trono e dell'altare).”

²¹⁷ Luporini 251. Excerpt from a letter written to his cousin Giuseppe Melchiorri on May 15, 1832.

consistently wrote to him, and not his mother, for advice and money when he was living outside Recanati.²¹⁸ Monaldo was the more emotionally available of Giacomo's parents but was exceptionally controlling:

Monaldo endlessly acts out the need for control, the failure to acknowledge a boundary, the failure to respect the otherness of the other person: the publication history, with all the many attempts to interfere with, suppress, or change what his son has written, can be seen as a territorial dispute, the fight by Giacomo to establish a boundary around his own autonomy. (Monaldo's utter incomprehension of what is at stake is reflected in a mournful letter in 1828 complaining that he never gets to see what Giacomo publishes any more.)²¹⁹

Leopardi harbored resentment toward Monaldo for his poor performance as a father and for not attempting to find him a position worthy of his intellectual abilities. He believed his father's egoism and jealousy of his precocious talent led Monaldo to be completely unresponsive to the needs of his children and Giacomo in particular:

I had given proofs of myself that were sufficiently rare and precocious, yet it was only much beyond the usual age that I began to reveal my wish that you should make provision for my destiny, and the welfare of my future life in the way suggested by what everyone was saying. I saw several families in this very city, much (indeed incomparably) less well off than ours, and I knew of countless other families from other parts as well, which in response to some glimmering of intellect perceived in some young family member, did not hesitate to make the heaviest sacrifices in order to find him a position that enabled him to use his talents to advantage. Although many people thought my intellect gave forth somewhat more than a glimmer, you nonetheless judged me unworthy that a

²¹⁸ Shaw 118. An interesting exception is a tender letter written to his mother from Rome in November 1822; "I am well, and the discomforts of the journey far from harming me have notably helped me. I kiss your hand with all my heart, and full of deep affection, and missing you, I remain your very fond son, Giacomo."

²¹⁹ Shaw 24.

father should make sacrifices for me, and you did not think that the welfare of my present and future life justified any alteration to your family plan.²²⁰

Young Giacomo consistently felt anger toward both his parents for not expressing adequate love or even concern for their son, instead focusing on material wealth and egotistical pursuits. In addition to being a competitor against his father, Leopardi sensed being an unwelcome part of the household and an inconvenience for his mother, feelings he expressed indirectly by revealing them in the *Zibaldone*:

...benchè i fanciulli sieno per natura esigenti ed incomodi, ed in quanto sono (altresì per natura) apertissimamente egoisti, offendano l'egoismo degli altri più che non fanno gli adulti, e quindi siano per questa parte naturalmente odiosissimi (sì a coetanei, sì agli altri).²²¹

The extreme egoism of children in turn offends the egoism of those observing them, generating feelings of irritation. Leopardi admitted that he found small children, women, and animals could be adorable however simply because males perceive them as inherently weak and thus needing protection, which in turn stimulates man's ego:

Ma il fanciullo è difeso per se stesso dall'aspetto della sua debolezza, che reca un certo piacere a mirarla, e quindi ispira naturalmente ... un certo amore verso di lui, perchè l'amor proprio degli altri trova in lui il piacere. ... Similmente discorrasi [3556] delle donne, nelle quali indipendentemente dall'altre qualità, la stessa debolezza è amabile perchè reca piacere ec. Così di certi animaletti o animali ... in

²²⁰ Shaw 82.

²²¹ *Zibaldone* 956.

cui l'aspetto della lor debolezza rispettivamente a noi, in luogo di invitarci ad opprimerli, ci porta a risparmiarli, a curarli, ad amarli, perchè ci riesce piacevole ec.²²²

Patronising attitudes and sexism are frequent in Leopardi's commentary and he rarely mentioned women's intelligence and literary contributions in his work. Leopardi's misanthropy lead him to either objectify or attempt to nurture the women he came into contact with, discounting them as intellectual counterparts. Leopardi experienced only a type of distant, unrequited love as he observed women, objects of desire, from afar.²²³ Other than his relationships with his mother and sister, his perception of women was simply as objects of desire. He did not acknowledge women's contributions intellectually or politically to the history of his era.²²⁴

His relationship with his sister Paolina is a stark exception. She seems to be the only female to whom Leopardi could relate as an equal and he showed great respect for her intellectual and emotional abilities:

²²² *Zibaldone* 956.

²²³ Tonelli 348. His form of love was, "...nutrito segretamente, alimentato dal sogno e dalla fantasia, materiato d'entusiasmo, d'estasi, e anche di pianto."

²²⁴ Leopardi's lack of acknowledgement of the women of his era is surprising especially considering their important role in the French Revolution which had a great influence upon him and the entire continent: "The prominence of women in the French Revolution owed something to the example of the successful American struggle in the New World. At bottom, though, the conditions of the people in France under the *ancien régime* were such as to have eroded many of the crucial distinctions between male and female long before those *aristo* and *sans-culotte* came under scrutiny--there is no democracy to equal that of the starving. Maddened just as much as their men by hunger, frustration and despair, the women of Paris contributed a major part of the force which set in motion "the great engine of Revolution" and which subsequently powered its remorseless progress through the churning seas of blood." Rosalind Miles, *The Women's History of the World* (Salem House Publishers, 1989) 147.

My dear Paolina. You write with your usual sensitivity, and you comfort me in three ways: because you show you're so fond of me, because you convince me that sensitivity does exist in the world, because you re-awaken mine which as you know is all too numb, not towards you in particular but towards the whole universe.²²⁵

Leopardi showed tenderness toward his sister during her continuously unsuccessful quest to escape the family home through marriage. He vicariously experienced the hopefulness and eventual disappointment following the interaction with various suitors and was always concerned with her happiness:

... I don't want you to despair; because in the space of a day the cause of your low spirits can disappear, and it is very likely that this will happen; or rather, it is more than likely; in fact, if things go in the natural way, it is quite certain.²²⁶

Indeed Paola eventually became engaged and as a demonstration of support and brotherly love and celebration, Giacomo composed *Nelle nozze alla sorella Paolina*. Sadly the wedding never took place, devastating his sister and rendering the poetic sentiment unintentionally heartbreaking:

Sorella mia, che in gravi
 E luttuosi tempi
 L'infelice famiglia all'infelice
 Italia accrescerai. Di forti esempi
 Al tuo sangue provvedi. Aure soavi
 L'empio fato interdice
 All'umana virtude,
 Nè pura in gracil petto alma si chiude.²²⁷

²²⁵ Shaw 167.

²²⁶ Shaw 133.

²²⁷ *Canti* 68. *Nelle nozze alla sorella Paolina*, lines 8-15.

Leopardi simultaneously exalted the strength of women of the past and of his sister. Gone is the condescension or vitriol he normally expressed. Women of antiquity stand in contrast to those in contemporary Italy who have abandoned the pursuit of heroic character. Giacomo's relationship of trust and respect for his siblings contrasts sharply with the mistrust and disdain he felt for his mother Adelaide. His mother was completely insensitive while his sister was much like him; intelligent, caring and unfulfilled.²²⁸

Paola and Carlo are the only supportive members of his family and are the only source of happy memories during his childhood. They could relate to Giacomo as no one else could since they too were subjected to the strict regimen of study²²⁹ and public interrogations their father had established for them as well as the ceaseless control of every activity by their mother²³⁰. His parents exemplified the ego-driven behavior and self-love that Leopardi would attempt to reject completely.

²²⁸ Origo 29. "No less violently than Giacomo did she rebel against the narrowness of their daily life, and her hatred of Recanati was no less intense. 'Among the causes', she wrote, 'that have dried up the source of happiness in me, is the fact of having to live in Recanati, that odious and abominable spot.' [...] 'I could wish no human being', she wrote, 'to lead a life like mine, deprived of every hope except that of soon leaving this world.'"

²²⁹ Origo 46. Monaldo selfishly refused to allow Giacomo to visit Rome initially, even though it would have benefitted his studies, because he feared losing the control and company of his only friend; "For the present my preference is, that he should be less learned, but belong to his father, and live peacefully and cheerfully in the town in which Providence has placed him...Depriving myself of him, I should lose the only friend I have, or hope to have, in Recanati, and I do not feel disposed to such a sacrifice.' This at least is frank, and there is something pathetic in Monaldo's belief that his son was also his friend."

²³⁰ Origo 29. "And once, when her friends came to stay nearby, Paolina was obliged to inform them not only that it would be impossible to pay them a visit, but that when they drove into Recanati to church, she would not even be free to catch a glimpse of them out of the window. 'My mother wanders round the house and is everywhere at every time, and all that I see out of the window is controlled by her.' "

Dislike of Similar Peers

Expanding the range of Leopardi's interactions more broadly and away from his immediate family, one finds strong misanthropy expressed toward those around him. In Leopardi's universe everyone inspires negativity for either being superior, inferior, or mediocre:

Odio verso i nostri simili. Galateo morale. Umanità degli antichi. – Da che viene quel fenomeno sì incontrastabile, sì universale senza eccezione; che è impossibile essere spettatori di un piacer vivo, provato da altri (non solo uomo, anche animale), massime non partecipandone, senza sperimentare un irresistibile senso di pena, di rabbia, di disgusto, di stomaco?²³¹

Misanthropy toward others is a universal force and its effect is particularly visceral when one observes the pleasure of others²³², even other creatures. In the *Zibaldone* the theme of jealousy as a source of misanthropy is frequently repeated. His own emotions as well as those of people he observed taught him that happiness for others' joy is impossible:

Il vedere che altri prova in nostra presenza un gusto vivo, ci è sempre grave, e ci rende odiosa quella persona. ... Similmente dico di un vantaggio... Tanto è vero che l'uomo odia naturalmente l'uomo. ... Questo effetto si prova massimamente cogli eguali e co' superiori (meno cogli inferiori, co' fanciulli ec.; ma cogli eguali soprattutto, e cogli amici e stretti conoscenti più che mai, perocchè con questi si

²³¹ *Zibaldone* 1173.

²³² *Zibaldone* 1184. "Troppe cure assidue insistenti, troppe dimostrazioni di sollecitudine, di premura, di affetto (come sogliono essere quelle di donne), noiosissime e odiose a chi n'è l'oggetto, anche venendo da persone amorosissime."

esercita principalmente l'invidia, e si sente al vivo l'inferiorità nostra ec. In qualsivoglia genere i superiori sono il soggetto di un odio più generale ... Parimente riguardo agl'inferiori, bisogna che i loro vantaggi o piaceri siano d'un altro grado (nel qual caso l'odio è maggiore verso loro che verso qualunque altro) perchè arrivino a pungere il nostro amor proprio, e la nostra gelosia ec. Nondimeno è vero che sempre se ne prova qualche disgusto.²³³

Leopardi disliked those who are happy or superior to him because they have what he does not. Even worse however are those he considered inferior, those with the audacity to suffer more than he, as if attempting to deny Leopardi the opportunity to hate them.

In a darwinistic sense those closest to one physically but outside the immediate family pose the greatest threat to an individual's survival as indicated in Malthus' aforementioned *Essay on the Principle of Population*. One is in direct competition with others for all commodities and in Leopardi's observation, they are resented for it:

La disugualianza tra gli uomini che la società rende naturalmente somma e di mille generi, sarebbe stata quasi nulla e limitata a ben poche cose. Infatti fra gli altri animali, fra cui la società è scarsa, la disugualianza fra gli individui è rara e sempre scarsissima; così i vantaggi degli uni sugli altri. Quindi le dette passioni, che sono necessariamente suscitate da' vantaggi e dalla disugualianza ch'è inevitabilmente prodotta da una società stretta, sono fra gli altri animali rarissime e dobolissime.²³⁴

²³³ Zibaldone 601.

²³⁴ Zibaldone 984. "Stante le natura generale de' viventi, a massime quella dell'uomo in particolare, una società stretta, la quale è cosa dimostrata che necessariamente produce tra gli uomini la disuguaglianza di mille generi e intorno a mille beni e mali, non può a meno di eccitare e di mettere in movimento, com'ella fa in effetto, le passioni dell'invidia, dell'emulazione, della gara, della gelosia, conseguenze necessarie, o piuttosto specie e *nuances* dell'odio verso gli altri, naturale ad ogni essere che ami naturalmente se stesso."

In a society characterized by scarcity and competition, the socially-oriented ideals of the Enlightenment are impossible to attain as the necessity of social cooperation is in constant battle with the ego-based needs of the individual. In 1762, the father of the illuminists Jean-Jacques Rousseau described in *Du contrat social* how humanity's lost innocence cannot be regained, especially when one lives with others in a restrictive society; "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains". Rousseau's work, present in the Leopardi family library²³⁵, along with other French illuminist and romantic literature²³⁶, emphasized the freedom experienced by the individual in nature versus the artificiality of the city. For Leopardi, misanthropy toward others is a natural byproduct of living in an artificial social context with competing others. Although Leopardi is an example of the hyper-cultured, extremely educated child of illuminist philosophy, he became ironically a detractor. Instead of knowledge bringing humanity closer to happiness, it pushes it further away. Ignorance of reality is the only way one can find happiness.

²³⁵ *La Casa Leopardi* confirms that the following works by Rousseau are present in the family library: *L'arte di renderci felici* (1766), *Sugli affari domestici* (1768), *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1797), *Du contrat social* (1797), and *Diritto pubblico* (1797).

²³⁶ Ferrucci 13. "La filosofia francese del Settecento è ben rappresentata nella biblioteca di Monaldo, e ha un forte impatto nella formazione del poeta, con propaggini contemporanee che si spingono fino a Chateaubriand."

The Role of Friendship

Having established Leopardi's firm belief expressed in the *Zibaldone* that hatred of similar others is a constant, his descriptions of friendship in his other works are especially contradictory. He indicated that he was isolated due to the impossibility of friendship:

In un luogo piccolo vi sono partiti, amicizia non v'è. Vale a dire, che delle persone, per trovarsi ciò convenire ai loro interessi, saranno unite e collegate insieme per certo tempo (per lo più contro altre); ma non mai amiche. *Amicizia non può essere che in città grandi, o pur fra persone lontane.*²³⁷

Friendship is seen as unnatural and possible only when the individuals are not in the same place or when forced to live in unnaturally close proximity as in a city. Leopardi's friends all lived outside Recanati and his communication with them was by post. The difficulty of establishing friendships described by Leopardi in the *Zibaldone* is theoretical and does not apply to him. In reality, Leopardi eventually cultivated a large circle of friends who did many favors for him, from gathering money for his expenses, offering employment²³⁸ to helping him relocate during his numerous moves. The *Zibaldone*, however, characterized by a more scientific and theoretical approach, is devoid of any such

²³⁷ *Zibaldone* 1187.

²³⁸ Shaw 158. In a letter to his father Monaldo from July 22, 1825, Leopardi tells his father of his friends' support of his literary ambitions, helping him travel and offering him funding and academic jobs; "I was tempted to stay here in Bologna, a very quiet, very cheerful, very hospitable city, where I have had a very warm welcome, and I would perhaps have a way of supporting myself with some literary work I have been offered... I was obliged almost against my will to consent to seeing Milan at Stella's expense..."

references to the strong role played by his friends:

L'odio dell'uomo verso l'uomo si manifesta principalmente ed è confermato da ciò che accade nelle persone di una medesima professione ec., fra le quali, sebbene la perfetta amicizia astrattamente considerata è impossibile e contraddittoria alla natura umana, nondimeno anche la possibile amicizia è difficilissima, rarissima, incostantissima ec. Schiller uomo di gran sentimento era nemico di Goëthe (giacchè non solo fra tali persone non v'è amicizia, o v'è minore amicizia, ma v'è più odio che fra le persone poste in altre circostanze) ec. ec. ec. Le donne godono del mal delle donne, anche loro amicissime. I giovani del male dei giovani ec. ec. ... Non solo in una stessa professione, ma anche in una stessa età ec. ec. l'amicizia è minore e l'odio è maggiore.²³⁹

The more a particular *other* is similar to an individual, the more likely one is to dislike that person, thus making friendship among similar types of people or those with shared interests impossible. Again, just as Leopardi described the dislike of foreigners for the purpose of creating national unity, here he described the impossibility of friendship in theoretical terms and in relation to others in order to highlight the solitude felt by all individuals:

Il fatto dimostra, al contrario di quel che gli altri lo interpretano, che l'uomo è per natura il più antisociale di tutti i viventi che per natura hanno qualche società fra loro.²⁴⁰

The act of communication with others, due to their inherently disappointing nature, engenders a natural and spontaneous kind of misanthropy.²⁴¹

²³⁹ *Zibaldone* 624.

²⁴⁰ *Zibaldone* 982.

²⁴¹ *Zibaldone* 1184. "Chi practica poco cogli uomini, difficilmente è misantropo. I veri misantropi non si trovano nella solitudine, si trovano nel mondo. Lodan quella, sì bene; ma vivono in questo. E se un che sia

Women and Romance in Leopardi's Life

In addition to the unfriendly nature of the individual's relationship to others, Leopardi's work deals frequently with negative social interactions with women.²⁴² In *Lo Zibaldone* Leopardi often angrily discussed romantic interactions between men and women and public displays of affection²⁴³ due in part to his own failed attempts at having meaningful relationships and unrequited love.²⁴⁴ Women in Leopardi's life are a constant source of strong emotion. In a letter written to his brother Carlo, Giacomo described an exciting new friendship with Countess Teresa Carniani Malvezzi:

In the first few days I knew her I lived in a kind of delirium and fever. We've never spoken of love except in jest, but we live together in a tender and sensitive friendship, with an interest in one another, and a lack of constraint, which is like love without restlessness. She has a very high regard for me; if I read her something of mine, she often weeps unaffectedly from the heart; other people's praise has no substance for me, hers all turns to blood and all remains in my soul.²⁴⁵

tale si ritira dal mondo, perde la misantropia nella solitudine.”

²⁴² Shaw 197. In a letter to Antonio Papadopoli, Venetian intellectual, Leopardi wrote bitterly about his love gone sour; “How can it enter your head I'm still calling on that Malvezzi bitch?”

²⁴³ *Zibaldone* 601. “Cosa spiacevolissima anche tra noi, e che m'è avvenuto di sentir condannare come insopportabile in due sposi che si facevano grandi carezze in presenza altrui.”

²⁴⁴ Tartaro 19. Although Leopardi's first infatuation ended badly, it inspired him to write a journal detailing his feelings as well as the poem *Il primo amore*. “È certo che questo canto fu ispirato al poeta dal suo amore per la cugina ventiseienne del padre, Geltrude Cassi Lazzari... Il nostro poeta, poco più che adolescente, ne fu conquistato; e alla partenza della donna, tra il 14 e il 23 dicembre, compilò un diario in cui descrisse minuziosamente i sentimenti che quell'esperienza aveva suscitati nel suo animo.”

Tartaro 21. In his diary he writes of Geltrude; “... un sorriso solo, per rarissimo caso gittato sopra di me, mi pareva cosa stranissima e maravigliosamente dolce e lusinghiera: e questo desiderio nella mia forzata solitudine ere stato vanissimo fin qui.” This forced solitude prevents him from, “parlare e conversare, *come tutti fanno*, con donne avvenenti...”.

²⁴⁵ Shaw 184. Written in Bologna, May 30, 1826.

He was in love and infatuated with various women during his life but his romantic feelings were always unrequited.²⁴⁶ Fanny Ronchivecchi is his most famous love interest. He met her when he first moved to Florence and her eventual rejection of him led to his departure for Rome:

A giudicare dalle lettere intime di costei al Ranieri...(Fanny) se ne preoccupò, in un secondo, quando il poeta ebbe a mostrarsi insistente, o comunque, sofferente; e più tarde, se ne dolse sinceramente. Ché, se non vogliamo parlare di scrupoli morali, avendo ella già, notoriamente, rotta la fede coniugale con altri, dobbiamo pur ammettere, da parte sua, una invincibile ripugnanza fisica, contro cui sarebbe sciocco, e propriamente ridicolo, protestare.²⁴⁷

In addition to his pessimistic outlook, his weak physical condition probably had a great influence on his social life as well as his scholarly one.²⁴⁸ He had severe scoliosis and poor eyesight which may be attributed to his frequent reading by candlelight. Leopardi emphasizes the appearance of the face and its strong influence on how people relate to each other:

Un viso, come ho detto altrove, ci par molte volte bruttissimo per la somiglianza che vi troviamo con un altro brutto, o di contraggenio per noi, o tenuto per brutto. ... Così una persona che da fanciulla ci è parsa brutta, e che siamo avvezzi a considerar come tale, benchè divenga poi bella, non mai, o non senza difficoltà

²⁴⁶ *Zibaldone* 1174. As a result of not receiving affection from the women he desired, he felt great irritation and jealousy when faced with others' public displays of affection and good fortune; "In fatto di donne generalmente, in fatto di galanteria, la cosa è notissima; insoffribile non solo la vista, ma i discorsi, i vanti di fortune altrui."

