A Philosophy as Old as Homer: 
Giacomo Leopardi and Greek Poetic Pessimism

Maria Giulia Franzoni

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of PhD in Classics at the University of St Andrews

22nd November 2016
This is what I said to myself, almost as if that painful philosophy were of my own invention […] But then, thinking it over, I remembered that it was as new as Solomon and Homer and the most ancient poets and philosophers we know […]

Giacomo Leopardi, *Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico*
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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is twofold: it explores Giacomo Leopardi’s (1798-1837) interpretation of, and engagement with, Greek pessimistic thought and, through him, it investigates the complex and elusive phenomenon of Greek pessimistic thought itself.

This thesis contends that Greek pessimistic thought – epitomised by but not limited to the famous wisdom of Silenus, the μὴ φῦναι topos – is an important element of Greek thought, a fundamental part of some of Greece’s greatest literary works, and a vital element in the understanding of Greek culture in general. Yet this aspect of ancient thought has not yet received the attention it deserves, and in the history of its interpretation it has often been forgotten, denied, or purposefully obliterated.

Furthermore, the pessimistic side of Greek thought plays a crucial role in both the modern history of the interpretation of antiquity and the intellectual history of Europe; I argue that this history is fundamentally incomplete without the appreciation of Leopardi’s role in it. By his study of and engagement with ancient sources Leopardi contributed to the 19th century rediscovery of Greek pessimistic wisdom, alongside, though chronologically before, the likes of Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jacob Burckhardt.

Having outlined some fundamental steps in the history of the reception of Greek pessimism, this thesis examines the cardinal components of Leopardi’s reception of it: his use of Greek conceptions of humanity to undermine modernity’s anthropocentric fallacy, his reinterpretation of the Homeric simile of the leaves and its pessimistic undertones, and his views on the idea that it would be best for man not to be born.
A Silvia Munari,
grande maestra,
per il mio primo Leopardi.
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I am greatly indebted to my MSc supervisor, Michael Lurie, for sparking my interest in, and passion for, Leopardi’s connections with Greek pessimism. I also wish to thank Professor Glenn W. Most for his kind and extremely helpful advice during the initial stages of this thesis. Many thanks to Julia Smith, Nikoletta Manioti, and Ben Naylor for their help in the final stages of revision.

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A Philosophy as Old as Homer: Giacomo Leopardi and Greek Poetic Pessimism

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INTRODUCTION

Sie hätte singen sollen, diese “neue Seele” - und nicht reden!
Wie schade, dass ich, was ich damals zu sagen hatte,
es nicht als Dichter zu sagen wagte: ich hätte es vielleicht gekonnt!

F. Nietzsche, *Versuch einer Selbstkritik* 3 (1886)

I

**Leopardi and the Pessimistic Philosophy of Ancient Poetry**

Let us observe how much imagination contributes to philosophy (which yet is its enemy), and how true it is that in different circumstances the great poet could have been a great philosopher, promoter of that reason which is lethal to the genre professed by him, and how, conversely, a philosopher could have been a great poet. The ability to mine a rich vein of similes is proper to the true poet (Homer ὁ ποιητής is the greatest and most fertile model).

[…] Now this is the philosopher through and through: the faculty of discovering and recognizing relations, of binding particulars together, and of generalizing. (Zib. 1650)

And in actual fact the first sages were the poets, or rather the first sages made use of poetry, and the first truths were announced in verses […](Zib. 2940)

It could be said that this thesis takes its inspiration and impetus from these two passages of the *Zibaldone*, the book of notes of the Italian poet, thinker, and philologist Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837). Both passages indirectly engage with the millennial quarrel between poetry and philosophy and their relationship with truth. Both find an identity

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1 In Colli and Montinari (1972), 9.
2 Throughout the thesis Leopardi’s works are cited from Felici and Trevi (2013) as “TPP (2013)” with page numbers. The *Zibaldone* is referenced by pages of the manuscript and the *Canti* by verse numbers. English translations of the *Canti* are by Nichols (2008), of the *Operette* by Cecchetti (1983) and of the Zibaldone from Caesar and D’Intino (2013).
3 Cf. Giambattista Vico’s *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* 9 for similar views, on which Berlin (2000), 10-11. This is not the place for a discussion of Leopardi and Vico, but the similarities between the two authors’ ideas have been noted before, in particular, as Roić (1997), 137-138 describes, in their common interest for “il problema linguistico in un discorso filosofico sulle forme della conoscenza”.
between the subject matter of poetry and philosophy and between the types of minds of those who partake in the two kinds of speculation. Leopardi’s stance is clear from these two fragments alone, and it is a radical (albeit not unprecedented) one in the history of this quarrel: poetry – “poetry” in the sense he himself intends it in Dialogo di Timandro ed Eleandro “libri destinati a muovere la immaginazione; e intendo non meno di prose che di versi” – can convey truths, says Leopardi.6

1. Poetry and Philosophy

These two paths towards knowledge – the story of whose contrast is almost as old as the oldest remains of Western literature – coexist in Leopardi’s notebook just as much as in his published work. The extent to which this contrasting tension fills Leopardi’s thought – on the one side the imaginative and epiphanic modes of poetry, on the other the rigour and the ambitions of philosophy – is most visibly embodied in his Operette Morali. Twenty-four in number, the Operette are a protean collection of prose dialogues, short essays, and tales. Mostly written in prose, they are dotted with verse inserts that include original verse compositions, translations of existing poems and imitations of tragic choral odes. The language swiftly shifts from unembellished dialogues to the bombastic

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5. Useful is Granger (1974) examining Xenophanes’ use of poetry as a vehicle for philosophy; Heath (2013) is a concise compendium of many of these themes, from truth and falsehood in poetry, to poetry’s claims to philosophical veracity, to Plato’s debates on poetry.

6. See Costazza (2000), especially 46-48; Fabio (1995), 76-77. Cf. Chapter 7 of Il Parini; Zib. 1383 (tightly connected to Zib. 1650) and Zib. 3245 – on which cf. Severino (1997), 519, 526-527 – on poet-philosophers throughout history; it is important that Leopardi sees Plato as one of them, cf. Nietzsche’s idea of Socrates and Plato in Barfield (2011), 17 discussing Nietzsche’s opinion that Plato attacked poetry only to channel it in his philosophy. Halliwell (2002), 105-106 suggests that Leges 7.817b1–8 conveys the “contrast between ‘tragic’ and ‘philosophical’ interpretations of life”; what is remarkable is that the passage clearly implies that both the poetic/tragical perspective and the philosophical one tackle in different ways the same material, i.e. the nature of life. For poetry as a means of “coming to terms” with the “burden” of human suffering and, consequently with life itself, see Halliwell (2011), esp. 60. Cf. Winckelmann’s Gedanken: “Griechenland hatte Künstler und Weltweise in einer Person und mehr als einen Metrodor”, in Eiselein (1825), 32; cf. Pliny Nat. Hist. 35.135.

6. In TPP (2013), 582. Cecchetti (1983), 397: “books intended to move the imagination, in prose no less than in verse”. Leopardi’s meaning of “poetry” and “poetic” as expressed here will be the one used throughout this introduction, otherwise differently specified. Leopardi’s opinion was not always this, cf. Timpanaro (1965), 197. It is remarkable to recall that Leopardi thought of the Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro as “una specie di prefazione, ed un’apologia dell’opera contro i filosofi moderni”, in the letter from 16th June 1826 to Antonio Fortunato Stella, in TPP (2013), 1321.
language of religious canticles. The protagonists of each dialogue are mythical characters, fantasy creatures, famous men of the past and natural elements. Nothing could seem farther away from the dogmatic and monolithic philosophical treatise than this colourful array of literary motifs and genres. Yet Leopardi’s own statements on the Operette reveal that he intended them as “cosa filosofica”. In their very essence the Operette elude the labelling of either “poetic” or “philosophical”: making sense of the formal choices of this complex collection, that continuously hangs in the balance between poetry and philosophy, has troubled generations of commentators.

Two assessments of the Operette by Leopardi’s contemporaries Lorenzo Collini, lawyer and writer, and Francesco Poggi, Florentine librarian and grammarian, are extremely telling of the general puzzlement induced by this work. Reviewing the Operette – which Leopardi had submitted for the 1830 prize of the Accademia della Crusca – Collini writes:

Io tengo per fermo essere profonda questa sua filosofia e frutto di lunga meditazione sui casi veri della vita. Non esito a creder dottissima e pregevolissima questa raccolta di Operette morali, da anteporsi a qualunque altra opera che in più grossi volumi e sotto più severe sembianze fosse dettata dal più accigliato Dottore. In questa raccolta il grave, il patetico giace sotto le vesti più gaie e la sostanza delude le apparenze.

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8 Cf. Manotta (1998), 9 on the various levels of difficulty in the Operette’s interpretation.


10 In Nencioni (2002), 6-7. My translation: “I hold it as certain that his philosophy is deep and (is) the result of true meditation on the real circumstances of life. I do not hesitate to believe that this collection of Operette morali is extremely learned and of great value, something to surpass any other work written by frowning Doctors in bulkier tomes and with more serious appearance. In this collection everything that is grave and moving has joyous semblance, and the substance deceives the appearance.”
Poggi says:

A dir vero parmi un infelice lavoro, che racchiude una certa confusione, non seguendo né la mitologia, né la filosofia e mescolando l’una e l’altra senza deciso accorgimento.11

In his favourable evaluation of the Operette, Collini understands Leopardi’s use of fiction and imagination as subservient to the necessity of lightening “pathetic” subjects. Conversely, in Poggi’s analysis Leopardi is guilty of having mixed myth with philosophy, truth with fiction, the language of scientific analysis with that of storytelling. Although different in focus and in their final verdict on the work, both reviews hit the same spot. It is clear to both that the author is trying to do filosofia, yet Leopardi’s “presupposto favoloso” (in the words of another and less appreciative reviewer, Francesco Del Furia), i.e. the method he devised to do philosophy, is surprising if not actually problematic.12

2. The Philosophy of Ancient Poetry

This type of criticism brings us back to the earliest problematizations of the relationship between poetry and philosophy: it was precisely this pervasive and intrusive presence of the mythical and fantastic element that led Aristotle to distinguish between poets and philosophers.13 In the words of Glenn Most, it was by distancing themselves from the “the shackles of myth and religion” of the early Greek poets that the early Greek philosophers became the forerunners of philosophy in the (more traditionally) modern understanding of it.14 It is then the contamination between the two realms – myth, religion, and poetic language on the one hand, and reason on the other – that throws Leopardi’s critics into confusion.15 Just as the mythologoi’s works were “philosophically

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11 In Nencioni (2002), 7-8. My translation: “This seems to me to be an unfortunate piece of work entailing some degree of confusion, insofar as it follows neither myth, nor philosophy, and it mixes one with the other.”
13 On Aristotle’s distinction between poets and physiologoi cf. Poetics 1.1447b, 16-20 and Most (1999), 332-333, reminding us that the distinction was not formal (on the basis of metre). On the scientific worth of poetic and mythical enquiries cf. Met. 3.1000a but also 1.983b-984b.
14 Most (1999), 333. Although in Poetics 1451b the poets’ approach is deemed φιλοσοφότερον than that of the historians, since it is concerned with more general truths about the world.
uninteresting” for Aristotle, so Leopardi’s work is neither philosophical enough to be taken seriously nor poetic enough to be deemed successful art.

The point of contact between Zib. 1650 and Zib. 2940 is Leopardi’s conviction that *the ancients* in particular were keenly aware of the potent percolation between the roles of poetry and philosophy. One example from a poem analysed later on in the thesis sheds light on this conviction: so strong is Leopardi’s belief in poetry’s ability to convey true wisdom – a belief especially stark in relation to the “philosophical” power of similes, as expressed in Zib. 1650 – that it shapes one of Leopardi’s boldest translation choices in a poem of the *Canti, XLI Dello stesso*, a translation of Simonides fr. 8 W. The word κάλλιστον (used by Simonides to define Homer’s simile of the leaves) in verse 1 is translated by Leopardi as “certissimo”. The significance of the Homeric simile, Leopardi says to his readers, goes well beyond the realm of beauty, or goodness; it is instead the generating power behind a truer understanding of human life, and as such it is symbolic of the philosophical force of poetry.

It is thus the second passage, Zib. 2940, that supplies the other driving force of this thesis. Delving once more into the ideas of wisdom and truth, Leopardi makes this time an historical point. If, then, philosophy is the passion and the striving towards wisdom and truth, Leopardi is saying that not only in principle, but in the reality of human history, the first philosophers were the poets. Not only does this understanding of ancient poetry do more justice to the reality of historical facts: Homer and Hesiod were the “educators of Greece” and the providers of wisdom before the advent of philosophy, and some of the first “philosophers” themselves chose to express their wisdom in poetic forms. It is also key to Leopardi’s reading and interpretation of antiquity, clarifying

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16 Most (1999), 332.
17 The power of similes is one aspect of the ability to grasp similarities and connections: for Leopardi’s notion that this ability is the root of poetry and philosophy, see Costazza (2000), 41-42.
18 Cf. Stasi (2010), 247 for a different interpretation of Leopardi’s choice of translation.
ancient poetry’s role in his thought. Far from being the mere source of learned references, or an inanimate point of comparison, ancient thought is throughout Leopardi’s life and work the dynamic and ineludible source of true wisdom.

3. Ancient Poetic Pessimism

This thesis focuses in particular on Leopardi’s engagement with, and revival of, one aspect of ancient Greek poetic wisdom: Greek pessimistic thought. With this formulation I broadly understand a type of thought that – whether or not fully systematised into a comprehensive worldview – reflects on the human condition and on the place of humans in the cosmos by challenging ideas of human pre-eminence and of divine providence, ultimately to question the value of human existence. Given the controversial nature of Greek pessimistic thought, Chapter 1 of this thesis is entirely dedicated to its nature and to the history of its interpretation from ancient times to the present; I thus refer the reader there for a fuller and more careful definition. It is this side of Greek thought that seals the real convergence of Leopardean and ancient thought: in Greek poetic writings Leopardi recognises his philosophy and the very same understanding of the world and of the place of humans within it as his own. This meeting across millennia sparks Leopardi’s own poetic philosophy, programmatically grounded on the wisdom of antiquity.

This thesis’s purpose is, by exploring Leopardi’s engagement with Greek pessimistic thought, to show how Leopardi’s work, and in particular his Operette Morali, are both a revival and a study of Greek pessimistic wisdom. As such, Leopardi’s work ought to be considered in historical and cultural relation with the other works that, in the course of


20 It should be noted that Leopardi’s acceptance of Greek pessimism is tightly connected to his full acceptance of the validity of philosophical ideas in poetic forms. The otherwise widespread refusal of scholars and interpreters across ages to acknowledge the existence of pessimistic currents of thought in ancient Greece comes primarily from the downright refusal to take into consideration non-strictly-philosophical sources.

21 My interpretation of “poetry” and “poetic” at note 6 applies to ancient sources too.
the 19th century, concurred to rediscover, explore, and investigate this long-forgotten side of Greek culture: chiefly, Arthur Schopenhauer’s *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1819), Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1872) and Jacob Burckhardt’s *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* (published in 1900 but composed more than three decades earlier). The crucial role of Leopardi in this process – not least insofar as it anticipates both Burckhardt and Nietzsche – has so far been neglected; one of the aims of this thesis is to bring it to light.

One of the reasons for the limited number of studies on Leopardi’s role and on the history of the reception of Greek pessimism lies in the problematic essence of Greek pessimistic thought itself. As *Chapter 1* explores in larger detail, scholarly belief in the existence (let alone scholarly agreement on the features) of this aspect of Greek thought has a long and troubled history. This thesis, which is, admittedly, the work of a classicist, strives then towards one more ambitious target, which is to explore the essence and features of Greek pessimistic thought at the same time as it analyses its influence on Leopardi; indeed, to use Leopardi’s readings and interpretations as a passageway towards the Greek sources. Of course, the full exploration of Greek pessimistic thought is beyond the scope and especially the size of this dissertation. I nevertheless hope to shed some new light on the topic of Greek pessimistic thought itself, and, given the relative lack of attention to this topic in the past decades, as explained in *Chapter 1*, I hope to open the field for more discussion of this contentious and fascinating aspect of Greek culture.

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22 In some cases Leopardian scholarship seems to deny the existence of Greek pessimism in the first place, cf. Binni (1973), 78; Dolfi (1986), 52.
23 Of course, this implies awareness of Leopardi’s own hand (and, inevitably, of my own) on these texts and their meaning, I am thinking of Gaisser’s simile comparing works to “pliable and sticky artifacts that are gripped, molded […]” in id. (2002), 387, on which Martindale (2007a), 4-5; cf. also Holub (2008), 322-324 for a summary of the history and meaning of the concept of Erwartungshorizont.
II

Literature, Methods, and Structure

1. Research So Far, and Some Questions of Method

Despite the vast number of scholarly studies on both Leopardi’s relationship with classical antiquity and his pessimism, no study has ever engaged directly and thoroughly with Leopardi’s revival of Greek pessimistic thought, possibly because such an enterprise requires equal interest in the ancient sources and issues as in Leopardi’s work (whereas the greatest part of the research on Leopardi is carried out by non-classicists). A number of works have nonetheless variously touched upon the subject.

Three works have directly (although by no means exhaustively) tackled this topic. Giovanni Cesareo’s 1893 “I precursori greci del pessimismo” in Nuove ricerche su la vita e le opere di Giacomo Leopardi is an early discussion of the relationship between the ancient pessimistic worldview and Leopardi’s pessimism. Yet, through a somewhat chaotic gathering of various pessimistic texts from antiquity, the author merely suggests that the ancients share on a general level Leopardi’s idea of life, eventually to deny any major influence of the former on the latter.

Several decades later comes Sebastiano Timpanaro’s insightful chapter on “Leopardi e i filosofi antichi” in his Classicismo e illuminismo nell’ottocento italiano (1965). Timpanaro’s essay is, to this day, the much-praised point of reference on this topic. Yet the widely held opinion that Timpanaro’s treatment of the subject is final – suggested by the omnipresence of this work in the footnotes of subsequent scholarship as the main reference for Leopardi and Greek pessimism – ought to be revised. Despite remaining a milestone for its insight, and despite having the great merit of having authoritatively opened up this topic for the scholarly public, Timpanaro’s essay only scrapes the surface of this engrossing story. Two shortcomings come to mind. The first is

24 Cf. Sole (1990), 275 n. 37 who criticises Cesareo for the absence of philological methods, but admits that Cesareo’s work “sottolinea in Leopardi l’intento di accertare che il proprio pessimismo era antico quanto l'uomo [...]”. On the other hand though Sole believes that the ancients, unlike Leopardi, did not believe suffering to be a universal feature of life “senza dedurre da tale contemplazione un principio universale, senza elevare il male a teoria e il dolore a necessità irrimediabile.”

25 Truly ubiquitous, two recent examples in Miranda (2005), 42 and Brogi (2012), 16 n.10.
Timpanaro’s tendency (in accordance with his chapter’s title) to give preeminence to Leopardi’s encounter with ancient *philosophical* pessimism, like that of Theophrastus.\(^{26}\) The second is the excessive importance given by Timpanaro to Jean-Jacques Barthélemy’s *Voyage du jeune Anacharsis en Grèce* (1788), read by Leopardi in 1823, as the origin of Leopardi’s awareness of pessimistic thought in Greek poetry, a notion that influenced generations of scholars,\(^ {27}\) and that this thesis aims to challenge.\(^ {28}\)

The third and last work is a chapter of Gaspare Polizzi’s *Giacomo Leopardi. La concezione dell’umano, tra utopia e disincanto* (2011). In its preoccupation with Leopardi’s (negative) anthropology, the chapter concentrates by its own admission almost exclusively on the direct impact of the reading of Barthélemy on Leopardi’s notes; even so, it neglects to address the influence of the primary sources conveyed by Barthélemy on the rest of Leopardi’s work, and especially on the *Operette*.\(^ {29}\)

Various essays and chapters on Leopardi and antiquity touch collaterally upon Leopardi’s relationship with Greek pessimistic sources. Amongst these it is worth mentioning Guido Polato’s exploration of Pindar’s influence on Leopardi in *Il sogno di un’ombra: Leopardi e la verità delle illusioni* (2007), with special reference to the notion of man as the shadow of a dream contained in *Pythian 8*.\(^ {30}\) Gilberto Lonardi’s *L’oro di Omero* (2005), although it restricts its focus to the *Canti*, is an open and intelligent analysis of the influence of antiquity on Leopardi’s work, and in several places it touches upon pessimistic themes shared between Homer and the *Canti*.\(^ {31}\) Alberto Grilli’s article in the collective volume of *Leopardi e il mondo antico* (1982) is

\(^{26}\) Cf. Timpanaro (1965), 199-202 Timpanaro uses the word “pensatori”, which from the context seems to exclude poets.”

\(^{27}\) E.g. Pacella (1991), 242, or recently Polizzi (2011), 87 (“La lettura romana del *Voyage* e la nuova antropologia della Grecia antica”) and Brogi (2012), 16 n. 10.

\(^{28}\) The *Voyage* is an historical novel recounting the adventures of Anacharsis through 5th century Greece and his encounter with Greek customs, culture, and history. Two chapters in particular (number 26 and 28) offer the reader a vast array of pessimistic statements drawn from Greek poetry and philosophy. After reading the chapters in the French edition Leopardi copied parts of them *verbatim* in his *Zibaldone* (Zib. 2671ff). Most of the scholarship claims these chapters are the exclusive basis of his knowledge of Greek pessimism. More about the *Voyage* in Chapter 1, and on Leopardi’s use of it in Chapter 4.

\(^{29}\) Cf. also Presti (2016), 199-205 who briefly explores the influence of the *Voyage*.

\(^{30}\) Polato (2007).

\(^{31}\) See note 29.
a penetrating and meticulous analysis of the role of Greek thought and philosophy in Leopardi’s work, with special regard to the Zibaldone.32 In doing so Grilli analyses with particular flare some of the passages that are the subject of this thesis. Yet the article does not allow for a thorough treatment of the theme, and the Greek sources are only swiftly considered in their own right; what is more, as the title suggests (“Leopardi, Platone e la filosofia greca”), a good portion of it focuses on the influence of philosophical schools. The work of the late classical and Italian studies scholar Marcello Gigante (and especially the posthumously published Leopardi e l’antico) is an essential reference, for both the great philological care of the author and the openness of his interpretations; yet, only his article on Simonides and Leopardi lingers briefly on the relationship between the pessimistic notions present in Simonides’ poems and Leopardi’s use of them. This article, together with Vincenzo di Benedetto’s Leopardi e i filosofi antichi, is a fundamental work for the relationship between Leopardi and his translations from Simonides, but does not focus specifically on Leopardi’s engagement with Greek pessimistic thought.33

This thesis originates not only from the desire to fill the gap created by existing scholarship’s lack of direct engagement with the theme; it also draws strength from a number of methodical tenets that are not completely fulfilled, and sometimes even entirely ignored or rejected by such scholarship. My own research is instead grounded in, and grows from, the belief that these tenets are vital to a thorough comprehension of Leopardi’s work and relationship with antiquity.

Two smaller points to begin with. It is a diffuse scholarly tendency to favour the Canti (and secondly the Zibaldone) when examining the presence and influence of ancient pessimistic wisdom in and on Leopardi’s work.34 Although it does not disregard the

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32 Grilli (1982).
33 Di Benedetto (1967); Gigante (2003). The same topic in Orlando (1973), whose title mentions “pessimismo antico”, which is nevertheless only cursorily and hastily mentioned in the last paragraph of the piece; as a consequence the piece fails to really tackle any wider relationship between Leopardi and ancient pessimism. More philological precision, but even briefer attention to the pessimistic notions, is paid by Randino (2000).
34 So does Cesareo (1893), cf. above. Di Benedetto (1967) and Gigante (2003) do the same. Another example is Lonardi (2005): many of his assumptions would be greatly beneficial if applied to the Operette, but, apart from very brief excursions, he restricts his research to the Canti.
Canti’s lyrical reception of antiquity, this thesis gives larger space to discussion of passages from the Zibaldone and the Operette. Secondly, in accordance with what has been said so far and in the hope of doing justice to Leopardi’s thought, this thesis treats the poetic ancient sources as having full philosophical significance and dignity: as such, it attempts to fill the gap left by those who (as Timpanaro himself partly did) look for the antecedents and inspirers of Leopardi’s pessimism in ancient philosophical writings alone.35

Let us come to the very core of this thesis’s claims. I believe that the strict philological approach taken by a great part of modern scholarship in the analysis of Leopardi’s relationship with classical sources, whilst allowing countless important considerations, nonetheless blinds us in a number of other essential respects, and that we thus ought to allow also for different perspectives on the topic of Leopardi’s engagement with antiquity. The quest of modern scholarship seems to be aimed at an (unachievable) Quellenforschung of sorts, driven by the necessity to ascertain what Leopardi read for sure and what he did not, a quest for the direct sources, for the consulted editions, for the verbatim quotations.36 Undoubtedly such a scientific philological stance is necessary in many cases, and entirely vital in others, such as Leopardi’s translations of Semonides’ and Simonides’ poems at the end of his Canti (oddly enough, as we shall see in Chapter 3, the relevant scholarship is in this very instance guilty of a considerable number of inaccuracies and philological mistakes).

If this attitude does on the one hand pay respect to Leopardi’s extensive and fecund philological work which is so conspicuous in many places of the Zibaldone – one can also think of the historian and philologist Barthold Georg von Niebuhr’s admiration for Leopardi, or of Nietzsche’s opinion of the Italian poet as “das moderne Ideal eines

35 A good example is Stefano Brogi’s recent Nessuno vorrebbe rinascere: da Leopardi alla storia di un’idea tra antichi e moderni (2012), which tackles both the ancients’ and Leopardi’s engagement with the idea of the nolo renasci (in Brogi’s own words a variation on the general theme that life would best be avoided or, if that is not possible, swiftly ended). Yet the ancient sources considered by Brogi are almost exclusively philosophical, and ancient poetry is disregarded.

36 Cf. Most (2016) for a good definition and a brief history of Quellenforschung, including its limitations.
Philologen” – it does on the other fall unquestionably short, in various ways.\(^{37}\) First, it can prove both anachronistic and ill-suited to Leopardi’s specific case: although Leopardi does in several instances – and, one can be sure, in different ways depending on the kind of work he is writing – make his sources explicit, or add footnotes and elucidations, by no means does he do this *systematically*. The fact that he does, here and there, reference his sources explicitly should not convince us that those are the only sources worth considering. Doing this would mean not only overlooking the fact that 19\(^{th}\) century literary practice was, even in scholarly contexts, worlds apart from that of today. It also means not appreciating both the breadth and depth of Leopardi’s readings and the imaginative and independent approach of his reception of them.\(^{38}\)

Most of all, this attitude can prevent us from looking at the influence of texts that Leopardi certainly knew, read, and perused – texts that had been so developmentally determinative, texts he knew so well, that the need to reference them openly is beyond the point. The impact of these texts – I am thinking first and foremost of Homer, but then also of Lucian and many others – is so profound, shaping, and dynamic that we simply cannot limit ourselves to looking for it in direct quotations, or in explicit allusions. My point echoes Gilberto Lonardi’s observations about Homeric influence on Leopardi’s work and thought, when discussing the (relative) decrease in references to Homer over the years.\(^{39}\) Lonardi – whose argument can easily be applied to other authors and their influence on Leopardi – argues that this diminution of explicit references only vouches for the new role played by Homeric thought: rather than an individual author narrating about a number of characters, Homer has become “nature”.


\(^{38}\) See Lonardi (2005), 113 for the distinction between Leopardi as poet and Leopardi as philosopher, drawing on a previous point by Timpanaro and Blasucci.

\(^{39}\) It should be also noted that Homer keeps being present in the *Zibaldone*, where the nature of the work facilitates the presence of explicit references.
i.e. a constant subterranean presence which does not need explicit mention, but that is at the same time the ineludible point of reference.\textsuperscript{40}

Lonardi’s argument was to be discussed and praised by Marcello Gigante, who urges scholars not to restrict their gaze when looking at the impact of ancient sources on the works of the Italian poet: even a partial or an indirect contact with an ancient text – Gigante uses the example of Sophocles – can spark connections and ideas, and the text ought thus to be considered when exploring Leopardi’s thought.\textsuperscript{41} Gigante questions – and I wish, through him, to challenge it even further – the idea indirectly implied in the strict forms of source criticism, according to which reception through mediation (i.e. through contact with something other than the idea’s text of origin, if such a thing even exists) is a lesser form of reception. Charles Martindale – speaking of Velázquez’s \textit{The Spinners} – has energetically confronted such an assumption: whether the painter used Ovid’s original text with the aid of experts, or translations of Ovid, or simply the medium of the “the Ovidian tradition in the visual arts” available to him at the time, the painting can have more to say about the reception of Ovid than many more direct and linear examples.\textsuperscript{42} Rather than hindering reception, mediation can foster it.

This thesis contends that this more open-ended kind of source criticism – alert, with Lonardi, to the subterranean and yet continuous influence of fundamental texts like the Homeric poems and, with Gigante, to the mediated stimuli that nourish Leopardi’s

\textsuperscript{40} Lonardi (1969), 42. In this sense I do not believe it fitting – in general, and with many exceptions – to speak of Leopardi’s relationship with Greek pessimism with the terms “allusion” or “intertextuality”. The connections Leopardi establishes are always looser and more subterranean than both terms normally imply, and the attention is – at least in the restricted field of his reception of Greek pessimism – much less for the “text” (in its wording, but even in its isolated presentation of an idea) than it is for the resonance of ideas that the text projects. On intertextuality I think principally of Conte (1994), 814 and (1996), 29 and Kelly (2008), 165ff for definitions of intertextuality, and allusion; cf. the suggestion of Thomas (1999), 115 n. 8 to use the term “reference” to eliminate the frivolity inherent in “allusion” in Kelly (2008), 166; Fowler (1997) is an older and more schematic survey of intertextuality and allusion.

\textsuperscript{41} Gigante (2003), 52-55.

\textsuperscript{42} Martindale (2007b), 309. Similar observations on Titian’s \textit{Europa ibid. 308}. A (very selected) number of studies on reception theory, other than Jauss (1973, but originally 1967), used later in the thesis: cf. Martindale (1993) on the need for the introduction of reception theory in the study of the Classics; Martindale (2007a) and in general Martindale and Thomas (2007); Holub (2008 in the online version, but originally 1995) for a summary of the novelty of the School of Constance.
thought – is crucial for the study of Leopardi’s work, and entirely imperative for our understanding of his study and interpretation of Greek pessimistic ideas. Closer investigation of the impact of both types of influences on Leopardi’s notion of Greek pessimism will also assist in challenging the assumption that Leopardi’s contact with it has to be ascribed for the greater part to his reading of Barthélemy’s novel, already mentioned. From this assumption – a good example of the overly philological approach that has been discussed so far – stems the disregard for the influence of texts other than those mentioned by the French abbé. Yet, the presence of pessimistic ideas in – among others – the Homeric epics, read by Leopardi far earlier than his first contact with Barthélemy, cannot and should not be overlooked when trying to grasp the extent of Leopardi’s engagement with this strand of Greek thought.

What is more, the clear-cut separation of Leopardi’s thought ante and post contact with the most famous Greek pessimistic sources – those contained in Barthélemy – does great injustice to the flow of thoughts in the history of ideas. The full growth and maturity of the ideas so enduringly and gnomically expressed in the words of Sophocles or Mimnermus (or many of the other sources mentioned by Barthélemy) is deeply rooted in their relationship with even earlier literature. Far from being the sudden outburst of unprecedented ideas, these thoughts germinate from the relationship with previous formulations of, and meditations on, similar notions. We should then acknowledge that Leopardi’s contact with the texts of Homer is in itself a doorway into the future reinterpretations and developments of the ideas conveyed by the epics, ideas that will contribute to shaping the works of Simonides, Pindar, Sophocles, and many others. If we believe in this kind of movement of ideas, ascertaining Leopardi’s access

43 Rephrasing Gigante (2003), 55.
44 More details on his contacts with the Voyage: the family library in Recanati hosted an edition of the work in its Italian translation, Viaggio d’Anacarsi il giovine nella Grecia verso la metà del IV secolo avanti l’era volgare, printed in Venice in 1791. Leopardi could also read excerpts of the work in Noël and De La Place’s Leçons de littérature et de morale (1804). Leopardi consulted the monumental work – 12 volumes in the edition possessed by Monaldo – at different times in his life, but we cannot say whether he read Chapters 26 and 28 of Volume III before 1823, when he quotes from them using a 1789 French edition he had access to while in Rome. Leopardi must have read parts of Barthélemy’s work previous to 1823, if he references him as early as Zib. 68 and 222. The Voyage is referenced explicitly in its Italian edition in the bibliography Leopardi himself wrote for his Storia dell’astronomia (1813), in TPP (2013), 857. On Leopardi and the Voyage, cf. also Polizzi (2011), 61-128; Presti (2016), 199-205.
to one specific text becomes less crucial. This reasoning, just like the flow of ideas, works in two directions: the same argument is valid for texts later than the sources used by Barthélemy – like those of Lucian – texts that are in continuous and open dialogue with the Greek literature of preceding centuries.

In light of all these observations, this thesis is at the same time a piece of comparative analysis and a study in reception. It is comparative, insofar as it observes the presence of themes or ideas in two sets of texts, those of the Greeks on the one hand and Leopardi’s on the other, and does not always aim at identifying specific allusions or even indirect references from the latter to the former. Yet, in consideration of the absolute certainty that Leopardi read and in fact perused many ancient works that in one way or another convey or presage pessimistic thoughts, this research aims to draw a direct link between him and them, and thus conceives of itself as a study in Leopardi’s reception of Greek thought. The aim of my research is thus never to prove that Leopardi drew this or that word, phrasing, or idea from this or that ancient source. Rather than narrowing down Leopardi’s sources of inspiration, this thesis intends to open the channels of interpretation in search of that spark of recognition that led to Leopardi’s study and revival of Greek pessimistic wisdom.

2. Structure

Chapter 1 of this thesis provides a definition of Greek pessimistic thought, and explores some crucial steps in the long and complex history of its interpretation. Chapter 2 looks at Leopardi’s conception of the place of humans in the cosmos – and in particular at his use of the comparison between humans and animals as a tool to be employed against man’s deluded anthropocentrism – by observing his use of ancient sources, chiefly Lucian and Homer, to strengthen his argument. Chapter 3 explores Leopardi’s interpretation and re-use of the famous Homeric trope of the leaves and of the Greek term ἐφήμερος to describe the human condition; the chapter ends with a brief analysis of Schopenhauer’s reflections on the same themes. Finally, Chapter 4 investigates the ways in which Leopardi’s conception of the Greek notion of the μη φῶνα is a revival of ancient sources, by focusing on a number of case studies in Leopardi’s œuvre.
CHAPTER 1

Τὸ μὲν δὴ πανταχοῦ θρυλούμενον: Modernity and Greek Pessimism

[...] immer noch nicht losgekommen von den Fragezeichen, die er zur vorgeblichen “Heiterkeit” der Griechen und der griechischen Kunst gesetzt hatte; [...] 

F. Nietzsche, Versuch einer Selbstkritik 145

About suffering they were never wrong, The Old Masters [...] 

