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Massimo Natale



Pour citer cet article

Massimo Natale, « «Questa solitudine immensa». Leopardi's Poetry Abroad: Three Snapshots », *Fabula / Les colloques*, « Corpus comme limite : dedans, dehors. Le Corpus : corps à corps », URL : <https://www.fabula.org/colloques/document12164.php>, article mis en ligne le 30 Mars 2024, consulté le 21 Décembre 2024

«Questa solitudine immensa». Leopardi's Poetry Abroad: Three Snapshots

Massimo Natale

1. Let us reopen a novel by the South African writer John Coetzee, *Disgrace* (Coetzee, 1999), published four years before its author won the Nobel Prize, in 2003. It was a remarkable success: the story of David Lurie, Professor at Cape Town University, and his removal from the University because of his affair with a student. Prof. Lurie is an expert on European Romanticism (he wrote, for example, a book on William Wordsworth) but is tired of writing academic essays. The protagonist is now trying to write an opera, and wants to title it *Byron in Italy*. Toward the end of the novel, at the beginning of chapter 24, the opera's protagonist – Teresa – stands at the window and begs her distant hero – Byron – to come to her. Meanwhile, the woman wonders about her lonely condition. I quote from chapter 24:

In her white nightdress Teresa stands at the bedroom window. Her eyes are closed. It is the darkest hour of the night. She breathes deeply, breathing in the rustle of the wind, the belling of the bullfrogs. *Che vuol dir*, she sings – her voice barely above a whisper – *che vuol dir questa solitudine immensa? Ed io*, she sings, *che sono?* Silence. The solitudine immensa offers no reply. Even the trio in the corner are quiet as dormice. 'Come!' she whispers. 'Come to me. I plead, my Byron! She opens her arms wide, embracing the darkness, embracing what it will bring (Coetzee, 1999, p. 90).

Moreover, at the end of the previous chapter Coetzee has just quoted some lines from Dante's *Commedia*. Now, the reader acquainted with Italian poetry can easily recognize another "Italian" quote (and the words transcribed in italics are actually in Italian in the original text), but more surprising. It is the *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia*, the great poem Giacomo Leopardi wrote between 1829 and 1830¹. In this song, the subject utters these words becoming aware of his insignificance in the world. In Coetzee's novel, however, there is a shift from a philosophical dimension to a strictly erotic one: the same words have become a feminine cry of pain, shaping the *cliché* of the abandoned and betrayed heroine. A woman at the

¹ On the elaboration of Leopardi's *Canto notturno*, see the classic analysis of Monteverdi, 1960; broader observations are to be found in Blasucci, 2003, and Lonardi, 2020 (both very faithful to the negative thickness of the text). For Leopardi's feminine figures see at least Bellucci, 2010.

window, singing, named Teresa: we seem to recognize, even in this, the mark of Leopardi, of one of his most famous poems, *A Silvia*.

2. It is just one example, and I do not know how well known. To me it seems rather suggestive: a novelist of the first magnitude, far from old Europe, canonized in a now postcolonial dimension, in whose work the reader suddenly recognizes a memory of Leopardi's poetry. It is true that Coetzee is an enthusiast of European poetry (I think of the fine essays devoted to Friedrich Hölderlin and Zbigniew Herbert)², but the Italian reader is still eager to know more: he would like to reconstruct a context, he would like to know more about Coetzee's culture, he would like to know if some mediation may have helped him (perhaps Samuel Beckett, who was an avid reader of Leopardi and to whom Coetzee devoted several essays, has something to do with it? Maybe so, but for the moment I am not able to make any assumptions).