²⁴⁷ Tonelli 345.

²⁴⁸ Luporini 251. Leopardi however did not believe that his health affected his philosophical opinions and expressed this in a letter to Luigi DeSinner on May 24, 1832; "... qui ont besoin d'être persuadés du mérite de l'existence, qui l'on a voulu considérer mes opinions philosophiques comme le résultat de mes souffrances particulières, et que l'on s'obstine à attribuer à mes circonstances matérielles ce qu'on ne doit qu'à mon entedement."

potrà piacerci...²⁴⁹

In this sense, humans respond to the visual image of the face as they would to any other visual stimulus. The glimpse of the face brings back all the memories associated with it the first time it was seen as well as all the subsequent viewings. If the associated memories are negative, they will build incrementally and thus one's reaction becomes more negative. Leopardi may have felt that he was a victim of this false method of assessment:

Ma siccome l'interno degli uomini perde il suo stato naturale, e l'esterno più o meno lo conserva, perciò la significazione del viso è per lo più falsa ... E c'inganniamo interamente perchè l'effetto particolare della bellezza umana sull'uomo (parlo specialmente del viso che n'è la parte principale, e vedi ciò che ho detto altrove in tal proposito) deriva sempre essenzialmente dalla significazione ch'ella contiene, e ch'è del tutto indipendente dalla sfera del bello, e per niente astratta nè assoluta...²⁵⁰

Leopardi's injured eye and poor posture caused by chronic back problems may have had something to do with this emphasis on an individual's attractiveness. His focus on the physical attributes needed for attraction between men and women indirectly addresses his personal issues.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ *Zibaldone* 535.

²⁵⁰ *Zibaldone* 536.

²⁵¹ Shaw 128. Leopardi's frustration at never having any romantic interactions led his writing at times to become very misogynistic. In a letter to his brother Carlo from December 16, 1822, he described in blatantly hateful terms his feelings about women, especially those in Rome; "But no matter how frightful an idea you may have of his wife, you simply cannot conceive of the sort of wretched, wothless woman that she is. Imagine a common servant girl, very stupid, very ugly, very clumsy, with no charm in her eyes or in

The dislike of those similar to oneself is a dominant theme of *Lo Zibaldone* and stems from the impossibility of obtaining what Leopardi truly desired; friendship, love, and the support of his family. While the search for unobtainable pleasure is a well-known theme of the *Zibaldone*, the root cause of misanthropy as an obstacle to forming relationships has been previously unexamined. Misanthropy is presented as a reason for the impossibility of friendship and as a limiting factor in romantic interactions. Even relationships between parents and children are affected adversely by misanthropy as the offspring continue to take resources away from the parents as well as serving as a reminder of the lost youth the parents once experienced.

her bearing or in any part of her person, with nothing to say for herself, in short lacking any conceivable attractive quality at all; and all this on top of being a whore, or at least a flirt.”

A Silvia

There is a consistent theme of the dislike of individuals in *Lo Zibaldone* and thus there are no positive descriptions of relationships with others in that context. In spite of this, one of Leopardi's best-known poems, *A Silvia*²⁵², shows a positive correlation between two people as well as empathy shown by the author for the subject's lost youth²⁵³. At the beginning of the poem there is an immediate indication of the joy felt by Silvia during her life, "Negli occhi tuoi ridenti e fuggitivi" (line 4). There is no sense of jealousy or bitterness that one might expect from the Leopardi of the *Zibaldone*. In his poetry characters are allowed to experience positive emotions which the author can aspire to. Silvia has a positive feeling toward life in spite of understanding the challenges which may lie before her, "E tu, lieta e pensosa" (line 5). To be intelligent and analytical and still be happy is the life-long challenge of Leopardi and is something which Silvia has achieved at a young age. To be "lieta e pensosa" at the same time within the context of the *Zibaldone* would be a paradox based on Leopardi's general conception that ignorance is bliss and that knowledge brings sadness. "Di quel vago avvenir che in mente avevi" (line 12) is another indicator of her contemplative nature and a sign that future events may potentially be negative. Leopardi clearly established his respect and admiration for Silvia at the beginning of the poem with no negative references, either explicit or

²⁵² *Canti* 152.

²⁵³ Roncoroni 174. "“La canzone *A Silvia*, composta nel 1828, inaugura una nuova fase della poesia leopardiana, una fase tutta incentrata sul recupero memoriale del passato e, in particolare, sul ricordo delle care illusioni della giovinezza perduta. Silvia, nella lirica, è una delicata figura di giovinetta, viva e vera nella commossa rievocazione di Leopardi, ma è anche il simbolo della giovinezza e delle speranze che l'accompagnano: in lei il poeta canta sia le gioie, fatte di trepida attesa e poi sempre rimpiante, di quell'epoca lontana, sia l'angoscia sempre viva che lo prende al pensiero della miseria fine di tante speranze.” While true that Silvia symbolizes hope, she more directly represents young Leopardi himself.

otherwise. It is a complete departure from the thoughts he espouses in *Lo Zibaldone* in terms of descriptions of other people. He shows parallels between his life and hers²⁵⁴ and that while she is focused on “all’opre femminili” (line 10) he is immersed in “gli studi leggiadri” (line15). Although Leopardi gave his best years and health to his studies, he expressed no bitterness about it but simply indicated it as a matter of fact:

Talor lasciando e le sudate carte
Ove il tempo mio primo
E di me si spendea la miglior parte (lines 16-18)

Again this is a departure from the thoughts expressed in *Lo Zibaldone* where events in his life are seen through a negative lens. While Silvia works and Leopardi studies, both filled with pleasure and hope²⁵⁵, he can overhear her talking to others and in this way their lives are intertwined, “Porgea gli orrecchi al suon della tua voce” (line 20). At this point in Leopardi’s life, he looks hopefully toward the future, again in total contrast with his thoughts in the *Zibaldone* which is devoid of hope:

Mirava il ciel sereno
Le vie dorate e gli orti,
E quinci il mare da lunghi, e quindi il monte.
Lingua mortal non dice²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ Binni, *Lezioni leopardiane*, 484. “La rimembranza d’altra parte viene a essere come un modo che attraverso la doppia vista poetica indaga nel passato del poeta e gli permette di rivivere la propria storia.”

²⁵⁵ Roncoroni 179. “Di fatto, però, tra Silvia e la speranza non c’è in tutto il componimento alcuna differenza: Silvia è, in tutta la lirica, il simbolo della speranza...”

²⁵⁶ Esposito 141. “Il verso 26 di *A Silvia*: “Lingua mortal non dice”, fa supporre un’altra reminiscenza dai versi 12-13 del sonnetto *Parrà forse ad alcun che ‘n lodar quella*: “Lingua mortale al suo stato divino / Giunger non pote...”; dove però il ricupero riguarda solo il stilema iniziale e la struttura negativa della frase. Diverso, qui, tutto il resto, anche la struttura metrica. Come è possibile pertanto parlare di “frasi ed

Quel ch'io sentiva in seno.(lines 23-27)

There is a tragic foreshadowing as Silvia's "vago avvenir che in mente avvevi" is echoed by Leopardi's "Lingua mortal non dice / Quel ch'io sentiva in seno" (lines 26-27). Both young people feel that inevitably an undesirable event will occur. As Leopardi reflects on the past, he recalls the hope they felt: "Che speranze" (line 29), "Cotanta speme" (line 32). Inevitably the dreams they had were shattered and the illusions that hope gave them have vanished:

Un affetto mi preme
 Acerbo e sconsolato
 E tornami a doler di mia sventura.
 O natura, o natura,
 Perché non rendi poi
 Quel che prometti allor? perché di tanto
 Inganni i figli tuoi? (lines 33-39)

As Leopardi reflects on the painful events of the past, he indicates that all of humanity shares in the feelings of lost hope.²⁵⁷ "I figli tuoi" is indicative of the Leopardian thought that humankind is united in its reaction to Nature, a malevolent force. On a more personal level, Leopardi expresses platonic love for Silvia and sadness for that which has happened to her. In any event, the sympathy he feels for a peer as well as his concern and

emistichi" "determinatamente petrarcheschi"? Come se il Leopardi fosse proprio -- lo volesse o no -- un poeta petrarcheggiante, magari abilissimo nel nascondere questa tendenza."

²⁵⁷ Binni, *Lezioni leopardiane*, 485. "In questa poesia c'è infatti come una bipolarità, un trapasso da un polo positivo e luminoso (l'aspettazione fiduciosa della felicità e della realizzazione delle speranze) a un polo negativo, la caduta delle speranze, la morte di Silvia, la demistificazione dell'illusorietà della vita."

love for humanity at large contrast completely with the feelings expressed in the *Zibaldone*. In the *Zibaldone* the author's perspective is that of an analytical outsider, observing the interactions of society and commenting philosophically on the relationships among its members, both collectively and individually. When treating the subject of similar *others* Leopardi demonstrated no sensitivity in the *Zibaldone*. The journal's function is that of a test canvass for his varied ideas on the world around him, expressed spontaneously.²⁵⁸

The *Zibaldone* is an exposition and a testing ground for ideas. When Leopardi approached a poem on the other hand, he was aware of the weight of every word and of the poetic conventions. The character of Silvia, while based on the real life of Teresa Fattorini, is a fabrication of the poet. All the attributes of health, youth and hope are given to her and then she is destroyed by the brutality of nature. In that regard Silvia's

²⁵⁸ Thomas G. Bergin and Anne Paolucci, *Selected Poems of Giacomo Leopardi* (Griffon House Publications, 2003), 5. "Giovanni Gentile (states) that Leopardi never approached philosophy as a systematic, formal study of the subject but as a personal exploration for answers to the large questions that plagued him: the meaning of life and death, the place and role of man on earth, the nature of fate and the universe, retaining only what appealed to him, what served his purpose as a writer and as a human being.

Those questions are the major subject of his poems and find eloquent expression in them; they are also the burden of his letters, notebooks, journals, and diaries, in which he scrutinizes and analyzes his thoughts and records his impressions and reflections as they occur, on a daily basis. And for this reason also, Gentile notes, these daily philosophical observations do not constitute a *philosophy*; they are true for one day, not necessarily for another."

Gentile's goal was for Italy to become militarily dominant and for its citizens to act collectively, with no recognition of individual thoughts and needs, leading to a totalitarian state. Gentile strove for national unity and broad tangible goals relating to the state whereas Leopardi simply wanted Italy to recreate a national literary identity which in turn would benefit the individuals in the population. Gentile believed that goals relating to the individual could not exist and were simply an abstraction since only the collective of society matters. Both exalted the cohesion of the Romans as one of the principal virtues that allowed them to dominate others militarily and to create a culture of unity. Leopardi was not a proto-fascist although he frequently emphasized the hatred of other groups and those considered inferior as essential to generating unity. Gentile, an avid Leopardi scholar, may have chosen to interpret Leopardi's desire for unification as primarily military not literary. The fascism of Gentile is based in part on a misappropriation of the misanthropy espoused in Leopardi's *Zibaldone*.

life has followed a similar trajectory to that of Leopardi and indeed Silvia is Leopardi as he sees himself. It is noteworthy that women in Leopardi's personal life were not held in high regard although women in his poetic life could be. The discrepancy is due to his not knowing any women other than his mother and sister, who represent the opposite ends of the emotional spectrum.

Silvia begins as a representation of a local character but her identity changes during the trajectory of the poem to become self-referential. Silvia ultimately represents Giacomo's brief period of childhood happiness followed by a descent²⁵⁹ into painful realizations about life. His hope is that he, like Silvia, will be allowed to die young and that his death will sadden others. Leopardi desperately desired attention and recognition.²⁶⁰ Even his portrait, although he did not like the depiction, was a source of contentment for Leopardi as he felt it would be a way for posterity to relate to him.²⁶¹

The tenderness he expresses toward Silvia is really the love and sweetness that he remembered as the young Giacomo, who began life so happily with his siblings, playing games and enjoying their time together. After that he began a rapid degeneration into the

²⁵⁹ Binni, *Lezioni leopardiane*, 486. "...[Leopardi] cerca di far rivivere totalmente quell'epoca lontana e felice, ma poi la poesia non regge a questa finzione e riporta (proprio in paragone a questo passato) al presente, al futuro, alla caducità, alla morte."

²⁶⁰ Shaw 52. In a letter to Giordani from September 26, 1817: "I certainly don't want to live among the crowd; mediocrity scares me to death; but I want to raise myself and become great and immortal by intelligence and application..."

²⁶¹ Origo 261. "The church of San Vitale, which at the time of Leopardi's burial stood in a quiet suburban village, gradually came to be surrounded by houses which formed one of the most crowded, overbuilt, and squalid quarters of Naples. The dust from the little square blew up over Leopardi's tomb; the squeaking of trams mingled with the voices of street-sellers crying their wares and the shouts of children dancing to barrel organs. Such was, for a century, the resting-place of the poet who had dreamed of '*sovrumani silenzi e profondissima quiete*'." Both Recanati and Florence attempted to gain possession of Leopardi's body but Naples refused, creating a tomb for him in 1939 in the Parco Virgiliano.

misanthrope poet he later became. His apparent concern for young Silvia and his cry of sadness for all of humanity is neither. His focus is again ultimately on himself and the personal suffering which he has endured. He expressed deep concern for another, although the individual is his alter ego, thus rendering the emotions self-referential and self-serving. The author, perpetually convinced that he was dying, describes the rapid disintegration of Silvia and the lack of enjoyment of her youth.

Perivi, o tenerella. E non vedevi
Il fior degli anni tuoi; (lines 42-43)

Silvia died too young and was unable to enjoy the common pleasures of youth, as was the case with young Giacomo, a once relatively happy child whose illusions were shattered.

Non ti molceva il core
La dolce lode or delle negre chiome
Or degli sguardi innamorati e schivi,
Ne teco le compagne ai di festivi
Ragionavan d'amore. (lines 44-48)

Silvia never had the opportunity to sit with her friends and discuss romance and their feelings, a scenario far removed from Leopardi's isolation. In *Lo Zibaldone* he claimed that real friendship is impossible although he often experienced it. *A Silvia* underlines some of these contradictory feelings between those expressed in the *Zibaldone* and those in his poetry in relation to friendship:

...vera amicizia difficilmente può essere o durare tra giovani ... L'odio verso i

simili, che essendo di ogni vivente verso ogni vivente, è maggiore verso quei della specie, ancor nella specie stessa è tanto maggiore, quanto un ti è più simile.²⁶²

While Leopardi will attribute no significance to friendship in his own life in the *Zibaldone*, he enjoyed close relationships with Antonio Ranieri and Fanny Ronchivecchi among many others. Silvia enjoys her friends and sits with others in town, another experience Giacomo never experienced in Recanati.

Silvia is an extension of the author and a reflection of him as a young man. Her death represents the end of hope and the death of his youthful persona.²⁶³ The poet was inspired to memorialize Teresa Fattorini in *A Silvia* during the spring in Pisa which brought back memories of Recanati. The primary room in the Leopardi home used for his studies overlooks the piazzetta where Teresa, daughter of the Leopardi family coachman, used to socialize with the other townsfolk. Spring in Pisa reminded Leopardi of spring in Recanati which in turn rekindled the memory of some brief moments of happiness in his youth. Changing Teresa's name to Silvia is a reference to Tasso's *Aminta* in which the protagonist experiences an unrequited love which leads to an unsuccessful suicide attempt. In the end, Aminta and Silvia are married. There is a confusing mix of images generated by the use of the name "Silvia". If the reference is not simply an homage to

²⁶² *Zibaldone* 1174. The paragraph continues to describe the barriers between individuals which limit the possibility of friendship; "Hanno gli ebrei in un loro libro di sentenze e detti vari, che si dice tradotto di lingua arabica, ma verisimilmente è pur di fattura ebraica (Orelli, *Opusc. graec. moral.*, t. II, Lipsia, 1821, praef., p. XV), che non so qual sapiente, dicendogli uno: io ti sono amico, rispose: che potria fare che non mi fossi amico? Che non sei nè della mia religione, nè vicino mio, nè parente, nè uno che mi mantenga?"

²⁶³ Franco Fortini, *Giacomo Leopardi - Canti* (UCD Foundation for Italian Studies, 1996), 81. "The gaunt, pointing figure of death--not then a cliché--concludes the cry of grief with deadening finality."

Tasso, one wonders who Leopardi is in the equation given that the poem is thought to have an auto-biographical slant.²⁶⁴ He may represent Silvia being pursued by Aminta or he may represent Aminta himself, in pursuit of Silvia. In the latter case, the self-love becomes extreme in that he would have projected himself into both characters in the poem who are in love with each other. In a final act of self-loathing, Leopardi kills Silvia, his poetic self.

Once Silvia died, an event representing the destruction of the young poet's dreams, the once-optimistic Leopardi died in a figurative sense, and continued living on a plane apart from others. In a social sense, Silvia is the person Leopardi would have wanted to be: beloved by all and surrounded by friends. Gradually the connection between the life of Silvia and that of Leopardi becomes even clearer:

La speranza mia dolce: agli anni miei
 Anche negaro i fati
 La giovinezza. Ahi come,
 Come passata sei,
 Cara compagna dell'età mia nova, (lines 50-53)

Leopardi's youth and hopes were also destroyed by the harsh reality of life and the focus on Silvia's suffering and the injustice her death highlights his own plight. He addresses Hope itself and marvels at its cruelty:

²⁶⁴ Binni 484. "È il motivo della rimembranza che infatti dà avvio alla grande prospettiva poetica che Leopardi apre in questo periodo, e in esso convergono motivi anche biografici ... La rimembranza da altra parte viene ad essere come un modo che attraverso la doppia vista poetica indaga nel passato del poeta e gli permette di rivivere la propria storia."

Mia lacrimata speme!
 Questo, è quel mondo? Questi
 I diletta, l'amor, l'opre, gli eventi,
 Onde contanto ragionammo insieme?
 Questa la sorte dell'umana gente? (lines 55-59)

Hope used to share confidence with Leopardi but that is gone now as Hope has revealed itself to be a cruel illusion. The description of the tragedy of Silvia's life gives way to a direct address to Hope which she also symbolizes. The rhetorical questions highlight the desperation of the poet who does not understand how Hope could break their confidence and shatter his dreams. Ultimately, Hope reveals its true nature:

All apparir del vero
 Tu, miseria, cadesti: e con la mano
 La fredda morte ed una tomba ignuda
 Mostravi di lontano. (lines 60-63)

Hope in the end moves ever further away, an impossible illusion, and leaves only death behind.²⁶⁵ The focus is not on Silvia, or even her symbolic representation in Hope, but rather on the broken dreams of the poet.

A Silvia is thus an interesting counterpoint to the negativity normally expressed toward peers which is abundant in *Lo Zibaldone*. Silvia is depicted as pleasant and full of potential. She is an inevitable victim of the cruelty of the world of nature. Her death is tragic, given that her dreams and life were simply snatched away from her without

²⁶⁵ Binni, *Lezioni leopardiane*, 498. "...qui per Leopardi nulla, neppure l'onore, la gloria, il pianto, può sopperire alla supreme sventura costituita dalla morte, dalla scomparsa totale dell'individuo."

reason. Gradually the description of Silvia and the unjust trajectory of her life converges with that of Leopardi himself at which point the poem becomes self-referential. The references relating to Silvia are thinly veiled protestations against the death of his once-hopeful persona.