W. H. Auden, Musée des Beaux Arts46

I

An Old Question: The Greeks and Pessimism

1. The Ancients on the Ancients: Towards a History of the μὴ φῦναι

The relationship of modernity with Greek pessimistic thought – its existence, its nature, its significance for antiquity and for modernity – has a long and troubled history, filled with denial, criticism, but also rediscovery and revival. This chapter is dedicated to this history, a history that is all the more engrossing if we consider that even today there is little consensus on this phenomenon, which continues all too often to be forgotten or ignored.47 If one turns instead to what antiquity had to say on the subject of Greek pessimism – and more specifically, on the μὴ φῦναι, taken as the very epitome of Greek pessimistic thought – the story is rather different. In striking contrast with the oblivion it long encountered in modern times, it is almost impossible to read about the notion that it would be best not to be born in ancient sources without encountering mention of its fame and wide diffusion, as if the two were hardly separable.48

45 In Colli and Montinari (1972), 5.
46 In Mendelson (1976), 146.
47 Forgotten, as in the case of Sim (2015), or denied and ignored, as in Dienstag (2006), discussed at the end of this chapter.
48 Less complete versions of the list of sources I present here can be found elsewhere, e.g. in Curi (2008), 43-44.
This chapter’s title incorporates a phrase from Euripides’ *Bellerophon* fr. 285; in it the speaker presents the idea that it is best not to be born by saying that it is πανταχοῦ θρυλούμενον,⁴⁹ “in everyone’s mouth”, or “common talk everywhere”, and the gnomic tone of the passage seems to increase the statement’s authority:⁵⁰

ἐγὼ τὸ μὲν δὴ πανταχοῦ θρυλούμενον
κράτιστον εἶναι φημὶ μὴ φῦναι βροτῷ [...].⁵¹

But there is more. Our main source for the μὴ φῦναι (most famously and commonly known as the “wisdom of Silenus”) is the story of King Midas and Silenus as preserved by pseudo-Plutarch’s *Consolatio ad Apollonium*,⁵² which professes to transmit the tale directly from its text of origin, Aristotle’s *Eudemus* (βέλτιον δ’ αὐτάς τάς τοῦ φιλοσόφου λέξεις παραθέσαι, *Cons. Ap.* 115b).⁵³ Hunted down and eventually captured by King Midas, Silenus is forced to tell the King what he believes to be the best thing for mankind. Silenus’ answer is legendary:

ἄνθρώποις δὲ πάμπαν οὐκ ἔστι γενέσθαι τὸ πάντων ἀριστον οὐδὲ μετασχεῖν τῆς τοῦ βέλτιστον φύσεως· ἀριστον γὰρ πάσι καὶ πάσιας τὸ μὴ γενέσθαι. τὸ μέντοι μετὰ τοῦτο καὶ πρῶτον τῶν ἄνθρωπων ἀνυστῶν, δεύτερον δὲ, τὸ γενομένους ἀποθανεῖν ὡς τάχιστα. (*Cons. Ap.* 115 d-e)

⁴⁹ Cf. Van Groningen (1966), 170: “Euripide, qui a vécu à peine un siècle après Théognis et qui disposait d’une bibliothèque bien fournie, connaît le premier hexamètre comme un proverbe πανταχοῦ θρυλούμενον”. I disagree with Opstelten’s (1952), 166-167 suggestion that (by saying πανταχοῦ θρυλούμενο) Euripides “called the sentiment a trite one”.

⁵⁰ See Collard, Cropp and Lee’s (2009) commentary for some of the most famous instances of the *topos*: Theognis 425; Soph. *OC* 1225; Eur. fr. 908.1 (a fragment on better not to be born attributed to the *Cresphontes*, cf. e.g. Harder (1985), 277 and see *Chapter 4 II.3*); Alexis fr. 145.14-15. The philosophising tone of the fragment seems to suggest the speaker is as a central character or one endowed with special wisdom; Curnis (2003), 124-129 suggests the speaker is Bellerophon himself.

⁵¹ In Collard, Cropp and Lee (2009), including critical edition, *testimonia*, and bibliography on the fragment; also Kannicht (2004), 352, with list of *testimonia*. See also the edition in Curnis (2003), 74-75 with comment at 104-129.

⁵² I reference the *Consolatio* from Paton et al. (1974). On the *Consolatio*, Hani (1972); Grilli (1992); Audano (2005), 1 for previous bibliography; Audano (2014a).

In the text leading up to the presentation of Silenus’ wisdom, the author of the *Consolatio* lingers twice on the circulation of the μὴ φῦναι. The first time is when he relates Crantor’s opinion (115b) about the dangers and madness of persisting in grief (114f -115a) given the numberless evils that crowd the world, an opinion that is used as a prelude for the myth of Midas as Silenus.¹⁴


The notion reappears again within the space of a few lines, as pseudo-Plutarch turns to quoting directly from Aristotle:


Even beyond a verbal similarity then (the same verb, θρυλέω, in the same form in both Euripides and Aristotle) the thoughts of Euripides’ character, of Crantor, and of Aristotle (and, one could argue, of pseudo-Plutarch as well) seem to unanimously suggest the wide diffusion of the μὴ φῦναι, and to be interested in conveying the popular status of the notion.¹⁷

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¹⁴ *Cons. Ap.* 115b is quoted among the testimonia for Crantor fr. 5b in Mette (1984), 19. Leopardi mentions Crantor in an early comment on the use of consolationes at Zib. 302; again at Zib. 2674 regarding precisely this passage in the *Consolatio*, and mentioning the Aristotelian fragment too. Cf. Audano (2014a), 24 on the fact that Silenus’ myth is chosen to iconically exemplify the understanding of the world under discussion in the *Consolatio*.

¹⁵ Cf. Curi (2008), 44 on how pseudo-Plutarch’s vague mention of “molti e saggi uomini” increases the “alone sapienziale” of the myth.


¹⁷ As Audano (2005), esp. 32, reminds us, references to the diffusion of sayings are found also elsewhere in the *Consolatio* (cf. 109d, 120b and 108e), and are, partly, a feature of the genre; Audano (2014a), 18 further suggests that these references are part of a general rhetorical strategy that uses “indeterminazione” to provide auctoritas; a strategy based on the “richiamo a un tempo passato, vago e lontano, da cui deriva, per il tramite di poeti e filosofi [...] il retaggio di un’antica sapienza [...]”
One could go on, and recall among others also Cicero’s *Tusc.* 1.113 as another example of this pattern.58 But let us linger instead on one last case of “ancient reception” that traces the history of the μῆ φῦναι even further back, indeed to the very beginnings of Greek literature. The story of the poetic contest between the two great poets of archaic Greece tells us that, once both performances were over, Hesiod turned to test Homer on a series of questions (*Certamen Homerii et Hesiodi* 7),59 starting with what is the best for mortals (τί φέρτατον ἔστι βροτοῖσιν). Homer’s response plays an important part in the history of scholarship: it was a young Friedrich Nietzsche who noticed that Homer’s reply, ἄρχην μὲν μὴ φῦναι ἐπιχθονίωσιν ἀριστον, φῦντα δ’ ὀπως ὀκιστα πῦλας Αἴδαο περῆσαι (“Not to be born in the first place is best for men on earth, or if born, to pass through Hades’ gates as fast as possible”) was in fact to be found in Stobaeus’ *Anthology* at 4.52.22 under the name of the 4th century sophist Alcidamas, a fact that led Nietzsche to suggest that Alcidamas’ *Mouseion* was the source of the oldest nucleus of the *Certamen.*61

Here however, the point is neither the dating nor the original source(s) of the *Certamen*, but rather the very fact that the μῆ φῦναι is attributed to Homer. The Homeric poems in fact present the μῆ φῦναι in four passages, which I explore later in the thesis.62 But even if we choose not to consider these four instances (in light of the fact that they are not universal statements, but rather individual characters wishing the annulment of their own existence), the ascription to Homer remains extremely significant. On the one

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59 In West (2003), 326; *Certamen 75* in Allen (1955), 228.

60 For a different version of the story see Plut. *Septem Sap. Convivium* 153f2-154a, see Graziosi (2002), 107, n. 48.


62 Cf. *Chapter 4*, the instances are *Il.* 3.39-40; 18.86-87; 22.481; *Od.* 8.311-313.
hand, this attribution tells us something about the reception of the Homeric worldview: even if we do not want to believe that this saying was, at some point in time, actually thought to be Homeric in origin, it seems beyond contention that the Certamen’s author saw no contrast – and instead possible harmony – between the wisdom of the Homeric poems and the μη φύναι. But there is also another, more symbolic interpretation, according to which Homer stands as the emblem of archaic poetry, and archaic poetic wisdom, and his response to Hesiod’s question is the response of an age, and of a type of poetry. In this sense just like Homer’s second answer to Hesiod (itself a direct quote from Od. 9.6-11) – stating that the finest thing for mortals is the delights of the symposium – this one too must have sounded plausible in Homer’s mouth to the Certamen’s audience. Attributing such a saying and belief to Homer means attributing it to the text that was read, studied, and alluded to for centuries to come, shaping the minds of thinkers of all kinds. What better testimony to the significance, repercussions, and notoriety of an idea?

2. Were the Greeks Pessimists?

Let us then examine the question about the existence and definition of Greek pessimism broached in the Introduction: were the Greeks pessimists? For one thing, they certainly did not call themselves so, since the term “pessimism” was born some 2000 years later in Europe. Given the anachronism inherent in the application of the term “pessimism” to the ancient Greeks, a remark on the terminology is in order. The term is employed throughout this thesis in light of the unyielding connection between ancient and modern

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63 Of course the dating of the Certamen influences which age’s reception we are dealing with. See Uden (2010) for details on the papyri. Cf. Graziosi (2002) who analyses the place of the Contest in what she calls “the invention of Homer” locating the text specifically within a 4th century dialogue about the value of Homer’s poetry in democratic Athens.

64 One should nonetheless recall that there are puzzling moments in the Certamen in regards to what is typically Homeric, see Arrighetti’s (1987), 168 and Graziosi’s (2002), 174 discussion of the odd choices of Homer’s best lines. Of course the line as we have it appears in Soph. OC 1224-1225; on this connection one should then recall other aspects of the relationships between Sophocles and Homer, on which cf. the article by Schein (2013).

65 Notice that Hesiod raises the expectations about Homer’s response by introducing the idea of Homer’s connection with the divine (θοδον ὧν μήδεα αἰώνες); also, note the audience’s response to Homer’s answers at Certamen 8. Cf. Graziosi (2002), 175.

66 On the birth of the term, originating from the debates on the pre-existing word “optimism”, see Stäglich (1951/1952) and the entry “Pessimismus” in Ritter and Gründer (2006).
pessimistic thought: the major founders of modern pessimism – Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, but also Leopardi – had extensive familiarity with Greek culture and its texts, and in different degrees they all researched and engaged with the idea of Greek pessimism. Even if we do not want to posit causation, (and believe that modern pessimism was born from the discovery of ancient pessimism), the strong relationship between the two remains undeniable. It is in this sense – without by any means equating ancient and modern pessimism – that the use of the term can be justified.

Asking whether the Greeks were pessimists means, then, to a certain extent, asking whether we trust the evidence regarding the diffusion of the μὴ φῶναι from which the chapter began. It is a matter of fact that what is left to us of Greek literature supports the statements of Euripides, Aristotle, and the other πολλοὶ σοφοί mentioned earlier. Let us take a moment to quickly review the sources we have. Some of these sources – like Solon’s narration of the myth of Cleobis and Biton at Hdt. 1.31, and, within it, Hera’s statement declaring that it is better for humans to die than to live, or Euripides’ Cresphontes fr. 449, voicing the same notion of Bellerophon fr. 285 – are more closely examined in Chapter 4 of this thesis and are thus only listed here.

Of fundamental importance is Theognis’ four-verse gnome (425-428), the mould of seemingly every other appearance of the theme, presenting its reflection on the

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67 In fact both the variety of media (tragedy, philosophy, moral writings) and the chronological distance between these sources are in themselves a guarantee of its diffusion. Cf. Easterling (2013), 162-163.

68 This quick rundown only includes the sources that convey the explicit formulation of the μὴ φῶναι. It is nevertheless essential to remember that the conception animating them is vividly active in many other works throughout Greek literature, despite the lack of explicit formulations; more about this throughout this thesis, and especially in Chapter 4. A list and brief discussion of most of these passages can be found in Curi (2008), 148.

69 Hdt. 1.31.3: […] διέδεξε τε ἐν τούτοις ὁ θεὸς ὡς ἀμείνον εἰπή ἀνθρώπῳ τεθνάναι μᾶλλον ἢ ζῶειν, on which more in Chapter 4.

70 Although the bibliography on the Cresphontes is referenced in Chapter 4 II.3, it is worth mentioning here Opstelten’s (1952), 131-132 brief exploration of Euripidean pessimism (including ibid. 131 n. 4 a list of pessimistic passages in Euripides), which is aware of the “strong accumulation of pessimistic utterances in the lost Bellerophon”. Ibid. 132 n. 3: “Bellerophon was the first melancholic in literature”, quoting Iliad 6.200-202.

71 Πάντων μὲν μὴ φῶναι ἐπικαθονίον χρῆσθαι άριστον μηδ’ ἐσπευδότες άγιος ἀγάλματος ἤλειον, φύντα δ’ ὑπὸς ὀκίστα πόλεως Αίδοιο περῆμακαί κεῖθαι πολλάν γῆν ἐπαμησάμενον. Cf. West (1989), 194 and the commentary by Van Groningen (1966), 169-171, who interprets both Sophocles OC 1224ff and Euripides’ fr. 285 as direct references to Theognis’ verses; so does Curnis (2003), 118 for fr. 285;
benefits of non-existence in a bipartite structure, suggesting that, after utter non-existence, the best outcome is to die as soon as possible. In Bacchylides’ *Ode 5* (160-161) it is Heracles who delivers the *gnome*, and commentators have long noticed how well the saying fits in with the ode’s general pessimistic tone. Bolstered by the connection with the suffering Oedipus (the very “παράδειγμα der Tragik und Nichtigkeit des menschlichen Lebens”) the chorus’ statements about the μὴ φύναι in the third stasimon of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Coloneus* 1224-1227 voices in all its might the universal connection between human existence and unhappiness. Similar testimony to the Herodotean Hera’s divine conviction that it is best for mortals not to live comes from the already cited words of the daimon Silenus in Aristotle’s *Eudemus* at pseudo-Plutarch *Cons. Ap.* 115b-e. Alexis’ fr. 145, vv. 15-16 reworks the *gnome* (or, more accurately, the content of the two hexameters, if we use Theognis as the paradigm)
trimeters, and remarkably introduces it by suggesting, like many of the sources seen so far, that the saying is “οὐκοῦλ, τὸ πολλοίς τῶν σοφῶν εἰρημένον” (v. 14). The list of evils that inevitably afflict human life – a list the reader remembers from Simonides fr. 19 W² among others – is presented with a slightly comic spin in Posidippus fr. *133 (AP 9.359); two things are left to choose from, says the poet, not to be born, or dying speedily at the moment of birth.

As this brief rundown shows, the “wisdom of Silenus” is a penetrating feature of many of the great works of Greek literature, and, as we said at the opening of this chapter, it can well be taken to epitomise Greek pessimistic thought. This wisdom, which directly confronts and displays the darkest of recognitions about human existence, is the progeny of the utterly ubiquitous Greek urge to question the value of life: although primarily posited as an irrefutable answer about life, the tale of Midas and Silenus is the story of a question. It is from this initial question that Achilles’ description of the divine granting of the human lot, Solon’s replies to Croesus with the tale of Cleobis and Biton, the comparison of humans and leaves, and all the other meditations on, and challenges to, the value of existence stem.

This brings us to a first and necessary caveat concerning the use of the formula “Greek pessimism”, insofar as it may suggest that the object of this research is one distinct and unified worldview, clearly defined in time and space. This is indeed not the case:

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78 τὸ µὴ γενέσθαι µέν κράτιστων ἕστ' ἅµι/ἐπὶν γένηται δ', ὡς τάχιστ' ἔχειν τέλος. In Kassel and Austin (1991), 102-103 and as fr. 141 in Kock (1934), 348. Commentary in Arnott (1996), 422-430 and esp. 429-430: “The popularity of such a maxim, with its message of total pessimism, doubtless owed something to its striking paradoxy”.

79 More on fr. 8 W in Chapter 3.

80 ἦν ᾦρα τῶν δευτέρων ἐνής αὕρεσις, ἢ τὸ γενέσθαι/µηδέποτ' ἢ τὸ θανεῖν αὐτικά τικτόµενον. In Austin and Bastianini (2002), 170-171, edition and Italian and English translations; Gutzwiller (2005), 47 with English translation. One further liminary case for this list is Aeschylus fr. 466, with testimonia in TrGF Radt (1985), 502; on fr. 466 cf. Opstelten (1952), 167 n. 5: “where however the addition of the words κακῶς πάσχοντα characteristically restricts the scope of the meaning”.

81 Cf. Easterling (2013), 194 and 198, calling it a cliché.

82 Chapter 4 of this thesis explores this theme in greater detail.

83 The label of “pessimism” is somewhat odd for Leopardi, who rarely uses it himself and does not apply it to his own philosophy.
throughout Greek history, pessimistic thought – this would be perhaps the fairest way to refer to it – never found itself a label, never founded a philosophical school or gained followers. And yet, as we have briefly shown and as Leopardi, Burckhardt and Nietzsche will contend, Greek literature brims with voices that in various ways, through various media, and with varying nuances, question the value of human existence, any teleological idea of destiny and justice, and the anthropocentric understanding of the *cosmos*. Despite lacking a name and the coherence of a proper current of thought this worldview was strong enough to cross centuries – arching from the archaic Homeric times to the Hellenistic age of Posidippus – and pervasive enough to imbue a large variety of literary and philosophical sources.\(^\text{84}\) It is this vitality and ubiquity that led Jacob Burckhardt to say that the whole understanding of Greek culture before his time had been deeply and utterly amiss, a “falsification” of reality in stark contrast with the evidence offered by the texts themselves.\(^\text{85}\) Rather than simply a current within Greek thought, for Burckhardt (and Leopardi) Greek pessimism *is* Greek thought, a force profound enough to shape the whole of Greek culture, ultimately to be essentially indistinguishable from Greek culture itself.

Beside the various moral judgements which, across history, have been held against the worldview depicted by Greek pessimism,\(^\text{86}\) what more than anything caused the modern mind to resist the notion of the Greeks as pessimists is the long-perpetuated vision of Hellas as a place of perfect beauty, pondered serenity, and heroic idealism. This vision has an engrossingly complex history, and roots as deep as the Roman fascination with Greece and Virgil’s “creation” of Arcadia.\(^\text{87}\) But most of all, this vision is born from Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s interpretation of ancient art (and more generally of ancient culture) and from the ensuing process of reinterpretation and re-imagination of

\(^{84}\) Cf. Burckhardt in Burckhardt et al. (2005), 368: “Die Klage über das Elend der Menschen, wie sie sich aufdringlich und überall bei den Griechen hören läßt, ist ohne einige Wiederholungen nicht wohl zur Darstellung zu bringen; ein und derselbe Gedanke wird bald einfacher bald reicher, mit allerlei Beziehungen und Vorstellungen gemischt ausgesprochen.”

\(^{85}\) See II.3 in this chapter.

\(^{86}\) See II.1-2 in this chapter.

\(^{87}\) Cf. Snell’s essay on Arcadia in Snell (1953); Rosenmeyer (1969); Jenkyns (1989); Iser (1989); Panofsky’s essay on *Et in Arcadia Ego* in Panofsky (2010).
antiquity that enveloped Europe through the age of Romanticism and beyond it.\textsuperscript{88} Even more than from Winckelmann’s conception of the Greeks’ joyousness of disposition, their privileged contact with nature, or their enlightened government, the “Greek ideal” was born from Winckelmann’s theoretical recognition of the principles of “unity” and “perfection” as the root not only of Greek art and beauty, but of Greek civilisation as a whole.\textsuperscript{89} The ensuing idea of Hellas was, and indeed still is, hard to reconcile with a darker and gloomier notion of Greece. Winckelmann himself came across some of the literary evidence of this other side of Greek thought, and could feel the contrast between the “tragic muse” of Aeschylus and the limpid, rational literature of the Socratic age;\textsuperscript{90} the only safe way out of this impasse was to attribute such divergence to an erring step in the path of a developing culture.

In truth the two things – serenity and striving for beauty on the one hand, and a pessimistic interpretation of the world on the other – are not necessarily mutually exclusive. As we shall see in this chapter, most of the people who proposed that modernity ought to acknowledge the existence and importance of ancient pessimism did not suggest that ancient pessimism had anything to do with sadness, resignation, or lack of enthusiasm for life.\textsuperscript{91} Rather, they saw in the Greeks a precocious, unclouded, and uncompromising cognisance of the condition of human life. The joy for life, the enthusiasm for missions and goals, and the appreciation of beauty are undeniably part of the Greek mode of life, as they exude from the poetry, the art, and the political achievements of ancient Greece.\textsuperscript{92} Could it perhaps be this feature of Greek life that has discouraged attempts at seeing what lay behind – or better, what lay at the roots – of the


\textsuperscript{89} Cf. Emden (2004), 376: “This very specific understanding of beauty is dependent on the ideas of wholeness and perfection which he discovered in Greek sculpture and regarded as a main attribute of Greek antiquity as a whole.” See also Silk and Stern (1981), 4-6.


\textsuperscript{91} Cf. Die Geburt der Tragödie 7 and 11.

\textsuperscript{92} See the Vorrede 4 to Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, in Colli and Montinari (1973), 19:“Oh diese Griechen! Sie verstanden sich darauf, zu leben : dazu thut Noth, tapfer bei der Oberfläche, der Falte, der Haut stehen zu bleiben, den Schein anzubeten, an Formen, an Töne, an Worte, an den ganzen Olymp des Scheins zu glauben! Diese Griechen waren oberflächlich — aus Tiefe!” , cf. Held (2004), 419.
shimmering beauty of the Greeks’ existence? Nietzsche phrased it beautifully, as he was writing his self-criticism to *The Birth of Tragedy* - *Man erräth, an welche Stelle hiermit das grosse Fragezeichen vom Werth des Daseins gesetzt war.* The Greeks’ pessimism is the act of questioning – more fundamentally than the act of challenging – the value of existence. The way one may go and practically live life – which choices, which self-rewards, which entertainment, which aspirations – is not necessarily touched by such a question.

What are we to do then with the question regarding the Greeks’ pessimism? One could dismiss the notion of Greek pessimism on the grounds that pessimistic thoughts are at some point found in every civilisation, as we do find them in Egyptian literature or in many Eastern traditions, and are merely a moment in the development of a culture. According to this view all these statements and reflections are simply the commonplaces and proverbs that emanate from this general popular mood and deserve little attention.

Without pretending that the presence of such thoughts straightforwardly makes the Greeks into pessimists and nothing else, I instead contend that it is crucial to listen to this evidence and try to grasp the significance of this side of Greek wisdom (and theodicy), a side that – as the following parts of this chapter illustrate – has been long forgotten, purposely deleted, or simply unacknowledged. In order to do this, I suggest we embark on a journey through history, to see what the reaction of those who came across this controversial aspect of Greek thought was. This chapter aims at tracing a short account of the reception and understanding of Greek pessimism. A great and long history could be written, and would deserve to be written, on this topic; here, however, the limited space only allows us to sketch some of the most important steps of this path of denial, curiosity, and rediscovery.

93 From his Versuch einer Selbstkritik 1, in Colli and Montinari (1972), 6.
II

A Modern History of Ancient Pessimism

1. The Querelle Des Anciens et Des Modernes

The second step in this brief history of the reception of Greek pessimism is distant in time from the writings of Aristotle or pseudo-Plutarch. We are now in 17th century Europe, with one of the most extraordinary, extensive, and long-lasting events in the history of the modern understanding of antiquity. The Querelle – whose “official start” is usually identified with Charles Perrault’s declaration of the Modernes’ superiority in his Le siècle de Louis Le Grand on January 27th 1687 at the court of Louis XIV – is the child of three centuries of incessant discoveries and cultural revolutions. On the one hand, the rediscovery of a multitude of ancient works, which cooperated in prompting a new (paralleling and) comparison between the achievements of antiquity – whose superiority had until then lived unchallenged –95 and the possibilities of modernity; on the other hand, the renewed trust in man born with the Renaissance, resurrecting man’s faith in the possibility of surpassing the deeds of the past, the newly born idea of progress, and the scientific advancement professed by the Baconian method.96

The whole Querelle burst out with tremendous gravity. More than just pervading the many years of skirmishes that involved the personal lives of the contestants,97 the atmosphere of battle kept metaphorically informing the discourse on the Querelle through the language and iconography of war.98 The reason for such gravity and controversy lies with the question at the root of the Querelle. Rather than simply a matter of mere superiority (who is to be deemed superior, antiquity or modernity?)99 the

95 Cf. Gillot (1914), 125-142 on the myth of antiquity as “mother of Sciences and Arts”.
97 Cf. Fumaroli (2001), 194-195 on the final make up between Perrault and Boileau with a public embrace in the Académie française in 1694.
98 Jonathan Swift’s Battle of the Books (1704) is perhaps the most famous example; cf. also a drawing on the frontispiece to the 1714 English edition of François de Callières’s Histoire poétique de la guerre nouvellement déclarée entre les Anciens et les Modernes, as seen in Levine (1991), 130 showing the line up of the troops of anciens and modernes depicted as armies facing each other.
99 Winckelmann’s own theory is in itself one monumental answer to the question posed by the Querelle: from the idea, brought forward early on in his Gedanken, that art is imitation of the ancients to the
real controversy runs much deeper, to involve the beating core of the relationship between antiquity and modernity: what can (and should) modernity do with the history, the fame, the inheritance of antiquity? Far from trivial, the Querelle tackled crucial questions about the future of literature, science, and, among other things, modern man.

As Marc Fumaroli reminds us, the main kernel of the Querelle fragmented to produce a multifarious series of “mini-Querelles” and a number of corollary battles (“de l’art avec les techniques, du génie avec la méthode, de la vision poétique avec l’univocité de la déduction logique” among others).\(^{100}\) Insofar as the notion of superiority was concerned, the Modernes armed themselves to scrutinise each and every aspect of the (alleged) ancient superiority – the knowledge of the various sciences, their philosophical doctrines, the beauty of their verses, to name but a few – an enterprise well epitomised by Perrault’s Parallèle des anciens et des modernes (1688-1697). Due to the limited scope of this section, I am forced to concentrate quite drastically on one specific point of contention between the two parties, i.e. the thorny subject of antiquity’s religion, morals, and worldview.

The bickering, fickle, and supremely flawed gods of the Homeric pantheon, the recurring and undisguised absence of providence,\(^{101}\) the unfair punishment of the just in so many Greek tragedies, these and many other issues inevitably were a difficult item on the battlefield of the Querelle.\(^{102}\) The problem was akin to the one faced by Winckelmann, but all the more irksome insofar as the contestants of the Querelle were directly concerned not only with the aesthetic realm, but also, and openly, with those of morals and philosophy. The scattered and yet undeniable evidence of this aspect of Greek culture inevitably jarred with the modern (and what is more Christian) mind.\(^{103}\) This feature – the intrinsic irreconcilability of ancient literature’s worldview and religion with modern mœurs and theological convictions – is what makes this one subject unique in representing a problem for both Modernes and Anciens, both finding explicit declaration of the superiority of antiquity, his work is a decisive defence of antiquity’s superiority. Cf. Held (2004), 413. On the question, cf. Gillot (1914), 32.

\(^{100}\) Cf. Fumaroli (2001), 203-204.

\(^{101}\) This is, of course, a generalisation that does not mean to encompass the whole of Greek thought, which includes, above all, the Stoic theory of divine providence.

\(^{102}\) Cf. the “demi-dieux […] capricieux” of Perrault’s Le siècle.

\(^{103}\) See Manuel (1959), 15-53; Vyverberg (1958), 86.
themselves inevitably at odds with it: the former shrewdly and lavishly used it to undermine antiquity, forcing the Anciens – troubled themselves by the religious and moral implications of Greek literature – to justify it in a multitude of more or less convincing manners.

The assault of the Modernes was biting and, more than anything, utterly ubiquitous. One can hardly go far into any of the works that tackle the dispute without encountering mention of the blasphemous character of the ancient mœurs. A few examples should suffice. Decades before the official start of the Querelle, and in line with Charles Sorel’s programme to attack “nondenifying forms of fiction”, the Berger extravagant’s (1627) characters criticise the ancients for their ridiculous and farcical depiction of the divine, and essentially for the ancients’ attempt to pass off “fables” as theology. The “demi-dieux […] capricieux” in Perrault’s Le siècle resurface in his Parallèle in the mention of the “mauvais exemples des dieux de L’Iliade”: rather than giving the gods all the vices of men, Homer ought to have given men all the virtues of the gods. Even somebody as moderate as François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon could regard ancient religion as “ridicule et monstrueuse” in his Lettre à l’Académie (1718). Issues with the theological assumptions of antiquity in the light of their clash with Christian beliefs are at the core of the work of Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin. All these various attacks bring forth a “radical reappraisal of Greek religion and theology as a mythic and

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104 Cf. Fumaroli (2001), 167-168 on the fact that some Anciens too were uncomfortable with the representation of human life drawn by the ancient poets. See Levine (1981), 78-79 for examples of other instances in which the two fronts agreed on their judgements of antiquity in general.

105 Huet’s reminder that poetry has to be educational and instructive gives us a sense of why the Anciens found ancient morals troublesome, cf. Huet’s Lettre de M. Huet à M. Perrault sur le parallèle des anciens et des modernes in Fumaroli (2001), 398.


107 Cf. Perrault’s Parallèle Tome 3, in Fumaroli (2001), 372 on Horace’s use of Homer and on the latter’s “les mauvais exemples des dieux de L’Iliade que dans la vie et les écrits des philosophes, et il devait dire, comme Cicéron, qu’Homère eût mieux fait de donner aux hommes toutes les vertus des dieux que de donner aux dieux tous les vices des hommes.”

108 Fénelon (1911), 66-67.

109 Cf. Desmarets at Rigault (1856), 80-81, 86, 93 (on the gods of Homer), where Desmarets professes himself an enemy of the Homeric theology precisely in light of his being Christian. Insofar as Christianity was the point, the issue was not – or at least was not always – the ancients’ polytheism and paganism per se, but rather and more deeply the clashing features of the gods of antiquity compared to the God of the Bible and to the other monotheistic religions.
superstitious mentality of a primitive people, on a level with American savages”, as one can see in Fontenelle.\(^\text{110}\)

Everywhere (and especially as far as Homer is concerned) we find an abundance of arguments against the theology and the gods of antiquity. But perhaps the greatest testimony to the Modernes’ feelings towards the ancients’ pessimistic worldview can be found in their reaction to Greek tragedy.\(^\text{111}\) As shown by Michael Lurie in his discussion of the reception of Sophocles, well into the 16\(^{\text{th}}\) century and before the “Christianisation” of the interpretation of tragedy,\(^\text{112}\) tragedy was conceived as “a warning representation of the mutability of unpredictable fortuna, and hence of the frailty of human happiness and the misery of human life”.\(^\text{113}\) With their descriptions of arbitrary fate and divine injustice, it was thus only natural for tragedy’s worldviews to become one of the weapons turned against antiquity.\(^\text{114}\) For reasons well explained by Lurie, and connected to the difficulty inherent in any attempt to Christianise this tragedy’s plot (and to the history of such attempts), Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex played a prominent role amongst the whole of Greek tragedy.\(^\text{115}\) In his The Ancient and Modern Stages Survey’d (1699) (once the Querelle had landed in England) James Drake plainly and unmistakably denounces the lack of virtue in the plot of the Oedipus Rex, accusing it of convincing man of the “lubricity of fortune” and the “instability of human greatness”.\(^\text{116}\) Drake’s opinion was nothing new. Eight years earlier, in his Réflexions sur la Poétique (1691), Fontenelle had exposed the Sophoclean play as morally deficient insofar as it conveyed what we can now call a pessimistic interpretation of the human condition.\(^\text{117}\) At the beginning of the following century the Abbé Jean Terrasson in his Dissertation critique sur l’Iliade d’Homère (1715) identified in Greek tragedy the

\(^{110}\) Fontenelle (1691–9), 30–32. Quotation is from Lurie (2012), 448.
\(^{111}\) It is not by chance that Philipp Melanchthon’s exegetical lectures on Sophocles’ plays – attempting to discern the action of divine justice and thus the theological correctness of each play – do not include the Oedipus Rex, cf. Lurie (2012), 444.
\(^{112}\) Cf. Melanchthon’s Cohortatio and Lurie (2012), 442-444.
\(^{113}\) Lurie (2012), 442.
\(^{114}\) Lurie (2012), 448.
\(^{115}\) See Lurie (2012) and Saint-Évremond (1692), 182 on which Lurie (2012), 448.
\(^{116}\) Drake (1699), 131-132.
\(^{117}\) “On ne remporte d’Œdipe, et des pièces qui lui ressemblent, qu’une désagréable et inutile conviction des misères de la condition humaine”, from Fontenelle (1818b), 19.
workings of an “idée impie” by which the innocent are unduly punished by fate and the gods.\textsuperscript{118}

Terrasson’s discussion of Greek tragedy had been prompted by the attempt of Ancien André Dacier to reconcile in the plot of the \textit{Oedipus Rex} a providential vision of divine justice – by which the guilty are punished – with the Aristotelian concept of \textit{hamartia} – according to which the punishment comes in light of an error made unknowingly and unwillingly by the character. To make sense of the terrible turn of events in the play, Dacier had to prove Oedipus guilty, and thus righteously castigated: to do so he argued that “involuntary, yet nonetheless morally culpable” character flaws were the justification for the gods’ action.\textsuperscript{119} Dacier’s untenable interpretation quintessentially exemplifies the \textit{Anciens}’ attitude in the face of the pagan beliefs of the Greeks: unable to thoroughly accept – let alone to embrace – the ancient worldview as it is, but nonetheless forced to defend their party, the \textit{Anciens} resorted to a variety of means, which fall mostly into two categories. On the one hand they proposed to interpret and explain the unacceptable aspects of ancient theology and \textit{Weltanschauung} by resorting to a \textit{prisca theologia} and to a number of allegorical readings.\textsuperscript{120} Such was the approach of Anne Dacier, wife of André and famous Homerist, who used Christianising interpretation to pursue the moralising endeavour of justifying the gods of Homer (attacked by Antoine Houdar de La Motte amongst others).\textsuperscript{121} A different approach was taken by all those who variously suggested that moral judgements should be waived entirely, and ancient literature enjoyed for the many other pleasures and teachings it can offer.\textsuperscript{122} Both attempts are a testimony to the \textit{Anciens}’ essential inability and refusal to read, interpret, and accept in full the very works they were defending. The gap between the accepted moral systems of modernity and the beliefs of ancient Greece is, at this point, unbridgeable.

\textsuperscript{118} Terrasson (1715), 188.
\textsuperscript{119} Lurie (2012), 447.
\textsuperscript{120} See Melanchthon’s moralising interpretations of Greek tragedy on which Lurie (2012), 443-444.
\textsuperscript{121} Cf. Perrault (1692), 55; Dacier (1714), 100-108; Hepp (1968), 410. Cf. Levine (1991), 141-145 for De La Motte’s and Terrasson’s criticism of Homer. Details of Dacier’s arguments in Dacier (1714), 101-102, 104, 106; Patey (2008), 54.
\textsuperscript{122} As did Brumoy, on which Lurie (2012), 450-452.
Jean-Jacques Barthélemy’s *Voyage du jeune Anacharsis en Grèce* was a publishing phenomenon: appearing for the first time in 1788, by the end of the next century it had been reprinted over forty times and in different languages. The *Voyage* is simultaneously a novel – recounting the travels of the Scythian Anacharsis through 4th century Greece – and an erudite scholarly enterprise, which aims at shaping both a liberal history *and* a social and cultural history of Greece. Through the looser and more narrative guises of fictional literature, the French scholar had the chance to include and discuss anything ranging from religious beliefs and customs, to culinary digressions, to the artistic and musical practices of the time. All this material is gathered from Barthélemy’s extensive acquaintance with ancient sources, sources that are both referenced in the dense note apparatus and listed at the end of the last tome of the novel. But on top of this, the fictional form allows Barthélemy to make the Greeks speak for themselves, and to introduce direct dialogues with not only common people, but also with important witnesses in the history of Greek culture, Badolle’s “grands hommes de l’histoire”. Clothed in alluring storytelling, the *Voyage* is formed by innumerable collections of ancient sources relating to each subject, a testimony to the author’s mesmerising erudition. It is one of these collections that wins the *Voyage* a place in this history of Greek pessimism: albeit extremely briefly – and, as we shall see, in a peculiar manner – Chapter 28 of Barthélemy’s work is one of the first modern collections of ancient Greek pessimistic statements. To the best of my knowledge no work has discussed this section of Barthélemy’s *Voyage* or explored the role played by ancient pessimistic thought within it.