In recent years I have tried to record instances like this, confirming an attention to Leopardi outside Italian borders³. I have noted isolated quotations, rewritings, homages even very different from each other. I chose Coetzee's example because to me it seems emblematic: it is difficult to reconstruct a provenance and a context, for that quotation, while the ease with which Leopardi's verses are manipulated stands out (we go from a philosophical to an erotic function of those verses, as I said). I will carve out a small part of my research, and show some instances of Leopardi's verses reenvisioned, in places where perhaps we would not expect it (just as in the case of Coetzee). We will, however, always be dealing with a deeply manipulated Leopardi. On this occasion I will look at just one Leopardi's poem and its fortunes, of which I will try to trace a very brief history in three snapshots: namely, the very same *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* [*Nocturnal Ode of a Wandering Shepherd of Asia*]⁴.

3. This quick reconstruction exercise would like to have, meanwhile, at least a first effect: that of questioning, or at least mitigating, a critical assumption that has become something of a *cliché*. I am thinking of the idea, which seems to me to be quite widespread, that Leopardi's poetry had an essentially nonexistent reception outside Italian borders⁵. Certainly, Leopardi has the misfortune of being a countryman of that Dante Alighieri who in Old Europe as well as in the New World is a massive, pervasive presence. By comparison, the idea of an almost completely absent Leopardi abroad is one that has long meandered and continues to meander.

² See Coetzee, 2018. Another clue of his interest for Italian literary culture is the important essay devoted to Italo Svevo in Coetzee, 2008.

³ For an example of the reception of Leopardi's *Canto notturno* far from Eurocentric tradition see Sangirardi 2020, an article entirely focused on Roberto Bolaño (in particular his novel 2666) and on his bond with the poet of the Canti.

⁴ The English translation will be always the old-fashioned, charming version by J. M. Morrison (Leopardi, 1900; but I will refer to this poem simply as *Canto notturno*, in Italian, from here on).

I give just two examples, very different and very far apart. I take an account from the 1960s, an observation by Ingeborg Bachmann. Bachmann, after naming Leopardi as one of her three favorite writers along with Tolstoy and Balzac (what a trio! and it is remarkable that Leopardi is the only *poet* in this trio!), adds, however, that Leopardi, in Germany, is “bis heute un unbekannter Mann, ein Name, ja, aber gelesen hat ihn niemand” (Bachmann, 2005, p. 466)⁶. When she writes like this – Leopardi is to date just a name, no one reads him – Bachmann is repeating the words she may have read in one of the most famous tributes devoted to Leopardi, a French tribute this time. I am thinking of the *Portrait de Leopardi* written by Sainte-Beuve in 1844: “le nom seul de Leopardi est connu en France, ses oeuvres elles-mêmes le sont très peu” [“only Leopardi's name is known in France, his works themselves are little known”] (Sainte-Beuve, 1994, p. 9)⁷. As I said: this is a critical *topos*. Let me add a second testimony: a review published in 2010 in the New York Times – some fifty years after Bachmann's opinion – after the full translation of Leopardi's *Canti* by a remarkable poet and translator, Jonathan Galassi. The reviewer, Peter Campion, writes that there are “very few contemporary American poets [...] who have taken the full measure of Leopardi” (Campion, 2010). And so on: I could continue with other similar examples. It is true that the early twentieth century, in any case, has also handed us some traces of more or less frontal contact with Leopardi by some names that we can certainly consider leading exponents of World Literature: I am thinking of Ezra Pound (who in 1911 translated a Leopardi sepulchral song)⁸; Walter Benjamin, who in the 1920s reviewed an edition of Leopardi's *Pensieri*⁹; and Samuel Beckett, who in 1930 showed that he reckoned with Leopardi in his essay on Proust¹⁰. I will try to push instead, with my exploration, to names and instances in the second half of the twentieth century, in an attempt to begin to write a further chapter in the history of Leopardi's reception.

4. Let us return, then, to the *Canto notturno*. As I have already mentioned, it was written by Leopardi between 1829 and 1830. It is a rather long poem, which I cannot reread now in its entirety. I will only recall that the canto spans six rooms. The protagonist, an anonymous shepherd, raises his questions to the moon from the

⁵ The history of Leopardi's reception has a very well-defined profile, starting with the canonical work of Lonardi, 1990. For an excellent and very useful reconstruction of Leopardi's fortunes among contemporaries, also very attentive to the international scene of the 19th century, see Bellucci, 1998. An overview of Leopardi's reception abroad, spanning from Europe to United States, is in Bianchi, 2000 (a monographic issue of the *Revue des études italiennes*). For a specific survey on the poetry of the second half of the 20th century let me refer you to Natale, 2017, and see Allegrini, 2022.