La parola della poesia, qui la parola di Leopardi, non è un mero segno: è quel che significa. È Silvia, abbiamo detto; ed è la dolcezza dei suoi modi; è il suo cantare gioioso di speranza, quel canto che popola di sé la quiete degli *interni* come pure a'altra quiete, quella degli *esterni*, ove affacciano l'abitazione modesta di Silvia, e il palazzo dal cui balcone guarda il contino appassionato allo studio: le stanze insomma e *le vie dintorno* – ma nel finale, la parola sarà pietrificata in un gesto funereo, simile a quello che spira nei versi delle cosiddette “sepolcrali” ispirate appunto, a quanto sembra, da una scultura del Tenerani.²⁶⁶

The loving sentiments expressed in *A Silvia*, in contrast to his repeated negative references toward similar others in *Lo Zibaldone*, are a result of what he claimed to be his fundamentally loving nature. While Leopardi believed that members of society dislike *others* because their self-love compels them to do so, the same was not true for him. Leopardi felt that his self-love was virtually non-existent and therefore misanthropic sentiments toward others generated by that love did not exist for him either. It is Leopardi's lack of self-love that allowed him not to hate others and to perceive himself as one who felt deep concern for humanity. In his more intimate works such as *Pensieri* he indicated that his observations apply to others but not to him.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁶ Rosario Assunto, *Leopardi e la Nuova Atlantide* (Benincasa, 1988), 12-14.

²⁶⁷ *Opere* 695. Citation from *Pensieri* I. “...la mia inclinazione non è stata mai d'odiare gli uomini ma d'amarli.”

Anti-Enlightenment Leopardi

Leopardi described an interesting phenomenon taking place within those around him in relation to similar others: once the illusions of virtue and the greatness of antiquity are destroyed, humanity tends to look to those who are closest to them to release their pent-up misanthropy:

L'odio, che non si indirizza più verso gli stranieri, si rivolge adesso verso i prossimi, che risultano estranei alla ricerca egoistica del mio bene: "si odia il compagno, il concittadino, l'amico, il padre, il figlio" [890]. La regressione è formidabile. "L'uomo, in quanto allo scopo, è tornato alla solitudine primitiva. L'individuo solo, forma tutta la sua società"[876].²⁶⁸

The hatred once applied to foreign others is redirected toward similar others. And yet, in both the *Zibaldone* and in *Pensieri* Leopardi stated that contrary to what his contemporaries believed, he loved humanity. He saw life as a struggle between the kind and the vile:

Dico che il mondo è una lega di birbanti contro gli uomini da bene, e di vili contro i generosi. ... le vie dell'uomo coraggioso e da bene sono conosciute e semplici, quelle del ribaldo sono occulte e infinitamente varie.²⁶⁹

Those who are dishonest are respected for their ability to manipulate the honest and for being able to turn all situations in their favor. Those who are good become inherently

²⁶⁸ Biscuso and Gallo 104.

²⁶⁹ *Opere* 696. Citation from *Pensieri* I.

irritating as their existence is a constant reminder of a painful truth: honest folk will never triumph.

Anche sogliono essere odiatissimi i buoni e i generosi perché ordinariamente sono sinceri, e chiamano le cose coi loro nomi. Colpa non perdonata dal genere umano, il quale non odia mai tanto chi fa male, né il male stesso, quanto chi lo nomina.²⁷⁰

Leopardi presented a paradox of sorts in that one can be identified as either clever but unkind or odious and good. In his logic, it is impossible to be intelligent, respected and good and not be detestable. The embodiment of positive traits in an individual makes others in society hate that person who serves as a reminder of how little virtue exists among members of society today. He again pulled himself out of the equation and did not indicate his own position in the spectrum of behavior.²⁷¹ In his writing Leopardi often attempted to assume the role of the inert observer.

In the *Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro* Leopardi is embodied in the character of Eleandro who harbors no negativity toward those in society and who observes and comments on society from a critical distance:

Premessa la circostanza che egli non fa il bene “per non potere” ma neppure il male “per non volere”, e che ira e odio sono sentimenti forti e inadatti al presente incivilimento dell’umanità, non barbara ma nemmeno primitiva, il problema di Leopardi è di trovare comunque una maniera che giovi nello scrivere libri, nel comunicare sentenze, nel filosofare, che dopo aver ricercato la verità si riduce al massimo a doversene consolare. Tale via risolutiva di venire incontro ai bisogni dei propri simili è nel segno dell’amore, Eleandro lo confessa dopo aver chiarito

²⁷⁰ *Opere* 697. Citation from *Pensieri* I.

²⁷¹ Minore 146. “Si era trovato spettatore inerte, senza poter opporre resistenza.”

la sua posizione anche nei confronti del sentimento opposto:

Dall'odio poi verso tutta la nostra specie, sono così lontano, che non solamente non voglio, ma non posso anche odiare quelli che mi offendono particolarmente; anzi sono del tutto inabile e impenetrabile all'odio. Il che non è piccola parte della mia tanta inettitudine a praticare nel mondo... Sentite, amico mio. Sono nato ad amare, ho amato e forse con tanto affetto quanto può mai cadere in anima viva.²⁷²

Elandro represents Leopardi, who believed himself incapable of hatred toward others. In contrast, those inspired by illuminist philosophy to understand and to learn were so miserably unhappy by their discovery that knowledge brings pain, that they directed their negativity against those around them. Leopardi in some aspects is anti-rousseau and anti-illuminist, as he did not believe that enhancing one's life through reason and learning would bring contentment. Instead it is the contrary. Knowledge of the truth does not bring happiness and indeed the benefits of ignorance are espoused as a positive by Eleandro, who represents this Leopardian anti-illuminist perspective:

Eleandro: Dunque s'ingannano grandemente quelli che dicono e predicano che la perfezione dell'uomo consiste nella conoscenza del vero e che tutti i suoi mali provengono dalle false opinioni e dall'ignoranza. E così vi sono quelli che dicono che il genere umano sarà finalmente felice, quando tutti o una grande maggioranza degli uomini conosceranno la verità, e organizzeranno e governeranno la loro vita in accordo di tali modelli.²⁷³

In spite of the high degree of knowledge in Leopardi's contemporary world, sadness,

²⁷² Gennaro Mercogliano, *La Ginestra – Saggio su Leopardi* (Periferia, 1991) 27.

²⁷³ N. Giordano 106. From the *Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro*.

dissatisfaction and boredom still reign. Precisely because those in society have learned so much, it has become impossible to maintain the illusion that humanity can improve and can ever live happily:

Dunque, Leopardi sembra, in questa fase della sua riflessione, in una situazione ancora interlocutoria, se non proprio aporetica: non possiamo rinnovare le virtù antiche, perché la ragione le ha distrutte, ma non possiamo neppure fare a meno della ragione come strumento necessario per combattere gli “errori barbari”; la ragione non consente alcuna fondazione della morale individuale e delle virtù civiche, ma ormai si è spenta la forza delle illusioni che ne era la radice.²⁷⁴

In the case of the *Zibaldone*, the negativity is still expressed in a theoretical way and is generally not supported by revealing personal feelings, whereas his poetry and vignettes appear to be highly personal and revelatory of his interior monologue. As a perpetual non-participant in the normal activities of life, the statements he made do not apply to him. Thus the rule of negativity toward others in the *Zibaldone* is real and applies to the masses but not to the author. It is not that he felt above the rule but rather separate from it. Leopardi was an author who defined the role of the artist as a marginalized member of society who is an observer and a non-conformist, unfettered by society's constraints. He believed the dislike of similar others was a sentiment felt by everyone but himself and he used that misanthropic lens to understand those around him and their actions:

...l'amor proprio, il grado, la forza la massa di esso può esser maggiore o minore secondo gli individui e specie, e quindi anche l'odio verso altrui. Può anche esser maggiore nello stesso individuo secondo le diverse età, assuefazioni successive, circostanze accidentali, giornalieri, momentanee, tanto fisiche che morali. Può parimente esser maggiore o minore in una medesima specie generalmente, nelle

²⁷⁴ Biscuso and Gallo 100.

diverse sue epoche fisiche e morali, circostanze, ec. [2206] Per esempio, verso i suoi simili l'odio naturale può talvolta esser maggiore talvolta minore che verso gli altri animali ec.²⁷⁵

The observations in the *Zibaldone* are merely that; anthropological observations of society and the stimuli that drive its collective behavior. As an artist, Leopardi's position is so marginalized that he is not a component of society per se. Images of collective humanity in his poems depict an idealized version of society where individuals work for themselves as well as the common good. As the reader experiences the love and support of the community in such a poem, one senses the deep regret felt by Leopardi that such unity cannot occur outside of the poetic construct. He yearned for the pleasant interaction with others that Silvia was able to enjoy, if only temporarily, even though he knew from his own experiences that socializing could only end negatively. Only in the idealized world of poetry can social interaction be positive.

²⁷⁵ *Zibaldone* 728.

Social Interactions of Young Leopardi

As a young man in Recanati, Leopardi was an object of ridicule for the townsfolk and sought solitude in his world of books. He had virtually no positive social interaction with anyone.²⁷⁶ *Il passero solitario* highlights Leopardi's disdain for his peers which lead him to seek solitude:

Pur festeggiando il lor tempo migliore:
 Tu pensoso in disparte il tutto miri,
 Non compagni, non voli,
 Non ti cal d'allegria, schivi gli spassi (lines 11-14)²⁷⁷

The bird is both a literal and figurative representation and parallels Leopardi's relationship to society from which he is alienated:

Oimè, quanto somiglia
 Al tuo costume il mio! Sollazzo e riso,
 Della novella età dolce famiglia,
 E te german di giovinezza, amore,
 Sospiro acerbo de' provetti giorni,

²⁷⁶ Enrico Ghidetti, *Dizionario delle Idee* (Editori Riuniti, 1998) XVII. "Nelle carte dello Zibaldone, Giacomo -- quando fu dolorosamente certa l'impossibilità di ogni commercio intellettuale in quel di Recanati, prima che al suo orecchio giungesse la voce amica di Pietro Giordani -- si abituò a "pensare seco stesso" ben oltre la frontiera del "natio borgo selvaggio". In assenza di interlocutori (le cronache familiari tramandano la sua cocciuta abitudine al silenzio) egli dette inizio ad un fittissimo dialogo con le ombre della grande biblioteca, le sole presenze che le condizioni materiali della sua reclusione gli consentissero di evocare. Con queste ebbe ininterrotti "colloqui o soliloqui", proprio come il Tasso con il suo Genio familiare. Le mura della biblioteca, come la siepe dell'infinito, costituirono un impedimento destinato paradossalmente ad aprire un varco sull'orizzonte della cultura contemporanea e in questo straordinario laboratorio convennero antichi e moderni a sceverare le difficoltà e le incognite dei tempi che cambiavano."

²⁷⁷ *Canti* 109.

Non curo, io no so come; anzi da loro
 Quasi fuggo lontano;
 Quasi romito, e strano
 Al mio loco natio,
 Passo del viver mio la primavera (lines 17-26)

Leopardi literally moves away from his peers and the electric atmosphere:

Tutta vestita a festa
 La gioventù del loco
 Lascia le case, e per le vie si spande;
 E mira ed è mirata, e in cor s'allegra.
 Io solitario in questa
 Rimota parte alla campagna uscendo,
 Ogni diletto e gioco
 Indugio in altro tempo (lines 32-39)

While the bird lives motivated by sheer instinct alone, Leopardi has the free will to do as he chooses and consequently the ability to regret the poor choices he has made later in life. The bird suffers no such remorse. The poet is miserable whereas the sparrow is not, for the bird simply lives and follows “Ogni nostra vaghezza” (line 49) assigned to it by nature:

Del dì presente più noioso e tetro,
 Che parrà di tal voglia?
 Che di quest'anni miei? Che di me stesso?
 Ahi pentirommi, e spesso,
 Ma sconsolato, volgerommi indietro. (lines 55-59)

Since Leopardi believed that solitude is natural and that community spirit is unnatural, he

lived that way, even though the lack of camaraderie hurt him deeply. He was in internal conflict between the “natural” desire to be alone and distant from others versus what others perceive as typical pleasures of life; laughing with friends, celebrating together, and sharing feelings. Some of these sentiments were explored in *A Silvia*. Much of the internal conflict in Leopardi’s life derived from the tension between the worlds of reason and the natural. Reason is overly analytical and scientific whereas natural sentiments are calm and geared more toward primal needs; solitude, tranquility, and self-love:

Altra prova che la ragione è spesso nemica della natura, si cava dall’utilità (così per la salute come per tutto il resto) della fatica a cui la natura ripugna e così dalla ripugnanza della natura a cento altre cose o necessarie o utilissime e però consigliate dalla ragione, e per lo contrario dall’inclinazione della natura a moltissime altre o dannose o inutili o proibite, illecite, e condannate dalla ragione: e la natura spesso tende con questi appetiti a danneggiare e a distruggere se stessa.²⁷⁸

Nature is a constant force of indiscriminate destruction whereas reason attempts to mitigate such effects. Reason by definition is measured and not spontaneous--the complete opposite of nature, which while harsh, is direct and unpretentious. Leopardi believed that for individuals living in a community, the natural inclination is to be with others and yet he personally willfully chose to not participate. He believed that he would come to regret such choices before death and yet could not bring himself to be with others considering the pain that all such contact had produced in the past.

Thus the concept of positive social interaction enjoyed by others expressed in his poems

²⁷⁸ *Zibaldone* 17.

is in direct conflict with themes espoused in *Lo Zibaldone*. If indeed *l'odio naturale* is so powerful, than friendships and positive social occasions should not be possible. While *Il passero solitario* shows humanity's typical desire is contact with others, the *Zibaldone* highlights Leopardi's perception that humanity's natural choice is to be alone. The *Zibaldone* is characterized by natural law while his poetry is characterized by reason. Misanthropy in *Lo Zibaldone* has three varieties as previously indicated; dislike of self, dislike of peers, and dislike of foreign others. Additionally however, these types can be dissected further depending upon if Leopardi is viewing them through the lens of Nature or that of Reason. Reason desires that humanity unites, in some instances, if only against its natural oppressor. In contrast Nature wills that humanity avoid others. Leopardi's embrace of nature and rejection of reason in terms of interactions with others is part of his anti-enlightenment stance.

When analyzing Leopardi's poetry and prose, it is essential to differentiate which filter is being used; the anti-social view of Nature (*L'infinito*) or the socially-oriented, collective perspective of Reason (*A Silvia*). In many instances, there is a conflict between the desires of the author to participate in society with the simultaneous understanding that interaction can only bring pain:

Uno sviluppo contrassegnato da un dissidio costante tra la sua teoria, che “dovrebbe tirarlo al suicidio, o alla misantropia, o alla compiuta indifferenza innanzi a ogni ordine morale”, e la sua stessa natura benefica che, “più forte della sua teoria”, gli ridona talora “il sapore della vita e la facoltà di amare” e che, anche quando egli si sente schiacciato dal fato, gli dà la forza di resistere e di sopravvivere.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁹ Esposito 74.

It is this “natura benefica” which leads some critics like DeSanctis to incorrectly identify Leopardi’s work as fundamentally positive. There is a plethora of evidence in Leopardi’s work which indicates that happiness is impossible in the contemporary world and any hope of such is merely an illusion. And yet for Leopardi, it is important for others to believe in illusions such as the concepts of society and religion, as they impose structure and meaning on a life filled with arbitrary events. *Il passero solitario* embodies the conflict between one’s desire for solitude and the need for human interaction while at the same time knowing that neither will bring satisfaction.

Disenchantment with Fellow Italians

This lack of satisfaction derived from social interaction also manifests itself in Leopardi's frustration with contemporary Italians. His obsession with ancient culture and desire to create a national literature underline his belief that contemporary Italy was deeply lacking sophistication and was alienating to him. Angelo Mai's discovery of Cicero's *De Repubblica* was a thrilling event in Giacomo's life. It was seen by Leopardi as an opportunity for Italy to rediscover its past literary greatness. Leopardi revealed his unbounded enthusiasm and excitement for the literature of the ancients and the hope that Italy could rekindle such passionate literature. In a personal letter to Angelo Mai, Leopardi could barely contain his excitement:

You really are a miracle in a thousand things--intelligence, taste, learning, industriousness, tireless study, unprecedented and paralleled good luck. In short, you take us back to the time of the Petrarchs and the Poggios, when every day was lit up by a new classical discovery, and the astonishment and delight of men of letters never ceased.²⁸⁰

In the poem *Ad Angelo Mai*, Leopardi's enthusiasm is quickly transformed into disdain when he shifts his attention from the literary glory of the past to the state of present-day Italy:

Italo ardito, a che giammai non posi
Di sveglar dalle tombe

²⁸⁰ Shaw 92. The letter was written in January 1820, in the same month he wrote the poem *Ad Angelo Mai*.

I nostri padri? Ed a parlar gli meni
 A questo secol morto, al quale incombe
 Tanta nebbia di tedio? (lines 1-5)²⁸¹

There is the exhortation to recapture the old glory and the shame felt in the present, exemplifying the themes of love of country, patriotism, and virtue. Leopardi has also expressed that virtue is an illusion so it may be that he is trying to inspire the reader to achieve the unattainable, a platonic ideal. It is notable that he could not simply rejoice in Mai's wonderful discovery, but must take the opportunity to criticize his countrymen, thus converting a positive event into an expression of negativity. Leopardi felt intellectually trapped in his country, much like his 16th Century literary hero, the imprisoned Torquato Tasso:

O Torquato, o Torquato, a noi l'eccelsa
 Tua mente allora, il pianto
 A te, non altro, preparava il cielo.
 Oh misero Torquato! il dolce canto
 Non valse a consolarti o a sciorre il gelo
 Onde l'alma t'avean, ch'era sì calda,
 Cinta l'odio e l'immondo
 Livor privato e de' tiranni. Amore,
 Amor, di nostra vita ultimo inganno,
 T'abbandonava.²⁸² (lines 121-130)

Leopardi related to Tasso's plight while being imprisoned in his parents' home and living

²⁸¹ *Canti* 60. *Ad Angelo Mai* was written and published in 1820 and republished in 1824.

²⁸² *Canti* 65. From *Ad Angelo Mai*.

in Recanati in general. Both he and Tasso were able to occupy themselves with varying degrees of success with their powers of imagination; analyzing the world around them, classical literature, and exploring the limits of the mind bordering on insanity. In the *Dialogo di Torquato Tasso e del suo Genio familiare*, Leopardi used the character of Tasso to express many of his misanthropic thoughts also described in the *Zibaldone*:

Tasso: ... Ma direi che la familiarità con i propri simili e lo sperimentare continuamente il dolore tendono a far sprofondire ed addormentare quel primo uomo presente in ciascuno di noi e che si risveglia di tanto in tanto per breve tempo, tanto più raramente quanto più si invecchia; sempre più poi si ritrae nella nostra interiorità e ricade in un sonno più profondo finché, sebbene la nostra vita continui ancora, esso muore.²⁸³

The semi-happiness once felt is oppressed by negative interactions with our peers and effectively hibernates, thus limiting one's ability to be happy. Such interaction can only bring disappointment which is why Leopardi sought refuge in dreams and Tasso in the far reaches of his mind, far from reality.

Genio: Devi sapere che la sola differenza esistente tra la realtà e il sogno è che il sogno può a volte essere più bello e più dolce di quanto potrebbe mai essere il vero.²⁸⁴

Since social interaction brings only disappointment and pain, pleasure can only be experienced as a memory or as a slight hope for the future, "In questo modo il piacere è

²⁸³ N. Giordano, 68.

²⁸⁴ N. Giordano 69.

sempre passato o futuro, mai presente.”²⁸⁵ As a result of this impossible quest for happiness, the individual waits for some positive stimulation which never arrives, leading to deep melancholy and sensory deprivation. To remind oneself of being alive, there are three options:

Genio: Il sonno, l’oppio e il dolore. E l’ultimo è il più potente di tutti, perché mentre soffre l’uomo non si annoia in nessun modo.²⁸⁶

The tedium caused by depression, lack of stimulation, and the disappointing behavior of one’s peers is almost like death itself:

Tasso: Ma certamente questa vita che io conduco è perennemente in conflitto con se stessa; perché se anche metto da parte le mie sofferenze, la noia da sola mi uccide.

The conflict stems from the natural desire to live and the reasonable desire of death. The only way to survive adult life is to escape from society, returning to a childlike state where anything is possible:

Genio: ... In questo modo la solitudine fa quasi la funzione della giovinezza; o certamente ringiovanisce lo stesso animo, consolida e dà nuovo vigore all’immaginazione e rinnova nell’uomo esperto i benefici di quella prima inesperienza di cui tu hai nostalgia.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵ N. Giordano 70.