Chapter 28 of the *Voyage* (*Suite des moeurs des Athéniens*) begins with a hectic scene of city life, meant to give the reader a taste of the “vie civile” of the Athenians, subject

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123 Cf. Silver (1990), 145-148. The bibliography on the *Voyage* is sparse to say the least. After Maurice Badolle’s (1927) book, the *Voyage* has been the subject of very little research, and mostly directed at observing this work’s influence on other works or authors. One exception is Silver (1990). Someone even suggested the author owed his life to his work, cf. Silver (1990), 145.


125 Badolle (1927).

126 Polizzi (2011), 125-126 discusses briefly Chapter 78, reaching very different conclusions.
also of the prequel to this chapter, number 20, *Mœurs et vie civile des Athéniens*. It is after some time spent among this not so pleasant crowd of pretentious characters, annoying chatterers, and slimy parasites, and after a brief encounter with Diogenes himself, that the protagonist begins to recount an altogether different type of meeting, taking place at the “portique de Jupiter” on a different day. The group of people gathered in the *porticus* is described as “quelques Athéniens qui agitoient des questions de philosophie”. Immediately the reader is immersed in medias res in the on-going conversation, just like the passer-by Anacharsis. The central topics under discussion are the essence of the world and the role of man in it. Each character in turn gives a short speech outlining their opinions, and the reader learns that each of them is a disciple of a philosophical school: disciples of Heraclitus, Democritus, Plato. It is here that the chapter gathers and presents the reader with a choice of Greek beliefs, part of which overlaps with the much more extensive pseudo-Plutarchean collection mentioned above, the *Consolatio ad Apollonium*. The speakers utter these notions as part of their philosophical beliefs about the world’s essence: man is the dream of a shadow, the worst of evils is to be born, the best thing is to die.

The extent of Barthélemy’s engagement with these pessimistic thoughts is rather limited, as the brevity of the entire passage (only a few pages in the French edition used here) shows. But the real peculiarity of the abbé’s approach lies in the mechanism by which he inserts these textual references. The vast majority of the pessimistic notions conveyed by the speakers – and then punctiliously referenced by the author in the footnotes, in line with his erudite approach – come from non-philosophical works, and especially from poetic ones. Yet they are repositioned in what is a downright philosophical sketch; the character of the philosopher is used to utter statements that come for example from tragedy (Soph. *OC* 1224-27) and lyric (Pind. *Pyth*. 8.95-96). The non-judgmental inclusion of these pessimistic notions in Barthélemy’s work is a crucial step in the history of the modern engagement with ancient pessimistic ideas.

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127 I quote from Barthélemy (1789-1790), with tome and page numbers.
128 Barthélemy (1789-1790), tome 3, 135.
129 Barthélemy (1789-1790), tome 3, 135-139. A brief rundown of the ideas mentioned here and of the sources which Barthélemy supplies for each of idea can be found on the table in Appendix 1. In the “source” column I copy Barthélemy’s text and add in square brackets references to the *locri* in the modern notation. The speakers’ numbers in brackets indicate if one speaker appears more than once.
And yet, although the fact that they are quoted testifies (at least partially) to the author’s acknowledgement of the existence of this dark worldview, Barthélemy’s handling of his sources reveals that we are still far from a complete acceptance (let alone an embracing) of such worldview. By choosing philosophers as the spokespersons of poets – who first divulged these ideas, but are not mentioned in the body of the text – Barthélemy “disguises” poetry as philosophy, thus revealing that he fails to fully espouse the philosophical worth of poetic writings. Although the speakers (and the author via them) positively use concepts derived from ancient poetry, thus proving that the content of these poetic statements is considered sound and valuable, we are nonetheless assuredly albeit inexplicitly told that poetry needs the backing and sanctioning of philosophy in order to be considered serious and credible.

Yet this is not the only instance of a somewhat censorial attitude towards pessimistic poetic thought in the *Voyage*. Whereas Barthélemy’s “disguise” of poetry is indirectly a statement about the author’s opinions on the validity and authority of a literary form – and in a sense once more a stance in the age-old quarrel between poetry and philosophy – a later section of the *Voyage* informs us that Barthélemy had words of caution also for the subject matter of this pessimistic wisdom. Chapter 78 (*Sur le bonheur*) takes up where Chapter 76 had left off, i.e. with the continuation of Anacharsis’ visit to Delos, guided (among others) by the native Philocles. The atmosphere that pervades these chapters is one and the same, a joyful mix of festive cheerfulness (the festival on the island, and a wedding celebration), exposure to quasi-divine beauty (that of Ismene, Philocles’ daughter, and her groom) and an overall sense of partaking in an ideal life. One detail contradicts quite powerfully the fresco of uncontaminated happiness painted by the author as he describes the celebrations on Delos in Chapter 77. As the offerings are brought in, the bystanders present tales about the Hyperboreans and their legendary health, beauty, and happiness, all lived in a perpetual spring.\footnote{Barthélemy (1789-1790), tome 6, 428.} In the face of the unmissable feature of the Hyperborean country – its distance from known human abodes – the narrator has to comment that “c’est ainsi que les hommes n’ont jamais su placer le séjour du bonheur, que dans des lieux inaccessibles”.\footnote{See Curi’s (2008), 39-42 section “L’altrove della felicitá” and *ibid.* 30-31; Curi explores the version of Silenus’ story trasmitted by Aelian, whereby Silenus speaks of the two cities that are on a continent
of the Hyperborean legend entails some degree of contradiction: this myth that envisions the land of perfect happiness outside the boundaries of the known world (or even in no physical and existing place, as Pindar’s *Pythian* 10. 29-30 seems to say) is mentioned in the context of an idealised representation of Greek life. Although its premises are inherently at odds with much of chapters 76-78, Barthélémy acts almost as if he could not resist the temptation to insert this one more piece of erudition, but then supplies no explanation for it and the myth remains somewhat adrift in the narrative, testimony to a worldview that Barthélémy is about to criticise in Chapter 78.

It is in Chapter 78 that we learn more about Philocles, his wisdom, his philosophical education and his “système de conduite” aimed at the achievement of happiness, a target which Philocles seems to have successfully reached. Chapter 78 looks, accordingly, rather like a short treatise “on happiness”. As we realise immediately Philocles’ discourse is nothing else than an anti-pessimistic venture, an assault on pessimistic worldviews, purposefully meant to respond to (and attack) all those who see happiness as incompatible with human life. By trial and error Philocles has learned that men seek happiness in the wrong places, be it pleasures, excessively stern virtue, or the strictest reason; real happiness comes, this is Philocles’ conclusion, from love.\textsuperscript{132} One could say that Philocles’ stance is a *modus vivendi* and not a *Weltanschauung*, in that it does not deny *per se* any of the pessimistic notions on the human condition, but it merely suggests the best way to cope with existence. And yet the fact that Barthélémy directly opposes such pessimistic ideas is strikingly evident from the very start of Philocles’ speech. Here the pessimistic conception of human existence is summarised and at the same time denounced in two powerful rhetorical questions: “Est-ce donc pour couvrir la terre de malheureux, que le genre humain a pris naissance? Et les dieux se feraient-ils un jeu cruel de persécuter des âmes aussi faibles que les nôtres?”\textsuperscript{133} No, is the vigorous (albeit indirect) response of Philocles, whose entire speech is a negation of such conceptions of the world.

\textsuperscript{132} Beyond this world. The inhabitants of the “pious” city live in happiness and die laughing (cf. the fragment by Theopompus cited by Aelian in Jacoby (1927), 551, fr. 75 c4.)

\textsuperscript{133} And especially selfless love. The last, love-centred part of Philocles’ speech is prompted by the heartfelt request of young Lysis, who cries out “Ah! Philoclé, nous sommes faits pour le bonheur”.

\textsuperscript{133} Barthélémy (1789-1790), tome 6, 446.
It is in Philocles’ response to these questions that we catch again repeated glimpses of Barthélemy’s problematic relationship with Greek pessimistic ideas. Whether or not with this passage in mind, Philocles’ discourse implicitly engages with the Homeric discourse on the human understanding of divine action, and in particular with the Odyssean Zeus’ much-debated speech on the role of the gods in the causation of human suffering (Od. 1.32-41). Philocles’ stark reply (“Je ne saurais me le persuader; c’est contre nous seuls que nous devons diriger nos reproches”) is in line with the most moralising readings of the speech, according to which Zeus is stating that the gods have no part in the causation of mankind’s sufferings, an interpretation which is untenable not only in the face of the very plot of the Odyssey itself, but also on a purely linguistic level. Consciously or not, Philocles is siding with those who see in man’s own doings the root of human trouble, thus implicitly disregarding the anti-teleological stance of so much of Greek literature, and its characters’ cries against malevolent gods.

The following part of Philocles’ speech confirms our thesis about the author’s views on pessimistic interpretations of the world. Philocles engages with the idea (widespread in Greek literature) that man’s lot is a mix of goods and evils, an idea that finds its earliest expression in Achilles’ speech to Priam at Iliad 24.526-534. There is nevertheless a vast

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134 Barthélemy (1789-1790), tome 6, 446.
135 See for example Dietrich (1965), 324. Although Kullman (1985), 5 acknowledges that “as frivolous as the gods may appear to us, their actions account for the whole of human suffering and weakness”, he still believes the Odyssey to introduce ever since the council of the gods “another way of thinking”.
136 An interpretation I deem untenable. There are two textual reasons for which Zeus’ clearcut denial of responsibility becomes highly implausible. Those who wish to rule out any divine role in human misery neglect to consider and translate the καὶ in verse 33 (as pointed out by Allan (2006), 16 n.73 and Tsagarakis (2000), 47 n.163. Fränkel (1975), 221, n. 6); the impossibility of reading in this passage merely the complete denial of involvement on the gods’ part is restated by Heubeck, West and Hainsworth (1988), 77, clarifying that Zeus’ speech is in no way a denial of divine interference in causing evil (κακά, ἄλγεα) to men. Furthermore the concept conveyed by the καὶ is in my opinion restated once again in the following line, as Zeus says that “(mortals) through their wickedness have sufferings ὑπὲρ µόρον”, a phrase often overlooked in textual analyses or translated rather generically as “beyond that which was ordained” as by Murray (1919) and similarly by Lattimore (2007). Given that Μόρος is the part allotted to a man in the course of his life, “one’s due share”(as in Heubeck, West and Hainsworth (1988), 78), to translate it as “that which was ordained” is to stress a vagueness which is not in the text, as µόρος refers to the share of humans. Thus “beyond one’s share” implies that human action adds to a lot that is already decided (by external forces), thus reinforcing the notion that human wickedness and depravity merely add to divine action. By acting wickedly, man brings upon himself disgraces beyond what was allotted to him: but it is the gods and the superior forces who allot man his basic lot.
and striking difference between Philocles’ conception of the distribution of goods and evils and that conveyed by Greek literature. According to Philocles, humans receive good mingled with evil (“Des lois constants mêlent sans interruption le bien avec le mal”). But describing the evil, Philocles suggests that some of it may well reveal to be real good, as opposed to pleasure (which is what humans understand as “good”), and that ultimately “pour la plupart des mortels, la somme des biens serait infiniment plus grande que celle des maux”. Nothing could be farther from the description of the jars given by Achilles, a description that only envisions two possible scenarios, and whose overall tone is certainly incompatible with the optimistic conclusion of Philocles. On the one hand, Achilles describes the possibility that a man would get a mixed lot (529-530), on the other hand the one according to which man receives only evil (ὁ δὲ κε τῶν λυγρῶν δῶ, 531-532). The description of the two jars and the practical explanation of their meaning for human life provides an efficacious seal to Achilles’ dark and irrevocable statement at 525-526, stating that the gods have destined men to live in pain. Pindar’s Pythian 3.82-83 (ἐν παρ’ ἐσθλῶν πήματα σώνδῳ διαιόντα βροτοῖς ἀθάνατοι) similarly deals with the allotment of good and evil; David Young has suggested that, by stating that for each good man is given two evils, Pindar has correctly understood the Iliadic myth of the two jars, and channeled “the attitude of most Greeks toward life itself”. Although superficially reminiscent of the Greek outlook on the apportionment of the human lot, Philocles’ discourse twists it to transform it into a tale of human happiness and even, ultimately, of divine benevolence (“Si vous demandiez des raisons d’un si funeste partage, d’autres vous répondraient peut-être que les dieux nous devaient des biens et non pas de plaisirs; qu’ils ne nous accordent les seconds que pour nous forcer à recevoir les premiers”).

Chapter 78 is thus to be read in conjunction with the observations on the state of the world that the Greek philosophers (and the poets through them) presented in Chapter 28. Philocles is then the one who – having had a philosophical education with “les plus célèbres philosophes de la Grèce” – goes beyond the teachings of philosophy,

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137 Barthélemy (1789-1790), tome 6, 447.
138 Barthélemy (1789-1790), tome 6, 447.
140 Young (1968), 50-51.
141 Barthélemy (1789-1790), tome 6, 447.
Barthélemy’s hand is unmistakably visible throughout the book in the recurring moralising tone; at times the distance and deprecation felt towards the things Anacharsis is witnessing is so stark that the author can explicitly condemn this or that custom (as he does, for example, with the ancients’ handling of unwanted newborns in Chapter 26). With his ode to happiness, strikingly positioned towards the end of the whole œuvre, as a last word on many of the ethical and philosophical positions analysed in the book, Barthélemy makes his presence vividly felt. This – the idealised worldview of Philocles, in line with the joyful scenarios of Arcadian flavour with which Barthélemy surrounds his character – is what the author wants the reader to take away from this historical (but also moral) trip to antiquity. Any belief that contradicts this vision – such as the (poetic) pessimistic statements uttered by the philosophers in Chapter 28 – is only suited to remain an inconsequential erudite detail among hundreds, fatally open to criticism, but most of all chastised as the flawed perspective of people who fail to really understand the cosmos.

3. A Different Tyranny: Pessimistic Greece in 19th Century Switzerland

As the three stages sketched so far briefly and yet unmistakably show, the history of the reception and understanding of Greek pessimistic thought is long, vexed, and complex. Despite acknowledging the presence of pessimistic thoughts in Greek culture – and thus going far beyond the various reactions of the Querelle’s Anciens – Barthélemy’s work still betrays the author’s unease towards some of their ethical and religious implications. One has to wait for the 19th century for things to change, and for a new era in the history of the interpretation of Greek thought to come about. Strikingly, this interpretative revolution has been, with the significant exception of Giacomo Leopardi, thoroughly German, taking place in the nation that had ever since Winckelmann shown an especially voracious interest in all classical (and especially Greek) things. Partly

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142 Cf. Burckhardt’s very different treatment of the custom in Burckhardt et al. (2005), 378, which he connects specifically to the Greeks’ pessimistic understanding of the cosmos. On this cf. Gossman (2000), 332.

143 See Nietzsche’s comment at Die Geburt der Tragödie 15, in Colli and Montinari (1972), 94: “[…] dass die Griechen unsere und jegliche Cultur als Wagenlenker in den Händen haben”.

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foreshadowed in the works of earlier generations (such as that of August Böckh),\textsuperscript{144} this radical rethinking of Greek culture was chiefly brought about by Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) in his \textit{Griechische Kulturgeschichte} and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) with his \textit{Die Geburt der Tragödie}. The role of another (minor, but nevertheless essential) character in this rediscovery, Arthur Schopenhauer, and his treatment of Greek pessimistic thought will be at the centre of one section of this thesis;\textsuperscript{145} for this reason he does not appear in the following pages.

Despite being published posthumously in 1900,\textsuperscript{146} the \textit{Griechische Kulturgeschichte} is the result of the research that Burckhardt carried out for a series of lectures on Greek culture that he delivered for the first time at the University of Basel in 1872, the very same year as the publication of Nietzsche’s \textit{Birth of Tragedy}.\textsuperscript{147} Albeit in drastically different manners, both Burckhardt’s work (in the chapter \textit{Zur Gesamtbilanz des griechischen Lebens}) and Nietzsche’s book (which the author himself subtitled “oder Hellenismus und Pessimismus” when he republished it in 1886) potently state the burning necessity of considering the pessimistic side of Greek thought. Much is left for us to wonder about the relationship between the two works, very likely conceived in the years of Burckhardt’s and Nietzsche’s friendship in Basel. We can hardly believe that no spark or idea of what was to form these coeval works was shared between the two in the long chats we know about, and yet as Arnaldo Momigliano’s short but enlightening essay tells us, we lack documentation to prove any such sharing, and we have, on the contrary, some proof that official collaboration never took place.\textsuperscript{148}

Reflecting the personality, the age, and the ultimate ambitions of their authors, the two works differ widely in both style and interpretation of this uncharted territory of Greek culture and thought. Although undoubtedly novel and \textit{risqué} for its times in his intuitive

\textsuperscript{144} Cf. Gossman (2000), 302. On the relationship between Böckh’s and Nietzsche’s conception of philology and the study of antiquity Porter (2000a) in various places, esp. 67 (contrasting Böckh’s “historical and antiquarian” approach with Gottfried Hermann’s) and 201-202.

\textsuperscript{145} See Chapter 3 III.


\textsuperscript{147} And then again for a number of times until 1885, when he decided to concentrate solely on art history, cf. Momigliano (1955); Gossman (2000), 304; Ghelardi (2002), 37 n. 6.

\textsuperscript{148} Momigliano (1955), 290. On their relationship, Müller (2005), 55-74; \textit{ibid.} 94-95.
and wide-sweeping interpretation of Greek culture, Burckhardt’s chapter on Greek pessimism in his *Kulturgeschichte* is still remarkably academic when compared to Nietzsche’s “impossible” book. *Die Geburt der Tragödie* is a visionary work that merges insightful intuitions – such as the comprehension of the Greeks’ pessimistic nature – with blatant historical and philological errors, and combines them in a majestic and powerful fresco of the cultural history of ancient Greece that of modern Germany. In Aby Warburg’s famous words, the prophetic force that is alive in both Burckhardt and Nietzsche manifests itself in two almost opposing ways: on the one hand the maenad-like Nietzsche, who showed with his own existence the need for his epiphanic intuitions to take body, inform reality, and change the future; on the other hand, Burckhardt, who is content with teaching the prophetic wisdom he has grasped without allowing it to shake the roots of his existence.

Yet what the two works really have in common is a core of profound tenets and beliefs that run significantly deeper than any difference ever may. First is the consciousness of the revolutionary character of their re-reading of the history of the understanding of antiquity. Both Burckhardt and Nietzsche, immersed as they were in the climate of German Hellenism, were fully aware of the magnitude of their break with tradition.

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149 On Burckhardt’s awareness of the difference of his own work and of the future judgement of Basel’s *viri eruditissimi* see Momigliano (1955), 290; Gossman (2000), 307.

150 In *Versuch einer Selbstkritik* 2, in Colli and Montinari (1972), 7.

151 Cf. Henrichs (2004), 125-126 on the divergence between Nietzsche’s academic writing and *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, which Henrichs suggests can be regarded also as work of fiction. On *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, see Von Reibnitz’s (1992) commentary.

152 See Warburg’s essay in Gheardi (2002), 7-12. Cf. Johnson’s (2012), 141-146 analysis of Warburg’s views on Burckhardt and Nietzsche. It is worth being reminded here of Nietzsche’s peculiar interpretation of the myth of Silenus, as revealing of his conception of pessimism at *Die Geburt der Tragödie* 3 (in Colli and Montinari (1972), 31); as Halliwell (2008), 339-340 describes, Nietzsche “makes Silenus break out into piercing laughter before uttering his irredeemably grim pronouncement”, and Silenus’ is undoubtedly an “existentially charged laughter”. His conception of pessimism is tackled in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882; 1887) as he attacks “romantic” pessimism and his call for a “classical” or “Dionysian” pessimism, cf. *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* 370 in Colli and Montinari (1973), 301-304.

both authors this awareness is joined with the strong conviction that every other reading of Greek culture – all those “flirting with ‘Greek harmony’, ‘Greek beauty’, ‘Greek cheerfulness’”154 and in short all those interpretations who denied the existence of Greek pessimistic thought – had been nothing but the mightiest historical falsification.155 This idea is expressed by both scholars at different points, phrased in a language that wavers between explicit hostility, slight ridicule, and proud offence at the extent of such falsification.156 Burckhardt’s is perhaps the most thorough and final presentation of the idea:157


Burckhardt’s discourse is passionate and yet composed, and resonates (without explicitly referencing them) with the ideas of those who had preceded him, such as

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154 Die Geburt der Tragödie 20 in Colli and Montinari (1972), 126.
155 Similarly, Gossman (2000), recalls Burckhardt’s refusal to “transfigure” or “prettify” antiquity.
156 See Held (2004), 413: “Nietzsche himself in a notebook entry from 1888 underlines this, claiming that when the comedies of Winckelmann’s and Goethe’s Greeks, along with Victor Hugo’s Orientals and Scott’s thirteenth-century Englishmen, are uncovered, it will become evident that all are false historically, though in modern terms all true.” Of course, as Held himself suggests (and Henrichs, see above n. 151), Nietzsche’s work himself can often be considered little short of pure fiction.
158 Burckhardt et al. (2005), 350.
Winckelmann himself. The brief enumeration of their misleading and embellishing interpretations eventually erupts in a potent statement that leaves no space for oppositions: the image of the happy Greeks that we have received and interiorised is “one of the most tremendous historical falsifications that have ever occurred”. Set in a somewhat unexpected and secluded spot halfway through the chapter he dedicates to Greek pessimism, this passage is indirectly and yet unmistakably a programmatic manifesto of what he is presenting as his own uncompromising interpretation of Greek culture. That Burckhardt is not only thinking of the political and social happiness granted by the much-praised (and much idealised) Greek democracy – a subject that he deals with at length in the Kulturgeschichte – is evident from his mention of literature and myth. Myth and literature are personified and depicted in the act of screamingly protesting against the falsified ideality that has been forced upon them.

It is precisely this complete acceptance of poetry in its widest (and Leopardian) sense that places Burckhardt and Nietzsche apart both from the preceding tradition and, as we shall see, from future attitudes. By embracing what the ancients’ literature tells us about their understanding of life, the two scholars finally bestow philosophical, ethical, and ultimately existential dignity onto poetic expression. Thus the artistic representation, the mimesis enacted by poetry is now the explicit source of evidence for the Greek worldview. Burckhardt uses myth – such as the story of Philomela and Procne – to convey the horror that the Greeks felt as inherent in existence, just as Nietzsche brings forward tragedy as the example of how “Der Grieche kannte und empfand die Schrecken und Entsetzlichkeiten des Daseins”. Although the material used in the two treatments oftentimes converges – as it does for the focus on the figure of Prometheus – the way in which Burckhardt and Nietzsche use and resort to literature is different. On the one hand is Burckhardt’s more linear exposition, which employs examples from

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159 Burckhardt et al. (2005), 350. On the place of pessimism in poetic and literary form, and on the quality of the Greeks’ acceptance of the nature of existence, see Burckhardt et al. (2005), 365: “In weit überwiegendem Male aber tritt uns in Poesie und Prosa der Griechen der Pessimismus als eine volksthümliche That sache entgegen, und zwar gar nicht als Resultat der Reflexion, und vollends lohne alle die vielseitige Begründung, welche er in unserm Jahrhundert erfahren hat, vielmehr wird er von Stimmungs wegen ingemein recht kurz und barsch in die Welt hinausgerufen.”

160 Die Geburt der Tragödie 3 in Colli and Montinari (1972), 31. See also Die Geburt der Tragödie 17, ibid. 105 “wir werden gezwungen in die Schrecken der Individualexistenz hineinzublicken”.

161 Burckhardt et al. (2005), 353, 364, 368 and Die Geburt der Tragödie 9.
a variety of sources (with a high recurrence of the Homeric poems); on the other is Nietzsche’s more opinionated writing, which often goes long stretches without any explicit reference to specific works or texts.

The embracing of poetic forms as the medium for philosophical notions goes hand in hand with the acceptance of the different morals espoused by the Greek mind. Everything that is un-Christian, immoral, and illogical to the modern mind – such as the causation behind the punishment of the innocent – is understood, explored, and recognised. But there is more: the fear of previous generations – that the immorality of Greek beliefs could taint modernity – is turned around by Nietzsche, who suggests that the Greeks’ insight into the essence of the world is precisely what modernity needs to live life at its fullest, having acknowledged the real state of the human condition. So Greek man – who, according to Burckhardt is not scared to consider the coming of death, and can enjoy life having uncompromisingly accepted its real terms and who, according to Nietzsche, is the epitome of the “pessimism of strength” – becomes the model for modern man to look up to. This complete overturn is made possible by the fact that both authors are able to observe one aspect of the Greek soul – the pessimistic understanding of human existence – without denying, and in fact explicitly stressing, the other side, i.e. the ability to make the most of life’s delights, be it the joy of art, the excitement of political engagement, or the simple pleasure of wine. Burckhardt expresses it with his usual flair:


162 Cf. Die Geburt der Tragödie 14 in Colli and Montinari (1972), 88 and Burckhardt et al. (2005), 356: “Was am Schicksal vor Allem hervorgehoben wird, ist nicht die Gerechtigkeit sondern die Unvermeidlichkeit”.

163 An example is Nietzsche’s response to the traditional interpretations of tragedy, cf. Die Geburt der Tragödie 22.

164 Burckhardt et al. (2005), 359, on Laertes’ case.

165 As in Versuch einer Selbstkritik 1, in Colli and Montinari (1972), 6.

166 Burckhardt et al. (2005), 364.
One side does not forbid the other; on the contrary it is precisely the Greeks’ thorough recognition of the nature of life that permits their full enjoying of what is allowed to men.\textsuperscript{167} It is this remarkable clarity with respect to the somewhat paradoxical nature of Greek pessimism and its seeming clash with the Greeks’ life that is peculiar to Burckhardt and Nietzsche.\textsuperscript{168} Drawing a distinction between the understanding of life and the practical response to it, both works loudly spell out that pessimism is to be confused neither with a gloomy attitude nor with “resigned acceptance” of what one sees.\textsuperscript{169}

But there is one further and crucial similarity between these two works. In different ways both Nietzsche’s \textit{Geburt der Tragödie} and Burckhardt’s \textit{Kulturgeschichte} respond to the peculiarly 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century necessity to understand what to do with the classics, a question inherited from the post-Renaissance and \textit{Querelle} era, and newly posed by so many German intellectuals. Both Nietzsche’s and Burckhardt’s efforts firmly deny that the answer could ever be mere specialist study or pure antiquarianism.\textsuperscript{170} The study of the past has to be made relevant for the present because it intrinsically has the potential to impact and influence people’s lives. Cardinal to both authors’ works was thus the belief that their respective disciplines – philology for Nietzsche and history for Burckhardt – needed profound and radical changes in order to be significant for the current century and those to come.\textsuperscript{171}

What philology had failed to do in Nietzsche’s mind was to become an “interpretative discourse” (to use Christian Emden’s words)\textsuperscript{172}, i.e. a discipline able to penetrate the nature and thought of a people or a culture. The new mission of philology is an almost

\textsuperscript{167} Nietzsche describes this complete acceptance in \textit{Die Geburt der Tragödie} 9, Colli and Montinari (1972), 67, through the Aeschylean Prometheus’ attitude: “Alles Vorhandene ist gerecht und ungerecht und in beidem gleich berechtigt.”

\textsuperscript{168} Of course stressing this point – the double nature of Greek pessimism – was vital to Nietzsche’s argument of the pessimism of strength. Cf. Invernizzi (1994), 502.

\textsuperscript{169} See \textit{Die Geburt der Tragödie} 6, Colli and Montinari (1972), 44 and Burckhardt et al. (2005), 361, 363-364 et al.

\textsuperscript{170} On Nietzsche’s philological career, see among others Most (2000); Latacz (2014); Babich (2014); Porter (2014).

\textsuperscript{171} Cf. Emden (2004), 380.

\textsuperscript{172} Cf. Emden (2004), 385.
obsessively recurrent topic throughout Nietzsche’s early writing, but they find special intensity and limpidity of expression in some of the Nachgelassene Fragmente dating to a few years after the publication of the Birth of Tragedy, fragments that were originally notes for Nietzsche’s Wir Philologen:


[...] (Nachgelassene Fragmente 3 (62), März 1875)

Whether or not the enterprise Nietzsche has in mind here has to be identified with the Geburt itself, the Birth of Tragedy is unquestionably an attempt to provide the world with the new insight into modernity that can be gained by looking at the past. In Nietzsche’s case this struggle to make philology a discipline for the future (to use the sneering phrase of his great detractor Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff) coincided with his personal struggle as a professor of Classics in Basel, merging into a heightened “alienation” from both philology and the professional world where he practiced it. What Nietzsche was doing for philology, Burckhardt was doing for history. Moving from a history in the manner of the Annales to a history of the Antiquitates (to borrow a famous Momigliano distinction) Burckhardt independently echoes a Nietzschean creed, maintaining that in the search for the particular historians

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173 Silk and Stern (1981), 17-18 collect a number of quotations from Nietzsche’s letters on this topic. See also Porter (2000a), especially the Introduction, for a broad sketch of Nietzsche’s relationship with philology over the years; cf. Porter (2014), esp. 27.

174 In Colli and Montinari (1972), 107.


176 Wilamowitz’ article in response to Nietzsche’s work was indeed entitled Zukunftsp hilologie. Wilamowitz was to criticise Burckhardt’s project too, cf. Gossman (2000), 307.

177 Henrichs (2005), 446 on Nietzsche’s early (1871) foreboding to be more suited to philosophy than to philology, on which also Stroux (1925), 72–80. Silk and Stern (1981), 22-23. See Porter (2000a), Lloyd-Jones (1976), 3 on the complex interweaving between philology and philosophy in Nietzsche’s history.
have lost sight of the essential: for Burckhardt the essential is the “inner life of past humanity”, the very “large, bold brushstrokes” of Nietzsche’s words. Burckhardt’s new cultural history is different from previous attempts, and – as the example of the discussion on infant exposure well shows – it escapes the dangers of moralism that Barthélemy had conversely stumbled into. A new history and a new philology then, united by the desire to be more relevant to the present and the future, and by the wish not to lie about or embellish the past, thus portraying the entirety of the soul of a culture without censoring its darkness.

4. Conclusion: Leopardi’s Role and the Destiny of Greek Pessimism

This briefly sketched history is meant to give a taste of some of the reactions to Greek pessimistic thought in a number of key periods. Ultimately this background better equips us to understand the role that Leopardi played in this history, to understand the extent of the novelty of his contribution.

The debates during the Querelle had shown how Greek pessimistic thought – although of course not yet identified as such – represented at best an awkward aspect of ancient wisdom, at worst a real obstacle to the appreciation and embracement of ancient works. The Querelle continued much longer than the lives of those who first started it, and went on to inform subsequent discussions on antiquity and modernity (although those are not often considered in the light of the Querelle itself). In his Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft (1967), Hans Robert Jauss challenged the tendency of the standard interpretations of German classicism to starkly isolate it from its historical milieu and especially from the results of the French Enlightenment. Conversely, Jauss argues, works like Friedrich Schlegel’s Über das Studium der

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179 Cf. the passage in note 178 and Gossman (2000), 309.

180 Cf. above Chapter I II.2.
griechischen Poesie and Friedrich Schiller’s Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung ought not only to be read more attentively in their historical context, but they benefit from being understood as “responses” to the Querelle.\(^{181}\)

I propose that it is equally fundamental to see Leopardi’s reception of antiquity as a direct response to the (question of the) Querelle, something that, to the best of my knowledge, has so far been entirely neglected by scholarship. Whether direct or indirect, the comparison of ancients and moderns is ubiquitous in Leopardi’s works, the Operette Morali being possibly the most striking example of his engagement with the various aspects of the relationship between antiquity and modernity.\(^{182}\) One might think for instance of the Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico, where the two debate on whether a long existence (granted by the “miracles” of modern science) is per se preferable; it is the wisdom of antiquity that Leopardi chooses to counter this argument, a wisdom distilled from the myth and literature of ancient Greece.\(^{183}\) Again, it is the ancients’ knowledge and use of dreams as a means of relieving one’s existence that Leopardi praises in his Dialogo di Torquato Tasso e del suo genio familiare. Throughout, modernity stands for everything that is an erroneous and damaging illusion (such as the ignorant wish for eternal life) or misplaced and blind faith (such as that in progress). Antiquity, on the contrary, represents the fuller ability to enjoy and live life (OM 259-260), the courageous strength to admit life is not good per se, and at the same time the mastery of those skills that can make existence more bearable. But what the ancients are hailed for over and over (and even outside the explicit comparison with the moderns) is their unyielding, uncompromising, and truthful understanding of life. The moderns’ lack of insight into the real nature of human existence is the direct opposite of this remarkable and brave ancient attitude. Here lies Leopardi’s revolutionary riposte to the Querelle’s enigmas. Unlike both Anciens and Modernes of the 17th and 18th century debates, Leopardi can appreciate and accept this part of Greek culture. But most of all, as a defender of antiquity himself, he can do what the Anciens had entirely failed to do,

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\(^{181}\) Jauss (1973), 67-106.

\(^{182}\) See among others the passages on the ancients at TPP (2013), 501, 527-528, 536-537, 543, 603. Dolfi (1997), discusses some of the passages mentioned here, but without the connection to the Querelle.

\(^{183}\) The exemplum of the centaur Chiron, who chose to renounce his immortality and the double (Herodotean) story of Cleobis and Biton and Agamedes and Trophonios, both displaying how for man it is best not to be born, or to die soon; for this cf. Chapter 4, II.2.1).
that is to defend and support the ancients precisely for their dolorous and brave worldview. This – their pessimistic Weltanschauung – is the reason antiquity beats modernity, and the reason modernity ought to look back and up to the past’s insights.

Ever since Sebastiano Timpanaro’s ground-breaking chapter “Il Leopardi e i filosofi antichi” (first published in 1965),184 scholarship on Leopardi has – so to speak, and as we explained in the Introduction – rested on Timpanaro’s laurels as far as research into Leopardi and Greek pessimism is concerned. One claim in particular, reasonable though it is in its original context, has been taken too far. Timpanaro was, to the best of my knowledge, the first to notice and comment on the role played by Leopardi’s reading of Barthélemy’s aforementioned chapters, which undoubtedly supplied the Italian poet with a number of sources he was not familiar with. Yet this link and the importance of Barthélemy’s impact have been overstated by later scholarship, or, more simply, overly relied on as if they represented full resolution to the question about Leopardi’s interpretation and use of ancient pessimistic thought. Thus for decades now countless footnotes refer to Timpanaro and Barthélemy, failing to question or to further Timpanaro’s discovery and thus avoiding a direct discussion of Leopardi’s life-long and complex relationship with Greek pessimistic thought.185

What Barthélemy’s chapter is undoubtedly responsible for is providing Leopardi with a collection, presenting his reader in one place and at one time with several Greek pessimistic notions. In the same months in which Leopardi was reading the Voyage, two other collections listed in Leopardi’s Elenchi di letture (Stobaeus’ chapter 34 from book 4 of the Anthology and Marcello Adriani’s vulgarisation of pseudo-Plutarch’s Consolatio ad Apollonium) were playing similar roles for the Italian author.186 The role of these collections (and chiefly of Barthélemy’s, insofar as it may have been the first which Leopardi accessed, according to the available information) is important primarily

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185 Recently Brogi (2012), 16 confines the topic to a note (n. 10) despite the very subject of his book is, as the title clarifies, Nessuno vorrebbe rinascere: Da Leopardi alla storia di un’idea tra antichi e moderni, Binni (1973), 78 argues that Leopardi “brought his pessimism to Antiquity” (“Pessimismo portato entro il mondo antico”) as to imply that antiquity knew no such a thing; similarly Dolfi (1986), 52, Polizzi (2011), 108 speaks of “pessimismo greco” in inverted commas.
in light of their very nature, which sketches a theme by collating various evidence. Yet, there are at least two reasons why this importance should not be overplayed. First, Leopardi might not have known some of the sources mentioned in Chapter 28 of the *Voyage*, but he most certainly had thorough knowledge of some others among them; one should in this respect bear in mind that in many instances the fact that we cannot be sure Leopardi read something does not straightforwardly mean he never did. As the chapters of this thesis explain in greater detail, many of the notions expressed by Barthélemy’s characters are already *in nuce* or even very openly present in works that Leopardi had great familiarity with, such as the Homeric poems.