⁶ On Bachmann and Leopardi see Degner, 2020, who comments on this passage. A history of the “female” reception of Leopardi, even from a gender perspective, remains entirely to be written. We can at least mention Antonella Anedda and her persistent interest in Leopardi's work: see Anedda 2000, and then especially the recent Anedda 2022.

⁷ On Saint-Beuve's Leopardi see Prete, 1996, and Rigoni, 1997.

⁸ *Her Image (from Leopardi)*: See Pound, 1911, p. 28.

⁹ Benjamin, 1972, p. 117-119; on Benjamin's Leopardi see Natale, 2013.

¹⁰ See Cauchi-Santoro, 2015, and Cortellessa, 2006 on Beckett reader of Leopardi works.

very first verse ("Che fai tu, luna, in ciel? Dimmi, che fai...?" ["O silent moon, what dost thou in the skies...?"]) that every reader of Leopardi has in mind. In the second stanza, life is compared to an old man's arduous journey. In the third, birth is considered a misfortune, as is the whole of human life. The fourth stanza is occupied by the shepherd's existential questions and his feeling of littleness within cosmic space (this is the stanza from which Coetzee draws his quotation). In the fifth, the shepherd observes his flock with envy, because it is not assailed by the tedium that takes human beings instead. Finally, in the brief concluding stanza, we read questions about man's destiny of unhappiness and the day of birth as a "fateful" day¹¹.

Having briefly summarized the *Canto notturno*, I can begin to show a few moments of the ongoing conversation with this text by so many exponents of contemporary poetry. I choose three episodes, extracted from three different national poetic traditions. I will try to comment on them quickly, to take a kind of snapshot of each text. And then I will try to make a few final points concerning Leopardi and his position in the canon.

Let's start in Spain, in the 1960s. Let us take one of the greatest Spanish poets of the 20th century, Jorge Guillén (1893-1984), of the so-called '27 generation¹². Guillén, as we know, has a strong connection with Italian culture, leading him to translate and be translated (for example, by Eugenio Montale)¹³. Among his collections of verses are at least a couple of poems explicitly inspired by Leopardi and together by Leopardi's places (Recanati, his hometown)¹⁴. I prefer, however, to stop not on a quotation, but on what I would call his translation-collage. In 1967, in his collection *Homenaje*, Guillén published a sort of version he titled *Leopardi sobre la luna*. Guillén's operation consists of choosing six Leopardi's poems, and translating only the lines that have to do with the emblem of the moon¹⁵. An emblem that is, moreover, a keyword in Guillén's poetry (it is enough to quote just a few lines from *Advenimiento*, in his *Cantico* (1945): "oh luna, cuanto abril / que vasto y dulce el aire!") ["oh moon, what an April / how vast and sweet is the air!"]. The result is an assemblage of fragments (the subtitle is actually *Fragmentos*), which begins with *La sera del dì di festa* (these are the first 4 verses); then *Alla luna* (5 verses); then precisely the *Canto notturno*, which is the pivot of this patchwork: it is the longest fragment, that is, 21 verses, corresponding to the entire first stanza of the song. Let

¹¹ The significance of this wondering was questioned by Dionisotti, 1988.

¹² On this group of poets see the *Introduction* in Rosso, 2008, p. 9-59.

¹³ See Montale, 1980, p. 745-750, which includes six Guillén's poems translated.

¹⁴ This translation/rewriting is also in the anthology book Guevara Mellado, 2005.