²⁸⁶ N. Giordano 72.

²⁸⁷ N. Giordano 73.

The implication is that contemporary adult society is inherently stifling creatively and is also damaging to the artist for the fact that there are other people in it. The artist's goal then becomes to escape physically or at least psychologically from the *others*. Leopardi's misanthropy toward similar others has two causes. The first springs from the Italian public's disinterest in culture and poorly-defined national identity. Leopardi constantly analyzed other European cultures which have clear national traits and wanted Italy to cultivate the same distinctions:

L'analisi della società elaborata da Leopardi ha due aspetti essenziali: da un lato, la diagnosi delle tendenze della società contemporanea e la loro valutazione storica e morale; dall'altro, l'individuazione delle differenze nazionali nell'esperienza della modernità. Lo studio comparato della situazione morale e culturale della società italiana rispetto a quella delle altre nazioni europee è di carattere storico-fenomenologico, affine ad una *Kulturkritik*. Lo sfondo generale è quello della modernità, nella quale "la conservazione della società sembra opera piuttosto del caso che d'altra cagione", a causa dell'estinzione o indebolimento delle credenze su cui si possono fondare i principi morali.²⁸⁸

The second variety of misanthropy is more personal and derives from the sadness and disappointment caused by those closest to him; family, peers, and objects of desire. Both kinds of misanthropy toward others, foreign and similar, are typified by Leopardi's desire to integrate his world into a larger whole. He felt that Italy was marginalized and not part of the intellectual life of the European continent and that he personally was not integrated into the community of those closest to him physically.

²⁸⁸ Biscuso and Gallo 130.

The next chapter will investigate misanthropy directed toward oneself. It is the only kind of dislike that Leopardi consistently depicted with no artifice. Misanthropy toward foreign and similar others are both thinly-veiled calls to action to unify and highlight Leopardi's social alienation and personal pain. Self-hate in contrast is depicted unambiguously and reveals Leopardi's profound sadness living as a perpetual outsider, never achieving the emotional and literary goals he had set for himself. He knew from the many books in his family library dealing with biology, those by Malthus and his contemporaries in particular, that his behavior from a biological perspective was an aberration.²⁸⁹ The individual according to biology should love him/herself if only as a means of propagating the species. While the dislike of others, foreign and familiar, is both logical and natural to some extent, his self-hate, and resulting lack of self-interest, is an issue which contradicts the laws of nature.

²⁸⁹ Malthus believed that no change in philosophy, such as Rousseau's belief in progress and the perfectability of man, could alter the competitive nature of humanity's struggle to survive. Scarcity dictates that an individual will act only out of self-interest and that our lives are governed in all aspects by the laws of supply and demand. "On the whole, therefore, though our future prospects respecting the mitigation of the evils arising from the principle of population may not be so bright as we could wish, yet they are far from being entirely disheartening, and by no means preclude that gradual and progressive improvement in human satiety, which, before the late wild speculations on this subject, was the object of rational expectation. To the laws of property and marriage, and to the apparently narrow principle of self-interest which prompts each individual to exert himself in bettering his condition, we are indebted for all the noblest exertions of human genius, for every thing that distinguishes the civilized from the savage state." *Essay on the Principle of Population*, Book IV, Chapter XIV.

Chapter Four - Dislike of Self

A periodi di “alegrezza pazza” seguivano altri di “maggiori angosce”. Giacomo teneva i primi pomeriggi e le notti interminabili consumate nel letto, senza poter prendere sonno. Una sensazione segreta e ineffabile lo torturava, con la precoce cognizione di sé e della propria infelicità, con la profondità del pensiero fissata su un “idea paurosa o dolorosa”.

Giacomo sentiva crescere, e diventare intollerabile, la sensazione di essere distante o separato da tutto, mentre fuori la vita continuava a scorrere festosa e inconsapevole. Il brusio delle piazze e delle stradine giungeva affievolito con il canto degli adolescenti e le chiacchiere delle botteghe artigiane.²⁹⁰

Much of Giacomo’s life was a struggle against depression and manic mood swings which left the author feeling progressively removed from the normal activities of society.²⁹¹ The only form of misanthropy Leopardi described which was not artifice was that which he felt for himself. His anger was due to his unsatisfying life which he described consistently in pessimistic terms:

Che cosa è la vita? Il viaggio di un zoppo e infermo che con un gravissimo carico

²⁹⁰ Minore 49.

²⁹¹ Tartaro VII. Leopardi felt his obsession with studying and literature had ruined him physically and socially, making him an ostracized misfit. He began his scholarly life by simply focusing on erudition and absorbing as many facts as he could on a variety of subjects. In 1809, at age nine, he was still very enthusiastic; “Inizia lo “studio matto e disperatissimo”, come poi dirà. Legge Omero e compone il sonetto *La morte di Ettore*.” He shifted from the pursuit of erudition to that of beauty but was still unfulfilled. He then began to pursue truth, *il vero*, and focus on his personal memories and the role of Italy in European culture. Tartaro X. “Inizia la corrispondenza col Giordani, al quale il 21 marzo [1817] scrive: “Io ho grandissimo, forse smodato e insolente desiderio di gloria” ... “la mia patria è l’Italia; per la quale ardo d’amore, ringraziando il cielo d’avermi fatto italiano, perchè alla fine, la nostra letteratura, sia pur poco coltivata, è la sola figlia legittima delle due sole vere tra le antiche”. Sempre al Giordani il 30 maggio scrive, “Io sono andato un pezzo in traccia della erudizione più pellegrina e recondita, e dai 13 ai 17 anni ho dato dentro a questo studio profondamente, tanto che ho scritto dai sei ai sette tomi non piccoli di cose erudite”; e aggiunge “la qual fatica è appunto quella che mi ha rovinato.””

in sul dosso per montagne ertissime e luoghi sommamente aspri, faticosi e difficili, alla neve, al gelo, alla pioggia, al vento, all'ardore del sole, cammina senza mai riposarsi di e notte uno spazio di molte giornate [4163] per arrivare a un cotal precipizio o un fosso, e quivi inevitabilmente cadere (Bologna, 17 Gennaio 1826)²⁹²

Such grim observations about the difficulty of living underscore Leopardi's belief that one's life never approximates the level of satisfaction or pleasure that it should, especially in his case. He believed that as one lives and recalls happy times, sadness is produced by the realization that such happiness will never occur again. At first one resists the slide into melancholy and tries to recapture the positive mood. Over time, however, one is worn down by the inevitable truth that recapturing positive feelings is impossible:

Tre stati della gioventù: 1. speranza, forse il più affannoso di tutti;
2. disperazione furibonda e renitente; 3. disperazione rassegnata.²⁹³

This leads to feelings of self-hatred, disgust and revulsion toward one's existence caused primarily by the inability of the individual to improve one's life:

Due verità che gli uomini generalmente non crederanno mai: l'una di non saper nulla, l'altra di non esser nulla. Aggiungi la terza, che ha molta dipendenza dalla seconda: di non aver nulla a sperare dopo la morte.²⁹⁴

The primary cause of unhappiness and self-hate for Leopardi is the presence of memory.

²⁹² *Zibaldone* 1092.

²⁹³ *Zibaldone* 1098.

²⁹⁴ *Zibaldone* 1188.

The function of memory is that of helping him remember previous pleasant periods which serve as points of reference, forcing him to confront his current misery. Memories then lead to self-hate and feelings of inadequacy because he could not achieve this remembered and idealized happiness from the past. Leopardi's position is that memory is a negative force for him and indeed everyone because instead of inspiring a person, it makes one bitter and frustrated about what one used to be. To be alive is to constantly remember the past and continually hope to recapture some shred of a past happiness:

Io vivo, dunque io spero, è un sillogismo giustissimo, eccetto quando la vita non si sente, come nel sonno ec. Disperazione, rigorosamente parlando, non si dà, ed è così impossibile a ogni vivente, come l'odio vero di se medesimo. Chi si uccide da se, non è veramente senza speranza, non più che egli odii veramente se stesso, o che egli sia senz'amor di se stesso. Noi speriamo sempre e in ciascun momento della nostra vita. Ogni momento è un pensiero, e così ogni momento è in certo modo un atto di desiderio, e altresì un atto di speranza, atto che benchè si possa sempre distinguere logicamente, nondimeno in pratica è ordinariamente un tuttuno, quasi, coll'atto di desiderio, e la speranza una quasi stessa, o certo inseparabile, cosa col desiderio.²⁹⁵

In this way Leopardi explained how the act of living demonstrates a love of life, albeit an unobtainable one. Allowing oneself to live is a frustrating act of desire, one which implies hope of recapturing happiness in some form. Once that hope is lost, so is the will to live. He believed that within the individual are conflicting feelings of love for life and hate for one's condition which always falls short of the ideal.

²⁹⁵ *Zibaldone* 1090.

Suicide and Nature

In Leopardi's case the conflict between the desire to live or to die was especially strong because his poor health²⁹⁶ made his body a terrestrial prison²⁹⁷. His self-directed misanthropy was in part due to his physical inferiority in relation to others and the continuous pain he experienced:

At an age when constitutions normally grow stronger, I have less strength every day, and my bodily faculties are abandoning me one by one. This comforts me, because it has made me despair of myself, and realize that as my life is no longer worth anything, I can throw it away, as I shall do shortly, because if I cannot live except in this condition and this state of health, I don't want to live, and if a different way of life is possible, it must be attempted. And to make the attempt as best I can, that is, desperately and blindly, does not cost me anything any more, now that the old illusions about my own worth, and about hopes for a future life, and about the good I could do, and the things to be achieved, and the glory to be won, have vanished before my eyes, and I have no opinion of myself, and I know I am worth much less than many of my fellow citizens, whom I used to hold in such profound contempt. (Letter 27)²⁹⁸

²⁹⁶ *Tutte le opere* 1382. Although Leopardi was in poor health, he did not want interpretations of his literary output to be influenced by his physical defects; “(Qualunque siano le mie sventure, che si è pensato di voler rivelare e che forse si sono anche un po’ esagerate in questo giornale [*Hesperus*, a German literary journal], io ho avuto abbastanza coraggio per non cercare di diminuirne il peso, né con frivole speranze in una prestesa felicità futura e sconosciuta, né con una vile rassagnazione. I miei sentimenti di fronte al destino sono stati e sono sempre quelli che io ho espresso nel *Bruto minore*. È stato in seguito a questo coraggio, che essendo condotto dalle mie ricerche ad una filosofia disperante, non ho esitato ad abbracciarla tutta intera; mentre che, d’altra parte, non è stato che per effetto della viltà degli uomini, che hanno bisogno di essere persuasi del merito dell’esistenza, che si son volute considerare le mie opinioni filosofiche come il risultato delle mie sofferenze particolari e che ci si ostina ad attribuire alle mie circostanze materiali ciò che non si deve se non al mio pensiero. Prima di morire protesterò contro questa invenzione della debolezza e della volgarità e pregherò i miei lettori di impegnarsi a distruggere le mie osservazioni e ragionamenti piuttosto che accusare le mie malattie).”

²⁹⁷ Origo 250. “And his father’s account of his adolescence recorded typical examples of preoccupation and anxiety, such as to affect even his physical functions. At once time, Conte Monaldo wrote, ‘he gave so much thought to his breathing that he could no longer do so freely’; at another he found, for the same reason, great difficulty in urinating. ...his digestive functions, manifesting itself in a chronic constipation and a mucous-membranous colitis...”.

²⁹⁸ Shaw 79. This letter was written to Pietro Giordani in Milan. Giordani was also a writer and consistently

At the point where hope is gone and illusions are destroyed, death becomes the only option to achieve some kind of pleasure in the form of the removal of pain. Since happiness cannot be obtained, at least a state of non-suffering can. He was therefore driven, “to the extreme of desperation, [took] supreme pleasure in the idea of suicide”²⁹⁹. In this case it is a passive suicide in that Leopardi was going to run away from his home in Recanati and put himself into the hands of an uncertain fate, which could then decide to end his intellectual or even physical life.

As a result of Leopardi’s conflict between the desire to live and to die, the act of suicide has conflicting meanings in the *Zibaldone*. It can be the ultimate act of self-hatred and low self-esteem or it can be a reasonable escape from life, which by definition is not worth living since it is inferior to what one deserves.³⁰⁰ His self-perception vacillates between high and low self esteem, deserving at times everything but generally nothing. The Leopardian logic is inherently negative since the life one desires and should be experiencing is unobtainable due to the competitive nature of modern life:

Intorno al suicidio. È cosa assurda che secondo i filosofi e secondo i teologi, si

supported Leopardi’s literary ambitions. Being twenty-five years older, Giordani served a role as a big brother from whom Leopardi would seek approval or encouragement.

²⁹⁹ Shaw 81. This is addressed to his brother Carlo Leopardi to be read after he had run away from home in July 1819. He planned to abandon himself to fate, possibly leading to his death in an indirect form of suicide, “For as long as I had self respect, I was more cautious; now that I despise myself, I find no other solace than to throw myself on chance, and seek out danger, as a thing of no value...It would have been better for them and for me if I had not been born, or if I had died a long time ago. Thus has our misfortune decreed. Adieu, dear Carlo, adieu.”

³⁰⁰ Esposito 15. Humanity, possessing a strong intellect in contrast with the animal world, can experience religion and reason: “Insomma la religione conferisce luce di verità a tutto ciò che la ragione, all’opposto, trova piccolo, brutto ed arido in questo mondo.”

possa e si debba viver contro natura (anzi non sia lecito viver secondo natura) e non si possa morir contro natura. E che sia lecito d'essere infelice contro natura (che non avea fatto l'uomo infelice), e non sia lecito di liberarsi dalla infelicità in un modo contro natura, essendo questo l'unico possibile, dopo che noi siamo ridotti così lontani da essa natura, e così irreparabilmente. (23 Giugno 1822)³⁰¹

For Leopardi, the sadness created by society's abandonment of nature is so overwhelming and humiliating that self-annihilation is a logical alternative³⁰² to life as a "sepulcro ambulante." Preventing Leopardi from following through and committing suicide is its essence as an act wholly against the laws of nature as well as those of religion. He was caught in constant conflict between the natural desire to survive and the will to die produced by living in society which is nature's antithesis:

Il suicidio è contro natura. Ma viviamo noi secondo natura? Non l'abbiamo al tutto abbandonata per seguire la ragione? Non siamo animali ragionevoli, cioè diversissimi dai naturali? La ragione non ci mostra ad evidenza l'utilità di morire? Desideremmo noi di ucciderci, se non conoscessimo altro movente, altro maestro della vita che la natura, e se fossimo ancora, come già fummo, nello stato naturale? Perchè dunque dovendo vivere contro natura, non possiamo morire contro natura? Perchè se quello è ragionevole, questo non lo è?³⁰³

Leopardi equated nature with a primal state of happiness and purity from which humanity has so far distanced itself that it can never return:

³⁰¹ *Zibaldone* 783.

³⁰² *Zibaldone* 988. "Come il suicidio, o il tormentar se stesso per odio proprio, quello è, questo, se potesse essere, sarebbe evidentemente contro natura, così la guerra tra gli individui d'una specie medesima, le uccisioni scambievoli, e i mali qualunque procurati da' simili a simili, sono cose evidentemente contro natura, mentre pur sono assolutamente inevitabili, e non accidentali (se non a una per una, non generalmente e tutte insieme), ma essenziali e costanti in qualsivoglia società stretta."

³⁰³ *Zibaldone* 703.

Io so bene che la natura ripugna con tutte le sue forze al suicidio, so che questo rompe tutte le di lei leggi più gravemente che qualunque altra colpa umana; ma da che la natura è del tutto alterata, da che la nostra vita ha cessato di esser naturale, da che la felicità che la natura ci avea destinata è fuggita per sempre, e noi siamo fatti incurabilmente infelici, da che quel desiderio della morte, che non dovevamo mai, secondo natura, neppur concepire, in dispetto della natura, e per forza di ragione, s'è anzi impossessato di noi..³⁰⁴

Leopardi believed that suicide will appear to be a reasonable alternative to one who is far distanced from the purity of nature and the immaculate spiritual condition found in the primal world. Suicidal thoughts are thus generated by reason and are a reaction to the unnatural overly-social conditions in contemporary society.

La ripugnanza naturale alla morte è distrutta negli estremamente infelici, quasi del tutto. Perché debbono astenersi dal morire per ubbidienza alla natura?³⁰⁵

Leopardi repeatedly confronted the question of the necessity of following the rules of nature even if one lives apart from it and is consumed by unnatural self-hate. Self-directed misanthropy is caused by modern life and its artificial constructs and creates an ethical conundrum which prevented him from following through his many threats. Furthermore, if he were to kill himself the pain suffered by his family would be too great. Thus he feels that it is better to continue suffering for the benefit of his family than to take the step of killing himself. For Leopardi there is a significant difference between dying by one's own hand as opposed to letting God determine the course of fate. In any case, he often prayed for death:

³⁰⁴ *Zibaldone* 372.

³⁰⁵ *Zibaldone* 372.

If anyone ever desired death as sincerely and earnestly as I for a long time have desired it, certainly no one ever desired it more. I call on God as witness to the truth of these words. He knows how many fervent prayers I have said (to the point of reciting triduos or novenas), to obtain this blessing; and how at every slight hope of danger near or far off, my heart lifts with cheerfulness. If death were in my own hands, again I call on God as witness that I would never have talked to you like this; because life *anywhere* is abhorrent to me and a torment. But since it still does not please God to grant my prayer, I would go back to Recanati to end my days, if living there, especially given my present inability to occupy myself, did not exceed my huge powers of endurance. (Letter 188)³⁰⁶

Whether death would come by his own hand or not, Leopardi did not grant much significance or value to life. He began to perceive it as no different than death.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ Shaw 266. In this letter written in Florence on July 3, 1832, Leopardi asks his father for spending money, "I think you are convinced of the desperate efforts I have made for seven years to find a way of being self-supporting...Literature is destroyed in Europe; publishers bankrupt, or on the point of it, or reduced to a single printing press, or forced to abandon projects on which a promising start had been made. In Italy it would be ridiculous now to presume to sell anything with honor where literature is concerned...I thus find myself, as you can well imagine, without the means to carry on."

³⁰⁷ Origo 256. "'Life', he had written, 'is a thing of so little moment that a man, thinking of himself, should not be greatly concerned either to retain it or to leave it.'"

Suicide and Religion

The mere idea of suicide also scared Leopardi because of his religious beliefs. While his concept of religion changed over time and the loss of his childhood spirituality was a cataclysmic shock to his system, some fundamental ideas from his early religious training persisted in his work³⁰⁸. Toward the end of his life the distinctions between existence and non-existence became blurred. The leopardian perspective is that modern life by definition is corrupt since the simple purity of classical society is gone as is all hope of happiness. What prevented him from taking his own life³⁰⁹ is the threat of the unknown, of infinite uncertainty³¹⁰ or eternal punishment, provided by religion:

Il giovane pensatore [Leopardi] ne deduce che gli infelici e i travagliati di questa vita non possono essere veramente consolati dalle speranze della religione cristiana... “Ed è certissimo infatti che l’influenza da lui [Cristianesimo] esercitata sulle azioni degli uomini, è sempre stata ed è tuttavia come di religione minacciante assai più che come di religione promettente; ch’egli ha indotto al bene e allontanato dal male, e giovato alla società ed alla morale assai più col timore che colla speranza; che i Cristiani osservarono e osservano i precetti della religione loro più per rispetto dell’Inferno e del Purgatorio che del Paradiso.”³¹¹

³⁰⁸ Esposito 14. After age twenty, Leopardi rarely referred to any personal religious belief and references to God become less frequent. However he indicated in the *Zibaldone* at times that he did believe, “In una delle prime annotazioni di quel suo straordinario diario intellettuale che è lo *Zibaldone*, si legge: “Tutto è o può essere contento di se stesso, eccetto l’uomo, il che mostra che la sua esistenza non si limita a questo mondo, come quella delle altre cose.”(p. 29) Come dire che, attraverso l’infinità dei bisogni, si giunge necessariamente all’aldilà e a Dio.” This also implies that Leopardi may have believed that contentment may come only after death and explains why he viewed terrestrial life as a litany of human suffering to be endured, a crucible to determine if one is worthy of a pleasant afterlife.