But the second and more crucial reason is that Leopardi’s presentation and interpretation of Greek pessimistic thought is so entirely different from Barthélemy’s that we are forced to face the novelty of Leopardi’s outlook on the subject. On the one hand stands Barthélemy’s rather sparse collection of sources, spanning only a few short pages in a chapter and therein contained; the themes briefly resurface at the end of Barthélemy’s *œuvre* only to be refuted and morally chastised. On the other hand we have Leopardi’s continuous engagement with Greek pessimistic thought, which is researched and explored, and ultimately interiorised to provide a springboard for Leopardi’s own worldview. What is one among hundreds of themes in Barthélemy’s work, is instead a crucial and essential point of reference for Leopardi, whose interest in Greek pessimism is catalysed by the belief that this ancient understanding of life ought to be paradigmatic for the modern world.

Bolstered by the daring efforts of Leopardi, Schopenhauer, Burckhardt, and Nietzsche, one would expect the road for modernity to fully embrace Greek pessimism to be paved successfully once and for all.187 Things instead did not go so smoothly. Briefly (if at all)

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187 It is worth reminding that both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were familiar with Leopardi’s work. Cf. Schopenhauer’s conclusion to Chapter 46, discussed in *Chapter 3 III*. Leopardi (although still guilty, according to Nietzsche, of being a “pessimist”) is for Nietzsche one of the highest examples of the poet-philologist (cf. *Nachgelassene Fragmente* 5 [17] in Colli and Montinari (1967), 120 and the letter to Marie Baumgartner from the 29th of December 1878 in Colli and Montinari (1980), 375), and one of the most profound voices to describe the human condition. Cf. Dahlkvist (2007), 216 on how “Nietzsche does not describe himself as a pessimist. On the contrary: pessimism is true, but we need something that saves us from this truth”. Cf. Levy (1921), 272 for Hans von Bülow’s letter to Nietzsche from the 1st of November 1874, whereby Bülow refers to Leopardi as “Schopenhauers
mentioned in the many “histories of pessimism” that flourished in the 70’s and 80’s of the 19th century – histories inspired by the increasing role played by modern philosophical pessimism in 19th century Europe – Greek pessimism is still poorly acknowledged and its connection with modern pessimism is most of the time not drawn.\textsuperscript{188} James Sully, whose 1877 monograph on pessimism post-dates Nietzsche’s \textit{Birth of Tragedy}, finds for example that it is Buddhism that should be seen as the “direct progenitor of the modern German systems”.\textsuperscript{189} Sully is not blind to the existence of pessimistic notions in Greek culture and spends some words discussing the Greeks’ concept of decadence and decline as it emerges from their mythology, and the way in which it opposes the modern idea of progress.\textsuperscript{190} Nevertheless his conclusion is that in “Greek thought, we find, on the whole, ideas conducive to optimism rather than pessimism”. Somewhat similar is the view of Elme Marie Caro in his \textit{Le pessimisme au XIXe siècle} (1878): Caro acknowledges that antiquity developed “sentiments analogue” to those of modern pessimism.\textsuperscript{191} Yet those are rather explained away as “des traits de profonde mélancolie” and Caro too fails to see the more profound nature of Greek pessimistic thought.\textsuperscript{192}

The 20th century, alongside the appearance of Burckhardt’s \textit{Kulturgeschichte}, saw some development with the publication of two academic articles focusing on Greek pessimism, both in 1921: Hermann Diels’ “Der Antike Pessimismus” and “Der Pessimismus und seine Überwindung bei den Griechen” by Wilhelm Nestle.\textsuperscript{193} Other
works of scholarship (albeit mostly briefly) dedicate some space to Greek pessimistic thought, such as Nestle’s article “Odysee-Interpretationen II” (1942) or William Chase Greene’s *Moira: Fate, Good, and Evil in Greek Thought* (1944). Nevertheless in 1985 an Italian article addressing the question of the pessimistic character of early Greek lyric can still lament the lack of thorough research on “il complesso fenomeno del pessimismo greco”. Two works have in more recent years addressed the topic more satisfactorily. Umberto Curì’s recent *Meglio non essere nati* (2008) is perhaps the single work to extensively address the topic; Curì’s analysis is mostly organised by theme, moving freely through a variety of sources following the philosophical threads that connect them, with balanced attention to philosophical and poetic sources alike (with great relevance given to tragedy, among the latter). Possibly because of its special focus on the idea of the μὴ φῶναι, Curì’s monograph does not exhaust the scope for research on Greek pessimism; many sources that are inextricably connected to the historical and literary milieu of the μὴ φῶναι remain out of Curì’s gaze, or are simply touched upon (the relevant example being the comparison of men and leaves, observed in *Chapter 3* of this thesis). Ultimately, despite being too brief to provide a complete assessment of the vast phenomenon of Greek pessimistic thought, this monograph is an example of what studious and at the same time creative research can produce in this field.

The final work worth mentioning here – Henk Versnel’s “The Gods: Divine Justice or Divine Arbitrariness” in his *Coping with the Gods* (2001) – is not directly concerned with Greek pessimism, but rather with the overlapping subject of Greek notion(s) of the gods’ role in, and power over, human existence and the world. Despite the difference in focus and the relative brevity (for the vastness of the topic) of the chapter, Versnel’s analysis has a number of very valuable merits. First, it brings together many of the passages that, throughout Greek literature (and especially Greek poetry), convey pessimistic worldviews; although Versnel spends only a few lines on each passage, he manages to convey with remarkable clarity the role it plays in the wider network of Greek thought. Most of all, Versnel speaks openly of “pessimism”, and succeeds in

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(1905). Other brief treatments of the theme are Max Pohlenz’s review of Diels, Pohlenz (1922) and Opstelten’s work focusing on Sophocles, Opstelten (1952).

194 Laurenti (1985), 51.

painting a summarised but well-balanced portrait of the nuanced and sometimes contradictory aspects of the Greek view(s) of the world and the divine.\textsuperscript{196}

The scarcity of research into Greek pessimistic thought in modern classical scholarship is perhaps one of the causes for the disregard of ancient pessimism in the broader field of the studies of the history of ideas, a lamentable gap indeed, especially if one considers the 19\textsuperscript{th} century path of the rediscovery of Greek pessimism and its inseparable connection with cultural history. Joshua Foa Dienstag’s \textit{Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit} is recent proof that there is no wide acknowledgment of, and consensus on, the existence and significance of ancient Greek pessimism. Dienstag presents an innovative and insightful analysis into the history of the idea of pessimism, setting out to undertake the complex task of proving that pessimism was and is not a personal tendency to discontent and spleen, but instead a worldview with philosophical dignity.\textsuperscript{197} As such, pessimism plays a role in the history of ideas and Dienstag analyses several steps in this history, even including a chapter on Leopardi’s pessimism. Yet, throughout the book the author readily dismisses the existence of pessimism in antiquity without further discussion: pessimism is irrefutably established by Dienstag to be a “conceptual child of Modernity”.\textsuperscript{198} It is thus no surprise that the essential connection between ancient and modern pessimism, and between those who formulated modern pessimism and the ancient pessimistic worldviews is entirely missed; Dienstag can mention with condescension “Nietzsche’s \textit{characterization} of the pre-Socratic Greeks as pessimists” or “Nietzsche’s \textit{characterization} of the Greeks as pessimists”.\textsuperscript{199}

Attitudes similar to Dienstag’s can be found elsewhere. In his analysis of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche George Simmel maintains that the idea of suffering as an \textit{a priori} in life appears for the first time with Schopenhauer, and that before him pessimism was merely the \textit{malheureux} outlook of some individuals on life.\textsuperscript{200} Curiously enough, the connection

\textsuperscript{196} E.g. his words on Hesiod at Versnel (2011), 151-156. Something similar had convincingly been done for the \textit{Odyssey} by Clay (1983) in the chapter “The Double Theodicy of the \textit{Odyssey}”.
\textsuperscript{197} Similar attempts at clarifying the nature of philosophical pessimism had been made long before, for example by Sully (1877), 1, 4, a testimony to the difficult reception of the idea of pessimism.
\textsuperscript{198} Twice on one page, Dienstag (2006), 16.
\textsuperscript{199} Dienstag (2006), 166, 168 n.16. My italics.
\textsuperscript{200} Simmel (1991), 53.
between ancient and modern pessimism is implicitly made by a book that does not aim to cover intellectual history or history of reception. Despite not being concerned with the history of the idea itself, David Benatar’s *Better Never to Have Been Born* (2006) – which treats as an ethical challenge the idea that existence is harmful to man – includes in its bibliography both the ancient works that convey the notions of Greek pessimism and those by modern pessimists. Despite suggesting he will investigate the history of pessimism as a philosophy, Stuart Sim’s *A Philosophy of Pessimism* entirely forgets the Greeks.\(^201\) Coming back to Dienstag, it is not by chance then that one more crucial connection gets lost, that is the tie between poetic expression and pessimistic philosophical content.\(^202\) Like Barthélemy, Dienstag seems to struggle with the idea of a pessimism not expressed in philosophical form(s). As he approaches Nietzsche’s identification of the Greeks as pessimists, he rather avoids drawing into the discussion any of the ancient evidence that lacks philosophical character: he speaks of “pre-Socratics” in a way that seems to encompass only the philosophical schools before Socrates and mentions Heraclitus as the only one whose thought could have borne vague resemblance to Nietzsche’s idea of Greek thought.\(^203\)

It goes without saying that Dienstag’s chapter on Leopardi’s pessimism entirely ignores antiquity. This mistake had not been made by the already mentioned Caro, who, more than a century before Dienstag, had not missed the prominent part played by ancient thought in Leopardi’s pessimistic philosophy.\(^204\) And yet, his interpretation had undermined, just like Dienstag’s, the real extent of the importance of Greek pessimism and, in so doing, had denied Leopardi’s interpretation of antiquity and understanding of the history of ideas any philosophical or academic value:

> Quoi qu’il en soit de ces symptômes philosophiques, le genre de sentiments qu’ils expriment est rare chez les anciens, et c’est un grave tort au poète du pessimisme, à Leopardi, d’avoir imaginé pour les besoins de sa cause une antiquité de fantaisie, et voulu nous persuader que le pessimisme était dans le génie des grand écrivains d’Athènes et de

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\(^{201}\) Sim (2015).
\(^{202}\) Sully (1877), 31 deals (in passing) with the idea that optimism and pessimism are traditionally expressed in the form of “reasoned truths”, as affirmations or *gnomai*.
\(^{203}\) Dienstag (2006), 168.
\(^{204}\) The subtitle of Caro’s work is “Leopardi, Schopenhauer, Hartmann”. 
Despite fully appreciating how much Leopardi incorporated ancient sources and their mythology and literature into his own pessimistic worldview, Caro suggests that Leopardi’s use of antiquity and Leopardi’s claim about the existence of ancient pessimism are nothing but the making of a “fantasy antiquity” that never existed in reality. The aim of this thesis is to challenge both Dienstag’s silence regarding ancient pessimism and Caro’s accusation against Leopardi. In fact, this thesis proposes to use Leopardi’s studious exploration and revival of Greek pessimistic thought to prove both the crucial importance of such a worldview in ancient Greece and its absolute centrality in shaping the thought and philosophy of one of 19th century Europe’s greatest intellectuals.

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205 Caro (1878), 13.
CHAPTER 2

Animals and Humans, Animals on Humans

Les Hommes veulent bien que les Dieux soient aussi fous qu’eux; mais ils ne veulent pas que les Bêtes soient aussi sages.

Fontenelle, Dialogues des Morts 5: Homère, Esope.\(^{206}\)

I have always felt we speak too much about human beings. This world is crowded with humans, but also with animals, birds, fish, and insects. They were here before we were and they will still be here should the day come when there are no more human beings.

Günter Grass\(^{207}\)

The Earth, somewhere, some time. The human race has gone and a Sprite and a Gnome are discussing the matter. This is the scene presented by Leopardi’s *Dialogo di un folletto e di uno gnomo*, through whose eyes we look at a world without man.\(^{208}\) It is here that a subtly spoken yet arresting truth confronts the (human) reader: nothing has happened. Man has disappeared and so has every sign of his presence on earth, from the measuring of time to the naming of things. Humanity is no longer imposing its organisational frame on the universe, and yet the universe and its inhabitants go on as they always have. One final and amused smile sparks from the memory of man, as the Sprite and the Gnome imagine what man’s pretension and egotism would have to say faced with a world that has perfectly outlived their race.\(^{209}\)

The unrealistic setting of this dialogue (to which I will return later in the chapter) and the presence of fabulous creatures are not a *unicum* in the *Operette*. Primarily a work on man, in order to capture the essence of human life and spirit the *Operette Morali* exploit the unreal to supply a variety of perspectives on man. It is not just men, then, who are

\(^{206}\) Fontenelle (1683), 62.
\(^{208}\) On the idea of the end of the human race, cf. Galimberti (1998a), 123. On the motif of “il mondo senza gente”, cf. Sangirardi (1998), 319-321; Blasucci (2003), 87-88 referring to Fubini (1977), 623 Polizzi (2008), 55-102. *Ibid.* 61 examines Noël-Antoine Pluche’s *Le Spectacle de la Nature* (1732), which Leopardi knew, as epitomizing the vision according to which “lo spettacolo offerto dalla natura è stato allestito da Dio in funzione di un unico privilegiato spettatore, l’uomo dotato di sensi e di ragione”; of course, the reversal of such belief is one of the cardinal points of many of the *Operette*.
\(^{209}\) TPP (2013), 509.
called to discuss the features of the human condition, but a manifold array of gods, divine or legendary beings, and natural entities and creatures. In doing so Leopardi is postulating that, given man’s ineptness at understanding his own life, external outlooks and voices are needed to explore the depths of the place of humans in the world.210

The idea of using an outside character to comment on or satirise a given subject is at the core of an enduring set of traditions which is hard to label univocally.211 These traditions variously merge satire with philosophical enquiry, observation of, and reflection upon (contemporary or a-temporal) reality with the use of fantasy; they have most commonly been called Menippean satire,212 or satirical dialogue.213 Leopardi himself, as we shall see, was well aware of the existence of these traditions, and of the fact that his work would engage with them. His main point of reference in this respect was the work of Lucian of Samosata,214 one of whose most representative characters was that very Menippus of Gadara to which Menippean satire owes its name.215

This chapter starts, then, from Leopardi’s and Lucian’s use of distance and perspective as tropes of enquiry, a similarity that has been noticed before, chiefly by Giuseppe Sangirardi in his Il libro dell’esperienza e il libro della sventura, to which we shall refer

210 Speaking specifically of the Dialogo tra due bestie (on which below), Blasucci (2003), 87 calls this process “straniamento” (but fails to describe it further); similarly Bellucci (2005), 232-233 briefly on the Sprite’s perspective “dall’alto”, which the Gnome lacks. Cf. Bazzocchi (1991), 55 on the “totale eliminazione del punto di vista umano dale cose del mondo”. Sangirardi (1998), 360 sees the protagonists of Leopardi’s Lucianic Operette as “testimoni soprannaturali, e quindi al tempo stesso obiettivi e dotati di una visuale amplissima, della miseria (cioè dell’imperfezione fisica, ma soprattutto morale e intellettuale) del genere umano”; Sangirardi forgets how these characters are observers of something much wider, the human condition.

211 Cf. Weinbrot’s (2005), xi definition of “the oxymoron of rigorous fluidity or borderless border”, referring also to Samuel Johnson’s idea of “regular literary enclosures regularly burst by the unruly imagination”.

212 Weinbrot (2005), 110 defines Menippean satire as mingling “at least two genres, voices, or even historical periods to resist a dangerously threatening false orthodoxy”. Two cardinal studies in the past century are in Bakhtin (1984) (but originally 1929) and Frye (2000) (originally 1957).

213 Cf. Relihan (1993), 21-25, on the cataloguing of fantastic settings: “posthumous judgements, dialogues of the dead, divine assemblies, heavenly symposia, sojourns in heaven or Hades.” Ibid. 22, n. 41 for bibliography on “the fantastic elements imputed to Menippus’s writings”.

214 Cf. Sangirardi (2000), 60. On the adherence of Lucian’s writing to the label of Menippean and on his claim to have invented the comic dialogue (as part of the broader issue of defining the form and content of Lucianic style) cf. Duncan (1979), 10-11; Whitmarsh (2001), 249.

More specifically, it focuses on their shared attention to, and use of, animals as part of this enquiry into the human condition. Both Lucian and Leopardi employ animals – or, similarly, animal-like creatures or other living beings – as ἐπισκοποῦντες, distanced and privileged observers of humankind. The rooster of Lucian’s Gallus – discussed later in section III 1 – is a revealing example; so are Leopardi’s Sprite and Gnome who, although not animals in the proper sense, are part of the living cosmos and, just like animals, are ignored or considered inferior by humans. But there is more. In both authors animals feature not only in this capacity, but also, and prominently, as a comparandum for man: the likening of humans and animals restores man’s correct place among all other creatures, dissolving a deep-rooted belief in human primacy. The service offered by animals to the two satirists is invaluable: at once they supply externally located objectivity and a means of attack against the nonsensical and hubristic constructs of anthropocentrism. These are, for Leopardi, the unavoidable starting-point of a realistic understanding of the cosmos, and the very root of his pessimistic depiction of the human condition.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the way in which the use of external observers, the distancing craft of a removed perspective, and the collation of humans and animals are blended by Leopardi to create his personal pessimistic satire of the human condition. Simultaneously, we shall observe how ancient sources – chiefly, Lucian, and through him, earlier works, like the Homeric poems – cooperate in providing Leopardi with ideas, structures, and tropes, ultimately to form the core of his anti-anthropocentric fight. Highlighting the role played by ancient sources in Leopardi’s anti-anthropocentrism does not by any means deny the important influence played by many other chronologically intervening works – such as, for example, Fontenelle’s Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes, expertly analysed by Guido Polizzi – on this aspect of Leopardi’s thought. Our aim is to explore some of antiquity’s impact on this specific feature of Leopardi’s critique of anthropocentrism, and thus to fill at least partly a void in the scholarship.

216 Sangirardi (2000), 105-107. Ibid. 103 on Zib. 1085-86 on “guardare dall’alto” as philosophical activity.
This chapter begins (section I) with a brief excursus on Leopardi’s place in the history of the reception of Lucianic satire, observed also in the light of Leopardi’s own statements about his interpretation of Lucian and about the role he wished to play among the vast crowd of Lucian’s imitators, commentators, and interpreters throughout the centuries. Section II explores Leopardi’s interpretation and reappropriation of Lucian’s distancing craft especially insofar as it prompts the comparison between humans and animals, and, consequently, as it serves to attack man’s anthropocentric fallacy. Section III brings together a Zibaldone passage, a Lucianic piece, and two passages from the Homeric epics for their underlying use of animals as a means of revealing and describing the (sorrowful) peculiarity of the human condition.

I

Leopardi and the Reception of Lucian

1. Of Gods and Fish: Leopardi, Lucian, and Insightful Distance

In the famous 1819 note that foreshadows the composition of the Operette, Leopardi refers to his future project as:

Dialoghi Satirici alla maniera di Luciano, ma tolti i personaggi e il ridicolo dai costumi presenti o moderni, e non tanto tra morti, giacchè di Dialoghi de’ morti c’è molta abbondanza, quanto tra personaggi che si fingano vivi, ed anche volendo, fra animali; (come sento che n’abbia fatto il Monti imitatore di Luciano anche nel Dialogo della Bibl. Italiana, e in quelli, che inserisce nella sua opera della lingua), insomma piccole commedie, o Scene di Commedie.  

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218 See Monti (1838) for the dialogues published in the Proposta di alcune correzioni ed aggiunte al vocabolario della Crusca (1817-26) and Monti (1841) for three more dialogues (including the one alluded to by Leopardi as published in the Biblioteca Italiana).

219 From his Disegni letterari 4, in TPP (2013), 1109. My translation (with changes in punctuation): “Satirical dialogues in the manner of Lucian, but without the characters and the ridicule of present or modern customs, and not [set] among the dead, since there is great abundance of Dialogues of the dead. Rather, but rather [set] among characters pretending to be alive, and even among animals (as I hear that Monti, imitator of Lucian, has done also in the Dialogue of the Biblioteca Italiana, and in the dialogues that he included in his work on language). In short, small comedies, or scenes from comedies”. It is appealing to remember here Photius’ description of Lucian as author of “comedies in prose on the life of the Greeks”, in Bibliotheca 128.30 in Henry (1960), 102, cf. Geri (2011), 21.
Not only does Leopardi mention Lucian, but he also shows awareness of a long
tradition that, throughout modernity, followed in Lucian’s footsteps.\(^{220}\) When he writes
“there is great abundance of dialogues of the dead”, the reader thinks immediately of the
vogue of “Dialogues des morts” in 17\(^{th}\) and 18\(^{th}\) century France, including especially the
works of Fontenelle, Fénelon, or Boileau’s Les Héros de Roman, which the author
himself calls “à la manière de Lucien”.\(^{221}\) Leopardi’s own notes and references, the lists
of his readings (edited by Giuseppe Pacella), and the catalogue of Leopardi’s library in
Recanati show that Leopardi knew and read several of these works.\(^{222}\) Leopardi’s
acquaintance with the tradition of the “dialogo satirico” shines through again years after
the 1819 note and well into the composition of the Operette. In the notes for a dialogue
that will not be part of the Operette (Dialogo tra due bestie, p. e. un cavallo e un toro)
Leopardi makes clear that he knows what role he wants to play in such a tradition:

\[
\text{Si avverta di conservare l’impressione che deve produrre il discorrersi dell’uomo come razza
già perduta e sparita dal mondo, e come di una rimembranza, dove consiste tutta l’originalità
di questo dialogo, per non confonderlo con tanti altri componimenti satirici di questo genere
dove si fa discorrere delle cose nostre o da forestieri, selvaggi ecc. o da bestie, in somma da
esseri posti fuori della nostra sfera.}^{223}\]

Centuries before Leopardi’s external onlookers, Lucian had peered at the Earth from far
away on the wings of his Menippus or gazed at it through the reed globe of his
Nigrinus, and had observed man from the detached divine perspective of – amongst

\(^{220}\) Cf. Scheel (1998), 29 on mentions of Lucian in Leopardi’s work, e.g. Zib. 1394, also referencing Blasucci (1989), 197-211.

\(^{221}\) Cf. Polizzi (2008), 69-81 analysing the (remarkable) influence of Fontenelle’s Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes (1686) on Leopardi’s Operette; on this also Fabio (1995), 100ff; Galimberti (1964).

\(^{222}\) Pacella (1966) and de las Nieves Muñiz Muñiz’s (2013) additions to Pacella; Campana and Pasquini (2011). A passage from Leopardi’s 1812 Dialogo filosofico sopra un moderno libro intitolato “Analisi delle idee ad uso della gioventù” in TPP (2013), 734 explains further Leopardi’s idea of the use of the dialogue and provides valuable information on his sources and readings (among which, of course, is Lucian). On the use of the dialogue form and on the complex interweaving in Lucian’s work between the heritage of philosophical dialogue form and his new comic type, see Lucian’s own reflection in Bis Accusatus, on which Halliwell (2008), 432-433.

\(^{223}\) TPP (2013), 611. My italics. My translation (with changes in punctuation): “One needs to make sure to preserve the impression produced by the discussion of man as a race already lost and disappeared from the world, and as a memory. Here lies all the originality of this dialogue, not to confuse it with many other satirical compositions of this kind where it is foreigners, savages etc. or beasts (in short beings placed outside of our sphere) who discuss our business.”
many – his Prometheus or from the point of view of the dead in his *Dialogi mortuorum*.224 Seamlessly at ease with his distancing craft, Lucian plays with it freely, and the distance he employs to deepen the insights of his characters is at times entirely physical (as is the case in the *Hermotimus* and the *Nigrinus*), at times purely (but nonetheless equally intensely) mental or philosophical, as in the *Icaromenippus* or in the *Charon*.225

Just like the gods of archaic Greek literature, the creatures and characters employed by Lucian – and, centuries later, by Leopardi – observe, comment on, and ultimately judge humankind. Here lies one of the paradoxes of the genre, endowing animals or non-existent creatures with the same claim to perspective and profound insight that belongs to the gods, making them equally capable of functioning as critical commentators on humanity. As Giuseppe Sangirardi noted, this connection between animals and gods in light of their distance from, and perceptiveness about, the real nature of humans crops up in the aforementioned 1819 *disegno letterario* that foreshadows the *Operette*. Here Leopardi mentions, as a possible setting, a world seen from the perspective of fish:

Argomento di alcuni Dialoghi potrebbero essere alcuni fatti che si fingessero accaduti in mare sott’acqua, ponendo per interlocutori i pesci, e fingendo che abbiano in mare i loro regni e governi, e possessioni d’acqua ec., e facendo uso de’ naufragi e delle tante cose che

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224 Cf. Duncan (1979), esp. 13-16 thoughtfully (albeit briefly) examining Lucian’s penchant for the figure of the *episkopos* or *kataiskopos* and the idea’s connection with Cynicism (on which also Bompaire (1958), 327). Cf. esp. 16: “All of his writings reflect in some way the search for a detached point of vantage, a rejection of prior commitments, a compulsion to get out in order to look in.” *Ibid.* 15 n. 7 quotes Bompaire’s (1958), 327 definition of the term and history of its meaning. Two significant examples of ἐπισκοπέω in Lucian are *Somnium* 15 and *Nigrinus* 18. Halliwell (2008), 443-446 discusses the *Charon* (whose complete title is Χάρων ἢ Ἐπισκοποῦντος), whose protagonist is yet another – and this time in-between men and gods – observer of human life from outside. *Ibid.* 441 on death as another possible perspective on life: “It is a remarkable fact about Lucian’s comic-cum-satirical repertoire that the perspective on life ‘from death’ is almost an obsession of his. For him, death is the very reverse of a taboo subject: it is, in a peculiar way, both a mediator and an object of laughter.” Cf. Anderson (1976), 23-25 on Lucian’s debt to Aristophanes’ *Aves* and *Pax* for the idea of “celestial journeys”. Cf. Geri (2011), 206-209 on Erasmus and the Lucianic topos of “La vita umana vista dall’alto”.

225 In *Nigrinus* 35 we observe the connection between metaphorical and physical travel being made by Lucian himself. Having listened to Nigrinus – who guides him on a “philosophical tour” of Rome (and the world) – Lucian feels “like the Phaeacians”, who, not by chance, had listened to and metaphorically travelled through the words of Odysseus.
Sangirardi perceptively connects this passage with a note found in Zib. 41-42 (dating from the same period), which analyses the difference between the “comedic sense” (“il ridicolo”) of ancients and moderns. In it Leopardi recalls the simile found in Lucian’s Ζεὺς ἐλεγχόμενος (J.Conf. 4) that “compares the Gods [in fact, just Zeus] hanging from the Parcae’s spindle to the small fish hanging from the fisherman’s rod”. It is impossible for us to securely ascertain whether Lucian’s image could be directly responsible for the idea sketched in the disegno; nevertheless, the idea of exploiting a distant and overturned perspective to say something about the human world has undeniable connections with the way the Lucianic gods – if not in the Ζεὺς ἐλεγχόμενος, in many of Lucian’s works – look at the world of men. The idea of the disegno will not be carried out as it is, and there is no fish world in the Operette, yet the satirical potential of Lucian’s notion must have struck Leopardi and prompted him to improvise on the theme. And if Lucian had already postulated that gods are like fish, then for Leopardi-follower-of-Lucian a world of gods speaking about humans can satirically become a world of fish speaking about humans. The end is one and the same: an inverted and external viewpoint from which to gaze at human life.

226 TPP (2013), 1109. My translation (with changes in punctuation): “Subject of some dialogues could be facts one could pretend have happened at sea, underwater, taking fish as speakers, and pretending that they had at sea their reigns, and governments, and water goods etc. and exploiting shipwrecks and all the things which are at the bottom of the sea, or that are born there (like corals etc) […] finding in this material for satire”.

227 Sangirardi (2000), 34.

228 Of course the Zibaldone note is later than the disegno, but, as Pacella (1966), 559 shows, by 1819 Leopardi had already read the Ζεὺς ἐλεγχόμενος.

229 Cf. Duncan’s (1979), 21 idea of “compulsive detachment” as an explanation for many of Lucian’s choices, among which the predilection for the dialogic form: “Lucian's speakers tend to be far removed from the battle. His mythological characters talk like men but belong to a timeless world. His Gods comment on life from above, his Dead from below, and even his Courtesans gossip off-duty. Perspective is variously achieved.”
Witty interpreter of contemporary life and society, pious moraliser or irreverent detractor of religion – in the history of his modern reception, translators, commentators, and imitators have created for Lucian an arresting array of literary personae. Similarly, everything and anything was made of Lucianic forms, manners, themes, and ideas throughout the modern history of his reception, the only constant being perhaps the enduring vivacity with which he was translated, read, debated upon, and reused. Such a complex and rich history could not be summarised in this context, and many works have thoroughly addressed it in recent years.

Yet one main pattern in this history catches the eye and proves useful in this context to compare and contrast with Leopardi’s own use of Lucianic manners and designs. Lucian’s outlook of contempt for, and dissatisfaction with, the world as a whole, including religion and its constructs and man and his beliefs – an outlook often carried out by mocking the vice without pointing at the virtue – posed a problem for the vast majority of his followers across the centuries. This ungodly and destabilising aspect did not prevent Lucian from being loved and imitated, but rather caused him to be adapted and softened in light of Christian principles and notions sometimes openly at odds with the more controversial aspects of Lucian’s own thought. In Henry

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230 TPP (2013), 1109.
233 Cf. Icaromenippus 4, where, even before he decides to embark in his trip to truly know the world, Menippus is convinced of the evilness of the human world. Weinbrot (2005) 63-64 provides examples of authors who blamed Lucian for his lack of pars construens.
234 This tendency interested many of the translators, commentators, and imitators of Lucian’s Dialogues of the dead in particular, a genre burgeoning especially in 17th and 18th century France, cf. especially Weinbrot (2005), 40-85. On the need for redeeming touch-ups, Weinbrot (2005), xi, 69. See also ibid. 63-66 for a summary of the accusation laid against Lucian for his supposed impiety; ibid. 72 on Fontenelle’s Christianising rejection of suicide apropo of Menippus. For different ages’ ideas of Lucian’s impiety see also Baldwin (1973), 7-20; 97. Hughes (1730), xvii credits Fontenelle with a general betterment of Lucian, who is judged as one who “laughs too loud, is often licentious, and
Fielding’s Lucianic trip to the underworld (his 1749 *Journey from This World to the Next*) the character of the biting Menippus himself disappears, abolished in favour of a more forgiving and moralising atmosphere. Matteo Maria Boiardo’s 1490-91 *Timone* substitutes the very bleak ending of Lucian’s *Timon* with “uno ottimistico e allegro, in linea con il tanto amato ideale tardoquattrocentesco di una vita semplice e priva di preoccupazioni”. At other times Lucian is (more or less lovingly and more or less directly) reproached for his unseemly views. Fènelon’s Herodotus accuses Lucian of impiety (“Impie, tu ne croyais pas la religion!”); John Hughes, responsible for the 1708 translation of Fontenelle’s *Dialogues des morts*, can burst into an incredulous “Whether this be decent, or like a banquet of the gods?” when faced with one of Lucian’s many invectives. Respected, loved, and imitated, Lucian is nevertheless a thorny author for his ungodly mockeries and disrespectful handling of human and divine matters.

On the other hand the harshness of Lucianic satire, aimed with (often dark) seriousness against – to use Weinbrot’s words – an “orthodoxy” that is often as wide as man’s pretension or the nonsensicality of human religion, was too weighty a matter for other followers or imitators, who preferred to direct their versions of Lucian’s cutting irony and reproachful tones towards more specific, more temporal, and often more personal targets. The note of the printer to the late 16th century *Satyre Ménippée*, a large and collective political satire stimulated by the contemporary religious wars, well explains sometimes course in his raillery. He has not thought it sufficient to make his dead reason, but they scold too, and are ready to fight in the presence of Jupiter himself”.

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235 Cf. Weinbrot (2005), 81-82 who illustrates it well with the case study of chapter 7 of Fielding’s work compared to Lucian’s *Necyomantia*, cf. Fielding (1798), 25-30.

236 Tomassi (2011), 107. Interestingly, Baruffaldi (1809), 182 commentator and editor of the *Timone*, suggests that the first lines of the last scene (atto V, scena ultima) “mai più non usciran: non gli aspettate” are to be related to Zaccaria Vallareso’s 1724 tragedy *Ratzvanscad*, the same referenced by Leopardi’s *Dialogo di un folletto e di uno gnomo* (*Folletto. Voi gli aspettate in vano: son tutti morti, diceva la chiusa di una tragedia dove morivano tutti i personaggi*); cf. also Bellucci (2005), 227.


238 Hughes (1730), xviii. As we have seen in Chapter I’s section on the *Querelle* this difficulty is consistent with the problematic relationship of both *Anciens* and *Modernes* with the pessimist, ungodly and anti-providential side of the classics. Weinbrot (2005), 63 reminds of the Christianising readings of Lucian during the 17th century, making him a champion against paganism. Fontenelle’s *prefatio* to his *Dialogues des morts* (1683) is a letter to Lucian in which the author himself declares he will forgo some of Lucian’s harshest features, e.g. the setting in hell, cf. *ibid.* ii.
such a tendency.\textsuperscript{239} The note, related by Weinbrot from its English translation, explains the work’s title and the type of satire as one that contains “evil speech in it, for the reproof, either of publike vices, or of particular faults of some certain persons”\textsuperscript{240} At the same time it unwittingly but effectively summarises one of the most striking differences between Lucian’s and this understanding of satire which, intrinsically tied to the contemporary circumstances of its composition, often fails to be as universal as Lucian’s concerns with humans, gods, and the world.\textsuperscript{241}

Of course there are exceptions in authors who could face the dark heterodoxy and unapologetically piercing modes of many of Lucian’s works, and who fully engaged with their philosophical, theological, and intellectual aspects. Leon Battista Alberti can use Lucianic modes and themes to tackle the trouble of his own times without losing the ability to critique atemporal and universal aspects of human nature: his Charon is positioned up close (rather than high above) but what he sees are still human \textit{ineptia} and \textit{improbitas}, prompting him to prefer hell to earth in order to escape the \textit{belua homines} (\textit{Mom.} 4.70).\textsuperscript{242} Voltaire’s \textit{Candide} (1759) fully inherits Lucian’s grimly farcical view of human achievements, reenacting it in a fight with contemporary Leibnizian optimism. Again, Wieland could read, translate, and interpret Lucian with remarkable clarity and full intellectual appreciation, grounded as he was both in the philological study of Lucian’s work and in his lucid and anti-idealistic interpretation of ancient Greece.\textsuperscript{243}

\textsuperscript{239} Weinbrot (2005), 88-89.
\textsuperscript{240} Weinbrot (2005), 89.
\textsuperscript{241} Robinson (1979), 110-115 on the example of Hutten’s \textit{Phalarismus}. For many of these works – as Robinson (1979), 114 states – “it is difficult to disentangle any Lucianic influence from that of Juvenal and the whole tradition of the anti-court satyre.” Branham (1989), 15 compares Aristophanes’ heroes’ “concrete topical complaints arising from actual events” and Menippus who “appears in a timeless ‘classical Athens’”, and his motive is accordingly more universal and less dependent on the concerns of a particular audience or occasion.”

\textsuperscript{242} Cf. the comment of Garin (1975), 224-226; also Acocella (2007); Geri (2011). \textit{Ibid.} 117 apropos of Alberti’s \textit{Momus} “un Alberti che si compiace di mostrarsi più disincantato e pessimista dello stesso Luciano.”