¹⁵ On the intertextual dynamics in *Homenaje* see Young, 1991.

us read a part of it (Guillén, 1987, p. 3939-394; he also translates some verses of *La vita solitaria*, *Il sabato del villaggio* and *Il tramonto della luna*):

Leopardi sobre la luna (Fragmentos)

I

(La sera del dì di festa)

Dulce y sin viento y clara está la noche,
y sobre los tejados y los huertos
posándose la luna nos revela
serena en lejanía la montaña.

II

(Alla luna)

Oh graciosa luna, yo recuerdo
que hará un año venía a esta colina
a mirarte y mirarte con angustia,
y tú pendías sobre aquella selva
como ahora que todo lo esclareces.

III

(Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia)

Luna ¿qué haces en el cielo, dime,
silenciosa luna?
Al final de la tarde surges, pasas
contemplando desiertos y te posas.
¿Harta no estás aún
de recorrer tus sempiternas vías?
¿No rehuyes aún, aún deseas
divisar estos valles?
Como tu vida es, luna,
la vida del pastor,
con la primera luz de nuevo surge,
a los campos se va con sus rebaños,
ve más rebaños, herbazales, fuentes,
de noche a su fatiga de reposo,
y nada más espera.
Dime, luna: ¿qué vale
para el pastor su vida?
Y esa tu vida, luna, ¿qué te vale?
¿Adónde, dime, tienden
el breve vagar mío,
tu carrera inmortal?

[Leopardi on the moon (Fragments)]

I
(The Evening after a Festival)

Sweet and windless and clear is the night,
and over rooftops and orchards
the moon resting reveals to us
serene in the distance the mountain.

II
(To the Moon)

Oh gracious moon, I remember
that a year ago I used to come to this hill
to look at you and look at you with anguish,
and you hung over that wood
as now that you enlighten everything.

III
(Nocturnal Ode of a wandering Shepherd of Asia)

Moon, what are you doing in the sky, tell me
silent moon?
At the end of the afternoon you emerge, you pass by
contemplating deserts and you perch.
Are you not yet tired
of traveling your everlasting ways?
Don't you still shun, still wish
to make out these valleys?
As your life is, moon,
the shepherd's life,
with the first light it rises again,
to the fields he goes with his flocks,
he sees more flocks, pastures, fountains,
at night to his fatigue of rest,
and waits no more.
Tell me, moon: what is his life worth
to the shepherd his life?
And what is your life worth to you, O moon?
Where, tell me, do you tend
the brief wandering of mine
your immortal path?]

There are some details of the translation that partly distance the versions from the original texts. I cannot dwell on them. I content myself with defining this operation as a whole: a very personal traversal, which has two results: decontextualizing and thus dehistoricizing the individual texts and, in a sense, undoing Leopardi's negativity. This collage actually ends up as a great tampering, a betrayal of Leopardi.

An implicit objection to his worldview by a poet who discovered “la maravilla de simplemente ‘ser’” as Ana Isabel Martín Moreno has written, with his “gozo de estar vivo y presente” and his “afirmación vital” (Martín Moreno, p. 67). Let us keep in mind that the *Canto notturno* instead calls life a “misfortune” and ends up regretting the day of birth (and other nihilistic tips could be sought in the other cantos reused by Guillén): no trace of Leopardi's bitter philosophy remains in Guillén's selection. After all, Guillén, as Montale wrote, “è un esaltatore quasi iperbolico della vita, è una fontana di tripudio e di gioia” [“is an almost hyperbolic exalter of life, a “fountain” of rejoicing and joy”] (Montale, 1996, p. 2924), and we therefore understand that he needs to tone down Leopardi, to make him let's say light or “sweeter”. And to adapt it, at the same time, to the Spanish “genius”. If we take even a quick look at the text, we can see that the first fragment, for example, makes the image of the moon more essential, simplifying it (the adjective “quieta” [“quiet”] does not appear, probably absorbed by the verb “posandose” [“resting”] while the place indicators (“*sovra i tetti e in mezzo agli orti*” [“above the roofs and mid the gardens”]) give way to the more linear “sobre los tejados y los huertos” (without the second preposition); in the second fragment, the verb “rimirarti” [“gazing on”] is rendered with an effect of redundancy (“mirarte y mirarte” [“looking at and looking at”]); in the third again the place indicators are more essential (the exquisitely indefinite “over pel campo” changes to “a los campos” [“to the fields”]), etc. It is a linguistic genius made then of joy of song, fragmentism, syntactic and lexical simplicity.