³⁰⁹ Tartaro XXIII. In 1819, “Scrive al Giordani che la sua vita “non valendo più nulla” egli può senza rimorsi “gittarla” e aggiunge: “così farò in breve.””

³¹⁰ *Zibaldone* 373. “L’idea della religione ce lo vieta (il suicidio), e ce lo vieta inesorabilmente, e irrimediabilmente; perchè nata una volta quest’idea nella mente nostra, come arrischiare l’infinito contro il finito?”

³¹¹ Esposito 18.

Leopardi struggled with the morality of even contemplating suicide for his entire adult life due to his belief in the eternal nature of an individual's existence:

Tutto è o può esser contenuto in se stesso, eccetto l'uomo, il che mostra che la sua esistenza non si limita a questo mondo, come quella dell'altre cose.³¹²

Young Giacomo wore the tonsure and had constant religious training, ideas from which are manifest in his earliest poems and introduced him to the idea of eternity. His family library contained the canon of western religion³¹³ and he studied it assiduously.

In spite of the religious skepticism which gradually imbued his outlook, he still maintained a healthy respect, or at least fear of, such concepts. Modern life compels the individual to become self-centered in a destructive way contrary to religious ideals. *L'amor proprio*, which by necessity engenders a hatred of others, creates an internal conflict in that one never achieves the happiness that nature had promised:

L'amor proprio dell'uomo, e di qualunque individuo di qualunque specie, è un amore di preferenza. Cioè l'individuo amandosi naturalmente quanto può amarsi, si preferisce dunque agli altri, dunque cerca di soverchiarli in quanto può, dunque effettivamente l'individuo odia l'altro individuo, e l'odio degli altri è una conseguenza necessaria ed immediata dell'amore di se stesso, il quale essendo

³¹² Zibaldone 32.

³¹³ Paolo Rota, *Leopardi e la Bibbia* (Il Mulino, 1998), 9. "...la collezione libraria, ampliata giorno per giorno dallo stesso Monaldo grazie ad acquisti di fondi appartenuti a canonici, cardinali o corporazioni espropriate, venisse a poco a poco incrementandosi principalmente nei settori della "Scriptura", "Historia Sacra", "Patres", "Ascetica", divenendo così luogo ideale per la crescita spirituale di un uomo di Chiesa, quale Giacomo, nei desideri del padre, era chiamata a diventare. Trattati di teologia, morale, dogmatica, opere di consultazione storico-linguistica sulla cultura ebraica, commenti a vari testi biblici, opere poetiche di ispirazione scritturale: sono questi, all'incirca, i sottoinsiemi della materia religiosa presenti nel Catalogo, ai quali Leopardi stesso rimanda attraverso le citazioni bibliografiche presenti nella sua opera."

innato, anche l'odio degli altri viene ad essere innato in ogni vivente.³¹⁴

The only clear manifestation of his purported self-love is the hate of others. It may seem like a perversion of the concept but it is important to distinguish between *amor proprio* and *amor di se*. The first is potentially malicious and the other typifies normal self-preservation behavior.³¹⁵ In Leopardi's relativist logic, where pleasure is simply the absence of pain, love is merely the absence of active hate toward oneself or others. Leopardi is in constant conflict between loving and hating himself and as a result his reactions to others vary. This contrast led him to alternatively love and hate his own life, depending on how he perceived his role, the acceptance of his literary contributions and the memories of his family.

It is interesting to note that, on 26 June 1820, after receiving a letter from Giordani telling him to accept death when it came "come un bene; e ti persuadi di non perder nulla perdendo la vita", Leopardi wrote that his friend's exhortations had produced the opposite result in him, so that "ricordandomi la mia fanciullezza e i pensieri e i desideri e le belle viste e le occupazioni dell'adolescenza, mi si serrava il cuore in maniera ch'io non sapea più rinunziare alla speranza, e la morte mi spaventava... non già come morte, ma come annullatrice di tutta la bella aspettativa passata. E pure quella lettera non mi avea detto nulla ch'io non mi dicessi già tutto giorno..."³¹⁶

³¹⁴ *Zibaldone* 385.

³¹⁵ Many of Leopardi's ideas relating to *amor proprio* versus *amor di se* are derived from the work of Rousseau who delved into humanity's warped sense of self-worth which is influenced greatly by how one is perceived by others in society. From *Pensieri*: "Dice Giangiaco­mo Rousseau che la vera cortesia de' modi consiste in un abito di mostrarsi benevolo. Questa cortesia forse ti preserva dall'odio, ma non ti acquista amore, se non di quei pochissimi ai quali l'altrui benevolenza è stimolo a corrispondere. Chi vuole, per quanto possono le maniere, farsi gli uomini amici, anzi amanti, dimostri a stimarli. Come il disprezzo offende e spiace più che l'odio, così la stima è più dolce che la benevolenza; e generalmente gli uomini hanno maggior cura, o certo maggior desiderio, d'essere pregiati che amati." *Opere* 743.

³¹⁶ Antonio Comin and Desmond O'Connor, *Leopardi: Poet for Today* (Flanders University, 1989), 28.

This passage underscores that contrary to the sentiments he often expressed, at times Leopardi clung tenaciously to his life, if only as a means of conserving the relatively pleasant memories of his childhood. His letters to friends often reveal this more personal and sentimental aspect whereas the *Zibaldone* contains more generic and pseudo-scientific observations. As a result of this quasi-empirical approach, the *Zibaldone* is consistent in its depiction of life as falling short of the ideal, thus producing disappointment. Leopardi often contemplated death and declared that he looked forward to it and yet never attempted suicide because he could not extinguish some degree of hope even though he knew that happiness was impossible. Florentine censor Amerigo Barsi, commenting upon the *Operette morali*, indicated that it was logical for Leopardi to hold out hope only if he were Catholic, and that terrestrial life is not inherently pleasant or hopeful:

La vita ha certo dolori, e forse più dolori che piaceri: ma si potrà egli concludere che legge dell'esistenza sia l'infelicità, e che la natura carnefice delle sue fatture? Che non ci sia nell'universo altro vero bene che la morte? Se il desiderio della felicità fosse per necessità di fatto impossibile ad appagarsi; il Leopardi potrebbe aver ragione ... Certamente se noi restringiamo lo sguardo dentro i limiti di questa terra, l'uomo è una creatura, non solo infelice, ma mostruosa: nel solo sistema cattolico il mistero della vita si spiega, e la speranza acquista pregio di virtù.³¹⁷

Barsi and many others of that time felt that hope is reasonable only when there is the basis of a tangible goal in the afterlife. This point of view contrasts completely with that of Leopardi who remained perpetually hopeful of some shread of happiness during his life, independent of religious views of death and the question of the existence of an

³¹⁷ Ottavio Besomi, *Giacomo Leopardi, Operette Morali* (Mondadori, 1979), LXXVII.

afterlife. For Leopardi, death represented the absolute end of any chance of redeeming his life of misery and the sadness associated with such an utter defeat was too much to bear. The remaining option then was for Leopardi to maintain a slight hope and to wait for his life to improve, secure in the knowledge that it never would. The sensation of tedium, *la noia*, is produced by such futile expectations.

Happiness and Tedium

Leopardi continually returned to the theme of the impossibility of happiness. From the *Operette morali*, the *Dialogo di Malambruno e di Farfarello* addresses the issue of the essence of death and the removal of sadness from one's life. The vignette contains many of Leopardi's core beliefs about humanity's futile quest for contentment. Farfarello, an agent sent by the devil to fulfill a wish for the magician Malambruno, has disappointing news for him:

MALAMBRUNO: Fammi felice per un momento di tempo.

FARFARELLO: Non posso.

...

MALAMBRUNO: Ma non potendo farmi felice in nessuna maniera, ti basta l'animo almeno di liberarmi dall'infelicità?

FARFARELLO: Se tu puoi fare di non amarti supremamente.

MALAMBRUNO: Cotesto lo potrò dopo morto.

....

MALAMBRUNO: Di modo che, assolutamente parlando, il non vivere è sempre meglio del vivere.

FARFARELLO: Se la privazione dell'infelicità è semplicemente meglio dell'infelicità.

MALAMBRUNO: Dunque?

FARFARELLO: Dunque se ti pare di darmi l'anima prima del tempo, io sono qui pronto per portarmela.³¹⁸

Again Leopardi confronted the issue of the impossibility of terrestrial happiness and the concept of pleasure as the absence of pain. It is better to be unconscious than conscious such that the individual cannot perceive the profound hopelessness of experiencing a positive sentiment. Florentine censor Amerigo Barsi, who vetted the *Operette morali* for

³¹⁸ Besomi 90.

appropriateness before its publication, found this line of thought erroneous:

Ma chi dirà che la privazione dell'infelicità sia meglio di questa infelicità, che il non vivere sia meglio del vivere? Se tu non sarai pienamente e interamente felice; non potrai trovarti in stato o discretamente lieto o almeno tollerabile? E allora il non essere sarà meglio dell'essere? Tutti gli uomini (salvo pochissime eccezioni) ti rispondono col fatto di no.³¹⁹

Barsi failed to understand exactly how far Leopardi was from “discretamente lieto” and the depths of his pessimism, depression and self-loathing. Leopardi’s tedium was created by the tension between his unfulfilled expectations and his self-loathing which made him feel sure never to achieve any kind of pleasure.

Leopardi often examined the motives behind others’ suicides and he found that the impetus to kill oneself was often based on shallow motives, especially in modern cities which strip individuals of their character.³²⁰ For example in *La scommessa di Prometeo*³²¹, Leopardi illustrates the often absurd motivations behind suicide in the modern world which lead those with complete and seemingly fulfilled lives to end them.

Tedium erodes the innate sense of happiness humans were born to feel:

³¹⁹ Besomi LXXIX.

³²⁰ Tartaro XVI. When Leopardi was in Rome; “Inoltre lo colpisce “l’indifferenza, quell’orribile passione, anzi spassione dell’uomo, che ha veramente e necessariamente la sua principale sede nelle grandi città, cioè nelle società molto estese.” His experiences in Milan produced similar feelings; “Anche Milano, come Roma, lo delude: “centoventimila uomini stanno insieme per caso, come centoventimila pecore.””, XIX. Even the small town of Recanati was at times perceived by Leopardi as a city and produced feelings of rage against the citizenry; “A F. Puccinotti scrive (21 aprile 1827): “Ogni ora mi par mill’anni di fuggir via da questa porca città dove non so se gli uomini sieno più asini o più birbanti; so ben che tutti son l’uno e l’altro.””, XXI.

³²¹ Solmi 504.

Prometeo: Chi sono questi sciagurati?
 Un famiglio: Il mio padrone e i figliuoli.
 Prometeo: Chi gli ha uccisi?
 Famiglio: Il padrone tutti e tre.
 Prometeo: Tu vuoi dire i figliuoli e se stesso?
 Famiglio: Appunto.
 Prometeo: Oh che è mai cotesto! Qualche grandissima sventura gli doveva essere accaduta.
 Famiglio: Nessuna, che io sappia.
 Prometeo: Ma forse era povero, o disprezzato da tutti, o sfortunato in amore, o in corte?
 Famiglio: Anzi ricchissimo, e credo che tutti lo stimassero; di amore non se ne curava, e in corte aveva molto favore.
 Prometeo: Dunque come è caduto in questa disperazione?
 Famiglio: Per tedio della vita, secondo che ha lasciato scritto.
 Prometeo: E questi giudici che fanno?
 Famiglio: S'informano se il padrone era impazzito o no: che in caso non fosse impazzito, la sua roba ricade al pubblico per legge: e in verità non si potrà fare che non ricada.
 Prometeo: Ma, dimmi, non aveva nessun amico o parente, a cui potesse raccomandare questi fanciullini, in cambio d'ammazzarli?
 Famiglio: Sì aveva; e tra gli altri, uno che gli era molto intrinseco, al quale ha raccomandato il suo cane.

Leopardi thus depicted the sickness of tedium which characterizes city life. The proximity to others and boredom combine to create an unnatural mental condition wherein a parent will murder his children, presumably for their benefit, yet will leave his dog in the care of a trusted friend. The dog is not murdered since its intellect does not allow it to experience the sadness and depression caused by boredom.³²² What makes the children's lives not worth living is the father's perception that only more tedium awaited them and there was no hope for anything else. Life is inherently tedious as individuals perpetually wait to recapture some past pleasure which will never return.

³²² Esposito 15. "Altrove il giovane Leopardi giunge ad asserire che l'immortalità dell'uomo è provata, oltre che dalla sua inevitabile infelicità nella vita presente, anche dal suicidio, gesto disperato che le bestie sono incapaci di compiere."

Suicide, murder and death by natural causes are treated differently by Leopardi. Death by natural causes is seen as a blessing whereas any attempt to change the course of fate is viewed as highly immoral, even though humanity lives in such a morally confused time due to our collective abandonment of nature. Leopardi's thoughts on death and specifically regarding parents seeing their children die may have been influenced by his mother who felt content³²³ for those who lost their children at birth or if baptized within twenty four hours because they could thus go directly to heaven without complication and without adding to the household expenses.³²⁴ It is an interesting contrast to *Quiete dopo la tempesta* or *La ginestra* which imply that survival and consciousness are desirable goals. In the *Zibaldone* he indicated that while suicide is a rational inclination, it is against the laws of nature.³²⁵ Leopardi expressed different feelings toward death in different genres. In Leopardi's poetry survival is considered desirable while the *Zibaldone* offers various axioms indicating that humanity exists outside the natural realm and that suicide is therefore logical.

Humanity therefore is perpetually frustrated as the conflicting sides of the argument influence the individual:

³²³ Comin 27.

³²⁴ Luigi Saviano, *C'è Religiosità in Leopardi?* (Editrice Copyright, 1987) 17. "Il poeta Giacomo Leopardi nacque in Recanati il 29 giugno 1798 alle ore 19 e fu battezzato il giorno dopo, 30 giugno, cioè entro le 24 ore dalla nascita. Tale circostanza va spiegata tenendo presente una pia credenza in voga un po' dovunque, credenza durata fino ai nostri giorni anche nel Napoletano: un neonato, ricevendo il Battesimo entro le 24 ore dalla nascita avrebbe liberato dal Purgatorio e fatto salire in Paradiso l'anima di quell'antenato, di cui i genitori del battezzando avessero messa l'intenzione" Giacomo's mother gave birth to twelve children but only five survived.

³²⁵ *Zibaldone* 703. "Il suicidio è contro natura. Ma viviamo noi secondo natura?"

Io mi trovava orribilmente annoiato della vita e in grandissimo desiderio di uccidermi, e sentii non so quale indizio di male che mi fece temere in quel momento in cui io desiderava di morire: e immediatamente mi posi in apprensione e ansietà per quel timore. Non ho mai con più forza sentita la discordanza assoluta degli elementi de' quali è formata la presente condizione umana forzata a temere per la sua vita e a procurare in tutti i modi di conservarla, proprio allora che l'è più grave, e che facilmente si risolverebbe a privarsene di sua volontà (ma non per forza d'altre cagioni). E vidi come sia vero ed evidente che (se non vogliamo supporre la natura tanto savia e coerente in tutto il resto, che l'analogia è uno de' fondamenti della filosofia moderna e anche della stessa nostra cognizione e discorso, affatto pazza e contraddittoria nella sua principale opera) l'uomo non doveva per nessun conto accorgersi della sua assoluta e necessaria infelicità in questa vita, ma solamente delle accidentali (come i fanciulli e le bestie): e l'essersene accorto è contro natura, ripugna ai suoi principii costituenti comuni anche a tutti gli altri esseri (come dire l'amor della vita), e turba l'ordine delle cose (poichè spinge infatti al suicidio la cosa più contro natura che si possa immaginare).³²⁶

Boredom and unhappiness lead one to desire suicide. It is therefore desirable to not be aware of one's condition and to not comprehend the infinite tedium. As such, children and animals are to be envied, not possessing the faculties to appreciate their misery.³²⁷ Again Leopardi returned to his anti-Enlightenment stance, where ignorance of the desperate human condition is bliss.

³²⁶ *Zibaldone* 65.

³²⁷ *Canti* 83. From *Bruto minore*: "Le fortunate belve / Serena adduce al non previsto passo / La tarde età." (Lines 62-64)

Suffering and Solidarity

Additional arguments for suicide are found in the *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*³²⁸ and are relevant in that they coincide with Leopardi's observations in the *Zibaldone*. The misanthropy he felt for himself was real and was supported laterally by his other works, unlike misanthropy toward others, foreign or familiar. All his works support his feelings of self-hate and self-nullification. Nature had become an enemy to him and was no longer a refuge. Porfirio is Leopardi's mouthpiece on the subject of the desirability of living:

Tu dubiti se ci sia lecito di morire senza necessità: io ti domando se ci è lecito di essere infelici. La natura vieta l'uccidersi. Strano mi riuscirebbe che non avendo ella o volontà o potere di farmi né felice né libero da miseria, avesse facoltà di obbligarmi a vivere. Certo se la natura ci ha ingenerato amore della conservazione propria, e odio della morte; essa non ci ha dato meno odio della infelicità, e amore del nostro meglio; anzi tanto maggiori e tanto più principali queste ultime inclinazioni che quelle, quanto che la felicità è il fine di ogni nostro atto, e di ogni nostro amore e odio; e che non si fugge la morte, né la vita si ama, per se medesima, ma per rispetto e amore del nostro meglio e odio del male e del danno nostro. Come dunque può esser contrario alla natura, che io fugga la infelicità in quel solo modo che hanno gli uomini di fuggirla? (lines 191-201)

Even Plotino's response is not very positive in terms of the desirability of living.³²⁹ He

³²⁸ Besomi LXXX. When the volume was republished in 1845, the preface included a short summary of the various *operette* written by the Florentine censor Amerigo Barsi. These comments reveal the religious cultural context Leopardi had to navigate as well as the common assumptions about the desirability of the afterlife, a topic which relates directly to suicide and Leopardi's fear of punishment; "Si ricordi il lettore che gl'interlocutori son due filosofi pagani, e che perciò parlano secondo le opinioni del loro tempo: nè faccia de' loro sentimenti coscienza all'autore, che cattolico essendo, dovea sapere, che il premio e la pena avvenire son cose certe; che l'oggetto della nostra speranza oltramondiana è oggetto desiderabile, anzi il solo desiderabile per se stesso, come quello in cui saran finalmente soddisfatti i nostri due grandi bisogni di conoscere e d'amare; e finalmente che nell'eterno giudice la severità della giustizia è temperata dalla dolcezza della misericordia."

³²⁹ This lukewarm endorsement of living is echoed in the *Dialogo di un venditore d'almanacchi e di un*

implies that it is wrong to kill one oneself because one then leaves the others behind without someone with whom to commiserate. This underscores the paradox of Leopardi's view toward interaction with others: solidarity among individuals is borne of individually-experienced misery:

Viviamo, Porfirio mio, e confortiamoci insieme: non ricusiamo di portare quella parte che il destino ci ha stabilita, dei mali della nostra specie. Si 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. (lines 270-274)

The use of reflexive pronouns underscores the importance of friendship as solitary individuals attempt to comfort each other during the obligatory life they are forced to endure. Repeatedly the nature of suicide is examined as an act of self-hate or self love. Suicide is alternately a sweet method of escape or an act of aggression; a form of misanthropy toward oneself. The supportive humanity described above is a depiction of an ideal interaction which Leopardi never encountered in his own life, leading to suicidal depression.

In his poems relating to the individual, or to individual characters, suicide is seen as a positive. When Leopardi's poetic subject is a group, such as *La quiete dopo la tempesta*, he appeared to be more optimistic, albeit only briefly. He simply depicted the illusion of the burst of community spirit and togetherness brought about by a group of individuals relieved to have avoided arbitrary annihilation at nature's hand:

passaggiere, "Passeggiere: Non vi ricordate di qualche anno in particolare che vi paresse felice? Venditore: Veramente, no, illustrissimo." N. Giordano 118.