\textsuperscript{243} Cf. Wieland’s (1820), x-xi description of the character, merits, and small flaws of Lucian’s work in his preface to his translation of Lucian, which I reference from the English edition. A few lines later Wieland says: “After a lapse of seventeen hundred years […] his satire [is] still applicable”. \textit{Ibid.} xvii Wieland describes Lucian as a lover of truth, whose satire aims at unmasking delusions and falsehoods of all kinds and \textit{Ibid.} xviii Wieland defends him against the (many) accusations of
Joining these ranks, Leopardi’s interpretation is not only entirely free of Christianising concerns, but utterly accepting of Lucian’s sceptical and questioning attitude towards religion and, more generally, human belief and dogma. What others found awkward or troublesome, Leopardi embraced, or even amplified: the case – examined in Chapter 4 of this thesis – of the centaur Chiron is emblematic: turned into a character full of optimistic faith in the gods in Fénelon’s remake,\textsuperscript{244} he is for Leopardi one of the cardinal symbols of the universal validity of the μὴ φūναι.\textsuperscript{245} As a consequence, Leopardi appreciates and inherits Lucian’s unforgiving and crude (but realistic) view of humanity and its shortcomings, not tainted by ideas of forgiveness and charity. The dark, destabilising character of Lucian’s understanding of the world is precisely what Leopardi needs to observe his target in its naked truth.

To a certain extent Leopardi himself was aware of the distance that separates his from some of his predecessors’ use(s) of Lucian. In the letter to Piero Giordani (dated 6th August 1821)\textsuperscript{246} in which he briefly discusses his future Operette, Leopardi takes great care to especially distance his project from Vincenzo Monti’s interpretation of Lucian, culpable, for Leopardi, of adopting Lucianic modes to jest on unimportant matters; Monti had in fact written a number of Lucianising dialogues as part of his wider attack on the linguistic bigotry of the Accademia della Crusca. The Operette, writes Leopardi, “will be dedicated to much graver subjects than the grammatical trifles to which Monti adapts him (Lucian)”.\textsuperscript{247} Thus, for example, the Lucianic idea of Menippus flying over the Earth and “seeing only the world’s horrors” (to use Weinbrot’s words again)\textsuperscript{248} is reused by Leopardi in the strongest possible way: in Leopardi’s La scommessa di Prometeo the spokesman of the utter disappointment and horror at the (aerial) view of mankind is no other than Prometheus, the very creator and supporter of the human race.

\textsuperscript{244} In Le Centaure Chiron et Achille, in Fénelon (1917), 150.
\textsuperscript{245} Cf. Chapter 4 II.2.1.
\textsuperscript{246} TPP (2013), 1218.
\textsuperscript{247} My translation. The original: “[...] rivolto a soggetti molto più gravi che non sono le bazzecole grammaticali a cui lo adatta il Monti”. Sangirardi (2000), 39 discusses the passage within a neat analysis of the “prehistory” of the Operette.
\textsuperscript{248} Weinbrot (2005), 65.
The significance of Menippus’ dismay and consternation over the world is magnified by Leopardi’s reworking of the Lucianic material, taunting one of modernity’s dearest achievements: human progress.

Indifferent to the shortcomings of different categories of men through the ages, Leopardi adopts the staples of the Lucianic satirical dialogue, which often sets the discourse outside reality, to speak of man across time, against the background of all other living creatures, and against the spectrum of the metaphysical beings within the universe. In short, Leopardi’s satire wants to speak of the human condition. Their mutual target brings Lucian and Leopardi closer than ever, united in a quest against man’s false conceit, his twisted understanding of the world, of religion, and of his rightful due. It is suggestive to recall that the very namesake of the Menippea, Menippus of Gadara, was said by Marcus Aurelius to have mocked the perishable and ephemeral nature of human life (cf. 6.47.1. αὐτῆς τῆς ἐπικήρου καὶ ἐφημέρου τῶν ἄνθρώπων ζωῆς χλευασταί, οἶνον Μένιππος καὶ ὅσιοι τοιοῦτοι). The aim of this thesis is, in a way, to show just how similar Leopardi is to this Menippus.

3. Lucian and Leopardi, So Far

Although much has been written over the years about Lucian’s influence on Leopardi, the relationship between the two authors and the real significance of the Lucianic influence on the Italian poet still remain to a certain extent controversial. On the one hand, Leopardi has been little if at all considered by scholarship on the modern reception of Lucian: in his Lucian and his Influence in Europe, for example, Christopher Robinson is content with mentioning Leopardi in the epilogue as an example of the presence of “traces of Lucian’s influence in the works of major

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249 Cf. Halliwell’s understanding of Lucian’s satire in Halliwell (2008), 431; as Halliwell recalls, not many among Lucian’s critics and not all among Lucian’s imitators perceived the extent to which Lucian’s laughter is “attached” to “life and death”.

250 From Dalfen (1979), 56-57.

251 Much less has been written on Leopardi and the wider tradition of satirical dialogue; most authors merely mention the Operette’s possible characterisation as satires or Menippean satires, for example Prete (1998), 20; Piscopo (1999), 42.
writers”. Leopardi scholars, on the other hand, have (especially in the past) considered Lucian to have a merely formal impact on the *Operette*, or even to be the “ispiratore […] delle meno felici delle *Operette*” in Sebastiano Timpanaro’s words. Although in the last couple of decades the importance of Lucian for Leopardi has been positively reconsidered and many works have reassessed his role in Leopardi’s works, several issues remain unexamined.

One issue in particular interests us here. A great part of recent scholarship on Leopardi and Lucian only approaches the topic as part of the wider study of the role of laughter and irony in Leopardi’s work, thus ruling out any other influence that Lucian could have exerted on Leopardi; the idea that Lucian is not much more than a formal source for a generic comic tone seems extremely widespread. In his otherwise brilliant *Libro dell’esperienza, libro della sventura* Giuseppe Sangirardi affirms that there is no connection between the content of the *Operette* and Lucian’s work. Frazzled by the forms and the humour of Lucianic works, or in search of specific references, Leopardi scholars have been often drawn to disregard the ways in which Lucian’s content and substance have influenced Leopardi. It is not only Lucian’s humour, or his brilliant use of the dialogue that inform Leopardi’s *Operette*, but also, and importantly, Lucian’s critique of human pretension, his unveiling of human delusions, and his satire of religion, among others.

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252 Robinson (1979), 237.
253 Scheel (1998), 27-28 admits to having underestimated the importance of Lucian for Leopardi in his previous work, Scheel (1959); *ibid.* 28-29 for a short history of Lucian’s “mis-fortune” among Leopardi’s critics and in particular the general disdain for the satirical and Lucianic works of Leopardi during the last century, for example Vossler (1923), 391.
One point follows closely. Dignifying Lucian’s content, and believing him to be not only a “satiric artist”, but also a “thinker” – to use and revert Duncan’s distinction – means to appreciate his intellectual inspection and judgement of earlier and contemporary thought, religion, philosophy, and poetry. Graham Anderson expresses it clearly, saying that “we can never strictly speaking talk of ‘Lucianic’ themes, but we should learn to recognise typical ‘Lucianic’ blends of Plato, Aristophanes and the rest.” Both these aspects – the impact of Lucianic thought and the influence of Lucian’s engagement with earlier intellectual and religious views – must be taken into account when observing the Lucianising Leopardi. Lucian is, for Leopardi, also a lucid and enlightened eye through which to look at, and to reflect upon, the works of archaic and classical Greece.

256 Duncan (1979), 17.
257 Anderson (1976), 21.
In summa, si mortalium innumerabiles tumultus, e Luna, quemadmodum Menippus olim, despicias, putes te muscarum, aut culicum videre turbam inter se rixantium, bellantium, insidiantium, rapientium, ludentium, lascivientium, nascentium, cadentium, morientium.

Erasmus, Stultitiae Laus 48258

Vide anche le formiche e le api intente ad un’opera più intelligente, ma vana del pari. In preda alle passioni della vita, gli uomini non potevano giudicare la inutile dei loro atti; ma chi, come lui, era uscito fuori alla riva del pelago dopo esservi stato immerse sino ai capelli, riconosceva nel consorzio umano un fòrmicaio più grande, un alveare più complicato, dove tutto si riduceva, come nei piccoli e semplici, a nascere, a crescere, a procreare ed a morire.

Federico de Roberto, L’imperio (1894-)259

1. Numberless and Insignificant

When, in the bucolic collection par excellence, Theocritus decides to give his readers a taste of urban life, he does so with the utmost vividness. After the customary chatter, Gorgo and Praxinoa, the two garrulous protagonists of Theocritus’ Idyll 15, get ready to go out and attend the festival of Adonis that is taking place in town.260 As we accompany them along the streets of a festive Alexandria, busy with the celebrations of the festival, we feel all the pressure of a city literally filled with humans. We are dragged through a constant crowd that pushes, crushes, and obstructs the way in every direction: men, women, and animals fill up the living space of the city and the ὄχλος is everywhere in the poem as it is in Alexandria itself (44, 59, 73). Ultimately the excitement of joining the public festivity is shadowed by the many annoyances and dangers that the overpopulated Alexandria presents to the two friends. The fear of the royal horses that run recklessly through the streets, the memory of recent criminality Αἰγυπτιστί (48), ‘à l’égyptienne’, the rudeness – and bland racism – of a man in the crowd, these things somewhat offset the couple’s amazement at the luxurious ceremony.

258 In Schmidt-Dengler (1975), 116.
259 De Roberto (2009), 401. Federico De Roberto is also author of a work on Leopardi, from 1898.
Yet the problem is not the city, endowed with beautiful architecture and better government (46ff) by the new king, but the people. When she is first faced with the crowd at 44-45, Praxinoa is overwhelmed by the fear, anxiety, and oppression caused by the ὀχλος and immediately bursts out: μῦρακες ἀνάρτημοι καὶ ἀμετροι! Humans are the real problem: the festival, as the progression of the idyll shows, only exposes the uncountable flaws of men and multiplies them for the numberless people that cram Alexandria on that specific day. The sudden perception of this sometimes hostile and certainly faceless crowd triggers Praxinoa’s metaphor of the people at the Adonia as innumerable ants. Praxinoa, coming from the quietness of a house ἐπ’ ἐσχατα γᾶς (8), perceives all the alterity of this unknown mass; to her external eyes the multiracial inhabitants of Alexandria become one large heap of minuscule, indistinguishable insects.

Theocritus’ Praxinoa already experiences a significant degree of detachment from the hectic crowd that she calls “ants”, and yet her analogy remains restricted to the people in Alexandria, on that very day. Let us take a leap of more than 2000 years to see a different take on the metaphor of the ants. Henry David Thoreau’s Walden or Life in the Woods (1854) enacts a “battle of the ants” which is most certainly a powerful metaphor for human warfare, very likely inspired by the struggles of contemporary America. The battlefield of red and black ants is one day casually discovered by the narrator next to his woodpile. The sudden realisation of this violent and bloody war – “the ground

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261 Cf. Gow (1965), 280 on the two adjectives as signifying that “the crowd can neither be counted as individuals nor estimated as a mass.” Ibid. on instances of μῦρακες to describe “a busy multitude”.

262 Cf. Davies and Kathirithamby (1986), 44 listing Theocritus Id. 15.45 for the use of ants to represent “vast numbers”. Ibid. on ants as symbol of “great wealth” in Theocritus Id. 17.107. In this second instance the mention of ants is not neutral: Hunter (2003), 179 n. 107 remarks that “The acquisitive and apparently tireless activities of ants may be regarded negatively as miserly hoarding, as here and at Crates, SH 359.6–7, or positively as sensible forethought, as at Hes. WD 778, Hor. Sat. 1.1.32–40, and Virg.Georg. 1.186”; Hunter connects this passage with the “rejection of hoarding” in various ancient sources. Theocritus’ mention of ants in Id. 17 serves thus the purpose of drawing a second (and negative) connection between men and ants (or at least between some human habits and a certain interpretation of the insects’ behaviour). Davies and Kathirithamby (1986), 44 seem to find no special connection between these instances of the use of ants and the idea of impersonality or insignificance, which they instead find in some Greek proverbs listed on the same page, e.g. “No path even for an ant”. Beavis (1988), 204 notes how “in a number of places great crowds on the roads or elsewhere are compared to ants” and lists a number of occurrences including Theocritus 15.45.

was already strewn with the dead and dying, both red and black” – is accompanied by surprise at the incredible silence that engulfs the fight; the meaningfulness of the ants' mortal combat is miniaturised by the – relatively – gigantic human perspective and turned into utter meaninglessness. It is quite remarkable that Thoreau’s first explicit signpost to signal the link between animal and human warfare is a reference to the Iliad, as he calls the fighting insects “these Myrmidons”. Throughout the Iliad men’s hectic and heroic activity inside and outside the Trojan walls is paralleled by the many moments in which the gods realise the inherent unimportance of this frenetic human war, insofar as all men’s destiny is ultimately death. The Iliad’s ability to bestow extreme dignity on human military deeds and at the same time downplay them by shifting attention to the immortal level of the gods is likely to have been in the mind of the classically-trained Thoreau as he compared his ants to the ant-men that form Achilles’ contingent.

There is no explicit sense in Praxinoa’s metaphor that all men (let alone the essence of humanity) are like ants, as perhaps the text of Thoreau might lead us to infer. Yet such an implication is far from absent in Greek literature, as this chapter will show, and Thoreau’s own reference to the Homeric poems is itself extremely telling. The notion that men observed at a distance or from an external point of view resemble a numberless, faceless, and sometimes animalised crowd has a lively history in Greek and

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264 The reference is followed by a further mention of Iliadic characters a few lines below, where Achilles and Patroclus are drawn in as comparison for some of the ants’ behaviour in the battle.

265 Albeit punctuated with proofs of the gods’ involvement with mankind – from gods intervening in battle, to gods fighting or even deceiving each other for the sake of particular individuals or sides – the Iliad offers powerful testimony to the opposite behaviour, as the gods choose to distance themselves from the world of men. In four instances the notion that there is a definite limit to the trouble worth taking for the sake of humans is conveyed by the formulaic phrase βροτῶν ἐνεκα (1.573-576, here ἐνεκα θνητῶν; 8.427-431; 21.379-380; 21.462-467), which significantly appears at times in which the gods are brought to explicitly reflect on the merit and desirability of excessive involvement with men, e.g. the quarrel of Zeus and Hera soothed by Hephaestus at 1.573-576 – on which Halliwell (2008), 59-64 – or Zeus’ threat to Hera and Athena at 8.427-431. In the sudden recollection of the real pointlessness of battling for mortals and as they realise how much more important they themselves and their activities are (Greene (1944), 192), the gods forget the favoured heroes or the preferred side of the fight, to make (and speak) of mankind as an undifferentiated, unimportant mass. Cf. Greene (1944), 197-198 on the metamorphosis of the “God the All-Knowing Watcher” into the “god who is not watching”.

266 According to a scholium to Pindar Nem. 3.21 Hesiod – in his Catalogue of Women fr. 205 Merkelbach and West (1967), 105 – said that the Myrmidons originated from ants that Zeus transformed into men to keep company to his son Aeacus.
Roman literature. Praxinoa’s miniaturised vision of Alexandrian men as a blurred mass of insects is a splendid and animated variation on this analogy.

Leopardi’s *La ginestra* (*The Broom or The Flower of the Desert*) (1836), written only a few years before Thoreau’s *Walden* and explored in the next section, presents the very same simile linking men and ants. But what is more remarkable about this comparison – possibly the most lyrical moment in Leopardi’s discourse about man’s foolish anthropocentric vanity – is that it is built on Leopardi’s long-lasting questioning of humanity’s place in the cosmos. More specifically, it originates from one specific strand of this questioning, that we mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. Before, during and, as *La ginestra* shows, after the *Operette*, Leopardi makes a point of exploring the real place of man in the universe by comparing him (often to man’s disadvantage) to animals. This process is carried out in a variety of ways throughout the years, but it ultimately grows to maturity in Leopardi’s insistent “animalisation” of mankind in his *Operette*, to become one of the constitutive pillars of Leopardi’s pessimistic worldview.

Both in the ideas it brings forward and in the forms it takes, Leopardi’s animalisation of mankind – aimed at undercutting human self-conceit and at gathering a more truthful view of man’s role, destiny, and function in the universe – resonates with what antiquity had to say about men, animals, and the cosmos. Greek literature’s idea of miniaturising man and his importance – found also in two very striking instances of the trope from Lucian’s *Icaromenippus* and *Hermotimus*, which will be discussed later, and connected to the (very Homeric) propensity for comparing men and animals – effectively provide a grand counter to anthropocentrism, which Leopardi intends as the first essential step to the understanding of the world as it really is.
2. View from Vesuvius: La ginestra and the Trope of the Ants

La ginestra is one of Leopardi’s last poems, composed in Naples where he spent the final years of his life and published posthumously. The poem opens with a powerful close-up of the humanised “back” of mount Vesuvius, the “slayer mountain” where the broomflower grows. The barren landscape of Vesuvius, where no other plant manages to grow and where the looming threat of possible eruptions scares natural life away, is for Leopardi the perfect metaphor for humanity’s destined abode. Just as it did with the resilient broom, Nature has placed man in a precarious universe, where the slightest event can prove fatal and human life is constantly at stake. Leopardi means both to depict veraciously the condition of men on earth and to ridicule the wishful thinking of those who believe they live in the best of all possible worlds: in La ginestra the proud humans, inflated by a modern faith in progress – “dell’umana gente/le magnifiche sorte e progressive” (50-51) – are just like little yellow flowers on the slope of an active volcano. The text of La ginestra can be found at Appendix 2. The first strophe closes on the idea of humanity’s vain faith in betterment and prompts the following two strophes to concentrate on modern man’s foolishness, on his brainless rejection of past wisdom, and on his senseless backward walk which he insists on calling “progress”. The first three strophes thus explore and dismantle man’s own conception of the cosmos he inhabits, a cosmos that is figuratively collated with the parched volcanic landscape. As if in preparation for what is to come, at v. 98 the narrator addresses man with the term “animal”. The term is far from fortuitous: by specifying (99) that man is not any animal, but a foolish one (“stolto”), Leopardi clarifies that the difference between men and other creatures is human foolishness, clearly exemplified by man’s ludicrous optimism (“quel che nato a perir, nutrito in pene, / dice, a goder son fatto”, 100-101) and pride (102).


268 The critique of man’s optimistic vision of progress is omnipresent in Leopardi’s work; two other significant instances among many are the Proposta di premi fatta dall’accademia dei sillografi, on which Chapter 3 II.1; Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico, on which cf. the conclusion to this thesis.
In the fourth strophe, after walking up the slope of Vesuvius gazing at the infertile scenery, Leopardi – and the reader with him – turns around to sit down (158-161) and look at the view from the mountain. The distance gained by the narrator-spectator is not only the most obvious one, allowing him to gaze at the spectacle below from a point of vantage. Rather, Leopardi plays expertly with multiple distances. The relatively closer and undisturbed view of the sky provokes a realisation of the incredible smallness of even the largest items in the human landscape – the land and the ocean – when compared to the size of stars. At the same time, the sullen and deserted landscape visible from Vesuvius prompts the memory of the fertile fields, luxuriant scenery, and famous cities that were once visible from the same spot, before the volcano destroyed them.269 The two types of physical distance – the view from above and the view to the above – merge with the imagined distance afforded by the recollection of historical facts, to trigger an even deeper epiphany about mankind. “Questo / globo ove l’uomo è nulla” (172-173): man lives on a globe – the earth, the unwelcoming space comparable to the volcano – where he himself is nothing. Since the earth is a “granel di sabbia” (191), how much more infinitesimal, then, is man?

A release of tension eventually arrives with the fifth strophe, where the two themes – the threatening cosmos and the nothingness of man – converge in the long metaphor that likens men to ants (this strophe is in italics in the Appendix). In La ginestra it is the narrator himself who, hiking up the slopes of Vesuvius and gaining the necessary distance from humanity, becomes the external observer that can name humanity for what it is: ants. The image of an apple falling on and destroying an anthill mirrors the natural calamities that can endanger human existence. The list of disasters continues through the following strophe, ending on a renewed mention of men's foolish claim to eternity (296). Like Thoreau, Leopardi emphasises the immense and organised effort that underlies the actions of the ants: “con gran lavoro”, with great toil the little creatures have managed to build their dwellings. All this toil is doomed to be in vain

269 Cf. Dialogo di un folletto e di uno gnomo: “non si trova più regni né imperi che vadano gonfiando e scoppiando come le bolle, perché sono tutti sfumati”, TPP (2013), 508; Sangirardi (2000), 271 traces the image of the bursting bubbles to Lucian Ch. 19, suggesting that the Lucianic influence is stronger than that of Ariosto’s Orlando furioso 34.76; a similar image appears also in the very Lucianic Somnium by L. B. Alberti (Intercenales 4.1).
and to have no bearing on the outer world: such, Leopardi suggests, are man's hectic efforts in a world that is not meant for him.

3. Lucianic Mountains and Ancient Ants

The moment in which the narrator of Leopardi’s poem climbs up the height of the volcano is in itself profoundly Lucianic. As I have mentioned already, Lucian’s ἐπισκοποῦντες famously and frequently rise to points of vantage from which they can look at the world.270 Although, as I briefly noted, the height is very often metaphorical, in many cases the ascension is properly physical, as is clearly exemplified by Hermes’ organisation of Charon’s visit to the land of the living in Lucian’s Charon.271 Once Hermes has taken up the role of guide – parallel to Charon’s position in the land of the dead – the god has to see to the details of Charon’s trip and, in particular, has to find a suitable viewpoint (τὴν ἱκανὴν σκοπήν, Ch. 3) from which Charon will be finally able to observe men to his heart’s content. The care that Hermes puts into this part of the plan and the length of the passage mark the importance of perspective needed to obtain thorough judgement of the object of one’s interests. Hermes will not only resolve to choose a mountain as his viewpoint, but even to pile several famous mountains one upon the other in a parody of a Homeric motif: first Ossa, followed by Pelion, Oeta, and Parnassus.272

But even more than the climb that grants the narrator of La ginestra the vantage point for his observations on human life, it is the spectacle that lies below that proves authentically Lucianic. The visualisation of humanity as ants features repeatedly in Lucian’s works and prominently in combination with the motif of the view from above.

271 Significantly this is one of the first Lucianic dialogues read by Leopardi, in February 1819, cf. TPP (2013), 1113.
272 See Duncan (1979), 18. Note the reverse perspective in the Prometheus, where the Titan has to be on the mountain but not quite too high as to be invisible from the perspective of men on earth (Prom. 1). The image of the height – and in this case specifically of the height from a figurative mountain – appears also in Rhetorum Praeceptor 5-7. Cf. Od. 11.315-316.
In the *Icaromenippus* Lucian narrates the story of Menippus’ quest for the truth about the world; failed by each and every philosopher on earth Menippus resolves to fly above it in person and learn the truth for himself. The dialogue skilfully merges metaphorical and physical distance, and the notion that distance and perspective equal (a higher degree of) understanding is essentially embodied by Menippus’ path of knowledge. And although in many other Lucianic passages even a metaphorical distance is presented as sufficient to the pursuit of knowledge, the *Icaromenippus* scorns the mental distance from the world paraded by the philosophers and replaces it with an entirely physical one.

As he recounts his expedition to a friend, Menippus recalls his surprise at the realisation of the smallness of entire regions (*Icar* 18), a realisation, as we have seen, very similar to the one that the narrator of *La ginestra* will experience. The smallness of relatively vast natural areas prompts Menippus’ friend to inquire about the look of man-made areas – cities – and of men themselves. Instead of directly answering, Menippus bluntly and quite abruptly turns to describing a community of ants:

> Οἷμαι σε πολλάκις ἢδη μυρμήκων ἄγοραν ἑωρακέναι, τούς μὲν εἰλοιμένους περὶ τὸ στόμα τοῦ φαλεοῦ κἀν τὸ μέσῳ πολιτευομένους, ἐνίους δὲ ἐξίωντας, ἐτέρους δὲ ἐπανόντας αὐθὲς εἰς τὴν πόλιν· καὶ ὁ μὲν τις τὴν κόπρον ἔκφαρε, ὁ δὲ ἀρπάσας ποθὲν ἢ κυάουν λέτος ἢ πυρὸν ἡμιτομὸν θεί φέρων. εἰκός δὲ ἢ παρ’ αὐτοῖς κατὰ λόγον τοῦ μυρμήκων βίου καὶ οἰκοδόμους τινὰς καὶ δημαγωγοὺς καὶ πυρτάνες καὶ μοσοτικοὺς καὶ φιλοσόφους. πλὴν αὐ γε πόλεις αὐτοῖς ἀνδράσι ταῖς μυρμηκίαις μάλιστα ἐδόκεισαν. (*Icar* 19)

The only apt response to his friend’s enquiry is a simile that compares the view of men from the sky to the human perspective on an anthill. But there is more to Menippus’
description than meets the eye. The comparison with ants, it turns out, is appropriate not only in light of how small humans look from a removed perspective but, more remarkably, for how similar the ants seem to human society when looked at more closely. Lucian’s Menippus is thoroughly aware of both sides of the comparison: he concentrates on the one hand on the smallness of humans, but he also focuses on the design of the ants’ society that, just like man’s, has its own “architects and politicians, magistrates and composers and philosophers”. What Menippus describes is thus not merely his newly gained idea of the objective dimension of men, but his realisation of the fallacy and bias that spring from man’s un-distanced observation of his own kind. Men are blind to the high level of organisation of the myrmecic society, blind to the similarity between that society and their own, and thus oblivious to the conclusions one can derive from such similarity. Man’s lack of awareness is, quite literally, a flaw of his vision: only because of the (physically and metaphorically) biased viewpoint from which humans observe themselves can they dismiss the undeniable similarity with, among others, the ants’ society.

That which is possible to the flying Menippus – a trip above the clouds to examine the world and man’s place in it – is nothing but a dream for the protagonist of Lucian’s Hermotimus. The dialogue recounts, as he chats with Lycinus, Hermotimus’ year-long pursuit of happiness through philosophy, a search that, from the very start, is described through images alluding to the act of travelling and mountaineering (Herm. 2-4); the path is a long, tiring, and most importantly ascensional hike at whose summit stand virtue and happiness. What lies on the top is the fullness of understanding granted by the high and remote position that the most enduring hikers have so exhaustingly gained:

Trygaeus’ in Aristophanes Pax, cf. Halliwell (2008), 430; Camerotto (2009), 21. Camerotto suggests that the Lucianic idea of ants is also to some extent inspired by Trygaeus’ outlook on the world from above; at Pax 819-822, describing the view from above Trygaeus stresses the smallness of humans (µικροὶ δ’ ὄραν ἄνωθεν ἔστ. v. 821). But it looks here as though a bigger distance is not straightforwardly conducive to clearer understanding, and the men who seem κακοήθεις from afar appear as πολύ τι κακοήθεστεροι at a closer glance. More than a direct inspiration, Camerotto sees in the Aristophanic passage a similar “ethical reading” of humans from a distance. On Lucian and Aristophanes, and in general on Lucian’s use of his sources see Anderson (1976), 21.

See for example ἔστιν ὁ ὄμος ἐπ’ αὐτὴν μακρὸς τε καὶ ὅρθως καὶ τρηχός; ἐπί τῷ ἄκρω γενόμενον, Herm. 2; ἐν τῇ ὑπορείᾳ κάτω ἦτο, Herm. 3.
The Hermotimus takes the discourse on human insignificance to a different – and this time openly metaphorical and theoretical – level. It is not only the physical mileage between the flying Menippus and the soil of the earth that makes men look like ants, but men appear to be the very same also from the abstract distance which one reaches through ceaseless philosophical inquiry. Thus men are in two ways minuscule, both in a strictly physical sense against the background of the wider natural universe and in a theoretical sense, insofar as their importance is questioned by the more alert among humans. As if Lucian was keen to seal the crucial insight granted by the comparison of men and ants from the dual perspective of physical and metaphorical distance, what the Icaromenippus ascertains by physical travel, the Hermotimus confirms through the piercing gaze of philosophy. The physical and the metaphysical intertwine to make of this trope an adamant and unassailable descriptor of the truth about humans in the cosmos.

Menippus consciously employs his intuition about the similarity of men and ants in light of the structure and high level of organisation of their respective societies to make a point about human life, the ultimate target of Lucianic inquiry. But the same similarity between the features that humans are keen to consider distinctively and uniquely theirs and those of other animal species (and, prominently, of ants) is observed by many ancient sources before and after Lucian, sources that variously praise the efficiency of the ants’ organised society. Going one step further, Aelian draws a direct link between ants’ and men’s behaviour and life-style, interpreting the ants’ choices and habits according to specifically human needs and reading in the pattern of the ants’ society the

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278 On insects in the ancient world Keller (1909-1913), esp 416-421 on ants; two books from the 80’s are entirely dedicated to the subject, Davies and Kathirithamby (1986) and Beavis (1988); see also Hunter (2003), 179 n. 107; a short section on ants is in Kenneth and Kitchell (2014), 3-4. See a good summary of praises of the ants’ society in Davies and Kathirithamby (1986), 38-40; and in Kenneth and Kitchell (2014), 3. Davies and Kathirithamby (1986), 42 contains their only mention of Lucian’s use of ants (Icaromenippus 19).
very patterns that regulate the communal life of humans.²⁷⁹ Although not concerned with questioning or challenging man’s view of the cosmos, ancient sources nevertheless highlight the same unwelcome similarity noticed by Lucian in the Icaromenippus and in the Hermotimus.

Observation and praise of ants’ behaviour can be found in several places throughout Leopardi’s work, and especially in his notes. He mentions ants for their innate organisational abilities (Zib. 210), for the way they form groups for the common good (Zib. 287), or for specific aspects of their societies (Zib. 370). What is more, he praises ants for skills that humans often lack, such as the attitude to forming resilient bonds between groups and individuals (Zib. 587).²⁸⁰ In line with the tendency mentioned above, Leopardi’s marked interest in the life of ants as well as in that of bees and other animals revolves around the similarities between the life and behaviour of ants and those of men. And here, as in Lucian’s case, lies the principal reason for Leopardi’s use of ants: they closely resemble human society in organisation, lifestyle, and life choices; they are even – as every animal is – endowed with the “principle τοῦ λογισμοῦ” (Zib. 370). But it is precisely here that the similarities end, as man, unlike ants, chooses to employ λογισμός differently, to rise above his station, and to demand a higher status above all other beings.²⁸¹

But let us go back to the comparison of ants and men within Leopardi’s programme of human animalisation. Despite the absence of such a striking trope as the ant simile of La ginestra, the Operette too perform a complex interweaving of the ideas of human

²⁷⁹ Cf. the argument regarding the ants’ organisation of their dwelling, which Aelian NA 6.43 interprets according to the need to have different quarters for different genders, cf. Keller (1909-1913), 418. Aside from Aelian, Davies and Kathirithamby (1986), 42 lists other authors who “compare and contrast the societies of man and the ant”. One can recall Strabo 8.6.16 for the habit of comparing laborious groups of people to ants, as in McCartney (1954), 234.

²⁸⁰ Often animal societies (and chiefly ants and bees) are indicated by Leopardi as examples of natural societies, such as even the human one must have been in some distant past. If men have not completely and always lacked those abilities, they certainly do not have them in the present, but might have had them in antiquity; see for example Zib. 587-590.

²⁸¹ Newmyer (1999), 99 begins his article on the notion of animal and human reason in the ancient world saying that “Since antiquity, a sharp dichotomy between animalkind and humankind has been posited by those who, for one reason or another, are eager to claim a unique and privileged position for humanity in the spectrum of creation”.
animality and human smallness. Animalisation and miniaturisation are constant – and often intertwined – means of getting at the foundation of man’s deluded understanding of life, i.e. his misconception of the place of humans in the universe. As in La ginestra, distance is an essential element in prompting clear-minded opinions of the human condition and generally the bigger the distance, the deeper the acuity of the cogitations about man’s existence. Yet unlike La ginestra, the Operette employ most of the time a metaphorical rather than a physical distance, and often achieve it by resorting to non-humans as their ἐπισκοποῦντες: the gods of Storia del genere umano observe the newly created human race from their immortal abodes; the mummies of Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie look at human life from the realms of death; the Earth and its inhabitants are watched by Hercules and Atlas as they juggle with the Earth like a ball (Dialogo di Ercole e di Atlante), and then by the Earth and the Moon themselves in Dialogo della terra e della luna. But what is the image of man that this varied array of characters contributes to sketch?

4. Giving Things Names: Man’s Naming Obsession and What are Men?

This chapter opened with the Sprite and the Gnome’s discussion about the end of mankind. The first reaction of the Gnome, who is at first unaware of mankind’s disappearance, is, paradoxically, to suggest that the news that men are gone is so striking that it ought to hit the newspapers: “Oh cotesto è caso da gazette”. The first implication of the vanishing of humans is that the human obsession with giving things a name has died out with them. For the human mindset, when a thing is not defined, not named, and not announced, this thing lacks solidity, reality, and even existence; newspapers are the symbol of this attitude, and the Gnome’s point – biased by human perspective – is that, if something does not appear in print, one cannot be sure that it has actually happened. It is not until the Sprite mocks him that he realises the sheer absurdity of his statement, and it takes quite a while for the Gnome to understand that the disappearance of names and labels (for example the days of the week, of the months, and of the years) does not impact in any way on the natural course of time on all other

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282 On this dialogue, see Celli (1992); Blasucci (2003), 85-102; Bellucci (2005); Polizzi (2008).
283 On Leopardi’s satirical attitude towards the role of newspapers, see Palinodia 19-21, 151-153, 206; see also Tristano’s comment in Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico; Galimberti (1998a), 123 n. 11.
natural things (Sprite. “What do you think? That if you don’t call them by their names they’re not going to come?”). 284

The depiction of man’s obsession with names and the swiftness with which names have disappeared once man himself has gone, combine to depict humans as a bunch of vainglorious creatures entirely deluded about the significance of their own existence. 285

But as we keep reading the dialogue, we see that this fixation plays also a more specific role. Initially in a subtle way and then with increasing frequency and emphasis, the two creatures stress one specific aspect of human life, i.e. its sameness with other animal races. The significance of the theme is underscored throughout by the recurring presence of the language of natural sciences that made a first prominent appearance in the notes to a short piece – the Dialogo di un cavallo e un bue – which anticipates this dialogue. In it Leopardi had listed a long series of references to ideas of evolution, anthropology, and zoology extracted from a variety of ancient and modern sources, to confirm that he saw in this idea of human zoology the roots of this work. 286

Leopardi begins by introducing the idea with remarkable subtlety as the Sprite reveals to the Gnome that humanity has vanished:

Folletto. Voi gli aspettate invan: son tutti morti, diceva la chiusa di una tragedia dove morivano tutti i personaggi.

Gnomo. Che vuoi tu inferire?

Folletto. Voglio inferire che gli uomini son tutti morti, e la razza è perduta.

284 TPP (2013), 508. Cecchetti (1983), 89. In several works Leopardi stresses the vanity of human works, activities, and inventions on earth, see Galimberti (1998a), 124 n. 13 for a list of other instances and for a brief history of the motif.

285 On the vanity of names (as opposed to the reality of things), see Zib. 2487; see also Galimberti (1998a), 125 n. 15: “si conclude la disputa tra il personaggio che guarda alla realtà delle cose e quello che tiene conto dei loro nomi, meri flatus vocis, e nemmeno innocui se, definendo, mettono a nudo la miseria della condizione umana.”