5. A second snapshot. I turn to another major objection to Leopardi's negativity, an even more explicit one. This time I borrow it from a great American poet, Mark Strand (1934-2014). Although it sounds strange to us, for an American poet, Strand recognizes Leopardi – not Dante – as his indispensable point of reference (“D is for Dante, who has not influenced me, which is too bad”: Strand, 2000, p. 4). So much so that in 1980, when he prepared an anthology of his own *Selected Poems*, Strand closed it with a translation or rather a remake of a song by Leopardi, *La sera del dì di festa* (Strand, 2014, p. 266), a text that since Jules Laforgue¹⁶ actually knows a certain fortune. But now I focus in particular on a 1990 collection, *The Continuous Life*. Here the traces of Leopardi are diverse and also very clear¹⁷. I will mention only the clearest: Strand even includes in his collection the translation of a canto that is certainly not among the best known, even to Italian readers, namely *Fear of the night* (*Odi, Melisso*, in Italian: Strand, 2014, p. 275-276). It is a song about a disturbing dream and the fall of the moon from the sky (and the moon is a constant presence for Strand as well, until his last book of poems, *Almost Invisible*¹⁸).

¹⁶ On Laforgue's rewriting, *Soir de Carnaval*, see Flabbi, 2008, p. 118-122.

¹⁷ I have dealt with an analysis of the translation-revising by Strand, and more generally of his relationship with Leopardi, in Natale, 2023.

¹⁸ See for example a poem like *Nocturne of the Poet Who Loved the Moon*, in Strand, 2014, p. 508.

In the last part of *The Continuous Life* we encounter a poem that has a title inserted directly into Italian in the original: *Se la vita è sventura...?* ["If life is misfortune...?"]. This is an explicit quotation from the *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia*, from which is taken the hemistichio that is used as title (we are in the third stanza of the canto). In Strand's poem (Strand, 2014, p. 299), which I will try to summarize briefly, the subject witnesses a murder from the window of his house. Then, he begins to question the meaning of existence, and it is precisely the continuous presence of questioning that is the strongest sign, after the title, of the influence of the *Canto notturno*. In the same poem, even expressions such as the "infinitesimal part of the night", with which the murder victim is described, or the "ruins of stars", seem well attuned to the cosmic afflatus emanating from Leopardi's *Canto notturno*. Actually, I think there is another lyric that is influenced by the same song: it is an important poem, because it gives the title to the whole collection: *The Continuous Life* (Strand, 2014, p. 285). Here we find "parents" who have to convince their children that the mournful repetition of the gestures of daily life (the "household chores", "cooking and cleaning", etc.) has a "meaning":

Explain that you live between two great darks, the first
with an ending, the second without one, that *the luckiest*
thing is having been born, that you live in a blur
of hours and days, months and years, and believe
it has meaning [...].

It comes to mind that the Leopardi stanza from which Strand removes the aforementioned title-quotation - *If life is misfortune* - is precisely the one in which the "parents" attempt to console their children "of having been born" ("consolar dell'esser nato"), of having come into the world, somewhat anticipating the ending of the *Canto notturno*, where the tragic nature of birth is definitively sanctioned ("È funesto a chi nasce il dì natale" ["it is mournful to those who are born on the natal day"]). And so the whole passage in question sounds like a kind of silent response to Leopardi, with that sentence - "the luckiest / thing is having been born" - which to me sounds like a reverse translation of the terrible assertions uttered by the Asian shepherd¹⁹, at the height of Leopardi's negative thinking.