Ecco il Sol che ritorna, ecco sorride
 Per li poggi e le ville
 Apre i balconi,
 Apre terrazzi e logge la familia:
 E, dalla via corrente, odi lontano
 Tintinnio di sonagli; il carro stride
 Del passegger che il suo cammin ripiglia. (lines 19-24)

Leopardi's images quickly become negative however as he reveals his belief that humanity's only pleasure is a brief respite from the cruelty of nature:

O natura cortese,
 Son questi i doni tuoi,
 Questi i dilette sono
 Che tu porgi ai mortali. Uscir di pena
 È pena fra noi. (lines 42-46)³³⁰

Especially since he generally indicated that a sense of community and communication are impossible, it would be illogical for him to believe that the camaraderie of humankind existed in any productive context. In fact the community is composed of "others" like him with similarly disappointing lives filled with sadness and regret. Their lives are completely focused on themselves and their own needs for survival. One cannot accept that the group togetherness he occasionally espoused is anything more than an artifice. In that sense, Leopardi is often misinterpreted as a poet of the fraternity of humankind.³³¹

³³⁰ *Canti* 172.

³³¹ *Lezioni leopardiane*, 28. Binni speaks of Leopardi's positivity when discussing the *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi*; "La pace, la fratellanza dei popoli, la libertà, l'odio per la tirannia, il diritto delle nazioni e dei popoli alla loro indipendenza sono in questo piccolo scritto testimonianza di un'adesione del giovane Leopardi a ideali proclamati dalla Restaurazione." The *fratellanza* described by Leopardi relates to the sentiment among the ancient Romans however, not to contemporary society. It is discussed precisely to highlight the lack of such feeling among the populace today.

The apparent unity he depicted in some of his poems is simply an opportunity to create beautiful emotional images:

E ancora, le visioni e le voci di cui il mondo, *quel* mondo, si allegra nella *Quiete dopo la tempesta* – visioni e voci la cui allegrezza è allegrezza della parola che si rinnova ripetendosi nel medesimo verso (“Di sentiero in sentiero”); o nei verbi che si susseguono e spandono la loro luminosità su un paesaggio che è anch’esso parola, quando nomina i *poggi* e le *ville*, nettissimi d’un tratto nei loro contorni e volumi, di colore giulivi per il sole che *ritorna*, e tornando, *ecco sorride*.³³²

There is no fraternity but simply a mass of dissatisfied people without any interest in the survival or happiness of those around them. The apparent happiness expressed in *La quiete dopo la tempesta* is simply the exhilarated relief of individuals who have survived the battle with Nature and have been allowed to continue a fruitless journey. Leopardi believed that others were like him; completely egotistical and centered on their own happiness. The intellectual cares as little about others as does the farmer who cares only for the survival of his crop and himself. Everything is self-referential. Paradoxically, the only sense of fraternity among men is that they are typified by a universal disinterest in the lives of others and by individual struggles.³³³

³³² Assunto 10.

³³³ Shaw 252. In a letter to Fanny Targioni Tozzetti dated December 5, 1831, Leopardi dismisses the possibility of happiness among the masses; “...I believe, or rather I see, that individuals are unhappy under any form of government; the fault is nature’s, which made men for unhappiness; and I laugh at the happiness of the *masses*, because my small brain can’t conceive of a happy *mass* made up of individuals who are not happy,”

Recanati

Individual struggle was a constant during Leopardi's youth and resulted in a continuous desire to flee his hometown. The experience of living in Recanati was torturous:

I am resolved, with the little money that remains from when I was able to work, to set out on a journey to seek health or to die, and never to return to Recanati again. I will not be particular about what I do; any situation compatible with my health will suit: I shall not mind humiliations; because there does not exist a humiliation or abasement greater than what I suffer living in this centre of European boorishness and ignorance. [161]³³⁴

..because it may be that I speak too harshly of my birthplace (and yet I am not sure if that is possible) out of too much hatred, but I certainly cannot speak too well of it out of too much love [4]³³⁵

L'infinito, one of his best-known poems and instrumental in creating the image of Giacomo as a perpetual alienated artist³³⁶, illustrates the desperate need of the young poet to escape his surroundings as well as how one can use voluntary psychological ploys,

³³⁴ Shaw 241. This letter was written to Giampietro Vieusseux in 1830. Six years earlier Leopardi had rejected Vieusseux's offer to collaborate on his *Antologia* but by this time Leopardi had become even more desperate and was willing to do virtually anything to escape Recanati. Unfortunately, by this point Leopardi was unable to write, "I'm asking this question about giving lessons, because I cannot compose, write, read. I could give lessons, that is teach, having someone else do the reading".

³³⁵ Shaw 46. In this letter Leopardi explains to Pietro Giordani why he began writing literature and moved away from the sciences. He feels that art can bring pleasure and creativity that science cannot, "My opinion would be that the function of the fine arts is to imitate nature in lifelikeness. ... For what are tempests, deaths, and a hundred thousand calamities if not disagreeable, indeed very painful? And the great poets have multiplied and perpetuated these countless images. And tragedy would have to be condemned almost entirely by its very nature. Certainly the arts should give enjoyment, but who can deny that weeping, trembling, being horrified are enjoyable when reading a poet? Indeed who does not know that they are very enjoyable?"

³³⁶ Fortini 54. "The fifteen lines that form "The Infinite", often erroneously thought of as a sonnet, constitute Leopardi's most magical work. Written in the spring of 1819 when Giacomo was just twenty-one, the piece, with its unrhymed hendecasyllables that abide well within English pentameters, creates a breathless instant of sublime poetic vision."

combining intelligence and creativity³³⁷, to escape terrestrial misery:

Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle,
E questa siepe, che da tanta parte
Dell'ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude. (lines 1–3)

Leopardi enjoyed this particular spot because he could be alone³³⁸ there and not see where he was as the hedge blocked his view of the horizon. His mind could run freely, contemplating the vastness of space³³⁹ and separating him mentally from Recanati:

Ma sedendo e mirando, interminati
Spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani
Silenzi, e profondissima quiete
Io nel pensier mi fingo; ove per poco
Il cor non si spaura. (lines 4-8)

³³⁷ *Lezioni leopardiane* 105. Binni states, “In realtà l’atteggiamento leopardiano nell’*Infinito*, è quello di un uomo ricco di esperienza, di profondità di pensiero, di sensibilità e di fantasia (non ingenuo e puramente istintivo) e la presenza del pensiero non è intrusione intellettualistica, ma essenziale componente di una poesia che trae la sua forza da un’intuizione fantastica e sensibile, alimentata da una profonda e intrinseca meditazione, come proprio avviene nella poesia più grande e matura.”

³³⁸ His poem *La vita solitaria*, *The Solitary Life*, expresses similar feelings in terms of losing oneself in nature and achieving complete separation from society as well as from his own physical existence: “The deepest stillness dominates those banks; / Almost I lose myself and all the world, / I stay so still; it really seems my limbs / Are now so loose and slack no sense or spirit / Can move them more, their immemorial stillness / Merged in that place and in its silences”. (lines 33-38) Nichols 62.

³³⁹ As a young man, Leopardi desired to return to a more primal and natural state, similar to what the Romans experienced. He gradually realized that to do so would be impossible and furthermore that nature does not care about him. As a result, he attempted to lose himself in the cosmos which are vast beyond comprehension. Esposito 75. “Anche lo Zumbini ammette che il Leopardi giunga in definitiva ad una concezione sensistica e materialista dominata dalla legge del dolore, ma è da rilevare che con lui si prospetta con maggior chiarezza la distinzione di due momenti fondamentali nel pessimismo leopardiano: quello del “dolore storico” e quello del “dolore cosmico”, il primo derivante dal contrasto “tra la felicità delle età antiche e la miseria delle moderne”, il secondo dal contrasto fra “l’eternità e immensità della natura a la fugacità e piccolezza dell’uomo”. ”

In contrast to the infinite silence and space he experiences there, the rusting of the leaves brings him partially back to reality. He compares for a moment, simultaneously, infinite silence and nearby sounds:

E come il vento
 Odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello
 Infinito silenzio a questa voce
 Vo comparando... (lines 8-11)

As he experiences both concrete and infinite worlds, he finds a sense of eternity in the present tense. A stream of consciousness flows through him as he achieves separation from the terrestrial world:

...e mi sovviene l'eterno,
 E le morte stagioni, e la presente
 E viva, e il suon di lei. Così tra questa
 Immensità s'annega il pensier mio:
 E il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare. (lines 11-15)

The reader may feel content that Leopardi has a place to feel free and to let his thoughts flow spontaneously. Yet the function and the greatness of the location where this occurs are derived precisely because there is no one else there. There is no one to bother him or to further damage his self esteem which could not be any lower:

But now I really have become unfit for anything, I despise myself, I'd hate and loathe myself if I had the energy, but hate is a passion, and I no longer feel passions. And this is the only reason I can find for not having torn my heart from my breast a thousand times. I see that everything contradicts me, and I'm rebuffed on all sides, and it's enough for me to want something for the opposite to happen;

I don't know what I'm doing in this world. [40]³⁴⁰

One can visualize the author visiting the enclosed space near the hedge as often as he could to escape from his domineering parents and a society which did not understand him. The blocking of the hedge is effective because he could literally not see where he was, a place that he despised. While it is one of the few cases where Leopardi expressed sweetness in terms of his own feelings, “E il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare”, it is implicitly in contrast to the bitterness he normally experienced in his life in Recanati:

Infatti, percepire l'infinito significa per Leopardi evadere da una realtà circoscritta e limitante, simboleggiata dalla *siepe* e dalla *voce* del vento, per perdersi, sullo slancio del pensiero e della fantasia, oltre ogni limite, in un infinito in cui è dolce smarrirsi per sempre, quasi perdendosi nel Nulla e trovare un attimo, quasi eterno, di conforto dai mali.³⁴¹

Binni's description of the freedom of the area enclosed by the hedge is perhaps even more ebullient:

Alla suprema limpidezza, chiarezza, sobrietà del linguaggio (che riassorbe e contiene l'estrema suggestività delle sensazioni e della fantasia senza mai disperderla in forme effusive, impressionistiche, evanescenti), alla musica profonda, così lontana da ogni mero musicalismo esteriore e disorganico, corrisponde un'articolazione perfetta del componimento nelle sue parti

³⁴⁰ Shaw 96. In this letter written on March 20, 1820 to Pietro Giordani, Leopardi describes how his terrible physical condition leaves him unable to contribute to the national literature Italy so desperately needs. Ironically, just days before the letter was written, he composed *Ad Angelo Mai*, a patriotic poem which was to become one of his best known. Mai's discovery in 1819 of Cicero's *De re publica* in the Vatican library and his use of chemical agents to reveal the text of the damaged manuscripts led to his receiving the title of Cardinal in 1837.

³⁴¹ Federico Roncoroni, *Testo e contesto* (Mondadori, 1984), 169.

intervallate da pause e da riprese che sottolineano, con una crescente novità e alacrità di approfondimento, il percorso di questo itinerario dell'intero animo del poeta nella progrediente presa di coscienza del sentimento dell'infinito.³⁴²

This liberating explosion of impressionistic light beams and effective loss of consciousness are a stark contrast to the crushing ennui of daily life in Recanati:

La più insopportabile e decisiva infermità del giovane eroe recanatese è la *malinconia*. Un'oppressione che lo uccide col pensiero e la solitudine: "a solo a solo", lui è lo "spietatissimo carnefice" di se stesso. La malinconia non è l'effetto, ma la causa della solitudine, e di una solitudine voluta, cercata. Lo riconoscerà, ma solo molto più tardi, anche il poeta, il 24 marzo 1827: "Error mio nel voler fare una vita, tutta e solamente interna (...) Continuo poi il travaglio della immaginazione, le prevedenze spiacevoli, la fantasticherie disgustose, i mali immaginari, i timori panici". Solitudine travagliata dal lavoro della malinconia, eppure solitudine che ristora e conforta, per effetto di quel lavoro, che libera e permette di "recuperare se stesso" e le illusioni. La malinconia non è l'effetto dei mali fisici e della bruttezza dell'aspetto, ma la causa della loro distorsione ed esagerazione. È un "quasi vestendosi a lutto", un'inibizione insuperabile, unita al peso di un pensiero che agisce come un'istanza autocritica e di carattere morale, come un'indistinta accusa e autodenigrazione, che lo porta a vedersi più malato, incapace, brutto e infelice che può e a ritirarsi da ogni possibilità di azione esterna e normale.³⁴³

Melancholy was a constant cause of self-destruction for the poet, leading to isolation and feelings of physical and mental ineptitude. He constantly desired to escape and was crushed by feelings of tedium and inertness.³⁴⁴ It is his misanthropy that drove him to seek an area of infinite space where he would not be so acutely aware of the people around him. Critics such as Fortini who note that *L'infinito* "overwhelms the spirit" and

³⁴² Binni, *Lezioni leopardiane*, 107.

³⁴³ Neuro Bonifazi, *Lingua Mortale* (Lungo Editore, 1984), 12.

³⁴⁴ Ghidetti 161. "La noia è la più sterile delle passioni umane. Come'ella è figlia della nullità, così è madre del nulla: giacché non solo è sterile per se, ma rende tale tutto ciò a cui si mesce o avvicina ec. [*Zib.* 1815 (30 settembre 1821)]."

“foretells the promise in store”³⁴⁵ do not understand the context of misanthropy in which Leopardi was immersed. His final act of terrestrial abandonment, “il naufragar m’è dolce in questo mare” (line 15), is sweet precisely due to the absence of others who are a bitter reminder of his many dissappointments, especially in Recanati.

³⁴⁵ Fortini 55.

Torturous Memories

In addition to the misery wrought by his hometown in the present, memories of the past were another source of depression which generated self-hate. A poem which underlines Leopardi's completely solitary experience of living and the sadness of life itself is *Le ricordanze* wherein all stimuli are self-referential and trigger memories of the past. One cannot forget childhood illusions, thus making adult life and death even sadder. The act of dying highlights the dichotomy of idealistic potential versus the sad reality of existence. Death is an escape but also a defeat; the end of a boring, unfulfilling and impossibly hopeless and solitary life filled with regret. Leopardi felt a great loneliness;

Che, tacito, seduto in verde zolla,
Delle sere io solea passar gran parte
Mirando il cielo, ed ascoltando il canto
Della rana rimota alla campagna! (lines 10-14)

The loneliness leads to sadness and a rejection of life which has not fulfilled his ideal:

Felicità fingendo al viver mio!
Ignaro del mio fato, e quante volte
Questa mia vita dolorosa e nuda
Volentier con la morte avrei cangiato. (lines 24-27)

During his brief relatively optimistic period as a young man, Leopardi felt that he would not be condemned to spend his life in a place that made him feel so alienated:

Natio borgo selvaggio, intra la gente

Zotica, vil; cui nomi strani, e spesso
 Argomento di riso e di trastullo,
 Son dottrina a saper; che m'odia e fugge,
 Per invidia non già, che non mi tiene
 Maggior di se (lines 30-35)

This is another example of memory leading to sadness as one compares the ideal to that which is real. The last line of *Le ricordanze* is indicative of much of Leopardi's thought, "Moti del cor, la rimembranza acerba" (line 173). Among Leopardi's letters one finds part of the source of his internal conflict regarding the simultaneous pain and pleasure the act of remembering creates; his relationship with his father and childhood memories of Paola and Carlo.³⁴⁶

Leopardi's poem *Alla luna*³⁴⁷ also underscores the theme of memory as a source of pleasure, even when the memory is that of a painful event. This poem, originally entitled *La ricordanza*³⁴⁸ and written in the same series as the *Idilli*, intertwines a realistic description of the nocturnal landscape and the sweetness of memory:

O graziosa luna, io mi rammento

³⁴⁶ Shaw 219. Leopardi addressed his father as *Papa* instead of *Signor Padre* for the first time in this letter from May 26, 1828. "For my part I can swear to you that, humanly speaking, I live only for you [father] and for my dear family: I have never enjoyed life except in relation to all of you; and now life means nothing to me except in view of the grief I would cause you if I were to lose it." (Letter 139)

³⁴⁷ *Canti* 116.

³⁴⁸ *Lezioni leopardiane*, 101. "A un livello certo più alto e da un altro strato più profondo dell'animo leopardiano, nasce l'idillio *Alla luna* (tale titolo sostituisce, nell'edizione dei *Canti* del '31, il titolo iniziale *La ricordanza*, probabilmente anche per diversificare tale lirica delle *Ricordanze* del 1829). In esso vive, intrecciato a un colloquio tenero con la luna, il motivo del ricordo che pur essendo ricordo di una situazione dolorosa tuttora persistente, ha in sé una gradazione di singolare dolcezza."

che, or volge l'anno, sopra questo colle
 io venia pien d'angoscia a rimirarti:
 e tu pendevi allor su quella selva
 siccome or fai, che tutta la rischiari. (lines 1-5)

A year ago when he last contemplated the moon, he was full of anguish. He cannot see for the tears in his eyes just as the moon is obfuscated by fog.

Ma nebuloso e tremulo dal pianto
 che mi sorgea sul ciglio, alle mie luci
 il tuo volto apparìa, che travagliosa
 era mia vita: ed è, né cangia stile,
 o mia diletta luna. (lines 6-10)

And yet in spite of the tears, to remember is a positive experience for it reminds one of a past time which was more optimistic:

E pur mi giova
 la ricordanza, e il noverar l'etate
 del mio dolore. Oh come grato occorre
 nel tempo giovanil, quando ancor lungo
 la speme e breve ha la memoria il corso,
 il rimembrar delle passate cose,
 ancor che triste, e che l'affanno duri! (lines 10-16)

Leopardi had an intimate relationship with the personification of the moon. Viewing it now as well as the memory of past interactions is positive even if it makes one re-examine the pain and sadness in one's life. Leopardi saw the passage of time as a process which leads humanity away from classical ideals and thus ever further away from happiness. *Alla luna* emphasizes the conflicting emotions experienced during reflection. Following this logic, life becomes increasingly negative as time pulls everyone ever

further away from an idealized happiness. The destruction of the illusions of youth can lead to suicide; a theme treated in the poems *Bruto Minore*³⁴⁹ and *Ultimo canto di Saffo*³⁵⁰ as well as the *Zibaldone*. *Le ricordanze* also echoes the theme of painful memory³⁵¹, “Moti del cor, la rimembranza acerba” (line 173).

The negative feelings Leopardi expressed toward himself in the *Zibaldone* are paralleled in his other work as well. This is a contrast in relation to his dislike of *others* in the *Zibaldone* which often is not reflected in his other work. His self-hatred and desire of death caused by the many disappointments in his life are constant threads in the *Zibaldone*, *Canti* and *Operette morali*. The other varieties of misanthropy directed toward familiar and unfamiliar *others* have contrasting meanings and can be ambiguous but the misanthropy he showed toward himself is consistent and real, neither artifice nor a stylistic tool. In Leopardi’s work there are few constants. The exception is self-hate. In Leopardi’s writing it is a fundamental and ever-present force expressed with sincerity and consistency. It is the one thing he was sure about and felt no internal struggle to reconcile. Although at times he also felt self-love, his self-directed misanthropy was never supplanted and was a constant source of unhappiness.

³⁴⁹ In 1844 Sainte-Beuve published the literary journal *Revue des deux mondes* in which Leopardi states: “Mes sentimens envers la destinée ont été et sont toujours ceux que j’ai exprimés dans *Bruto minore*.” In the poem, the morality of society is depicted as meaningless and death by suicide a reasonable alternative to a life lived in such a distorted and unnatural fashion.

³⁵⁰ *Canti* 102. In the *Ultimo canto di Saffo*, Leopardi describes death in a peaceful and beautiful way, almost willing it to come: “Ogni più lieto / Giorno di nostra età primo s’invola. / Sottentra il morbo, e la vecchiezza, e l’ombra / Della gelida morte. Ecco di tante / Sperate palme e dilettoni errori, / Il Tartaro m’avanza; e il prode ingegno / Han la tenaria Diva, / E l’altra notte, e la silente riva.” (Lines 65-72)

³⁵¹ Fortini 87. “The now unconstrained rhymeless verse displays a new mastery in handling the dichotomies of hatred and affection, the present and the elusive past memories of childhood and youth, and the agonizing existential recollections of things irremediably lost. The poem is a diatribe against parochialism and also a desperate yearning for love, with its alternating bitter-sweet reveries.”