286 Cf. the notes at TPP (2013), 612-613. On these notes see Fabio (1995), 51 who sees in this long set of footnotes an encyclopedic tendency that, still present in Leopardi’s earlier works, will progressively disappear; also, Polizzi (2008), 88-91 on the scientific works that inspired Leopardi’s scientific knowledge and curiosity.
What at this point could seem little more than a mere coincidence or a slight allusion – since the term “race” (razza) is a common enough word to define humans – is stressed over and over again to become an inescapable fil rouge in the two characters’ discourse. The adumbration in the Sprite’s speech is taken up again by the Gnome, as he accepts that the end of mankind is reality, and made utterly explicit twice, to leave the reader with no doubts regarding the implications of the term “razza”:

Gnomo. Oh cotesto è caso da gazzette. Ma pure fin qui non s’è veduto che ne ragionino. (OM 5, 123)

Humans are a “race”, a “species of animals”, “beasts”, etc. And most importantly, as one gathers from the Sprite’s remark about geology, man is just one amongst the thousands of animal races that existed and then disappeared in the history of the universe. We find even greater confirmation of Leopardi’s keenness on this point in the couple of sketched dialogues (dating to 1820-21 and not included in the Operette’s final edition) whose themes he will reemploy in the Dialogo di un folletto e di uno

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287 My italics. TPP (2013), 508. Cechetti (1983), 87. “Sprite. You look for them in vain. They are all dead, you could hear at the end of a tragedy in which all the characters died. / Gnome. What do you mean? / Sprite. I mean to say that men are all dead, and their race is lost. / Gnome. Oh this is a scoop for newspapers! But so far we haven't read it anywhere.”

288 My italics. TPP (2013), 508.-509 Cechetti (1983), 91. “Gnome. In any case, I can't understand how a whole species of animals can be completely lost, as you say.” / “Sprite. A master geologist like yourself should know that it’s not such a novelty and that in ancient times there were on earth many kinds of animals that aren’t there any more – except for a few petrified bones.” My italics.

289 Of course the fact has been noted before, e.g. Blasucci (2003), 87, but, in my opinion, not sufficiently explored, especially in connection with the Greek sources. On the satirical generalisation of mankind cf. Dialogo di un Galantuomo e del mondo, as the World compares men to eggs: “A questo non devi pensare. Non ci dev'essere un uomo diverso da un altro, ma tutti devono essere come tante uova”, a comparison which Fabio (1995), 41 interprets as a “metafora comico-riduttiva”. Fabio then goes on to present some other comical metaphors such as the one that compares men and horses on the grounds of their similar need for shouts and spurs.
The two dialogues – the Dialogo tra due bestie, p.e. un cavallo e un toro and in particular the Dialogo di un cavallo e un bue, which I mentioned earlier for its abundance of scientific language and evidence – reinforce with utmost clarity the equivalence between humans and animals. Perhaps due to the rougher state of these sketches – still containing Leopardi’s notes to himself about his objectives and arguments – the fact that Leopardi wants his reader to understand humans as another animal species is spelled out here repeatedly.

It becomes clear then that the human compulsion to name things is just another aspect of this wider portrayal of men as animals. Just like any other animal, man has distinctive customs and habits, here epitomised by the necessity to give things a name. Yet the problem with human habits – as opposed to those of other species – is that they are entirely disconnected from (a realistic understanding of) their habitat and their role in it. As the obsession with name-giving clearly elucidates, man’s customs attempt to bind the human species to earth in a unique and privileged manner, but in fact do nothing but display the complete and unnatural detachment between this particular animal and his habitat.

The two sketches for dialogues mentioned above – the Dialogo tra due bestie, p.e. un cavallo e un toro and the Dialogo di un cavallo e un bue – deserve further note. Cesare Galimberti has briefly but insightfully traced a path that, starting from the reference in the Discorso di un italiano intorno alla poesia romantica (1818) and two Zibaldone

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290 On these two sketches and the Dialogo di un folletto e di uno gnomo, Fabio (1995), 52; Blasucci (1989); Sangirardi (1998) and Blasucci (2003), 85-102; Bellucci (2005.)

291 From the Dialogo di un cavallo e un bue: “B. Che sorta di animale era? C. Mia nonna mi disse ch'era una scimia. Per me aveva creduto che fosse un uomo e questo m’avea messo una gran paura. B. Un uomo? che vale a dire un uomo? C. Una razza d'animali”, TPP (2013), 611 and ibid. “[L'uomo] Era una sorta di bestie da quattro zampe come siamo noi altri, ma stavano ritti e camminavano con due sole come fanno gli uccelli, e coll'altre due s’aiutavano a strapazzare la gente”.

292 Compare the Bull’s speech in the Dialogo tra due bestie, p.e. un cavallo e un toro: “Non viveva già naturalmente, e come tutti gli altri, ma in mille modi loro propri”, TPP (2013), 611. On Il. 6.146 and the comparison of men and leaves (subject of Chapter 3) cf. Redfield (1975), 102: “For a moment Glaucus moves back and sees men as the gods see them – creatures as ephemeral and insignificant as all the other creatures of nature.”

293 TPP (2013), 993.
notes (19 and 1469), describes Leopardi’s relationship with the ideas expressed by Xenophanes of Colophon in his elegiac poetry (B15). After the references in the Discorso and in the two Zibaldone pages, Galimberti sees the Dialogo tra due bestie as a further, although non-explicit allusion to the Xenophanic fragment. Fr. 15 ridicules and criticises the anthropomorphic tendencies of human religion, by suggesting that every species would imagine and draw their gods in its own image. The idea is explained first by postulating that animals – exemplified by horses, oxen, and lions – would draw theriomorphic divinities, and, in B16, by suggesting that different populations would imagine gods ethnomorphically as bearing their physical traits.

Both titles of the two versions of the “dialogue between two beasts” include a horse, and, while the former uses a bull (“toro”), the latter refers precisely to an ox (“bue”). Leopardi’s interpretation of Xenophanes’ critique of religious anthropomorphism shifts the original focus ever so slightly from the way in which we imagine the gods to the way in which we relate to our cosmos and its inhabitants. Of course the two concepts are closely interconnected, and it is precisely man’s pretension that triggers both his anthropomorphic imagination of the divine and his conviction of diversity from animal-kind. The mockery of human conceptions – of themselves, of the divine, of other creatures – animates both Xenophanes’ fragment and Leopardi’s dialogues. Although Xenophanes focuses primarily on the relativisation of man’s ability to understand the divine, his fragment B15 nonetheless straightforwardly pairs humans and animals by likening their inability to grasp the nature of the gods. Leopardi’s choice of the horse

Zib. 9 seems to be tightly connected with the Discorso, and thus possibly coeval; Zib. 1469 dates to August 1821, thus either in the same time frame of the two sketches or immediately after it. See Sangirardi (1998) for interpretation of the connection between these passages and the Dialogo di un folletto e di uno gnomo.


B15 from Diels and Kranz (1951-52): ἀλλ’ εἰ χεῖρας ἔχον βόες <ἐπιοι τ’> ἢ λέλοντες/ ἢ γράφαι χείρεσσι καὶ ἔργα τελεῖν ἀπρὸν ἀνθρόπος, / ἐπιοι μὲν 0’ ἐπιοι βόες δὲ δε τι βουσίν ὁμοίας/ καὶ κε θεόν ἴδιας ἐγραφον καὶ σώματ’ ἐποίουν τοιαύτ’ οἶον περ κατ’ ἄνδρες ἔχον <ἐκαστότε>.
B16: Αἴθιοπες τε <θεοὺς σφετέρους> σημοῖο μέλανας τε / Θρήμακες τε γλαυκοῦντες καὶ πυρροῦ <φασι πέλεσθαι>.

On Leopardi, Xenophanes and in general man’s tendency to interpret the universe according to himself, see Negri (1998), 68-75.

Warren (2014), 44: “just as it would be ridiculous to think that horses, say, are right about what the gods are like when they draw equine gods, so too it would be ridiculous to assert that any of the human conceptions are correct”. Cf. Halliwell (2008), 269 n. 13 on Babut (1974), 116-117.
and the ox as representatives of animal-kind channels all the relativising force of Xenophanes’ comparison to transport it into a world which, finally freed of humans, can once and for all prove the utter meaninglessness of man’s self-conceit. To use Deborah Levine Gera’s words, written in relation to Xenophanes but equally apt for Lucian and Leopardi too: “These imaginary animals are good to think with, for they teach us about ourselves, humans.”

5. Il Copernico: Heliocentrism and the Scala Naturae

Perched on the slopes of the volcano, the narrator of La ginestra owes his insights not only to the view from above, granting him perspective onto the world below, but also and especially to the celestial scene above him. The consideration of the true immensity of the stars in contrast with the human perception of their size (little more than dots, says Leopardi) had prompted a spinning mise en abyme reversing man’s fallacious viewpoint and leading to the ultimate and inevitable conclusion that our earth is a punctum, and man is nothing (170-173). The dialogue Il Copernico, composed in 1827, tackles the same theme, playing more closely with the history of man’s ideas and knowledge of the earth and space, and toying with modern man’s unyielding anthropocentrism, seemingly unshaken by the Copernican discoveries about the universe. The scientific premise is enacted in a lively theatrical piece that centres around the Sun’s refusal to labour any longer for the benefit of man, and consequently around Copernicus's visit to the Sun, aimed at subverting the order of things and at getting the lazy Earth to move around the sun instead.

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299 Levine Gera (2000), 41.
300 On Il Copernico, Galimberti (1998b); Giachery (1999); Galluzzi (2001); Di Meo (2001); Bonito (2008).
301 Earlier in the Operette, the theme had been touched upon in Dialogo d’Ercole e di Atlante, cf. Melosi (2015), 513-514 for a quick overview of the development in Leopardi’s use of astronomical knowledge for philosophical enquiry on man; cf. Giachery (1999), 73 on how the theme appears also in the Paralipomeni della Batraciomachia. Leopardi’s interest in astronomy is long lived, as shown by his precocious and dense Storia dell’astronomia (1813). Cf. Lucian’s (and the Icaromenippus’ in particular) influence on Kepler’s Somnium seu opus...de astronomia lunari in Romm (1989); Pantin (2007), 115-128; Ligota and Panizza (2007), 14-15. From Sabnis’ (2008) BMCR review of the latter: “Kepler’s citations of Lucian’s Icaromenippus and Verae Historiae indicate his interest in the scientific underpinnings of fiction; far from misunderstanding the nature of Lucian’s satire, as some have argued, Kepler saw in Lucian a fruitful combination of fictional play and philosophical labor.”
The interplay between the physically elevated point of view offered by the Sun’s abode and the metaphorical detachment that grants Copernicus a clearheaded understanding of the limits of humanity (which is, surely, going to reject the Sun’s plan) creates an ideal background for a lucid observation of mankind’s role in the cosmos. As one would expect, this dialogue weaves together the themes of human animality and human smallness especially tightly. First appearing in the words of the Sun himself – connoted by a diminutive “quattro animaluzzi” and with the miniaturisation of the Earth (“un pugno di fango, tanto piccino, che io, che ho buona vista, non lo arrivo a vedere”), the notion arises once again in the speech by the First Hour, who calls humans “quei poveri animali”.

Besides being a theme common to both the Dialogo di un folletto e di uno gnomo and Il Copernico, human animality connects the two works in one specific way. Let us look at two moments in the two dialogues, starting from the Copernico. Copernicus is, as we were saying, called to the rescue and asked to promote the change in the universe, convincing the Earth that she has to take up what the Sun is now refusing to do. The dialogue plays smilingly and acutely with this subtle confusion between physical and metaphysical, and merges the practical difficulties of lifting and moving the lazy Earth, with the mental challenge involved in revolutionising humans’ self-conception, which is used to thinking of the universe as revolving around the Earth’s throne (“trono”). It is in this setting that the relationship between animals and humans and the insights it offers into human existence come yet again into play, as Copernicus realises what the consequences of the revolutionary transformation that the Sun demands are:

Copernico. […] Ma voglio dire in sostanza, che il fatto nostro non sarà così semplicemente materiale, come pare a prima vista che debba essere; e che gli effetti suoi non appariranno alla fisica solamente: perché esso sconvolgerà i gradi della dignità delle cose, e l’ordine

302 TPP (2013), 586.
303 TPP (2013), 587. Cecchetti (1983), 419. Ibid. the Sun calls the Earth “a small grain of sand”; compare La ginestra vv. 190-191 “in questo oscuro / granel di sabbia, il qual di terra ha nome”.
degli enti; scambierà i fini delle creature; e per tanto farà un grandissimo rivolgimento anche nella metafisica, anzi in tutto quello che tocca alla parte speculativa del sapere. E ne risulterà che gli uomini, se pur sapranno o vorranno discorrere sanamente, si troveranno essere tutt’altra roba da quello che sono stati fin qui, o che si hanno immaginato di essere.  

Let us pause and turn to the Sprite and the Gnome, which we had left as they were busy criticising humanity’s narrow and deluded perspective: men understood and called “their own events world revolutions and the histories of their own peoples world histories”, and believed that “there was no other reason for everything in the world to exist, except for their own personal use”, says the Gnome. Within the space of a few words the discourse returns to animals, epitome of the world’s perfect capability to survive without humans – “those animals, however, that had been created only for their benefit never realised that such world revolutions existed”. The Gnome’s definition of animals is incidental (quite literally squeezed, in the Italian original, in between two commas), yet essential in leading the discourse towards Leopardi’s next point:

*Folletto.* Ma i porci, secondo Crisippo erano pezzi di carne apparecchiati dalla natura a posta per le cucine e le dispense degli uomini, e, acciocché non imputridissero, conditi colle anime in vece di sale.

The change requested by the Sun will turn upside down the order of beings and the “ladder of the dignity of things”, and will “switch the purposes of creatures”. The Sprite’s reference to Chrysippus (fragment *SVF* 2.1154, which Leopardi obtained from Cicero *De Natura Deorum* 2.160) comments ironically on man’s belief that pigs –

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305 *TPP* (2013), 590. Cecchetti (1983), 435. “Copernicus. But I mean to say that this business of ours is not going to be simply material, as it appears at first sight, and that its effects are not going to be restricted to physics, for it will upset all the steps in the ladder of the dignity of things and the order of beings; it will switch the purposes of creatures; and therefore it will cause an extremely great revolution in metaphysics as well – in fact, in everything that touches the speculative side of knowledge. And as a result, if men can or want to reason well, they'll discover that they are something completely different from what they have been until now or from what they have imagined themselves to be.”


308 *TPP* (2013), 509. Cecchetti (1983), 93. “Sprite. But pigs, as Chrysippus believed, were pieces of meat especially prepared by nature for the kitchens and the pantries of men, and to keep them from rotting, they had been dressed with souls rather than with salt.”
symbolising all animals useful to men – are created solely for man’s use.\(^{309}\) The allusion, subtle and nevertheless glaring in the *Copernico*, is clarified by the Sprite’s remark: Leopardi is thinking of the notion of the *scala naturae*.\(^{310}\) Remarkably, neither the presence of this idea nor the fact that it acts as a fundamental link between the two dialogues are noted by some of the latest commentaries on the *Operette*.\(^{311}\) Similarly Alberto Grilli reduces the Sprite’s mention of Chrysippus’ opinion to a mere humoristic note (“un ‘bon mot’”), without further comment.\(^{312}\)

Yet the idea implied in the reference to Chrysippus’ belief about pigs plays an essential part in the critique of anthropocentrism that is so crucial to these two dialogues. It is useful then to mention that we know that Leopardi was familiar with the notion long before both dialogues: the *scala naturae* appears in *Zib.* 2899-2900, dating to 1823 (one year prior to the Sprite and Gnome’s dialogue and four years before the *Copernico*),\(^{313}\) where Leopardi challenges its traditional order, dethroning man from his spot at the peak of the ladder. The challenge to the Stoic belief advanced by Chrysippus and supported at length by Cicero plays a similar overturning role. One of the most striking features of Cicero’s depiction of the universe – aimed at proving that “omnia quae sint in hoc mundo quibus utantur homines hominum causa facta esse et parata”\(^{314}\) – is the almost complete annihilation of every other inhabitant of the earth, where the sole meaningful dwellers are humans and divine beings (*ND* 2.154-155). The blindness of the vision of the Stoics as exposed by Cicero lies precisely in the complete omission of

\(^{309}\) Chrysippus in Arnim (1903), 333, on which Jedan (2009), 27; Cicero *ND* in Ax and Plasberg (1961), 114-115. The entomologist Giorgio Celli has concentrated on the theme from a scientific perspective in his introduction to Leopardi’s *Dialogo di un folletto e di uno gnomo* in Celli (1992), 5-17.

\(^{310}\) Cf. the initial chapter of Arthur O. Lovejoy’s *The great chain of being: a study of the history of an idea* (1960) for the development of the notion from Plato to Aristotle.

\(^{311}\) Galimberti (1998a); Melosi (2015).

\(^{312}\) Grilli (1982), 61 n. 34.

\(^{313}\) Cf. Caesar and D’Intino’s (2013) commentary to *Zib.* 2900.

\(^{314}\) On the Stoics’ faith in the gods’ “special concern for man”, Dragona-Monachou (1976), 154-156 for a discussion of *N.D.* 153ff and 156 on divine providence for humans. Dragona-Monachou (1976), 157 discusses the alternatives objectives for the aim of the creation of the world and lists the fragments that support “the anthropocentric character of providence” (*SVF* 2.1118; 1149; 1152; 1154; 1156; 1157; 1161; 1162; 1163; 1165; etc.). On *SVF* 2.1152-1154, Gould (1970), 156-157. On the ten arguments that Dragona-Monachou (1976) ascribes to Chrysippus (including the one contained in *SVF* 2.1154), Jedan (2009), 21-23. For the link between Chrysippus’ argument and Cleanthes’, see Meijer (2007), 81 n. 446 and 82.
animals, with the one exception, i.e. only to the extent to which they serve man.\footnote{Compare Voltaire’s Sixième Discours of his Discours en vers sur l’homme for animals uttering the idea that the world is made for them, cf. Della Giovanna (1899), 44-45 and Polizzi (2008), 87. On the influence of Voltaire on the Operette, see among others Cellerino (1995), 312-318.} One can think that the Xenophanic relativism that Leopardi so profoundly adopts in his Dialogo tra due bestie – and later in the dialogue of the Sprite and the Gnome – would have something to say about the straightforward connection that men draw between themselves and the gods.

The themes we have been discussing – human pretension and the significance of humans in the universe – are so crucial in Leopardi’s thought as to inform virtually all of his work. Yet, as we have seen, the Copernico and the Dialogo di un folletto e di uno gnomom are especially connected by their use of the idea of human animality as a distinctive and fundamental means of enquiry into such themes. It is in this light and by engaging with and challenging ancient sources that Leopardi ties these two dialogues further together.

The studious and almost scientific attitude by which the Sprite and the Gnome break down the patterns of specifically human behaviours, describe them, and finally contextualise them in the mechanisms of the wider universe characterises the two characters as for-the-time zoologists. Just as a botanist or a zoologist would comment on the disappearance of this or that animal or plant, so the two creatures converse about the utter annihilation of human life. The distance necessary to the external observers in order to perceive the truth about humankind is created by a quasi-scientific detachment that transforms men into the objects, as it were, of a wildlife documentary and the Sprite and the Gnome into the reporters.

Here lies one striking paradox, as the two characters simultaneously have their own specific place in the world (and are as such equal to humans and all animals) and are the external judges of human behaviour. Insofar as they are equal to all other species they should not be allowed such a judgemental say, and even less should they proceed to the conclusion that “the world is made for the gnomes” (TPP 509) or for the sprites – or,
again, and even more explicitly, for horses or bulls, as in the *Dialogo tra due bestie.* Against this background the distance between humans and the little creatures created by Leopardi’s fantasy fades and invites the reader to question the architecture of the operetta.

One answer – which is not intended to be either conclusive or exclusive – could be that the underlying moral is that every time someone puts himself in the position of humans (that of judging and establishing a hierarchy) he falls into the same detrimental lack of objectivity that men famously display. Thinking like men leads astray, and the paradoxical notion provided by the Sprite and the Gnome means to question more than to solve, thus encapsulating and symbolising the bias and precariousness of man’s outlook on the world. Of course, even this reading is at last obliterated (or, perhaps, reinforced?) by humour, since the ultimate voice, Leopardi, is a man himself. Many of Lucian’s dialogues end on similarly inconclusive paradoxes: in one case in particular it is the very notion of man’s ability to look at the world from an (enlightening and laughter-provoking) distance which is presented and yet destroyed within the space of a piece, the *Icaromenippus*. The flying Menippus is granted a removed view of the earth, but this prerogative is to last but briefly: soon Zeus is to strip him of his wings and send him back down to earth. As Stephen Halliwell suggests, “As the mythologically loaded title of Lucian’s work, *Icaromenippus* (‘Icarus-Menippus’), implicitly makes clear (with its evocation of a fateful fall back to earth), the person who tries to laugh at the whole of life cannot really transcend the human viewpoint for long.”

\[316\] *TPP* (2013), 611.
\[317\] Cf. Sangirardi (2000), 63-65 on the paradox of having childish and unauthoritative judges to speak of the human folly and delusion in the *Operette*, as part of the “carattere sottilmente autoironico dell’invenzione mitologica”.
\[318\] Cf. Blasucci (2003), 89 for another explanation, suggesting that Leopardi believed that all animal species thought of themselves as the target of creations. I deem such an explanation untenable: although some evidence (like *Zib.* 390, from 1820, quoted by Blasucci) seems to support it, it is obvious from the whole of Leopardi’s following production that he thought of man as the only creature to hold such hubristic views of the world. Blasucci also interprets Xenophanes B15 as supporting this theory, offering an awkward reading of the fragment that makes it into a statement about animals rather than about humans.
\[319\] Halliwell (2008), 430.
III
(Speaking) Animals and the Human Condition

Denn der Mensch ist kränker, unsicherer, wechselnder, unfeststellter als irgend ein Thier sonst, daran ist kein Zweifel, — er ist das kranke Thier: woher kommt das?

F. Nietzsche, Zur Genealogie der Moral, 3.13

1. Life of Men, Life of Animals: Lucian’s Gallus

The very Schopenhauerian note that extends from page 2411 to 2414 of the Zibaldone outlines, according to Leopardi’s own theory of pleasure, the proportionality between a being’s self-love (described also as the being’s inner life, and the activity of his mind) and the unhappiness of such a creature. It follows that since man is the creature that has the greatest intensity of life and self-love, he is also the one that is born the unhappiest of all other living creatures. Such belief is crystallised by Leopardi in a gnomic statement:

Quindi l’uomo per essenza propria e inseparabile, è, e nasce più infelice, o meno capace di felicità che verun altro genere di viventi, o di esseri.\(^\text{321}\) (Zib. 2412)

The sentence starkly separates from an ontological point of view (“per essenza propria e inseparabile”) man and every other living being on the grounds of their different chances of happiness. The exploration of the various aspects adumbrated here – Leopardi’s theory of pleasure, his evolving conception of the condition of humans within nature, and again his understanding of the differences between men’s and other creatures’ approach to emotion, reason, and life – would require far more space than is allowed here. My focus for this last section of this chapter is thus more confined, being concerned once again with the ways in which animals can variously offer insight into humans. So far, we have seen animals acting as (direct or indirect) detectors and indicators of the real place of humans in the cosmos. In this section, we wish to look at

\(^{320}\) Colli and Montinari (1968), 385.

\(^{321}\) “Hence man by his own inseparable essence is, and is born, more unhappy, or less capable of happiness, than any other type of living creature or being.”
animals insofar as they (directly or indirectly) tell us something about the nature of human life, and the human condition.

Two texts will act as our guides through this brief probe into the statement of Leopardi quoted above, in the belief that they can help us grasp more of its subtle subtext. The first is Lucian’s *Gallus*. Awoken halfway through a beautiful dream by his rooster, the cobbler Mycillus realises that the animal is chatting to him with the voice and propriety of a human being. The main plot of the dialogue is simple, rotating on the one hand around Mycillus’ yearning for the life of the rich, and on the other hand around the Rooster’s personal story, involving multiple reincarnations, from Pythagoras, Euphorbus, and Aspasia, to a variety of animals. The two stories intersect as the characters discuss the best type of life, and the Rooster attempts to convince the cobbler – both through arguments and via incognito trips to the houses of a number of rich individuals – that the life of the wealthy is not enviable after all.

The dialogue is certainly remarkable for our purposes by virtue of the fact that it features an animal in the educational role of the giver of wisdom. The Rooster is the ἐπίσκοπος, and an enhanced version of it at that: his multiple lives – crossing genders and even kinds – offer him an extraordinary detached perspective, and, consequently, more profound insights, that he variously employs to instruct Mycillus. Undoubtedly, a lot of wisdom comes to the Rooster from some of the human lives he has lived, which have supplied him with the direct experience to back up some of his arguments. But we would be mistaken if we thought that this is all, and that the body of a rooster is merely a rhetorical device to contain pieces of human knowledge. Instead, Lucian’s stress on the animal side of things is paramount throughout the dialogue.

Not only has the Rooster lived several lives as animal, but he has now been a rooster multiple times (*Gall. 20*). Eventually, we discover, it is precisely his experience of life

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322 The Rooster (like the Homeric horses that he uses as a reference to Mycillus for the fact that speaking animals are nothing new, *Gall. 2*) speaks like a human (ἄνθρωπινος ἐλάλησεν). Cf. Heath (2005), 40;49 for discussion of *Il. 19.407* (also referencing Chrysippus *SVF* 2.144 for a description of the Homeric horses as speaking in human fashion); *ibid. 49* on the fact that “Achilles’ horses are granted a human voice (*auden*) but we hear nothing of noos.”
as an animal that grants him the ability to judge other kinds of existence. To this judgement and explanation the Rooster turns once he has introduced himself fully: the life of the poor, knows the Rooster, is better than that of the rich (Gall. 21), as the latter are constantly preoccupied with not losing their wealth. Even the epitome of the enviable life, that of the king, is demystified and demythologised by the Rooster, who has tried it for himself. Rather than πανευδαιμόν (Gall. 24) as Mycillus imagines it, the life of the king is a bundle of anxiety, duties, and worries. It becomes increasingly clear that the Rooster has one major parameter for judging types of existence, which is the degree of preoccupation or freedom from it that they entail. The root and origin of this μέτρον becomes strikingly apparent at Gall. 27, as the Cobbler asks the Rooster – who has at this point compared the lives of the poor, the rich, and the king – how life as an animal compares to life as a human:

οὐδεὶς δότις οὐκ ἀπραγμονέστερος τῶν βίων ἔδοξε μοι τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

The question, says the Rooster, should be answered in greater detail, but in short every one of the animals he has embodied has an easier existence than man. The life of animals (presented last, not by chance, after those of the poor, of the rich, and of the king) is the μέτρον from which the Rooster-ἐπίσκοπος can look at and judge human life. Something more can be said if one considers the Rooster’s definition and conception of life as one of the dialogue’s allusions to Herodotus.

Herodotean seems to be, for example, the Rooster’s allusion to Mycillus’ previous life as a gold-digging ant (Gall. 16). But most Herodotean of all is the question arching over the entire dialogue – what is the best life? – reminding us of the dialogue between Croesus (a rich man and a king, no less) with Solon (a philosopher, one of the lives of the Rooster). And although in Herodotus the question is differently posed (who is the

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323 Cf. Lucian’s Timon for the same theme.
324 In Lucian also at Sar. 24. Hdt. 3.102-105 on which McCartney (1954); Karttunen (1989), 171ff with previous bibliography; Pigoń (2008), 19-22.
325 The episode (and its significance for Herodotus’ conception of the divine) has been vastly debated, and the passage has been variously connected to other places in the Histories (esp. the speech of Artabanus at 7.10e.1). Of the vast bibliography, cf. the commentary of Asheri (2007), 93-104; Lloyd (1987); Cairns (1996); Griffin (2006); Versnel (2011), 179-187; ibid. 182 n.73 for earlier
ολβιώτατος man? 1.30.2) and the criteria for Solon’s various responses are more subtle and controversial, we still find in their conversation a comparison between the immensely wealthy Croesus and the average man Tellus, which ends in favour of the latter to the utmost surprise and outrage of the former. Indeed, Lucian has his Mycillus inquire about the life of the king, which he imagines to be πανευδαίμων (Gall. 24), while in Herodotus Croesus’ (impressive) εὐδαιμονίη (1.32.1-2) had not been enough to grant him a place in Solon’s list.

Puzzling choices as they may be, Solon’s ολβιώτατοι are all humans. Lucian introduces one further element, animals, going smilingly one step beyond Herodotus, and uses one of them to illustrate the misery common (albeit to different degrees) to all possible nuances of the human condition: the best life, one deduces, is anything but human life, which, even at its best, is ridden with preoccupation and anxiety. The formulation’s litotes emphasises a concept that could have been conveyed more plainly (“every animal....” or “the life of every animal...”). Within it Lucian nests the term ἀπράγμωνεστέρος, in itself the negation of what follows the initial alpha privativum: ἀπράγμων encapsulates the opposite of what man is, making human life all about things, necessity of action, and, eventually, trouble. Leopardi read the Gallus in July 1824, too late for it to bear a direct influence on Zib. 2412, but early enough to impact on many of the Operette: and although the Talmudic sources for Leopardi’s Cantico del gallo silvestre (dating to November 1824) have been thoroughly identified and discussed, it would seem odd that Leopardi’s wild rooster – prophetically announcing at dawn the unhappiness of life to mortals – was not at least partially a recollection of the Lucianic animal who had so clearly illustrated the hardship of the greater part of human existence.

bibliography; the doctoral and post-doctoral work of Anthony B. Ellis – in Ellis (2013) and id. (2015) – to whom I am greatly indebted for a clearer understanding of the logos of Croesus and its implication for Herodotean theology.

326 Chapter 4 discusses Cleobis and Biton, the two precociously deceased youths picked by Solon at 1.31.1.

327 On the Gallus, cf. Herchenroeder (2008), 370, who considers it an example of works on “animals with superior intelligence and the ability to speak” used “as satiric foils for deficiencies in human behavior”.

328 In agreement with me, Bonanno (2006), 60-70 who convincingly comments on the many similarities (among them the sweet dream at the beginning of each work, and the philosophical penchant of both roosters). Briefly also Ronzitti (2012), 58. Mattioli (1982), 93 reckons differently: “L’unico punto di
The comparative with which the Rooster describes human life is ἀπραγμονέστερος. To conclude this chapter, and as a further commentary to the Zibaldone passage with which I began this section, I pause for a moment on two other comparatives, that, albeit of diametrically different connotations from the Rooster’s, are equally informative of the differences between the human and animal condition. The passages are famous: the first comes from the speech of Zeus as he looks at the mourning horses of Achilles at Iliad 17.442-447; the second from that of Odysseus at Od. 18.130-137. Significantly, the horses of Achilles – and more specifically the moment at which one of them, Xanthos, becomes a “speaking animal” at Il. 19.408-417 – appear at the very onset of the Gallus (2), as the Rooster explains to his bewildered master that speaking animals are not something extraordinary, and that Homer himself described Xanthos’ speech.

Away from the battlefield, Achilles’ horses learn of the death of Patroclus (17.426-428). The narrative slows down to dwell at considerable length (17.426-440) on the reaction of the pair: the horses in fact start crying (κλαῖον at 427 and δάκρυα θερμά κατὰ βλεφάρων at 437-438). One striking detail about this rather surprising scene is that the reader is given a dual perspective on what is happening. On the one hand there is the narrator’s description of the horses’ reaction; on the other hand there is Zeus’ speech to the pair that serves as a commentary on the scene we have just witnessed. Zeus is touched with pity for the two horses and addresses them (17.443-447):

ἀ δειλώ, τί σφόδρο δόμον Πηλῆ ἄνακτι
θνητῷ, ὑμᾶς δ’ ἐστόν ἀγήρῳ τ’ ἀθανάτῳ τε;

contatto fra i due testi è che in tutti e due i casi si ha un gallo provvisto di parola”. On the Hebraic sources cf. Melosi’s (2015) commentary and, among others, Felici (2005). Perfetti (2013), 33: “the philosophical reader cannot but think that this Cock endowed with reason, placed between heaven and earth, is the post-human replacement of the former role of the centrality of man so widespread in philosophical literature”; ibid. 42 on the similarities between the views of the Gallo silvestre and the Dialogo di un folletto e di uno gnomo.

Throughout, in splendidly absurd Lucianic fashion, the dialogue is fraught with literary references, channelled both by the wise (and ex-philosopher!) Rooster and by the supposedly ignorant Mycillus (cf. Gall. 2).

On the horses of Achilles, Harrison (1991) albeit only on the horses as symbol of Homer’s allegiance in the war; Heath (1992) on the horses in connection with other divine gifts.
The passage makes synergic use of multiple elements in order to define human nature and the human condition. Partaking in the same scene we have the divine, immortal and all-knowing; the human, both in the person of dead Patroclus and of the human throng that crowds the battlefield; ultimately we have the animals, who are in this case endowed with a special status that makes them closer to the divine, and yet still representing by contrast the idea of non-sentient creatures.\textsuperscript{331} In the face of death these animals are able to have profound insight into the despair of the human condition, to the point of awakening Zeus' pity with their tears.\textsuperscript{332} Zeus is thus prompted to cry out about the peculiar – and miserable – nature of man's existence. Such is the degree of man's misery that Zeus feels sorry to have sent another creature to witness it and mingle with some of that sorrow (443-445).\textsuperscript{333} Man is διζυρώτερος\textsuperscript{334}, more woeful, more miserable than every single one of them. It is interesting to notice that the adjective διζυρός appears very early on in both epics to describe the respective protagonists. It is used for Achilles at II. 1.417 and for Odysseus at Od. 3.95: in both cases there is great emphasis on the hero’s bond with sorrow (Achilles is διζυρός περὶ πάντων and Telemachus says of Odysseus that περὶ γάρ μιν διζυρόν τέκε μήτηρ), making the two epics the tales of two exceptional sufferings among the ubiquitous suffering of mankind.\textsuperscript{335}

\textsuperscript{331} Heath (2005), 40 and n. 5 for horses’ association with “death and fate” and bibliography on the subject.

\textsuperscript{332} Patroclus’ death is par excellence the symbol of the human mind’s failure at grasping the bigger picture of life; Achilles fooled himself into believing that his twofold wish would have been granted by Zeus (II. 18.74-77) and the thwarting of part of it teaches him about the unpredictability (and shortsightedness) inherent in human life, a theme expressed elsewhere in the Iliad (cf. 17.201-208 and 18.361-367.)

\textsuperscript{333} Edwards (1991), 107: “We may compare the happy life of Poseidon’s horses, whose master is immortal (12.23-38)”. Heath (1992), 389-390 “the painful juxtaposition of an immortal gift of the gods (Thetis) and the tragedy of mortality (both Peleus’ natural but deserted senescence and Achilles’ precipitate race towards death) […].”

\textsuperscript{334} In both cases the exceptionality of the hero’s sorrow is connected with his coming into existence (and more specifically with the act of being given birth by his mother).

\textsuperscript{335} Cf. Halliwell (2011), 3 on the fact that Telemachus' remark to Penelope at 1.354-355 that it was not just Odysseus who encountered a sorrowful destiny in the nostoi “suggests that the truth in question is more a matter of the “human condition” than of any individual life.”
of speech, and it is Zeus, and not the horse, who gnomically describes the human condition. And yet, can we not think of the horses’ tears as being themselves a statement about the human condition, powerful enough to prompt Zeus’ pity and reflection?

At the beginning of *Odyssey* 18, Odysseus gets in a fight with the beggar Irus. The suitors stand and watch the fight, loudly cheering and mocking. Odysseus wins and is congratulated by some of the suitors, among them Amphinomus, who wishes Odysseus good fortune for his future (χαῖρε, πάτερ ὦ ξεῖνε· γένοιτο τοι ἐξ περ ὀπίσσω / ὀλβος· ἀτάρ μὲν νῦν γε κακόσ’ ἐχει απόλλεσσε, 122-123). Amphinomus’ wish centres on the opposing ideas of ὀλβος and κακά and expresses the positive side of the notion of the instability of human fortune: in the same way in which Odysseus has obtained his present state of suffering, he may well gain happiness in the future.336

Odysseus’ response tackles a twofold objective. On the one hand, he very practically wants to encourage Amphinomus to leave, so as to save him from the forthcoming slaughter.337 On the other hand, however, Odysseus feels he has to engage with the theoretical premise of the suitor’s wish, and the two aims are skilfully merged in one speech.338 As he responds, Odysseus shifts the focus ever so slightly: it is not the alternation in itself, nor the divine causation behind it, but rather the way the human mind interprets man’s rotating destiny.