6. I come to the third snapshot, the last example. Let's go back to old Europe but to another poetic tradition, in Germany. I venture this time to the poetry of Michael Krüger (born in 1943), which is furthermore not translated in its entirety in Italy. A book like *Zoo* for example (1986), is not yet published in Italian. In the cover of the volume, one can see a small gathering of animals. Krüger is certainly no stranger to the prestigious tradition of the German *Naturlyrik*, from which he restarts with

¹⁹ For another case of misreading and "betrayal" between an American poet - Charles Wright - and Leopardi see Natale, 2022.

poetry of strong reflective depth (it is enough to quote the title of the penultimate poem of *Zoo: Spaziergang mit einem Philosophen*: Krüger, 1986, p. 46). The example I give precisely combines, right from the title, natural element and philosophical element. There is in fact a poem entitled *Leopardi and the Snail* (*Leopardi und die Schnecke*: the snail actually appears on the cover and also in the lithograph accompanying the poem itself: Krüger, 1986, p. 20-21). Here it is:

Leopardi und die Schnecke

Eine Schnecke kriecht über die Terrasse,
ein schleimiger Bauchfüßler, der Unruhe des Gartens
glücklich entkommen. Zart, biegsam, hornig,
saugt sie den Boden ab, von einem Magneten
gelenkt unter den Fliesen. Erhobenen Kopfes
kreuzt dieses heilige Tier mit verletzender Würde
die Straße der Ameisen, wo Geschäfte blühen
und Lasten getauscht werden, daß der Blick
sich verwirrt. Eine Schwester des Sisyphos,
die in der Ebene arbeitet, eine nützliche Feindin
der Wiederholung.
Die Mitte ist erreicht, so lautlos, als dürfe
das Walthaus nicht erschüttert werden,
das voller unsichtbarer Risse ist.
Jetzt denke nicht an die Zeit, nicht an das Glück,
denn nur als Unglückliche sind wir unsterblich.
Aber wie beigreifen, daß die Ordnung
nur mit dieser Schnecke funktioniert, die nun
den weißen Zeiger ihrer Uhr vollendet hat?
Wozu wären wir denn wohl geboren, sagt Leopardi,
als um zu erkennen, wie glücklich wir wären,
nicht geboren zu sein?

[Leopardi and the snail

A snail slithers across the terrace,
a slime that goes on its belly, happily
Escaped the bustle of the garden. Tender,
pliant, horny, it sucks up the ground, directed by a magnet
Beneath the marbles. Head held high
this sacred animal with offensive dignity
cuts the way to the ants where trades bustle
And exchange loads to confound
the sight. Sister of Sisyphus,
she works in the plains, the natural enemy
Of repetition.
The center is reached, in great silence as if
one should not shake the house of the world

Which is full of invisible cracks.
Now I think about time, not happiness,
For only as unhappy are we immortal.
But we understand that order works
only with this snail that has now gone around
Of the white face of its clock?
What good would we be born for, says Leopardi,
if not to recognize how happy we would be
not to have been born?]

Again, I cannot stop on the entire lyric, which is complex despite its apparent simplicity. The snail is called a “sacred animal”, and even “sister of Sisyphus”, with a mythological appeal that sounds ironic. But the animal, unlike Sisyphus who carries his heavy stone aloft, “works on the plain”. The poem becomes a reflection on time and happiness, which is condensed into an aphoristic line near the end: “only as unhappy are we immortal”. The “order” of the world works only if things have an end (this implies the image of the snail that has finished its “turn”). Finally, a quote from the authority of Leopardi, explicitly called into question: why being born, if not to recognize that we would be happy *not* to be born?