Chapter Five – Conclusion and Directions for Further Study

This study has differentiated the three kinds of misanthropy present in Giacomo Leopardi's work which illustrate the conflicting themes expressed in his poetry in comparison to the *Zibaldone*. Misanthropy expressed toward foreign others, similar others and toward the author himself each serve a different purpose. That which is directed toward foreign others has the goal of creating literary unity for Italy by returning to the heroic *ethos* of ancient Rome. Dislike shown toward similar others highlights the Darwinian struggles occurring between like individuals for scarce resources. The author's self-loathing stems from his persistent feelings of inertness, tedium, and self-recrimination for not having experienced a life closer to the ideal it should have been.

The designation of these various types of misanthropy as the very source of Leopardi's pessimism and rancor had not been previously examined. The implications of this discovery are significant in that literary criticism in the past focused exclusively on Leopardi's pessimism but never named misanthropy as its source. Reasons usually given for Leopardi's persistently negative approach are tedium, not living life in accordance with nature, and modern society's abandonment of Roman values. While correct, all of these are not causes but rather by-products of the deeply-flawed characteristics of a detestable humanity which are delineated in great detail in the *Zibaldone*. The error of most modern critics is to attribute positive sentiments and hopefulness to Leopardi's

perspective in relation to collective humanity³⁵² when he indicated repeatedly in the *Zibaldone* that such appearances were an illusion.³⁵³

*La ginestra, o il fiore del deserto*³⁵⁴ from the *Canti*, written toward the end of the poet's life in 1836 in the Ferrigni villa near Naples, confronts the problem of shattered illusions and humanity's struggle against Nature. The misinterpretation of this poem is the primary reason that literary critics allow a positive or progressive interpretation of his other works. Many of Leopardi's other central themes such as humankind's role in the universe, one's relationship to others, and interactions between groups as well as national character are explored in *La ginestra*. In many ways, *La ginestra* is a synthesis and a logical summation of Leopardi's misanthropic thoughts as relates to himself and others as well as his definitive position regarding the force of nature which dominates everything:

Nella *Ginestra* si svolgono più apertamente i motivi eroici del suo animo, le punte estreme della poetica leopardiana nata con il *Pensiero dominante* e si attua l'estremo tentativo del Leopardi di portare in poesia tutta la sua più decisa esperienza e persuasione filosofica, morale, estetica, di fondere l'impegno poetico e l'annuncio di una buona o disillusa novella (al cui valore di decisivo annuncio il

³⁵² DeSanctis, *Leopardi* 199. "Nella infelicità universale il primo sentimento umano è la compassione reciproca, essendo tutti vittima della matrigna natura, o piuttosto del Fato; perché è da natura che abbiamo le dolci illusioni, che c'incoraggiano a vivere. Onde nasce il concetto della fratellanza universale o della solidarietà umana, l'unione di tutti contro il Fato, nemico di tutti."

³⁵³ *Zibaldone* 1188. "Due verità che gli uomini generalmente non crederanno mai: l'una di non saper nulla, l'altra di non esser nulla. Aggiungi la terza, che ha molta dipendenza dalla seconda: di non aver nulla a sperare dopo la morte."

³⁵⁴ Nino Borsellino, *Il Socialismo della "Ginestra"* (Lalli Editore, 1988), 69. "Forse è lecito assegnare al capolavoro dell'ultimo Leopardi, a *La ginestra o il fiore del deserto*, un diritto di primogenitura nella geneologia dei simboli floreali che continuano a fregiare i messaggi di rinascita del socialismo europeo." Borsellino's positing of *La ginestra* as a socialist manifesto is a common incorrect interpretation of the poem. Leopardi's political motivation was the creation of a unified Italy, free of Papal control. He expressed no tendency toward collective ownership and his previously-noted studies of Malthus et al would have lead him to believe that such a system would be unattainable.

poeta volle rimandare con l'iniziale epigrafe evangelica: *e gli uomini preferirono le tenebre alla luce*) attraverso un'espressione lirica, in una rappresentazione poetica della propria personalità persuasa e annunciatrice e nel mito-parabola della "ginestra".³⁵⁵

La ginestra depicts his pessimistic vision of life which only briefly allows a sliver of hope that progressive thought can improve humankind and stop the senseless competition among us. The battle however appears to be against Nature which unconsciously assails all creatures and always prevails, rendering humanity with its ego-based needs and feelings irrelevant in the universe. Leopardi is incorrectly viewed by many critics as optimistic that humanity tends toward community spirit:

Testamento, non solo dell'uomo che si congeda dagli uomini lasciando loro tutto quello che può, di pensiero e di canto, ma di tutta una generazione tradita ed illusa di cui il poeta interpretava l'istanza più profonda di libertà e aristocrazia spirituale, operando, non so quanto, lo sforzo popolare e politico che comunemente si crede dalle interpretazioni del '47 (Binni, Luporini) in poi, certamente desiderando ancora la morte per sé come la sola fine possibile delle sue mille sofferenze, e una progressiva sopravvivenza del consorzio umano che certo gli spiriti eletti dovevano realizzare, in uno slancio di *amor vitae* che non abbandonava Leopardi nemmeno in punto di congedarsene.³⁵⁶

The amount of *amor vitae* is minimal in *La ginestra* especially once the utter isolation, driven by misanthropy³⁵⁷, of both Leopardi and humanity is understood. The only love to

³⁵⁵ Walter Binni, *La Protesta di Leopardi* (Sansoni, 1973), 258.

³⁵⁶ Mercogliano 17.

³⁵⁷ The misanthropy and pessimism which imbued Leopardi's outlook derived from his youth in Recanati. In his letters to Pietro Giordani, such as this excerpt from April 30, 1817, he frequently lamented the lack of intellectual stimulation there; "Che cos'è in Recanati di bello, che l'uomo si curi di vedere e d'imparare?"

be found is in the distant memory of past greatness or perhaps a past era of less pain. Those such as Mercogliano who cite Leopardi's apparent interest in our collective survival miss the point. As Biscuso and Gallo noted, the critic's tendency to decontextualize the author, thus moderating his/her position, relegates the poem's once contemporary analysis to a merely superficial reading. Biscuso and Gallo come closest to accurately defining Leopardi's negative attitude and how such a position should prevent one from interpreting the poem as progressive:

Come possono allora la solidarietà umana e la lotta comune contro la natura, a cui *La ginestra* fa appello sulla base della cognizione del vero, apparire altro che aspirazioni morali “tirate co' denti, non dedotte bene, anzi in contraddizione con le premesse” del suo “sistema”, come apparvero a DeSanctis? L'ultima parola coerente di Leopardi non sembra essere dunque l'esortazione della *Ginestra* a superare le lotte fratricide che lacerano “l'umana compagnia”, esortazione nobilissima ma utopica, se non incongrua con tutte le precedenti riflessioni, bensì la disincanta e amara constatazione della *Palinodia...*”³⁵⁸

In the satirical poem *Palinodia al Marchese Gino Capponi*, Leopardi pretended to retract his pessimistic position and yet the destructive power of nature and humanity's misanthropic tendencies lead him back to his initial position of pessimism:

l'umana compagnia principii e parti
ha per natura; e por quegli odii in pace
non valser gl'intelletti e le possanze
degli uomini giammai (101-104)³⁵⁹

Niente. ... Che parla ella di divertimenti? L'unico divertimento in Recanati è lo studio; unico divertimento è quello che mi ammazza: tutto il resto è noia. So che la noia può farmi manco male che la fatica, e però spesso mi piglia la noia, ma questa mi cresce, com'è naturale, la malinconia; e quand'io ho avuto la disgrazia di conversare con questa gente, che succede di rado, torno pieno di tristissimi pensieri agli studi miei...” Rita Scala, *Leopardi “Lettera a un giovane del XX secolo”* (Casa Editrice Federico, 1989), 13.

³⁵⁸ Biscuso and Gallo 101.

³⁵⁹ *Opere* 143.

....
 la natura crudel, fanciullo invitto,
 il suo capriccio adempie, e senza posa
 distruggendo e formando si trastulla. (170-172)³⁶⁰

Having read Leopardi's complete opus, it becomes difficult to interpret any of his poems as viewing humanity in a positive or socialist light. So-called "progressive" readings are far-fetched and completely lacking support. The *Palinodia* is indicative of Leopardi's position; "Quale documento è più conclusivo dell'antipoliticità leopardiana, dell'assurdità delle letture *progressive*?"³⁶¹ This perspective contradicts Salvatorelli who believes erroneously that the *Ginestra* indicates that humanity has the ability to somehow tame nature for the common good and move society toward a socialist state:

La politica a cui approda il Leopardi è quella di un'umanità universalmente associata, che sostituisce alle guerre intestine per il danno reciproco quella esterna per il soggiogamento della natura a vantaggio comune. Egli suppone, senza formularlo espressamente, un concetto di stato e di governo puramente strumentali, puramente di organizzazione amministrativa, senza nessun valore finale e trascendente; e salta a piè pari lo stadio nazionale per l'associazione universale che va dall'individuo all'umanità, e in cui il bene di tutti è il bene di ciascuno, e reciprocamente.³⁶²

Leopardi's elaborate discourses on the non-existence of altruism render the above interpretation impossible to believe. Not only does Leopardi not indicate such a socialist theme *espressamente*, but in the *Zibaldone*, he repeatedly indicates that such sharing of

³⁶⁰ *Opere* 145.

³⁶¹ Biscuso and Gallo 101.

³⁶² L. Salvatorelli, *Il pensiero politico italiano dal 1700 al 1870* (Torino, 1942), 186.

resources is impossible:

La società stretta, ponendo gl'individui a contatto gli uni degli altri, dà necessariamente l'essor all'odio innato di ciascun vivente verso altrui, il qual odio in nessuno animale è tanto, neppur verso gli individui di specie diversa e naturalmente nemica, quanto egli è negl'individui di una società stretta verso gli altri individui della medesima società!³⁶³

Furthermore the mere idea of subjugating nature is patently false and is considered an impossibility by Leopardi. None of his other works contain any indication that such an act is possible. It is the goal of *La ginestra* to enable the reader to understand that nature is in charge and that humanity is merely a miniscule part of it. To battle against it or to believe that one can change its immutable course is a fallacy.

La ginestra follows an interesting trajectory, beginning with a polemic against society and its lack of unity. Eventually nature asserts its strength and dominion over all things, including humanity. In spite of its over-developed ego³⁶⁴, humanity is subject to the will of nature as much as any other creature. In a literal sense *la ginestra*, a robust plant with fragrant yellow flowers, is exalted for living in harsh conditions and not withering before the strong and destructive hand of Nature. It is commonly accepted that the plant is a metaphor, representing Leopardi's hope that humanity can bravely face the obstacles

³⁶³ Zibaldone 987.

³⁶⁴ Due to the individual's ego it is difficult to encounter compassion, "Ed ogni qualunque operazione dell'animo nostro ha sempre la sua certa e inevitabile origine nell'egoismo, per quanto questo sia purificato, e quella ne sembri lontana. Ma la compassione che nasce dell'animo nostro alla vista di uno che soffre è un miracolo della natura che in quel punto ci fa provare un sentimento affatto indipendente dal nostro vantaggio o piacere, e tutto relativo agli altri, senza nessuna mescolanza di noi medesimi." Zibaldone [108]. Gino Ditadi, *L'Anima delle Bestie* (Isonomia, 1999), 172. Again Leopardi contradicts other statements he has made about the non-existence of altruism.

placed before it by Nature:

...Leopardi compose *La ginestra* (1836), la più complessa delle sue liriche... In essa il poeta prende spunto dall'umile fiore della ginesta, che continuamente rinasce e cresce anche sulle pendici di un vulcano, per invitare tutti gli uomini a ritrovare una fraterna solidarietà che li unisca e li protegga nella comune lotta contro la Natura matrigna.³⁶⁵

Although the above is the commonly-held view, it is wrong. There is no solidarity among individual sufferers and there is no invitation to commiserate. In none of his work did Leopardi indicate that sharing feelings was possible much less desirable. A thorough investigation of Leopardi's misanthropy indicates that his view of the world is entirely individualistic. Everyone experiences life in a solitary fashion and there is no solidarity created by an individual's suffering no matter how common it may be. Additionally there is no indication that humanity can seek protection from stepmother nature. Leopardi perceived nature initially as benign but gradually came to the realization that it is a destructive force with no concern for humankind.

The blossom thus represents Leopardi's conception of a platonically³⁶⁶ ideal element of the cosmos struggling against nature, be it a plant, an individual, or a society. In other

³⁶⁵ Roncoroni 165.

³⁶⁶ Leopardi believed that such relativism comparing the platonic ideal to reality permeates humanity's perception of all objects and events to the point that when a person is touched by fortune, it becomes a negative event, reminding others how distant they themselves are from living in an ideal way. The positive event generates misanthropic thoughts; "...all'annuncio del suo caso prospero, i volti de' cari distorcersi ed oscurarsi, e alcuno sbigottire; molti sforzarsi in principio di non credere, poi di rappiccinire nell'estimazione sua, e nella loro propria e degli altri, il suo nuovo bene; in certi, a causa di questo, intepidirsi l'amicizia, in altri mutarsi in odio; finalmente non pochi mettere ogni loro potere ed opera per ispogliarlo di esso bene. Così è l'immaginazione dell'uomo ne' suoi concetti, a la ragione stessa, naturalmente lontana e aborrente dalla realtà della vita." *Pensieri XXVI, Opere* 712.

words, the *ginestra* is what Leopardi himself aspired to be; strong in the face of adversity and accepting of his position in the universe:

Nato ad amare gli uomini piuttosto che a odiarli, Leopardi, se si riconosceva con la ginestra in una identità di tragico destino di soccombenza, doveva poi parimenti difendere il decoro e l'onore che gli derivano dal fatto di essere paladino delle “due sommità dello spirito umano”, la filosofia e la poesia, sentendosi per questa via chiamato a dare viva esplicitazione del suo impegno superando la stessa dimensione di passività necessitata, per la quale, in quanto alla vicenda biologica, si riconosceva fratello di quell'umile fiore del deserto.³⁶⁷

The blossom simply exists and attempts to survive, struggling against the forces of biology. It suffers neither the existential torment of the poet nor the petty thoughts of the population at large. The supposed unifying political overtones proposed by Borsellino are more speculative than practical.³⁶⁸

Revisiting *La ginestra* with a misanthropic lens, the reader notes that while there is some optimism shown toward what humankind can achieve, the first half of the poem is very staunchly against humanity's current attitude, its handling of affairs and is distinctly non-collegial.³⁶⁹ The first stanza describes Leopardi's fear of the devastating power of Nature which takes the form of Mount Vesuvius. He described the volcano as a barren area where nothing thrives, akin to Italy's intellectual scene. No animals live there as they

³⁶⁷ Mercogliano 83.

³⁶⁸ “Io abbotino la politica, perché credo anzi vedo che gli'individui sono infelici sotto ogni forma di governo; colpa della natura che ha fatti gli uomini all'infelicità; e rido della felicità delle *masse* perché il mio piccolo cervello non concepisce una *massa* felice, composta d'individui non felici.” (To Fanny Targoni Tozzetti, Roma 5 Dicembre [1831], *Epistolario*, 782, Leopardi, *Tutte le Opere*, cit., pg 1369)

³⁶⁹ Leopardi asks contemporary society to see itself in the burnt wasteland of volcanic destruction; “Qui mira e qui ti specchia / Secol superbo e sciocco” *La ginestra*, lines 52-53.

cannot survive the arid and burnt atmosphere:

Qui su l'arida schiena
 Del formidabil monte
 Sterminador Vesuvio,
 La qual null'altro allegra arbor nè fiore (lines 1-4)

Yet the solitary flower grows, displaying its beauty and releasing its perfume, much like Leopardi diffuses his poetry into a world with little ability to comprehend it. There is no audience to experience the spectacle but it is not wasted:

Il fiore delle solitudini non soffre di non essere visto; il profumo non è “spreccato”, bensì “sparso in lontananza”. E la virtù è tale proprio perché separata dal mondo, immune dalle lusinghe della fama e del successo.³⁷⁰

Such is Leopardi's vision of heroism; of being true to oneself and one's abilities, even if no one else is cognizant of them:

...strenuamente fedeli a noi stessi, al nostro mondo interiore, alle nostre persuasioni, ai nostri valori ideali: che è poi il senso più profondo che Leopardi dava alla parola “eroismo”.³⁷¹

³⁷⁰ Giuseppe Sandrini, *Il Fiore del Deserto e altri studi su Leopardi* (Esedra Editrice, 2007), 10.

³⁷¹ Binni, *La protesta di Leopardi*, 263.

The Role of Nature

Nature is a constant destructive force whereas human behavior is volatile and erratic. This destruction however is purely incidental and is not directed at humanity per sé; it is simply what nature does. Many critics have latched on to the phrase, “Madre è di parto e di voler matrigna” in an attempt to attribute malicious intent to nature’s actions:

Il Vesuvio sterminatore diviene così allegoria politica e filosofica, non potendo il poeta limitarsi a simboleggiare con esso esclusivamente l’odio immane della natura per tutto ciò che esiste.³⁷²

This is not the case however. Although humanity is focused on the battle with nature, nature itself is not aware of our struggle with it. *Matrigna* is used to indicate a lack of concern, not an active misanthropy toward us. Leopardi is satirical, expressing the feelings of the average person, not his own. Only humans burdened with the unnatural ability to reason are capable of misanthropic thought³⁷³ or are aware of their mortality.³⁷⁴

Humanity acts against its own interests by ignorantly believing itself not to be an integral part of Nature and by living apart from it. With a shrug of its shoulders in the form of an

³⁷² Mercogliano 108.

³⁷³ *Zibaldone* 527. “Come dunque la natura ha fatto l’uomo ripugnante e se stessa, cioè a se stesso? E che cos’è questa legge naturale, che gli altri animali (perfetti sudditi della natura) non seguono, nè ponno seguire, impediti dallo stesso amor proprio nè conoscono in verun modo?”

³⁷⁴ Borsellino 74. “Infine, la più esplicita, finale identificazione della condizione umana con quella della “lenta ginestra” rivendica la forza vitale dell’individuo proprio in ragione della sua debolezza, ovvero della coscienza della sua mortalità.”

eruption Nature can show humanity just how irrelevant it is by destroying everything:

Con lieve moto in un momento annulla
 In parte, e può con monti
 Poco men lievi ancor subitamente
 Annichilare in tutto. (lines 45-48)

By the time *La ginestra* was written in 1836, Leopardi had come to the realization that Nature harbors no misanthropy toward humanity--we are simply not relevant and are not the center of the universe. French illuminism had impacted him greatly with its endorsement of English Empiricism. The consequent loss of faith had a shocking effect upon the author.³⁷⁵ Significantly, in a break from the illuminists, although Leopardi may have agreed with the illuminist premise that equality existed among humanity in nature, such discussions are irrelevant as society has abandoned nature and its natural order. The organizations of humanity are defined by competition in society for scarce resources with neither altruism nor social agenda. The false concept of humanity's progressive nature is due in part to the end of the first stanza:

Son della umana gente
Le magnifiche sorti e progressive. (lines 50-51)

The italics indicate that the line is drawn from another work, in this case one written by

³⁷⁵ DeSanctis, *Studio su Giacomo Leopardi*, 238. "Questa maledizione alla scienza è anche cosa biblica. Tutte le religioni hanno in sospetto la scienza, come distruttiva della fede. E la scienza a volta sua, quando ha coscienza del suo potere, ne ha anche la superbia. Tutto l'orgoglio del razionalismo è in quel motto di Pascal: -L'uomo è "una canna pesante", così fragile per sua natura, così forte per la sua ragione-. Leopardi rigetta fede e scienza, nega teologia e filosofia, rimane nel nulla, l'infinita vanità del tutto. Perciò la sua teoria è morte di ogni teologia, di ogni poesia e di ogni filosofia: il nulla universale."

Leopardi's cousin Terenzio Mamiani (1799-1855) in the prologue to *Inni Sacri*. Leopardi does not agree with humanity's belief to be magnificent and progressive and finds it amusing and contemptuous. There is no progress to be had and no conception of time, only nature's eternal destructive power.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁶ Cesare Galimberti, *Operette morali* (Guida Editore, 1998), 8. The goal then becomes to abandon terrestrial concerns altogether and to immerse oneself in nature completely, "...si volge alla disperata ricerca di una condizione ignara non soltanto della ostilità della ragione alla natura, ma della distinzione stessa tra vero e falso, estranea persino alla possibilità del costituirsi di nozioni contrapposte o anche solo distinte; a uno stato, in definitiva, totalmente indifferenziato, alieno di *qualsiasi* distinzione: tra uomo e animale, tra mondo animato e mondo inanimato, tra soggetto e oggetto; a una condizione anteriore a qualsiasi volontà di crescere, come l'esistenza dei primi uomini-bambini nel mondo privo di varietà..."