οὐδὲν ἀκιδνότερον γαῖα τρέφει ἀνθρώποι
[πάντων, ὅσσα τε γαῖαν ἐπὶ πνεῖει τε καὶ ἐρπεῖ.]
οὐ μὲν γὰρ ποτὲ φησὶ κακὸν πεῖσθαι ὀπίσσω,
ὅρφ’ ἀρετὴν παρέχοσι θεοὶ καὶ γονάντ’ ὀρόφη;

336 It should be noted that this expression of faith in the optimistic possibilities of the future does not straightforwardly entail the belief in some form of justice in the way human affairs are brought about: as Jenny Clay’s insightful chapter on the double theodicy of the Odyssey has shown, the idea of divine justice normally finds expression, as here, in the abstract context of wishes and prayers. Note how the wish for good fortune only refers to the future, as the present is full of woes. Apropos of the Odyssey’s faith in the gods’ good will towards men see Clay (1983), 221ff, as she suggests that this wishful attitude is only ever visible in wishes or prayers (expressed in the optative) and never in factual statements (expressed in the indicative).

337 Clay (1983), 228.

338 Brilliantly analysed by Clay, ibid.
The fact that the gods bestow both good and evil upon men is stated matter-of-factly at 133-134; such divine power and freedom have been often spoken about in the course of the Homeric poems, in some cases with more specific reference to the amount of good and evil that befall humans. What Odysseus cares to concentrate on here, however, is man’s inability to appreciate both the actual internal workings of such alternation of fortunes and the very fact that such rotation is a key component of his existence. The nature of man’s intellect (described in vv. 136-137) prompts him to disregard all possible future woes at the time at which he is given good things from the gods (132-133), woes that he will inevitably be forced to face once the wheel turns.

In the passage from *Iliad* book 17 the presence and the attitude of the horses brings animals into the limelight, as it is their grief that triggers Zeus’ consideration. In both cases animals are the *comparandum* for man’s condition: man is ὀϊζυρώτερον (more miserable) and ἀκιδνότερον (feebler) than all other creatures.

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339 Leopardi could read the passage also at *Cons. Ap.* 104d-e.
340 We briefly discussed this in Chapter I II.2 and will tackle it again at Chapter 4 II.1.
341 On the concept behind ἐπ’ ἡμαρ ἄγησι, Russo et al. (1992), 56 and Chapter 3 in this thesis.
342 See the discussion apropos of the term *ephemeros* in Chapter 3.
343 Fénelon’s dialogue *Ulysses et Grillus* tackles the very theme of the difference between life as humans and life as beasts, with Gryllus promoting the advantages of animal life, while Odysseus sides with human reason. Just as in Lucian’s *Gallus*, Fénelon presents a being who, once a human, prefers life as an animal; the grounds for such choice are again similar to the Rooster’s characterisation of animal life as ἀπράγμον compared to that of man. The hog-Gryllus goes a little further: his life as an animal has given him insight on something that not even the cunning Odysseus perceives, which is that the entirety of man’s claims to happiness and privilege is an illusion and nothing but a shade: “Ne me parlez plus de l’humanité ; sa noblesse n’est qu’imaginaire; tous ses maux sont réels, et ses biens ne sont qu’en idée”, says Gryllus (at Fénelon (1917), 138). Of course Fénelon’s dialogue is a close reinterpretation of Plutarch’s *Gryllus*, on which Herchenroeder (2008), who provides bibliography on the dialogue. Yet whereas Plutarch seems concerned with the features that make beasts better than humans (for example courage, *Mor. Bruta* 987f.; see Herchenroeder (2008), 360 and 364; and 369 for his idea that Gryllus’ argument is basically a “typical expression of the Golden Age theme”), Fénelon, like the *Gallus*, focuses especially on which life is to be considered best.
344 Russo et al. (1992), 55 on ἀκιδνότερον, the rarity of the term and the other occurrences within the *Odyssey*. 

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human condition, but both aspects are the two faces of the same coin. Man is weak and foolish enough to hope for the best, as Odysseus describes, and not to see the worst that will inevitably come, as the situation faced by Achilles’ horses well displays. Man’s feebleness is increased by his sensitivity, and when the worst strikes the blow can be made harsher by the recollection of previous hope, as in the case of Achilles’ shock at realising that part of his wish to Zeus had been thwarted, and that Patroclus would not come back alive.\footnote{Edwards (1991), 107: “It is man’s […] awareness of his mortality which makes him more wretched than they.”}

The idea that unhappiness is inherent in, and inextricable from, human existence is at the core of both Leopardi’s note and the two Homeric passages. Leopardi’s “per essenza propria e inseparabile” marks this peculiarity just as the comparatives (ἀκιδνότερον, ὀϊζυρώτερον) do in the Homeric Greek. Odysseus and Leopardi arrive, from different perspectives, to the same distinction: humans and the rest of living beings are irremediably apart when it comes to their condition in the world and the attainability of happiness. For Odysseus the cause of the gulf that separates men and other creatures is the limits of human knowledge (especially regarding one’s own destiny), a notion otherwise very dear to Leopardi, who used it profusely, not least in his translation of Semonides, as we shall see in Chapter 3. For Leopardi it is instead the tendency inherent in man’s self-love to hold wishes (or one could say hopes) for his own existence, provoked and galvanised by the greater sensitivity of the human species. Yet the conclusion is similar: man is born with consciousness and intellect surpassing all other creatures, but such intellect stimulates man to pursue destiny beyond the capabilities of his mind, and to sorely feel the restrictions placed on his will to live and on his striving towards happiness. Not limited enough to lack the need to inspect his own existence, as animals do, and yet too far from attaining to the level of the divine, this is the specificity of the human condition.

I have brought together these passages in the belief that they can help us to grasp the deepest nuances not only of the note at Zib. 2412, but also of the entirety of Leopardi’s conception of the human condition within the cosmos. A passage from a later work –
the *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, written five years after the 1822 note – corroborates the possibility that at least one of these Homeric passages is directly at the origin of *Zib.* 2412. Centred around Plotinus’ discovery that Porphyry has been contemplating suicide and his decision to confront his friend about it, the dialogue has its emotional peak in Porphyry’s attack on Plato, triggered by Plotinus’ mention of Plato’s thoughts about suicide.\(^{346}\) Porphyry’s passionate attack is rooted in the belief that, having persuaded man that the afterlife may contain punishment and suffering – possibly according to one’s behaviour during life – Plato has led man to “fear the port more than the tempest”, i.e. to fear death rather than life. Life, instead, is the tempest, and Porphyry is keen to describe in full the nature of this life he has thought about renouncing, and the inescapable unhappiness inherent in it. In Leopardi’s hands, Porphyry the philosopher not only resorts to a poet to find adequate description of the misery of existence, but turns more precisely to that antichissimo Homer, whose role as the educator of Greece Platonic thought had long tried to attain.\(^{347}\)

“[…] tu vedi, Platone, quanto o la natura o il fato o la necessità, o qual si sia potenza autrice e signora dell’universo, è stata ed è perpetuamente inimica alla nostra specie. Alla quale molte, anzi innumerabili ragioni potranno contendere quella maggioranza che noi, per altri titoli, ci arroghiamo di avere tra gli animali; ma nessuna ragione si troverà che le tolga quel principato che l’antichissimo Omero le attribuiva; dico il principato della infelicità.”

The passage is bitterly sarcastic: the only superiority of which man can boast over other creatures is the distinctive misery inbred in his existence. This time Homer is *explicitly* chosen directly as the authoritative spokesman of man’s uniqueness, a uniqueness that Leopardi has by this point in time explored multifariously in both the *Canti* and

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\(^{346}\) On Leopardi’s “manipulation” of the ideas of the protagonists see Galimberti (1998b), 455-456. Galimberti nonetheless recalls how some of these notions can be authentically traced back to the characters (the case in point is Plotinus *Enn.* 2.9, 18, where the philosopher invites to “rimanere nella casa del corpo finché giunga il termine della partenza”).


\(^{348}\) *TPP* (2013), 593. Cecchetti (1983), 449: “You see, Plato, how much Nature, Fate, necessity, or whatever the power that is the author and the ruler of the universe has been and is a perpetual enemy of our species. Many, indeed, innumerable reasons, may dispute that supremacy, which, by other titles, we claim for ourselves over all animals; but no reason will be found to strip us of that preeminence which most ancient Homer attributed to us: the preeminence of unhappiness.” On Leopardi and Platone, among others, cf. Trabattoni (1999).
Operette. It is a path that goes from (at least) as early as 1820, the year of the Dialogo tra due bestie, to 1827 with the Copernico, and beyond. Over the course of time and experience the comparatives of Zib. 2412 (“più infelice, o meno capace di felicità”) which described the distance between humans and animals become Porphyry’s enraged and spiteful “pre-eminence”, the only superlative man is entitled to, and, at the very same time, the core of his own ineluctable sorrow.
CHAPTER 3

Oἴη περ φύλλων γενεῆ: Ancient Ideas of Ephemerality

Das Leben und die Träume sind Blätter eines und des nämlichen Buches. Das Lesen im Zusammenhang heißt wirkliches Leben. [...] Nimmt man nun den Standpunkt der Beurtheilung außerhalb Beider an, so findet sich in ihrem Wesen kein bestimmter Unterschied, und man ist genöthigt, den Dichtern zuzugeben, daß das Leben ein langer Traum sei.

Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* 349

Quando questa musica suona, noi sappiamo che i compagni, fuori nella nebbia, partono in marcia come automi; le loro anime sono morte e la musica li sospinge, come il vento le foglie secche, e si sostituisce alla loro volontà.

Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* 350

“Si sta come d’autunno sugli alberi le foglie”. 351 Giuseppe Ungaretti’s *Soldati*, written from the front-line of the First World War, laconically yet powerfully captures the precarious character of the lives of the soldiers by comparing them to autumnal leaves. Composed in July 1918, it is only one in a large constellation of literary works that employ this comparison; resurfacing at different times in a variety of literary, geographical, and cultural contexts, the simile that compares humans and leaves crosses the history of Western literature. To the leaves of the forest Percy Bysshe Shelley compares both his own life and his thoughts in *Ode to the West Wind* (1819), and in a similar manner leaves are both Nashtenka’s present dreams and her earthly existence in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *White Nights* (1848). 352 The sight of the shedding autumnal trees triggers Rainer Maria Rilke’s realisation that, just like the leaves, we humans fall too (*Herbst*, 1902). 353 The comparison with the falling leaves of Autumn offers Baron Taittinger (the somewhat oblivious character of Joseph Roth’s 1939 *Die Geschichte von Herbst*). 354

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350 Levi (2014), 44.
351 In Piccioni (1970), 87.
352 Shelley in Buxton Forman (1882), 290-293. Dostoevsky in Heinemann (1918), 22-23.
353 In Zinn and Sieber-Rilke (1955), 400. Cf. Schier (1967) on Rilke’s poem and Hölderlin’s *Die Eichbäume*. 
But far from being a creation of modernity, this trope has a lively history in the literary works of ancient Greece (and Rome). The life of the simile begins with the *Iliad*, where the trope comes up twice, first in the words of the warrior Glauclus at *Iliad* 6.146-149 and then in the god Apollo’s speech to Poseidon at *Iliad* 21.462-467. A fragment preserved by Clement of Alexandria (*Strom. 6.5*) attributes the same comparison to the mythical poet Musaeus. Lyric poetry variously elaborates on the idea, from the direct reference to the Homeric passage contained in Simonides fr. 8 W² to Mimnermus’ comparison of men and leaves in fr. 2. The simile appears again in Bacchylides *Ep*. 5.63-67, where it is used for men who are already dead: it is their souls which resemble the leaves moved by the wind on Mount Ida.

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355 Other comparisons of (groups of) men with leaves are *Iliad* 2.467-468; *Iliad* 2.800-801.

356 Cf. fr. 5DK in Diels and Kranz (1951-2), 23: Πάλιν τοῦ Μουσιαίου ποιήσαντος: ὃς δ’ αὐτός καὶ φύλλα φεύ ζείδισκος ἄνουρη· ἄλλα μὲν ἐν μέλησιν ἀποφίνει, ἄλλα δὲ φεύ· ὃς δὲ καὶ ἀνθρώπων γενεάς καὶ φύλλον ἔλισει; on it, cf. Piccaluga (1980), 248 and n. 27, elaborating on the pre-existing theme of the “comune origine, dagli alberi, degli uomini e delle foglie, soggetti perciò, sia gli uni che le altre, ad un medesimo destino di morte” and Burgess (2001), 125.

357 Mimnermus’ long comparison starting with ἡμᾶς δ’, οἶα τε φύλλα in West (1992), 85-86.


359 These are not the only sources to employ the trope. For a list of occurrences in the works of Homer and Hesiod cf. Burgess (2001), 190-192. Cf. Babut (1971), who compares Simonides 8 W, Simonides 1 W², and Mimnermus 2 W²; Shannon (1975), 47f.; Redfield (1975), whose focus on the insignificance of the species will be dealt with in the epilogue to this chapter; Lowry (1995), who lists the various scholarly interpretations of the trope in *Iliad* 6 up to his days; Sider (1996). Another interesting appearance of the simile is Aristophanes *Aves* 685: φύλλων γενεά προσόμοιοι, on which Dunbar (1995), 429 commenting that the passage describes “the weakness and transience of human life in contrast to that of the gods”; note also skoomdá in 686 and ἕρμηριοι at 687, terms to which I come back later in the chapter. An interesting passage is Lucian *Charon* 19, referencing Homer’s simile: Οὐδὲν χάρον σὺ τοῦ Ὀμήρου εἴκασας, ὦ Χάρων, ὃς φύλλος τὸ γένος αὐτῶν ὁμοίοι.
But going back to Soldati, rather than simply representing one late-blooming example of the use of the simile, Ungaretti’s poem exemplifies well two possible attitudes towards the origin of this trope. Did the simile resurface from memories of Ungaretti’s school and university years, or did it emerge independently in the mind of the young soldier – who was in fact fighting in the trenches of the wood of Courton in those very months? Is it a reminiscence of the many literary works that employed it, or is it triggered by the soldier’s observation of the human condition and the existence of the leaves surrounding him? The question is, in short, whether we are dealing with the spontaneous generation of an idea or instead with cases of literary reception or allusion. The presence of this trope as early as the first text of Western civilization (Homer’s Iliad) has often led interpreters to read occurrences of the trope as examples of literary reception.\(^{360}\) The opposite has been argued as well: focusing exclusively on ancient Greek literature, which contains already many different takes on the simile, Jonathan S. Burgess suggests that the repeated recurrence of the motif is not a case of literary allusion or reception, but instead an example of the liveliness of a “commonplace”.\(^{361}\)

In many cases, such as the ones listed above, it is hard if not impossible to establish the source of the trope, and most of all to grasp whether the author intended the reader to be aware of a source. Giacomo Leopardi’s use of it, however, is a completely different story. The image of the leaves as a comparison for humankind is strongly present and has a complex history in his works and thought, but what is especially striking about Leopardi’s use of this trope is that throughout his work he makes sure the reader knows that his use of the simile originates from ancient literature. This chapter explores Leopardi’s study, interpretation, and re-use of this motif in the turn of years between 1823 and 1827, a period that sees Leopardi returning over and over again to the Greek conception of human life as embodied both in the simile of the leaves, and, similarly, by the Greek term ἐφήμερος. Although some publications have tackled aspects of, or moments in, this long process, no work has explored this theme thoroughly; in particular, as this chapter clarifies repeatedly, scholars have for the most part failed to engage properly or at all with the Greek texts involved in their own rights: this has

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\(^{360}\) Cf. Burgess (2001), 119 n. 252 for a list of scholars who believe in Mimnermus’ debt to Homer (and in the idea of reception of the trope). Also, Laurenti (1964), 91; Privitera (1970), 70.

\(^{361}\) Burgess (2001), 121.
resulted in a lack of exploration in the best cases, and in real inaccuracies in others.\footnote{362 The works of Gigante (1998) and Randino (2000) are the remarkable exceptions, engaging soundly with the Greek material in its own right.} This chapter aims thus both at correcting past imprecisions and, most of all, at tackling the yet unexplored connections between the Greek texts and their poetic descriptions of human life and Leopardi’s work. Through Leopardi, I hope to shed some light on the meanings and implications of these motifs in their ancient context.

I

**Leopardi and the Trope of the Leaves: from the First Homeric Readings to the Simonidean Translations (1809-1824)**

That Leopardi read and re-read the Homeric poems as a child is no secret.\footnote{363 Cf. Timpanaro (2008), 16.} Even before he started to learn ancient Greek around 1813, he had pored over the two epics: his first attempt at poetry is the 1809 sonnet *La morte di Ettore*, in which an Iliadic theme serves the purpose of challenging the young poet’s imagination.\footnote{364 Cf. Leopardi’s *Indici delle opere composte da Giacomo Leopardi compilati da lui stesso*, in *TPP* (2013), 317 and cf. *ibid.*, 1036.} Written between 1815 and 1816, his translations of the pseudo-Homeric *Batrachomyomachia* and the first book of the *Odyssey* are some of his earliest from Greek.\footnote{365 Cf. Timpanaro (2008), 19; 101. That Leopardi chose to translate the *Odyssey* ought not to lead one to believe he was less acquainted with the *Iliad*. By the time Leopardi was writing, Vincenzo Monti’s famous translation of the *Iliad* had already been published, but Italy lacked a translation of the *Odyssey*. The introductory lines to his translation are testimony to the fine philological and linguistic skills of the young Leopardi, in *TPP* (2013), 422-423.} More detailed evidence about Leopardi’s acquaintance with the Homeric epics is available starting from the following year, as he begins his *Zibaldone*, between July and August 1817: some of its very first pages, tackling the aim of the “belle arti”, compare Achilles and Aeneas and their role within the respective epics.\footnote{366 *Zib. 2.*} From several details in this note (*Zib. 2*) one can perceive the degree of ease and familiarity between the 19 year-old Giacomo and the subject matter – and interpretation – of the *Iliad*. The page is written in the nonchalant tone of someone who deals with familiar topics: the present Leopardi writing the note to the future Leopardi possesses an already advanced degree of reflection on the two poems that can only come from intense reading and perusing.
That Leopardi read and knew the Homeric simile that links men and leaves, a simile twice present in the *Iliad* (6.146-149 and 21.462-467), is confirmed – if ever proof was needed – by a note (Zib. 3276) dating to August 1823, where he comments on the very Iliadic passage that contains the first trope of the leaves. The note does not directly comment on the trope, and in fact uses the Iliadic episode only as an *exemplum* of the “blindness” with which young people freely and selflessly offer their generosity and empathy: similar blindness must have taken Glaucus when he decided to exchange his golden armour for Diomedes’ copper one. Yet, it is precisely this year that opens to a period of intense engagement with the complex and fascinating set of ideas behind the Iliadic simile of the leaves.

Around the same period in which this *Zibaldone* note was written, Leopardi was working on the translations of a number of Greek works which he labels *Volgarizzamenti di alcuni versi morali dal greco*. He himself places these translations between the end of 1823 and the beginning of 1824, somewhat overlapping with the beginning of the composition of the *Operette*, which will start in January 1824. The *Volgarizzamenti* are the poetic translations of a handful of Greek verses by scoptic or comic poets: Archilochus, Alexis, Amphis, Euboulus, and Eupolis. Originally part of this group were two poems by (so Leopardi thought) the same Simonides of Ceos who inspired his *Canzone all’Italia*. We now know that whereas number XLI *Dello stesso* is in fact a translation of the version of Simonides of Ceos fr. 8 W which Leopardi read in the version preserved by Stobaeus, number XL *Dal greco di Simonide* is instead

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367 *TPP* (2013), 1040.
368 Cf. Orlando (1973), 927.
369 On these two translations see Di Benedetto (1967); Orlando (1973), 926-937; De Robertis (1978), 512; Pasquini (1984); Gigante (1998); Randino (2000) on XLI; Sole (2001); Lonardi (2005), 205ff. Carella (2010), 176-196 whose work on the two Simonidean translations is highly derivative from Gigante (1998); Stasi (2010); the short and not in depth section by Presti (2016), 205-210 on XLI.
370 Stobaeus is mentioned in the *Zibaldone* as early as Zib. 501 (1821) and then again in the passages listed in *TPP* (2013), 2635 s.v. “Stobeo”, cf. Polizzi (2011), 90 n. 34. Cf. Di Benedetto (1967); a very detailed account of Leopardi’s familiarity with the text of Stobaeus is in Gigante (1998), 164-166 and Randino (2000); also Carella (2010), 178-179, n. 114.
Leopardi’s version of fr 1 W² by Semonides of Amorgos, a poet whose existence Leopardi ignored.³⁷¹

The special status of the two pieces is in many ways evident, not least in light of the fact that the two translations were chosen to conclude Leopardi’s Canti, otherwise only comprising the poet’s original work. Leopardi laboured on the two translations very intensely and with fine philological care, as is shown by some of his choices and by the originals of the various versions he wrote for each poem.³⁷² That this labour was intense and, in a way, never conclusive, is also evident from the fact that an alternative version of (part of) XL appears in one of the Operette, Il Parini, ovvero della gloria, which Leopardi composed later in 1824.³⁷³ Despite – or perhaps because of – the strenuous philological toiling, XL and XLI somewhat fail to be merely translations, but become painstakingly well-researched reinterpretations of the original poems.³⁷⁴

³⁷¹ Fr. 8 W in West (1972), 114-115 appears as fr. 19 W² in West (1992), 123 followed by 20 W², the text discovered in P.Oxy 3965. I refer to the fragment as 8 W (from West’s first edition) since this edition presents the texts (broadly speaking) as it is preserved by Stobaeus, and before the changes brought about by the discovery of the papyrus. On the debates about the authorship of 19 and 20 W² and on their connection cf. especially Hubbard (1994) and (1996), Sider (1996). Hubbard (1996), 259-260 lists positive arguments in favour of a Semonidean authorship for fr. 19 (despite the evidence provided by P.Oxy 3965: interestingly one of the grounds is its close thematic similarity to Semonides fr. 1 W², the same similarity which undoubtedly lead Leopardi to treat the two poems as a couple, see later in the chapter). Babut (1971) argues for Semonidean authorship for fr. 8 W (before the discovery of P.Oxy 3965); cf. Sider (1996), 267 n. 6 for a list of scholars who argued for a Semonidean authorship, while Sider himself suggests the author is Simonides. On Leopardi and Simonides (and his ignorance of Semonides) see Timpanaro (2008), 108-109 and Pasquini (1984), 605-607.

³⁷² Pasquini (1984), 608 stresses how Simonides’ poetry is not only the only instance of translation in the Canti, but also in the Operette, in which the fragment of the Stobean Simonides is one of only two poetic fragments, the other one being Leopardi’s Coro dei morti in Dialogo di Federico Rysch e delle sue mummie; cf. ibid. for a useful link between the Coro and the two Simonidean translations.

³⁷³ TPP (2013), 549.

³⁷⁴ On the status of the two pieces, as translations or reworkings, see Sole (2001); Orlando (1973), 928, on Leopardi’s search for a “morale” in the texts he translates. On Leopardi’s translations from ancient texts cf. Bigi (1967); De Robertis (1978); Pasquini (1984), 603 n. 1 for a summary of the scholarship on the subject; Fasano (1985), 51ff in the chapter “Come gli antichi greci”. Gigante (1998), 191 usefully suggests to bear in mind Leopardi’s own words about the process of translation of a work from ancient Greek contained in his Discorso sopra la Batraciomachia; also Carella (2010), 185. On the philological labour behind the two translations, cf. Gigante (1998), 166, 172-191; Carella (2010), 191-192 on the two manuscripts of XLI, both contain copious corrections and the first one is rich in marginalia.
A few paragraphs previously we mentioned how Leopardi used one detail from the Homeric scene which includes the simile of the leaves in August 1823. It must have been around the same time that he set about the task of translating Simonides’ poem. Leopardi could read it in the version preserved by Joannes Stobaeus, who includes the Simonidean elegy in chapter 34 of the fourth book of his *Anthologiaion*. Chapter 34, entitled περὶ τοῦ βίου, ὃτι βραχύς καὶ εὐτελής καὶ φροντίδων ἀνάμεστος, is a collection of 75 texts and excerpts of texts ranging from elegy, to fragments from tragedy, comedy, and philosophy among others. The 28th entry of the chapter is the text that Leopardi will transform in his XLI. The Stobean text of Simonides and Leopardi’s XLI Dello Stesso can be found at Appendix 3a and 3b.

In the Stobean Simonides Leopardi found the Homeric simile of the leaves introduced by the double auctoritas of the Cean poet and the “man from Chios”, as verse 2 of Simonides’ fragment quotes in full Il. 6.146: ὃ ἱπ περ φύλλων γενεή, τοίῃ δὲ καὶ ἄνδρῳ. The poem as Leopardi read it can be subdivided into 3 main parts. First comes the gnome, the Homeric Glaucus’ opinion about the generations of men (1-2). Second comes men’s general failure to understand its meaning (3-9). Last is Simonides’ own view about the truth behind the Homeric statement (10-12), which appears joined to his own practical suggestion about how to act upon the real understanding of the quotation (12-13). Although to today’s reader, familiar with the problematic nature of the fragments’ authorship and original structure, the matter seems more complicated, one can see how the fragment as Leopardi would have seen it gravitates heavily around the Homeric quotation. The Stobean Simonides places great emphasis on the Iliadic

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376 Text from West (1972), 114-115. For both Simonides 8 W and Semonides 1 W2 I use the text of West (the first edition for Simonides and the 1992 edition for Semonides), although I am aware that this is not exactly what Leopardi could consult. However, the textual differences relevant to this study are tackled in the course of the chapter. XLI in TPP (2013), 216.

377 It does not quite matter that the two poems as we have been talking about them may not be in their original form: this (with small changes according to the editions) is the shape Leopardi had access to, and the one that formed his understanding of these works and their worldview.
reference: if one saying can be singled out as τὸ κάλλιστον within the large and awe-inspiring Homeric production, the reader ought to pay attention. The fame of the Homeric saying is again established by verse 3: the notion that “few mortal men welcome it in their ears and store it in their hearts” indirectly testifies to the vast circulation of the Iliadic verse. But verse 3 also serves the purpose of making Simonides’ fragment into a piece of Homeric exegesis: vast as its diffusion may be, there are few men who grasp the real meaning of the Homeric gnome, and Simonides prepares his audience to understand his reading of the trope as the correct one and the one to be internalised.

I argue that Leopardi’s XLI ought to be seen not only as a charged – albeit respectful – interpretation of Simonides’ poem, but consequently also as another attempt at an exegesis of the Homeric trope thereby contained. That XLI is not merely a translation, but also a vehicle for some of Leopardi’s own sentiments about the theme of the Stobaean Simonides is evident in the many more or less free interventions that the Italian poet makes in the Greek text. Although several of these choices can be ascribed to his desire to be philologically true to the original text or to linguistic necessities, many others testify more clearly to the presence of Leopardi’s own voice in the text. As such, they let the reader have a glimpse of Leopardi’s stance on various aspects of Simonides’ fragment, and, consequently, of Leopardi’s understanding of the Homeric saying.

The following sections focus first on Leopardi’s use of botanical language in his translation of Simonides in XLI (section 1) as a case study in the former’s reception of the trope of the leaves. I shall then concentrate (section 2) on the first line of XLI, which I believe to be a privileged place which offers deeper insight into Leopardi’s interpretation of the fragment as a whole and its take on the Homeric gnome.

378 These choices – both on the poetic and on the philological level – have been the subject of a number of publications, see Lonardi (1969); Orlando (1973); Randino (2000); Sole (2001). The scholarship on the subject has variously explained them by Leopardi’s desire to create a work of independent poetic beauty. Although a few more remarks could be made on the topic, this is not the place for another detailed comparison of the Greek and Italian versions.
1. Germinating from the Sources: XLI and Botanical Language

Let us first observe how Leopardi tackles the translation of the Homeric quotation contained in Simonides’ text.

οὴ περὶ φύλλων γενεῆ, τοῖν δὲ καὶ ἀνδρόν.
φύλλα τὰ μὲν τ’ ἀνεμοὺς χαμάδις χέει, ἄλλα δὲ ὣ’ ὅλη
τηλεθῶσα φύει, ἐαρός δὲ ἐπηγένεται ὄρη·
δὸς ἀνδρὸν γενεῆ ἢ μὲν φύει ἢ δ’ ἀπολήγει. (Il. 6.146-149)

The gnomic first line of the Iliadic comparison – which in Iliad 6 develops over three more lines – is spread over two lines in the Italian translation (4-5): “conforme ebber natura le foglie e l’uman seme”. In the original Greek the simile revolves around the two parallel parts introduced by οὴ and τοῖ. Leopardi chooses instead to discard the two correlative pronouns in favour of a more explicit phrasing: rather than being like each other, men and leaves share a common “nature”. What happens to the Greek word γενεή?

The major editions in the principal European languages around Leopardi’s time are unanimous in translating the word γενεή as “race” or “generation”: in the English-speaking world Alexander Pope’s edition (1715-1720) translates γενεή as “race”, as will William Cowper’s (1791) and William Sotheby’s (1831). In France Anne Dacier (1699) chooses to liken directly the two parts of the simile (men and leaves) without translating γενεή (“Telles que sont les feuilles dans les forests, tels sont les hommes sur la surface de la terre”); half a century later Leconte de Lisle (1866) will render γενεή with “génération”. Again in Germany both Johann Heinrich Voss (1793) and Friedrich Leopold Stolberg (1843) choose “Geschlecht”. Leopardi knew the Italian

379 The word, ionic version of γενεά, is used with various meanings in Homer, cf. Liddell Scott s.v. γενεά: with the meaning of “living family”, II. 20.306; “birth” (II. 11. 786) or “birthright”, Od. 1.387; of “stock” or “breed” for animals, in particular horses, II. 5.265; “race” or “generation”, as in the passage examined. On its meaning as referring both to the moment of birth and to the place of such birth in a succession of births and generations cf. Redfield (1975), 102 n. 4.
380 Pope (1806), 147; Cowper in Southey (1837), 152; Sotheby (1833), 192.
381 Dacier (1819), 269, 271. Leconte de Lisle (1867), 106.
382 Voss (1839), 150; Stolberg (1823), 204.
Just as he had abandoned the Homeric parallelism of οἵη and τοίη, Leopardi chooses not to use one term (γενεή) to refer to the two types of races (φύλλων and ἀνδρὸν). Instead, the subjects of the comparison are straightforwardly the leaves and the “uman seme”. The term γενεή is not directly reemployed by Leopardi; neither “natura” nor “uman seme” take up the function that γενεή had performed in the Greek clause. Yet both words recirculate and diffuse some of the ideas it conveys, as if the conglomeration of meanings implied in it had found two different points to discharge in Leopardi’s poetry. Albeit stripped of the formal roles of sole subject and “glue” for the two components of the simile, the word γενεή resurfaces in the word “natura” and in the expression “uman seme” only to bind the two parts of the simile even more tightly together. The human seed – which does of course symbolise the human race – indirectly connects men and leaves on account of their common origin, however metaphorically one wants to understand the root of human life.

The effect of these choices – both the introduction of the concept of “natura” in line 4, and the translation of γενεή with “natura” and “uman seme” – is that Leopardi’s translation of the Homeric gnome orbits heavily around the idea of vegetation which, in the original verse, is only present in the mention of the leaves. But the image of vegetation must have struck a chord for Leopardi: in addition to the two points just observed (“natura” and “seme”) XLI is dotted with the language of flora. Line 10 contains “vermiglio” (which substituted the earlier drafts’ “verdeggia” and “verzica”) and “fiore”, line 11 calls youth “etade acerba” (unripe age), and line 13 the verb “educa”. This dense presence is all the more striking if one considers that, just as it was only once mentioned in the Homeric verse, the flourishing of botanical terms in Leopardi’s adaptation is nowhere to be found in the text of Simonides, which contains one sole reference to flowers (ἄνθος) in verse 6. In XLI the image and the idea of ἄνθος

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383 Monti (1815), 139.
384 For “educare”’s semantic connection with the botanical world cf. Sole (2001), 339 and ibid. n. 40. See also Nicolò Tommaseo’s and Bernardo Bellini’s (1977), Dizionario della lingua italiana s.v. Educare, 470. The version of the translation contained in Carte Leopardi X 1 2.b, reads “verdeggia” (and before “verzica”) instead of the final “vermiglio” (line 10), cf. Peruzzi (2009), 658.
is expanded and elaborated. What is simply “the flower” in the Stobean Simonides, becomes for Leopardi the periphrasis “when the flower of our unripe age is still crimson”. The semantic area of flora is present not only in the literal translation of ἄνθος with “fiore”, but also in the vivid visual note of the colour of the young and new flower and in the adjective chosen to accompany the word “etade”: although “unripe” is certainly a slight shift from the image of the flower to that of the fruit, the semantic area remains the one of vegetation, and of vegetation upon a tree.

What could have prompted Leopardi to do so? Without aspiring to be conclusive, I propose two possible explanations: the former concerning the text of Homer quoted by Simonides, the latter instead focusing on the context in which Leopardi found the Simonidean text. Although it is true that II. 6.146 only contains one term pertaining to the semantic area of botanics (φύλλων), this is not the case for the remaining part of the simile, which occupies three more verses until verse 149. Having compared men and leaves, Glaucus goes on to describe the life cycle of the leaves, from the moment of their end – as the wind scatters them on the ground – to the birth of new ones with the arrival of spring. This description is filled with the vocabulary of natural life in general (the wind and the ground at 147, to the season of spring at 148) and of vegetation (the forest at 147, the participle of τηλεθάω describing the blooming of the trees and the verb φύω at 148). The parallel between the leaves and humans is reiterated by the repetition of φύω for both parties, highlighting the similarity in their paths of existence.

It is true that the two texts – Leopardi’s XLI and Homer Iliad 6 – make different use of the semantic area of botanics. The botanical language of II. 6.147-148 is only metaphorical insofar as it can indirectly apply to men within the comparison of men and leaves – men’s death is, in a sense, being scattered to the ground; the idea of φύειν instead can be more obviously related to both humans and leaves, as the text itself reminds us – and it otherwise describes in a realistic manner the physical states of the

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385 On the encounter between Glaucus and Diomedes cf. Redfield (1975), 102; Piccaluga (1980), concentrating on the general meaning of the episode in the wider context of the Iliad, more specifically on 6.146ff from page 247; Lowry (1995) on the details of the heroes’ interaction; Burgess (2001), 118-123.
life of the leaves. Leopardi’s use of botanically-related terms instead pours out from the space of the simile, spreading freely over the Simonidean text. It exports the language of vegetation to describe by analogy moments or features of the existence of humans. And yet the strong vibrant presence of botanical language in XLI could be Leopardi’s way of reminding the reader (the reader of his poem as well as that of Simonides’) of the original context of the trope, and of the fact that, whereas Simonides only reports one verse (II. 6.146), the original simile was much longer, and delved in more detail into the similarities between the life of men and that of natural elements such as the leaves.  

Giulia Piccaluga has furthermore suggested that the role of vegetation in the Glaucus-Diomedes episode ought to be seen not only in the space of the simile of verses 146-149, but also in the “dietary requirement” that forces βροτόι to cultivate and eat cereals to survive. But although the direct influence of the Homeric passage in shaping the language of XLI cannot be proven, the abundance of botanical terms certainly testifies to the fact that the Homeric trope of the leaves is for Leopardi the very core of the Simonidean fragment, key to the understanding of Simonides’ thought and crucial to Leopardi’s expression of his own worldview.