The lyric plays explicitly with paradox: immortality, eternal repetition is unhappiness, and living only serves to recognize our tragic fate. Krüger's poem becomes an implicit and disenchanting eulogy of immanence, of mortality. In doing so, Krüger is in turn manipulating the *Canto notturno*: even in the *Canto notturno* one encounters an image of eternal toil, since life is compared to the walk of an old man carrying his very heavy burden on his shoulders (“Vecchierel bianco, infermo, / mezzo vestito e scalzo, / con gravissimo fascio in su le spalle [...] / tale / è la vita mortale” [“The feeble old graybeard / in tatters and bare-foot, / upon his shoulders bearing grievous load [...] this / is sad's life little day”]): Krüger's snail seems a kind of creaturely translation of that old, canute man. In Leopardi poem, happiness is felt to be impossible, the negativity of existence is ratified, but Leopardi protests against this “evil” of existing, certainly not accepting it, as the author of this poem does. Krüger is an anti-historicist and, I believe, a reader of Nietzsche, as suggested by the image of repetition/*Wiederholung*, which also lets us think of the Nietzschean eternal return (as I said, this poet is often in dialogue with the philosophical tradition)²⁰.

7. Let us draw some tentative conclusions. We have seen three examples brought close together, under the banner of manipulation. Three ways of drawing Leopardi within the orbit of a different tradition, of absorbing him: reducing him to fragment and song (Jorge Guillén); denying his negative truths (Mark Strand) or making him the ally of a Nietzschean “saying yes to life” (Michael Krüger). In this regard, I think it is suggestive to recall where the fortune of the Night Song begins in the European

²⁰ For the “anti-historicism” of Krüger (and for a short but useful overview of his poetry) see Forte 2002, p. 213.

tradition. It begins precisely with Nietzsche, who at the beginning of the second *Untimely Meditations*, the one *On the uses and disadvantages of history for life*, paraphrases Leopardi's verses, and starts from there to sketch his model of "non-historical knowledge" (Nietzsche, 1983, p. 87). In a sense, a form of supra-historical dialogue is precisely what is established between these three poets and Leopardi. I think that identifying a constellation of stars gathering around Leopardi can have two important effects. On the one hand, certainly, to help write a chapter in the history of Leopardi's reception and to try to really bring him, as far as possible, into the horizon of World Literature. On the other hand, however, this part of the history of Leopardi's reception I think can also teach something about Leopardi's position in the history of Italian poetry. In the Italian canon Leopardi certainly assumes, to use David Damrosch's terminology, the role of a "hypercanonical author" (Damrosch, 2003). It is a position that does not benefit him, and one that causes Leopardi to be simply considered a poet of his time, brother of Alfieri, Foscolo, Manzoni. It's an image that says something true about Leopardi, but certainly does not exhaust his greatness. His *Nachleben*, the attention paid to Leopardi beyond Italian borders – from Nietzsche to contemporary poetry – suggests that, within the Italian canon, he has an altogether different position: no other, among the Italian poets of his generation, has aroused such interest even posthumously, no other has been able to cross those borders and fit into books of verses, novels, philosophical works. Indicative, in this sense, is especially the family in which World Literature seems to want to place Leopardi. It would be interesting to see a series of pairings that seem to betray all the fixed points by which Italian critics read Leopardi: Leopardi the materialist is traditionally the brother of a custodian of the sacred such as Friedrich Hölderlin, already for Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 1972, p. 117). Leopardi the anti-Romantic is continually paired with some of the great names of Romantic poetry such as Wordsworth or Coleridge (so does Harold Bloom in a fine essay devoted to Leopardi, in his *Anatomy of influence*: Bloom, 2011). The Leopardi of whom Italian philology still has sometimes a somewhat bookish and eighteenth-century image is brought vertiginously close to Baudelaire by Philippe Jaccottet (Jaccottet, 1987) or even to Rimbaud by Yves Bonnefoy (Bonnefoy, 2001: and so I have mentioned a few more names from a truly fascinating constellation). It may be that in order to continue Leopardi's dialogue with World Literature we have to give up a bit of historical sense, maybe a bit of precision, we may have to accept that his readers also become "traitors" or "manipulators", as in the examples I have brought: but if the gain is to erase forever an image of him that is only erudite, to get him off the dust-filled shelves of national critical editions and into the constellation I mentioned, I think it is a risk we can, indeed we must, take.

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PLAN

AUTEUR

Massimo Natale

[Voir ses autres contributions](#)

University of Verona, massimo.natale@univr.it