National Literature

In the second stanza Leopardi elaborated upon his dislike of contemporary Italian thought. Leopardi was addressing someone distasteful; the personification the 19th century and contemporary society. Due to the pride and closed-mindedness of the 1800s, literature had taken a great leap backward and away from the progressive ideals of the *Risorgimento*:

Qui mira e qui ti specchia,
 Secol superbo e sciocco,
 Che il calle insino allora
 Dal risorto pensier segnato innanti
 Abbandonasti, e volti addietro i passi,
 Del ritornar ti vanti,
 E procedere il chiami. (lines 52-58)

Leopardi reveals his hatred of contemporary literature and its supposed culture:

Ma il disprezzo piuttosto che si serra
 Di te nel petto mio (lines 65-66).

In the third stanza Leopardi continues his tirade against current Italian literature and by extension its populace³⁷⁷ which is akin to a poor man in bad physical condition yet generous and kind in spirit:

³⁷⁷ Leopardi expressed his disappointment in Italy's national literature years prior in *All'Italia*; "O patria mia, vedo le mura e gli archi / E le colonne e i simulacri e l'erme / Torri degli avi nostri, / Ma la gloria non vedo, / Non vedo il lauro e il ferro ond'eran carichi / I nostri padri antichi." (lines 1-6)

Uom di povero stato e membra inferme,
 Che sia dell'alma generoso ed alto,
 Non chiama se nè stima
 Ricco d'or nè gagliardo,
 E di splendida vita o di valente (lines 87-91)

One is reminded of the misanthropy that such a weak literary position produced in the poet as he compared his country with others, France in particular. Italian literature is no longer rich or strong due to the weakness and ignorance of its citizens.³⁷⁸ His compatriots are depicted as very ignorant, for they are very proud but are destined to die:

Magnanimo animale
 Non credo io già, ma stolto
 Quel che, nato a perir, nutrito in pene,
 Dice, a goder son fatto,
 E di fetido orgoglio (lines 98-102)

Human goodness should be guided by grand ideas and not religion. Leopardi very much dislikes contemporary culture and the attitude of his countrymen. Ideally they should behave thusly:

Tutti fra se confederati estima
 Gli uomini, e tutti abbraccia
 Con vero amor, porgendo
 Valida e pronta ed apettando aita
 Negli alterni perigli e nelle angoscie
 Della guerra comune. (lines 130-135)

This feeling of love and solidarity is the depiction of a leopardian dream world, a utopia

³⁷⁸ Zibaldone 829. "Gl'italiani non hanno costumi: essi hanno delle usanze. Così tutti i popoli civili che non sono nazioni."

which can never exist due to the low quality of human interaction.³⁷⁹ This is another example of an idealized world presented by Leopardi and similar to his poem *A Silvia* where he used the death of a local young woman as an artifice to indirectly criticize his contemporaries by highlighting the positive qualities only she possessed.

In the fourth stanza, Leopardi sits alone and is overcome by the vastness of space, the far away stars and celestial spaces. Just as humankind is miniscule in relation to the Earth, so is Earth in relation to the cosmos. Thus even tinier are one's thoughts in relation to all space. Humanity believes itself to be the center of the universe and that everything was made for it by God who descended upon this tiny grain of sand. It is hard to know whether to feel pity for humanity due to its stupidity or its pride. Leopardi concludes this section by again referring to his dislike of humanity's odious pride and self-centeredness:

Credi tu data al Tutto, e quante volte
 Favoleggiar ti piaque, in questo oscuro
 Granel di sabbia, il qual di terra ha nome,
 Per tua cagion, dell'universe cose
 Scender gli autori, e conversar sovente
 Co' tuoi piacevolmente; e che i derisi
 Sogni rinnovellando, ai saggi insulta
 Fin la presente età, che in conoscenza
 Ed in civil costume
 Sembra tutta avvanzar; quel moto allora,
 Mortal prole infelice, o qual pensiero
 Verso te finalmente il cor m'assale?
 Non so se il riso o la pietà prevale. (lines 188-201)

In the fifth stanza, Leopardi describes humankind's relationship and precarious standing

³⁷⁹ *Zibaldone* 982. "Il fatto dimostra, al contrario di quel che gli altri lo interpretano, che l'uomo è per natura il più antisociale di tutti i viventi che per natura hanno qualche società fra loro."

in the world of nature and his value in the natural world. Like an ants' nest inside an apple which falls from a tree, so lava emerges from the volcano destroying and crushing its inhabitants. To Nature, humans are no different than the ants inside the apple, there are simply fewer of them:

Non ha natura al seme
 Dell'uom più stima o cura
 Ch'alla formica: e se più rari in quello
 Che nell'altra è la strage,
 Non avvien, ciò d'altronde
 Fuor che l'uom sue prosapie ha men feconde. (lines 231-236)

In the sixth stanza Leopardi shows the sad reality that Nature, our greatest enemy, is not even aware of humanity's existence or of the battle in which it believes itself to be engaged.³⁸⁰ Leopardi determined that humanity, instead of inspiring hatred, is simply pathetic and deluded by an over-developed sense of importance. Many years have passed since the eruption that devastated Pompei and Ercolano but even so, the farmer today, cultivating the burnt soil, looks anxiously up at the crown of the volcano in fear:

E il villanello intento,
 Ai vigneti che a stento in questi campi
 Nutre la morta zolla e incenerita,
 Ancor leva lo sguardo
 Sospetoso alla vetta (lines 240-244)

³⁸⁰ Eamon Grennan, *Selected Poems of Giacomo Leopardi* (Dedalus, 1995), xii. In the preface, John C. Barnes commits the typical error of believing that humanity can battle nature and its effects; "Resurrecting a strain of Titanism harking back to Enlightenment attitudes, he [Leopardi] stresses the need for all men to repudiate superficial consolatory myths and courageously to unite in brotherhood the better to confront the blind despotism of nature."

There is a constant threat that his house, his sustenance, and all his family's belongings will be taken away. Nature does not care about humanity or the passage of time. Humankind believes time passes but Nature and its power are timeless. Meanwhile countries and peoples fall and Nature does not realize that humanity believes itself to be eternal:

Sta natura ognor verde, anzi procede
 Per sì lungo cammino,
 Che sembra star. Caggiono i regni intanto,
 Passan genti e linguaggi: ella non vede
 E l'uom d'eternità s'arrogava il vanto. (lines 292-296)

Thus far, *La ginestra*, known by many as a celebration of the fraternity of humankind³⁸¹, has indicated quite the contrary. Humanity is depicted as pathetic, self-centered and oblivious to its unimportant role in the universe.

In the seventh and last stanza, Leopardi focuses on how a dignified, idealized element of the cosmos, the hearty plant, faces Nature. The fragile blossom that beautifies this arid landscape will also be destroyed by the force of the lava:

E tu, lenta ginestra,
 Che di selve odorate
 Queste campagne dispogliate adorni,
 Anche tu presto alla crudel possanza
 Soccomberai del sotteraneo foco,
 Che ritornando al loco
 Già noto, stenderà l'avarò lembo

³⁸¹ Mercogliano 21. "...proclamando la confederazione di tutti gli individui nobilmente pensanti per la comune sopravvivenza..."

Su tue molle foreste. E piegherai
 Sotto il fascio mortal non renitente
 Il tuo capo innocente. (lines 296-306)

In a surge of misanthropy, Leopardi indicates that the blossom will not die pathetically because it did not behave like a proud coward, as does humankind. It simply existed where chance created and left it. The blossom is much wiser than humankind because it is not sick with pride and does not believe that its fragile life was made immortal by destiny nor by its own self-proclaimed power:

Ma più saggia, ma tanto
 Men inferma dell'uom, quanto le frali
 Tue stirpi non credesti
 O del fato o da te fatte immortali. (lines 314-317)

This poem follows the trajectory of Leopardi's life and thought as well as his ever-present misanthropy. He began by looking externally and criticizing his country, the current culture and humanity itself. Having expressed that negativity he then viewed the cosmos and understood his own role in the universe as a tiny, nearly undifferentiated grain of sand. He became the plant; a creature alone on a rock with neither pride nor expectations of survival. He projects this identity only onto himself as the rest of humanity is still awash with pride and over-inflated egos which place them at the center of earth as well as the entire cosmos. His misanthropy toward others is consistent and contrasts with the flower which embodies all the positive qualities that humanity will never possess. Neither the "slancio di *amor vitae*" referenced by Mercogliano nor the "fratellanza universale" noted by DeSanctis exist.

On Misanthropy

Leopardi presumed that the reader of the *Zibaldone* will believe that he simply demonstrated a law of nature, that hate is natural. Leopardi, damaged by life in so many ways, was filled with so much hate for others and for himself, that he could not separate that feeling from any other. Dislike of others, peers and oneself are the three distinct varieties of misanthropy which serve different functions, personal and poetic. They represent darwinistic competition on a group level and on a personal level as well as self-recrimination for not achieving that which Leopardi desired most: happiness. The novelty of this work is that it differentiates misanthropy and does not treat it as a one-dimensional concept. Additionally misanthropy is the engine that powered his creativity and motivated him to write. This study has defined the methodology of Leopardi's misanthropy and demonstrated its various complex layers. It is not simply a monolithic concept but has much more nuance. Thus, in his works of poetry and stories relating to the self, other individuals or other groups, the reader can determine that new vocabulary is in play. Hence the oft-used *odio* is not a static term but instead adapts dynamically to the context in which it is used.

Leopardi could not stop thinking about himself constantly and the misery of his existence. Other themes he investigated and wrote about were not necessarily an artifice but rather a form of escapism or perhaps the resentful, hopeless strike from a man who had abandoned any hope of happiness due to life experiences eroding his once hopeful self. Leopardi's complete deconstruction and redefinition of misanthropy is yet another

indicator of the minute level of detail with which he examined all things from literature to fluid dynamics to astronomy as a teenager³⁸². They are the observations of an individual so far removed from the interactions of normal society that he simply observes, angrily, from the outside. As he observed women through bedroom windows, married couples strolling, satisfied farmers in the countryside, and friendship among others, the question of why he could not have such contentment echoed in his consciousness.³⁸³ He deeply desired to be privy to others' confidence and to be an object of romantic desire. Constant resentment, disappointment, and the eventual disintegration of any hope of normalcy conspired to define Leopardi's role in the world, in his mind at least, as a perpetual outcast, and non-participant. As time progressed, his ability for optimism diminished. Even when living in Naples with Ranieri, a somewhat pleasant time comparatively³⁸⁴, Leopardi can not resist viewing all things in a negative vein.

Leopardi used and viewed objects as literary devices to express his negative feelings, and

³⁸² Frattini 13. "L'interesse per le scienze si manifesta assai precocemente in Leopardi che nella *Storia dell'astronomia*, elaborata a quindici anni, mostra, soprattutto nell'ambito della cultura greco-latina, una ricchezza d'informazione che ha del prodigioso. Ma in quell'operetta, dedicata a "la più nobile tra le Fifiche scienze", con l'intento di far cosa gradita "alla letteraria repubblica nel tesser la Storia delle più ardite imprese dell'umano intelletto", affiora l'idea, di estrazione illuministica, che il progresso del sapere consista essenzialmente nel perder coscienza degli errori in cui l'intelligenza umana era in precedenza incorsa." This vein leads Leopardi to his *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* wherein he describes the contemporary misunderstanding of the society of the ancients.

³⁸³ Tartaro 51. Leopardi's first love had ended badly and while it inspired his first romantic poetry, it also inspired him to write of his impending death; "*Il primo amore* insieme con il diario, che ne è il precedente scopertamente autobiografico, segna un passo in avanti nella direzione aperta dunque già dell'*Appressamento della morte*."

³⁸⁴ Zibaldone LI. Although content living with his friend, Leopardi's existence was never easy; "Ignorato dai più, viene visitato da qualche straniero di passaggio, come Augusto von Platen: "Leopardi è piccolo e gobbo, il viso ha pallido e sofferente, ed egli peggiora le sue cattive condizioni col suo modo di vivere, poiché fa del giorno notte e viceversa. Senza potersi muovere e senza potersi applicare, per lo stato dei suoi nervi, egli conduce una delle più miserevoli vite che si possono immaginare.""

not as true representations. One is reminded of *A Silvia* where the history of the mythical local girl dying is more artifice than historic fact. For example, he could see Mount Vesuvius from his Neapolitan home with Ranieri and eventually attributed events to Vesuvius which did not occur. He chose to view Vesuvius as a constant menace even though no geological events occurred when Leopardi was present. He even wrote to his father informing him of an explosion of Vesuvius which did not occur.³⁸⁵

Mount Vesuvius is symbolic of destructive natural forces in Leopardi's world. One suspects that Leopardi has a symbolic literary concept of himself, others like himself, and others unlike himself. There may exist another *one* of each type, a literary *other* to which Leopardi assigned attributes which helped him literarily. Mario Giordano claims *Il Vesuvio* di Di Leo is the basis for *La ginestra*. Di Leo's description of Vesuvius is one of destructive power and for Leopardi it is also an opportunity for bitter reflection.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁵ Mario Giordano, *Leopardi e l'altro Vesuvio* (Mephite, 2003), 11-13. ... nella lettera al padre del 5 aprile 1834 il Leopardi fa un preciso richiamo al Vesuvio nella cui rappresentazione egli si era molto presto imbattuto traducendo giovanissimo, nel 1812, un epigramma di Marziale: Il giovamento che mi ha prodotto questo clima è appena sensibile, anche dopo che io sono passato a godere la migliore aria di Napoli abitando in un'altura a vista di tutto il golfo di Portici e del Vesuvio, del quale contemplo ogni giorno il fumo ed ogni notte la lava ardente. Del Vesuvio egli parlerà ancora al padre nella lettera del 25 aprile 1835, informandolo di una sua "terribile esplosione": Io continuo, grazie a Dio, a star benino, anche non ostante un'infame stagione, che qui si è messa, dopo una terribile esplosione del Vesuvio, che la sera del primo di questo mese spaventò tutta la città. Considerati insieme, questi due espliciti richiami al Vesuvio risultano particolarmente interessanti. Mentre nella prima lettera il Leopardi parla del fumo e delle colate laviche del vulcano come di un semplice spettacolo, nella seconda parla invece di una sua "terribile esplosione" in relazione a un evento che in realtà non dovette presentare nulla di eccezionale dal momento che in sede scientifica non risulta registrato alcun fenomeno di rilievo nell'attività del Vesuvio per tutto il 1835.

³⁸⁶ M. Giordano 48. "Gli elementi attineni dal *Vesuvio* si configurano quindi come una sorte di materiale grezzo che, oltre ad essere perfettamente assorbiti nella severa armonia propria dell'ultimo Leopardi, viene ordinato dal poeta a ben altro fine che quello del Di Leo: non alla descrizione quanto si vuole efficace di uno spaventoso fenomeno naturale considerato per altro secondo il gusto tipicamente settecentesco dell'ostentazione scientifica ma all'espressione del pensoso sentimento della sciocca superbia umana concepito alla luce di una coscienza altissima e nello spirito dell'amara riflessione giovannea: "E gli uomini vollero piuttosto le tenebre che la luce.""

In Leopardi's works there is a sense of the opposite of the platonic ideal. Instead of the existence of a perfect version of all things in a parallel universe, there is a completely negative one and any view of it as positive is an illusion. The anti-platonic ideal then becomes the basis for all observation. These images take on new meaning and must be compared to this anti-model of negativity. If the citizens of Italy could achieve the ideal level of patriotism and unity found in some other countries, than its people could participate in a national dialogue. A national literature is the first step in creating a national collective consciousness which will spur the populace to successful united actions. Such collective action would make people less self-centered and on a personal level would result in less torment in the life of young Giacomo, the man silently screaming because he cannot have what he wants, an ideal and unobtainable life of happiness.

Leopardi sought fame based on his intellect³⁸⁷ and found it although he could not have anticipated the strong influence he would have nearly 200 years later. He found the one portrait that was done of him to be unsatisfactory and yet was content that it existed such that future generations would know of him and of Recanati. Today there exists a love/hate relationship between the citizens of Recanati and their most famous son. It is similar in some ways to the same conflicting sentiments Leopardi felt for them. Now famous as the *Città della Poesia*, Recanti attracts thousands of tourists a year hoping to understand how the sequestered poet lived. In spite of his constant expressions of dislike

³⁸⁷ In a letter to Giordani from September 26, 1817, Leopardi indicated his goals: "I certainly don't want to live among the crowd; mediocrity scares me to death; but I want to raise myself and become great and immortal by intelligence and application; an arduous and perhaps futile enterprise for me, but men must not lose heart and despair of themselves." Shaw 52.

toward Recanati, Leopardi always came home and when there, rarely ventured far from his front door. The hedge that inspired *L'infinito* is merely 150 yards from his home. The tower that inspired *Il passero solitario* is only a quarter of a mile away. The square where he observed Teresa Fattorini, who would later be depicted in *A Silvia*, is directly outside the window of his study. The same window is the same perspective from which he observed the farmers walking home after working in the fields. He wrote as if he knew them but did not. Rather he imposed his own existential philosophy upon them to some degree or at least used their experience as a foil to express his own relationship to life and his expectations. Leopardi's life was dominated by fear of his parents, fear of failure, fear of not knowing enough, and fear of not passing the challenging exams he was subjected to by his father³⁸⁸. He constantly feared not achieving his goals and was afraid of leaving home although he felt the constant need to do so.

A thorough examination of misanthropy in Giacomo Leopardi's work gives a clearer idea of the kind of person that he was and the scope and goals of his writing. His public, literary persona is substantially different from his private one. The misanthropy espoused in the *Zibaldone* is in large part an artifice, a rhetorical device to capture the emotions of his audience although the book was never published during his lifetime.³⁸⁹ He harbored a

³⁸⁸ Monaldo Leopardi had a special exemption which allowed him to possess books which were banned by the Vatican and he allowed Giacomo, Paola and Carlo to read them. In that way, he was somewhat progressive. At the same time he was so eager to demonstrate his children's erudition that he would hold periodic public interrogations, oral exams, where he would ask a variety of questions on books they had recently read. Information from the core 12,000 books was fair game although Monaldo had a list of typical questions he might ask. Example interrogation programs are on display in the museum adjacent to the *La Casa Leopardi* in Recanati. One can easily imagine the children dreading such a public performance.

³⁸⁹ Saviano 114. Leopardi may have never intended to publish the *Zibaldone*; "Il poeta non parlò mai ad alcuno, eccetto al fedelissimo amico Ranieri, di questo manoscritto, per cui si può arguire che egli non avesse avuto alcun progetto di farne pubblicazione. Per tale motivo egli effuse tutto il suo intimo su quei

particular dislike for Recanati³⁹⁰ but after his trip to Rome, he realized that his solitude was to be persistent and unchangeable. No matter where he was outside of Recanati he found no real peers although many friends. He resigned himself to not feeling satisfaction but instead striving to be true to his ideals in a form of intellectual heroism.

Leopardi's legacy is a timeless one and conveys the message that all humanity lives alone, a life of solitude, with no connection to others, and with no meaning. The universality of Leopardi's message is that one is always alone and contemplating one's position in the universe. Because of his idiosyncrasies and wholly unique life, which many can relate to in one aspect or another, he continues to speak to many even today.³⁹¹

fogli, che pensava rimanessero privati ed inditi.”

³⁹⁰ Perhaps not surprisingly, according to *La Casa Leopardi*, Giacomo's childhood in Recanati was a much more pleasant experience than is typically depicted in literary criticism.

³⁹¹ Saviano 7. “Giacomo Leopardi, dalla sua morte a oggi, non è stato certo un autore trascurato da editori e studiosi. È stato sempre un “filone” che ha tirato molto, che ha interessato e appassionato soprattutto per l’attrazione che, verso di esso, hanno sentito le generazioni ... Sono le ragioni di una poesia lirica che si rinnova continuamente e il cui contenuto non perde di attualità.”

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