There is yet another explanation, which takes into account the context in which Leopardi found the text of Simonides. In book 4.34, only a few pages away from the Simonidean fragments, Stobaeus quotes a fragment by Mimnermus (Mimnermus 2 W2) that shares with Simonides’ text not only the focus on the brevity and suffering of life mentioned by the title of Stobaeus’ chapter, but also the use of the trope of the leaves. The two fragments are so remarkably similar in focus that it has been suggested repeatedly that they are connected and that one was written in response to the other. Just like Simonides’ fragments, Mimnermus 2 explores the link between the life of man and that of the leaves. Similar to Simonides’ fragment it tackles the brevity of existence, and it even expands on the age of youth as the only possible moment of happiness in a life that is otherwise short and miserable. More than Simonides’, fr. 2 elaborates on the language of vegetal growth (φύλλα, πολυάνθεµος, ἔαρος, and ἄνθεσιν, all in the first

386 Cf. Bierl and Latacz’s (2008), 59 commentary: “Blätter, Blüten oder Gras sind ein verbreitetes Bild für die Vergänglichkeit der Menschen.”
three verses). The flourishing of this semantic area brings Leopardi’s interpretation of Simonides one step closer to Mimnermus’ fragment, and so do two other details in Leopardi’s translation. First is the notion of unripeness and thus the presence of the fruit, a different stage in the growth of the plant: this is absent in Simonides, but appears in Mimnermus at verse 9 (καρπός). Second comes Leopardi’s decision to turn the third person of Simonides’ narration into a first person plural: the choice – which can be also justified by the desire to increase the emotional intensity of the poem – seems all the more striking if one compares it to the powerful Ἡμεῖς that opens fr. 2.389

2. Umana cosa picciol tempo dura: Brevity and Ephemerality

XLI’s first line – “Umana cosa picciol tempo dura” – is Leopardi’s adaptation of a verse composed by Joachim Camerarius (1551). Faced with a 13-verse poem (which we had up until the discovery of POxy 3965) starting with a pentameter, Camerarius fashioned a hexameter, in the attempt to fill in the gap and to complete the poem, which would have otherwise been limping on a pentametric beginning.390

οὐδὲν ἐν ἀνθρώποις μένει χρήμα ἐμπεδον αἰτί391

The scholarship which has dealt with Leopardi’s translation of Simonides in XLI has achieved diverse results in tackling the nature of its first line. While Saverio Orlando’s analysis of the two Simonidean translations entirely ignores the issue, both Antonino Sole and Claudia Carella seem to maintain that the line is in fact Leopardi’s own creation. Sole states that the line is “interamente leopardiano”,392 and similarly does Carella in her 2010 book crediting the whole verse to Leopardi (although, oddly enough, she does not seem to be familiar with Sole’s 2001 article).393 And yet Marcello Gigante’s “Leopardi e Simonide” (published in La parola del passato 1998 and again

389 For Leopardi’s knowledge of Mimnermus, cf. Zib. 2589; Carella (2010), 178 (Carella does not seem to be acquainted with Sole’s (2001) work).
390 See Sider (1996), 266 n. 5 for a brief history of the conjecture; Gigante (1998), 166-167. Note that Camerarius thought that only one verse must have been missing from the original.
391 As Sider (1996), 266 n. 5 has correctly pointed out, Camerarius’ suggestion finds some validation in the text of the new papyrus, which reads παραιν* in line 4 of fr. 20 W².
392 Sole (2001), 337.
393 Sole (2001), 337; Carella (2010), 193.
in 2003 in the collection *Leopardi e l'antico* clearly makes the point that Leopardi did not invent the line, but instead accepted it as part of the original poem.\(^{394}\)

But beyond acknowledging that the line is not Leopardi’s, one ought to confront the interpretative issues behind both Camerarius’ original and Leopardi’s translation. Sharing not only the mistake of attribution, Sole and Carella reach similar conclusions as to the verse’s meaning, having paid little more than cursory attention to it. Having (correctly) stressed the line’s gnomic character, Sole suggests that its role is that of a “conceptual compendium” for the entire fragment;\(^{395}\) similarly Carella states that the line is “una sentenza, che riassume il tema centrale”.\(^{396}\) Marcello Gigante, whose main aim is not to tackle the interpretation of the line (a fact justified, perhaps, by the fact that he knows well that the line is not Leopardean) does not delve deeper into Leopardi’s relationship with this line, being content with stating that Camerarius’ verse “non suscitò né repugnanza né diffidenza nel Leopardi”.\(^{397}\)

In this section I wish to argue against the idea that Leopardi saw in *XLI*’s first line merely a summary of the themes of the poem. I instead propose that by translating the verse as he does, he is programmatically creating a conceptual bridge between his translations of the Stobean Simonides and Semonides 1, thus asking his reader to connect the two original poems. In particular, I believe that Leopardi is especially keen to link his understanding of two aspects of the poems, i.e. the trope of the leaves in the Stobean Simonides and the idea of ephemerality in Semonides 1.

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\(^{394}\) Gigante (1998), 166 recalls how Hense deemed the verse “worthy of Simonides”, and included it in his edition of Stobaeus. Gigante’s seminal piece is oddly not referenced by Sole (2001) on the very same topic, resulting in Sole’s mistaken interpretation. Carella’s error is all the more surprising if one considers that her section on the Leopardi’s Simonidean translations draws heavily (and sometimes word by word) on Gigante’s article.

\(^{395}\) Sole (2001), 337.

\(^{396}\) Carella (2010), 193.

\(^{397}\) Gigante (1998), 167.
Let us first tackle the content and form of Camerarius’ Greek verse, and its possible meanings. When fashioning his conjectural verse, Camerarius must have turned to the corpus of Greek hexametric poetry he knew. This line is in fact carefully crafted from existing phrases and expressions. The very end of Camerarius’ hexameter ἔµπεδον αἰεί is found many times across Greek literature and with a tendency to recur in the position at the end of a hexameter.398 Two of the occurrences listed in note 398 come from Theognis’ collection (1.316; 318) – which Camerarius commented and annotated – where ἔµπεδον αἰεί is placed at the end of a hexameter.

The expression ἐν ἀνθρώποισι is a very common noun phrase, often used idiomatically in clauses with an adjective in the superlative to indicate the extension of the superlative itself.399 In some cases, such as Hesiod Op. 719-720 (γλώσσης τοι θησαυρὸς ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν ἀριστος φειδωλῆς) the combination ἐν ἀνθρώποισι + superlative can be interpreted in the more literal sense: for men (but not for animals, or other beings) the best treasure is a sparing tongue. However in many other instances (and not exclusively when in combination with a superlative) ἐν ἀνθρώποισι acquires a meaning similar to “on earth”, “in the whole world”, or “under the sun”.400 The phrase is remarkably well-attested in the corpus of the Theognidea, with seven occurrences;401 even more strikingly Th. 131 begins with the very combination of οὐδὲν and ἐν ἀνθρώποισι which Camerarius chose for Simonides’ fragment, which leads us to imagine that the scholar might have used the corpus of Theognis as a study springboard for the fashioning of the

398 Using the text of Stobaeus as a sample field ἔµπεδον ἡ αἰεί is found 3 times: once in Book 1.3.53.8; and twice in two quotations from Theognis’ elegiacs at 3.1.8.4 and 3.37.3.2. A few other instances in which the phrase occurs at the end of hexametric verse: Apollonius Rhodius 1.1076; Theogn. 1.316, 318; Hes. fr. 294 (Schol. Eur. Phoen. 1116 in Schwartz (1887), 366) in Merkelbach and West (1967), 152; Argonautica Orphica 347 in Vian (1987), 99.

399 See for example Franco Montanari’s (1996), Vocabolario della lingua greca s.v. Ἄνθρωπος, 211.

400 Cf. Sophocles Trachiniae 421, where the phrase is used in the context of an exclamation, to mean “To whom on earth (did I say it)” (ποίοις ἐν ἀνθρώποισι;) or in Hdt 1.53.2 (Κροῖς ὁ Λυδῶν τε καὶ ἄλλων ἄθλινων μαυσωλείως, νομίμως τάδε μαντήμα τίνα μοῦνα ἐν ἄνθρωποι;) where arguably the μαντήμα are on the earth or in the world, rather than among men. This process of generalisation (that brings the formula to be less about men than about the general condition of things) can lead to instances where ἐν ἀνθρώποισι is doing little more than reinforcing the superlative itself. When this is the case, translators may be even completely forgo the formula in their translation.

401 Th. 131; 623; 637; 647; 1003; 1135; 1139.
missing verse. Two possible translations thus can be imagined for the line. One, more literal, reads “nothing lasts forever amongst men”. The other, which takes into account the idiomatic meaning of ἐν ἀνθρώποισι, translates along the lines of “nothing lasts forever on earth”. However one chooses to intend Camerarius’ take at a Simonidean hexameter, the verse concentrates on the impossibility of duration; in what sense we ought to think about duration remains to be seen.

One could argue that there is little if any difference in meaning between the two translations. And yet for someone as preoccupied as Leopardi was with the sorrowfully unique status of mankind – that pre-eminence of unhappiness we have observed in Chapter 2 – and as keen as he was to investigate it, the difference is paramount. It is reasonable to argue that Leopardi, who by 1823 had read a vast amount of Greek literature, was aware of the two possibilities. “On earth” or “in the world” would not entail the necessary focus on humanity, which is after all at the very core of the Homeric and Simonidean texts as well. Significantly then Leopardi opts not only for the non-idiomatic version (“among humans”), but his translations emphasises further the presence and role of humans. Leopardi’s first line begins with the adjective “umana”, which – strictly speaking nowhere to be found in Camerarius – translates precisely ἐν ἀνθρώποισι, as if it were an adjective relating to χρῆμα (“umana cosa”). Leopardi sees in ἐν ἀνθρώποισι a sure reference to humankind, and only to humankind. The decision to bring it to the very opening of the verse – and thus to the very opening of the entire poem – emphasises Leopardi’s interpretation of the poem as a poem about human nature, and man as the focus of the enquiry of Simonides-commentator-of-Homer (and consequently of Homer).

Leopardi’s second step is to tackle the idea of duration conveyed by Camerarius’ ἐμπεσον αἰεί (which of course has to be read with the negation of the initial οὐδέν). First of all Leopardi chooses to discard the negation which is the very start of Camerarius’ concept. Whereas for Camerarius no-thing (οὐδέν χρῆμα) lasts forever (ἐμπεσον αἰεί), in XLIII human thing(s) last but a “small” time. Leopardi suppresses the idea of a negative infinitum, opting instead for the notion of a small span of time. In this sense Leopardi’s version is more prosaically pessimistic than the 16th century Greek text:
human things not only do not last forever, but really they last only a “small time”. But what is crucial is that Leopardi’s translation brings the first verse one step closer to the rest of the text, both Homer’s and Simonides’, and thus closer to their own pessimism. The (objectively) brief life of the Homeric leaves is surely much more truthfully depicted by Leopardi’s “picciol tempo” than by the idea of the lack of eternity. What is more, “picciol tempo” is in fact the literal translation of the Simonidean χρόνος ὀλίγος (11).

These are, arguably, Leopardi’s main actions in translating Camerarius’ verse. But what did Leopardi see in verse 1 and how are we supposed to understand the idea that “umana cosa picciol tempo dura”? I believe that Leopardi’s translation of verse 1 points us towards two different ways of reading the trope of the leaves. The first one is to see in XLI’s line 1 the first proposition of that idea of brevity which is to play such a crucial role in the poem: section 2.2. thus explores the ways in which the original Homeric passage, Simonides’ poem, and, as a consequence, Leopardi’s XLI can be seen as perspectives on the brevity of human existence. Section 2.3. then proposes that Leopardi’s translation of Camerarius’ verse 1 is meant to lead the reader towards a further and different meaning of the simile of the leaves.

2.2. Leaves and the Brevity of Human Life

One obvious interpretation is to say that the line – “human things last but a small time” – refers quite simply to the briefness of human existence. That this motif could be read in the Iliadic episode from which Simonides is quoting does not surprise, as the shortness of human life is in many ways present in the Homeric scene. First, the idea that life is brief is obvious in the context of the encounter between two warriors of opposites sides, the Trojan Glaucus and the Greek Diomedes. Everything in the text – from Diomedes’ unsuppressible bravery in his aristeia in book 5, to Helenus’ speech to Hector and Aeneas’ warning about the seriousness of the threat that Diomedes still represents for the Trojan army in book 6.96-101 – suggests that one of the two lives is

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403 Cf. Kirk’s (1990), 176 commentary reading in the simile the idea that “life is transient”.

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at stake.\textsuperscript{404} And although to the audience’s surprise the meeting will not result in battle and death, but in civilised conversation and ultimately in the exchange of armour, the notion of the fast approach of death, and of the possibility of premature departure from the world of the living remains hanging in the air. But aside from the context, it is the actual conversation between the two warriors – and in particular Glaucus’ use of the trope of the leaves – that sheds more light on the role of the notion of brevity in the episode.

As the two warriors meet on the battlefield, Diomedes addresses Glaucus by asking him who he is among mortal men (τίς δὲ σὺ ἐσσι φέριστε καταθνητῶν ἀνθρώπων, v. 123), adding through the exemplum of Lycurgus his reason for asking: he wants to make sure he is not going to fight a god, and, since gods have been mingling in the battle indistinguishable from humans, it is vital to ascertain Glaucus’ identity.\textsuperscript{405} It is to this question that the Greek warrior replies with the simile that compares men and leaves (\textit{Il.} 6.146-149): men are like leaves which the wind scatters to the ground, but the forest grows back once spring has come.

The entire simile is grounded on ideas of time and duration. This is evident first and foremost in the mention of the seasons of nature: spring (ἔαρος) is explicitly mentioned at 148, and the wind (ἄνεμος) of verse 147 can be seen as symbolising the cold seasons. The idea of time is once again present in the incessant and cyclical movement of regrowth and death, death and regrowth, which is visually represented by the mention of the two alternate moments: death and life for the leaves (147-148), and life and death for men (149), in a never-ending cycle. The alarming proximity of the two moments is further conveyed by the handful of months that separate the leaves’ birth from their falling, and by the physical closeness of φύω and ἀπολήγω, curtly listed in verse 149: the simile cannot but leave the human reader with a sense of the shortness of his existence. Together with the sense of the swiftness of life, the trope also instills in man

\textsuperscript{404} And possibly Glaucus’ life. Also, book 6 opens on the tense atmosphere of a long list of mortal combats (\textit{Il.} 6.5-36) and the one encounter which we observe in close-up – the one between Adrastus and Menelaus – ends with Menelaus’ rejection of the Trojan’s appeal for salvation.

\textsuperscript{405} Cf. Gaisser (1969), 166-167 on Diomedes’ awareness of the limitations of his mortal status (with textual examples). Piccaluga (1980), 238-243 on Diomedes’ insistence on avoiding a fight with an immortal.
the feeling of the necessity of his mortality. Only two moments connect the existence of the leaves to that of men: the moment of birth and growth (φύω in both cases) and that of dying (χέω and ἀπολήγω respectively). If all else is subject to change, these two moments are unavoidable and necessary.

On the basis of the simile, men and leaves share two cardinal moments of existence, birth and death. In both cases – the briefness of existence and the necessity of death – the likening of men and leaves seems to hint at another term of comparison. In comparison with whose life is the life-span of humans as short as that of the leaves? And again, which being is exempt from mortality, which seems to be the very staple of existence? The response is, in both cases, the gods. The difference in duration between the life of men and gods is virtually unmeasurable; set against the existence of the immortals the life of humans is all too similar to the seasonal life-span of the leaves, and the comparison gains credibility. And it is again the gods who, alone, are immune to the binary rhythm of human and natural life. 406 There is some irony in this: the being which man believes he resembles the most, the one that men imagine and portray as better versions of themselves, and the being which Diomedes is so scared to meet in battle, indistinguishable from other humans, is in fact the one being which is eventually less similar to man than the leaves are. The gods are the necessary counterpart to the two halves of the simile, men and leaves. 407 Not only is their implicit presence entirely understandable in the context of a response to the enquiry of Diomedes, aimed at verifying Glaucus’ nature, but it is also vital in highlighting and underscoring further the briefness inherent in human existence. 408 It is worth remembering that the trope reappears in the words of a god, Apollo, at Il. 462-466, as he tells Poseidon that he will

406 Cf. Piccaluga (1980), 247 who sees the episode as “tramato sulla falsariga dell’opposizione immortalità/morte”.

407 Cf. Nagy (1999), 179-210 who, discussing Hesiod Works and Days, contrasts the “artificial continuum of immortality” and “the natural cycle of life and death as symbolized by the flourishing and wilting of leaves on trees”. The lack of winter in the Golden Age (Op. 117-118) as on the Isles of the Blessed (Op. 172-173) is contrasted with the inevitability of the passing of time on earth.

408 It is precisely the comparison between the duration of the life of man in the sight of the immortality of God that triggers in Psalm 89 (4-6) the connection between men and another natural element, grass, cf. Fränkel (1946), 132, using this passage in his analysis of ephemeros.
not join the human fight; the nature of humans – their brevity and their unbridgeable
difference with the gods – is the reason the fight is not worth it.409

The shortness of human existence figures prominently also in Simondes’ fragment as
Leopardi would have read it.410 It seems certain that Simonides understood the Homeric
simile to convey the sense of the brevity of human life: verses 4-12 of the Stoabean
Simonides delve into the vain hopes of the man who is not aware of his mortality, and
verses 10-12 in particular remind the reader of how brief (ὀλίγος) life is. But Simonides
goes further: not only does he remark and comment upon the notion of the shortness of
life, but he further suggests that the trope of the leaves is also warning man about the
shortness of youth. In Simonides’ interpretation then the comparison with the leaves
provides a parallel not only for the overall brevity of human existence – from life to
death – but also for the swift nature of the bloom of young age. Youth is *par excellence*
the time for those hopes and illusions (5) which are destined to be proved false by the
arrival of old age, illness, and in the end, death (6-9). What this blinding hope ultimately
does is to prevent man from seeing the brevity of life and youth (ἡβής καὶ βιότου
ὀλίγος, 11-12).

*XLI* shows without a doubt that Leopardi too thought of brevity as being one of the
crucial notions conveyed by the trope of the leaves. Not only does he translate the
references to brevity already contained in Simonides’ fragment (lines 17-19), but once
again he intensifies the presence of this theme in his own rendition of the Greek poem.
The two portions of Simonides’ statement that χρόνος ἔσθ’ ἡβής καὶ βιότου ὀλίγος
θνητοῖς (where both βιότος and ἡβή depend on χρόνος) are now made independent and
turned into two separate clauses (lines 16-18 in *XLI*). The first one depicts the velocity
of youth – described metaphorically as winged – and the latter develops the idea of the
brief span of life (χρόνος βιότου ὀλίγος) by suggesting that in the metaphorical path of

409 Nagy (1999), 178 on φθινύθουσιν as portraying the “natural aspect of death” common to humans and
leaves.
410 Babut (1971), 24 seems to agree that brevity is at the core of fr. 8 W, as he briefly suggests that the
fragment is not about “l'instabilité, l'incoherence de la nature humaine” but rather about the modern
idea of ephemerality. Yet he seems to interpret the mention of human ephemerality – together with the
invitation to enjoy the present pleasure at the close of the poem – as a sign of the poet’s hedonistic
superficiality, and as a minor *carpe diem* (contrasting this hedonism with the “more profound” work
of Mimnermus).
life, the cradle is (almost physically) very close (but literally “poco lontano”) to the pyre (“rogo”). Brevity is also, very clearly, in the final line of XLI (“La breve età commetti”). This time however the term chosen by Leopardi (“breve”)\(^{411}\) does not translate any specific Greek word, but rather echoes the idea expressed by βιότου ποτὶ τέρμα (12): the man who is close to death is invited to trust the brief time he has left (“breve età”) to the present enjoyments.

2.3. “Umana cosa picciol tempo dura”: Leaves and the Precariousness of Human Life

The first line of XLI could thus easily be taken simply as a statement on the short span of all human things: from the objective brevity of human existence to the even shorter life of its seasons. As we have seen, this statement is on its own – as Camerarius wrote it – and in Leopardi’s translation a declaration of the brevity of human things; furthermore, both the importance of the notion of brevity in the original Homeric episode and in the Stobaen Simonides, and Leopardi’s peculiar attention to this concept in his rendition, vouch for the centrality of the theme. And yet I wish to suggest that Leopardi’s translation of Camerarius’ verse points the reader (also) in another direction.

The choice of rendering the Greek μένει with the Italian “durare” is possibly the least striking part of Leopardi’s translation of Camerarius’ verse: the overlap of meaning in the two languages is almost complete. Yet the same Italian verb is also found somewhere else in Leopardi’s Simonidean translations in a much less obvious place. “Durare” appears – in the same person and number as in XLI – in line 9 of Leopardi’s XL Dal greco di Simonide, the translation of Semonides 1 W\(^2\), which Leopardi could again read in Stobaeus 4.34. Here are the first verses of both texts, which are discussed more closely in this section. The complete texts can be found at Appendix 4a and 4b.\(^{412}\)

\[\delta\\\\\pi\alpha\iota,\\tau\varepsilon\lambda\omicron\varsigma\mu\acute{e}\nu\\\varsigma\\\varsigma\acute{e}\varsigma\\acute{e}i\varepsilon\beta\alpha\rho\omega\kappa\tau\omicron\upsilon\omicron\varsigma\]

\(^{411}\) The previous version read “dubbia” instead of “breve”, showing how the final choice is the result of a complex process, cf. Gigante (1998), 187. Ibid. 189 recalls how critics have suggested that even the choice of the metre is the result of a wish to render “il breve rapido scorrere della vita”.

Semonides’ poem begins with a discussion of the role of god in the world, combined with the declaration of man’s utter incapacity to understand not only the unfolding of such action, but even the factuality of the absolute freedom and power inherent in god’s role (1-5). In the following verse man’s inability is further explained with the human tendency to hope for an optimistic future (6-10). Verses 11-19 unveil the truth about the vain nature of human hope, thus piecing together the first two sections of the poem. If man knew more about the real operation of the world’s mechanisms, he would not entertain vain illusions, but instead look at reality for what it is: the arrival of grim old age, the diseases, the chances to be slain at war or on the sea, or even to die by one’s own hand. The poem closes on two notes. On the one hand, the conclusion about the myriad of evils that surround man, of which one grows aware once he has removed the veil of false hopes (20-22); on the other hand the poet’s recommendation not to wallow in sorrows, tormenting our heart more than it already is tormented (22-24).

413 “Whatever happens here/ Is in the power of Jove, O son of man,/ And he decides it all/ According to his will./ But blindly we take thought/ And struggle after things of distant date,/ Although it is our fate./ As Heaven determined was to be the way./ To live from day to day.”

414 Cf. Gerber (1984), 126 on ὅκη θέλει for other instances within Greek literature of “the [common] idea that Zeus (or the gods) disposes according to his wishes”. Cf. Versnel (2011), 153-154 and 157-158 for a collection of other lyric sources expressing similar worldviews.
Let us concentrate on Leopardi’s translation of Semonides’ 3-5, which become lines 5-9 of XL. As one can see at a first glance, Leopardi’s translation of these verses is far from literal.\footnote{Cf. Sole’s (2001), 328-329 analysis of this passage which presents very different conclusions, mostly summarised in the idea that the translation has a “spiccato animus leopardiano”. Noteworthy is the mention of the position of “di giorno in giorno dura”, placed at the end of line 9, which according to Sole mirrors “la collocazione in clausola, ossia, in posizione evidente, di ἐπήμεροι”.} The two texts are in fact so remarkably different that it can seem problematic to follow Leopardi’s reasoning in translating the passage. Semonides’ text as we have it is quite linear. It begins with a blunt statement about man’s lack of νοῦς: from what man is not – or rather has not – the fragment goes on to describe man’s state: men are \textit{ephemeroi} and they live like cattle.\footnote{See Gerber (1969) on the interpretation of Semonides 1.4. See also Gerber’s commentary (1984) on ἐφήμεροι, summarising the various positions of interpreters.} The second half of the passage seems to disclose the reason behind the similarity: humans are like animals insofar as they ignore the mechanisms of divine action. These very mechanisms are the ones that the fragment is going to explore in verses 11-19, and to ultimately declare irrevocably at 20-22. Leopardi’s line of reasoning is significantly different. After having stated the overarching power of Zeus in lines 1-5 – and, in doing so, having remained substantially faithful to the Semonidean text – Leopardi needs to tackle Semonides’ declaration of the limits of human understanding. In his version, the blind human intellect worries and distresses about a long span of time (presumably in the future), \textit{despite the fact} that in reality human life “lasts from day to day”, and that the sky (the divine) decides our destiny (lines 5-9).

The marked difference between the two texts is first of all explained by the textual differences between our text and the one preserved in the editions available to Leopardi.\footnote{Cf. Gessner (1559), 529.} The 16th century editions presented a number of different readings for verse 3 and 4, originating from the corrupted text possessed by Gessner.\footnote{See Randino (2000), 247-248 for details of the (obviously) incorrect text of Gessner’s edition preceding his conjectures.} As Simonetta Randino has convincingly suggested, the vain and agitated wanderings of XL’s “Ma di lunga stagione / Nostro cieco pensier s’affanna e cura” are explained by the Stephanus’ \textit{lectio} νόος δ’ ἐπ’ ἀνθρώποισιν οὐκ ἔφημέροις ἔστι’, ὀ̱λλ’ ἔφημέροι βροτοὶ δὴ ζῶομεν.\footnote{This version resembles Gessner’s conjecture, see Randino (2000), 248.}
Henry Estienne’s text is certainly one of the reasons for Leopardi’s choice to drop the reference to animals: although he read βροτοί in Estienne’s edition, he could find βοτά in Gessner’s, as part of the damaged text which Gessner will amend, substituting βοτά with βροτοί. One further reason for Leopardi to avoid the reference to cattle is that he simply could not agree with Semonides’ understanding of other living creatures as a *comparandum* for man; as I have shown in *Chapter 2*, Leopardi rather believed that the type of νοῦς possessed by animals allows them to be superior to men in the art of living. For Leopardi, it is rather that the human type of νοῦς is incorrectly directed, or even blind. Leopardi substitutes for the absence of thought, one of the attributes that he deems most distinctive of the human intellect, and at the same time one of the most harmful to humankind: the tendency to look at the future. It could also be argued that Leopardi is in such a way rendering the future tense – that future at which humans gaze without understanding – of Semonides’ verse 5 (ἔκτελευτήσει). Aside from being triggered by the variants in the two editions, this notion draws on the wider content of Semonides 1 and on its discussion of man’s hope.

Leopardi thus designs an opposition between the human tendency to gaze into the future and man’s congenital inability to see (“cieco pensier”), let alone understand, the operation behind such future events (a lack of knowledge already expressed by Semonides: νοῦς δ’ οὐκ ἐπ’ ἀνθρώποισιν; οὐδέν εἰδότες). But more than contrasting man’s leaning towards the future and the state of man’s mind (the lack of consciousness), *XL* contrasts this peculiar human propensity and the state of man’s *life*. The real condition of man’s existence is, as Leopardi understands it, ephemerality. What did Leopardi make of Semonides’ notion of ephemerality in the context of *XL*? Whereas Semonides used ἔπημερος as an adjective referring to ἀνθρώποισιν, Leopardi on the one hand modifies the reference to humans: Semonides’ ἀνθρώποι become “l'umana etate”. On the other hand he employs one whole line (line 9) for the purpose of translating ἔπημερος, which he translates as “di giorno in giorno dura”. Leopardi’s translation

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420 Gerber (1969) on βοτά in Semonides 1.4
421 Cf. Babut (1971), 20-21 proposing that the fact that Semonides sees intelligence as the distinctive trait of humans – rather than the more Homeric ”faibless” – may suggest that for Semonides it is precisely man’s reason which “le rend le plus misérable des êtres ‘qui respirent et qui marchent sur la terre’ ”.
422 For the characterisation of man’s limitations of understanding as a physical impairment, and, specifically blindness, cf. Parmenides 6 DK 6-9 in Diels and Kranz (1951-2), 232-233.
preserves the etymological origin of the adjective and makes it explicit by directly referencing the day (ἡμέρα) as the core of the concept. Line 9 – read jointly with its subject in line 7, “umana etate” – suggests that human life lasts “from day to day”.423

One could be tempted to read in this yet another declaration of the brevity of human existence. And yet, although this notion is here indirectly implied, the point is different. Rather than focusing on the duration of human life, Leopardi concentrates on the reasons behind its possible brevity. Human life can be brief, but indeed it can also be long and lead to a painful old age, or it can be full of woes and illnesses. The point is rather that man is not in control. From day to day man is at the complete disposal of the god who τέλος ἔχει [...] πάντων δοσὶ ἐστὶ καὶ τίθησι δοκῇ θέλει (fr. 1.1-2) and who ἔκαστον ἐκτελεύτησε (5).424 In interpreting ἐπήμερος in such a way, Leopardi is using Semonides’ own conception of the condition of humans as found in fr. 1: XL’s line 8 (“Come destina il ciel nostra ventura”) is the translation of Semonides’ verse 5 (δοκως ἔκαστον ἐκτελεύτησα θεός), which Leopardi joins with his interpretation of the Semonidean notion of ἐπήμερος. What Leopardi reads in ἐπήμερος is chiefly the fluctuation and precariousness inherent in the position of humans in the universe. The role of humans is that of passive recipients at the mercy of external forces, a portrayal of man that strongly resonates with Achilles’ description of the condition of humans and of the role of the gods in Iliad 24—425 humans to whom the gods assign the thread of destiny (ἐπεκλώσανθο πότις δειλοίσι βροτοίσι, Il. 24.525) and who live awaiting the lot contained in the two jars to which only Zeus has access.

But there is more: with his translation of ἐπήμερος Leopardi is constructing a parallel between XLI’s first verse “umana cosa picciol tempo dura” and lines 7 and 9 of XL, “l’umana etate […] di giorno in giorno dura”. This parallel, far from being merely formal and verbal, is crucial to Leopardi’s interpretation of the wisdom of Simonides,

423 The meaning does not change if one translates “etate” with the more obvious “age”.
424 Cf. Laurenti (1964), 86-87 understands man’s attitude in Semonides as “rinunciatario” and “indifferente”, although at the same time admitting that man could not fairly claim what is not in his power. Ibid. 87 for a list of other lyric sources expressing a similar message about the role of the divine. See Babut (1971), 20 on fr. 1: “un tableau fortement contrasté, opposant la puissance divine, qui parait ici sans limite, à l'impuissance de l'homme”.
425 And with a number of other passages in Greek literature, cf. Chapter 4.
and essential to the formulation of Leopardi’s own worldview and conception of human existence as a reception of Greek thought. The comparison of humans and leaves – and hence the notion of the brief duration of human existence – is now tightly interlocked with the idea that whatever happens to human affairs is out of man’s control.\textsuperscript{426} The idea of duration (“dura” in both texts) is now imbued with the idea of the complete fluctuation of man’s destiny: man’s brevity is but one aspect of the wider nature of the human condition. The simile of the leaves acquires thus another layer of meaning: just as the leaves are subject to the winds and to all sort of external elements, so men are at the mercy of the will – or even simply of the behaviour – of the divine. I thus wish to argue that we ought to see Leopardi’s two poems also as a purposeful study about the Greek conception of human existence. As he works and reworks the Greek texts, Leopardi explores, scrutinises, and ultimately internalises the portrait of human existence painted by the comparison with the leaves and by the idea of ephemerality. Each helps explain the other, and they both cooperate in resurrecting the Greek notion of human life, and in creating Leopardi’s own.\textsuperscript{427}

Finally, I wish to look at Leopardi’s interpretation of ἐπήμερος in the context of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century debate about the meaning of the Greek term, centred around Hermann Fränkel’s 1946 article “Man’s 'Ephemeros' Nature According to Pindar and Others” and Matthew Dickie’s “On the Meaning of ἐφήμερος” (1976). The disagreement between the two scholars is certainly grounded in a different interpretation of the Greek term, and yet the difference between the respective arguments is not unbreachable; in fact, to a certain extent and regarding specific points, Fränkel and Dickie are in agreement. Yet, partially because Fränkel is very keen to stress one particular side of his interpretation, and partially because Dickie fails at times to do justice to the nuances of Fränkel’s reading, the two are often read in opposition. Let us first look at the basic assumptions of the opposing sides of the debate.

\textsuperscript{426} That the two ideas could indeed be understood as closely relating is apparent in Theocritus \textit{Id.} 30.31-32 (ἐμε ἐν, φύλλον ἐπήμερον σημίρας δεήμενον αύρας, ὠνέλων δικα φόρει πνόη); Gow (1950), 517-519 connects the passage with \textit{Il.} 6.146 and comments that Theocritus’ “point is not the brevity of human life but the levity of human affections and emotions, which are the sport of every wind”, but does not go further and does not connect the passage with passages containing ἐφήμερος.

\textsuperscript{427} Leopardi’s belief that the two poems had shared authorship contributed to the creation of this connection.
In his article Fränkel proposed that the Greek term “does not mean ‘creature of one day, shortlived’, but ‘subject to the (changing) day, variable’”. Fränkel’s argument does in truth heavily insist on the idea that ἐφήμερος refers to the changeability of the human nature and of the human mind; as in Pindar’s Nemean 6.3-6 or in Odyssey 18.130-140 the instability of the human mind conveyed by ἐφήμερος coincides with our ignorance about our destiny, a point very similar to that made by Semonides fr. 1 about man’s lack of νοῦς. Yet, nowhere does Fränkel claim that this is the only meaning of ἐφήμερος, but suggests that ἐπήμερος can present the human condition from an external point of view, as the collection of events – both fortunes and misfortunes – that will affect man during his life span (Fränkel thinks of the Herodotean Solon πᾶν ἄνθρωπος συμφορή at Hdt. 1.32 or of ἐφήμερος as corresponding to the Latin in potestate fortunae).

Dickie, who is not convinced that ἐφήμερος conveys the meaning of internal changeability or of human lack of understanding, acknowledges almost exclusively Fränkel’s contention that ἐφήμερος signifies internal mutability, or that “the human spirit is subject to abrupt shifts – it is sometimes confident and sometimes despondent”.

Dickie proposes that ἐφήμερος means “short-lived”, and should be read as a description not only of the duration of human existence, but also of the “inconstancy of human fortune and the brevity of human felicity”. Both Fränkel and Dickie analyse Semonides 1 in search of the meaning of ἐφήμερος. Whereas Fränkel understands the term as if it were meant to be explained by the following clause (ἀ δὴ βοτὰ ζῶοννιν, οὐδὲν εἰδότες ἄκατον ἐκτελευτήσει θεός) and thus as conveying man’s lack of understanding, Dickie interprets it as instead another term to describe the ἄνθρωπος of verse 3.

428 Fränkel (1946), 131.
429 Fränkel (1946), 135,137.
430 Fränkel (1946), 134-135. Although it is true that Dickie’s critique of Fränkel applies to Fränkel’s interpretation of Pythian 8.95f, in which the latter reads the “mutability of the human spirit” rather than the “inconsistency of human fortune”, cf. Fränkel (1946), 134; Dickie (1976), 8.
431 Dickie (1976), 8.
432 In doing so Dickie’s analysis actually encompasses some of the meanings that Fränkel too considers.
433 Cf. Fränkel (1946), 137; Dickie (1976), 10-11. On ἐφήμερος cf. also Babut (1971), 21, according to whom Semonides 1 employs the term to define human nature “instable et sans consistance”;
Leopardi’s reading of ἐφήμερος in Semonides 1 anticipates and responds to the future debate in several ways. If Fränkel’s insistence on the new meaning of ἐφήμερος – not “short-lived” but “changeable” – is to be taken as a sign that the privileged interpretation among his contemporaries was indeed “short-lived” (i.e. having a brief life) then Leopardi’s nuanced understanding of the term is one step ahead of the game. With his translation of ἐφήμερος in XLI – and with the connection he draws between it and the exegesis of Homer II. 6.146 in XL – Leopardi is, many years before Fränkel, opening up the discussion about the meaning of the term and at the same time providing a nuanced range of possible interpretations. Leopardi is also, in a way, anticipating Dickie’s point: just as Dickie will suggest, in XLI ἐφήμερος is read and understood in the context of Semonides’ wider text (and in particular in the context of verses 1-5, stating the passive condition of man in the universe) thus allowing for the three meanings – brevity, submission, and fluctuation – to tightly coexist in the two Simonidean renditions.

Vermeule (1979), 24 concentrates on the fact that it is man’s lack of intelligence that renders us ephemeroi, and unable to understand our destiny. Gerber (1984), 127 on ἐφήμερος at verse 3 “there may be nothing in the context […] to suggest a reference to the brevity of human life, but why should the rest of the context determine the meaning of this particular adjective”; in doing so Babut is reading Dickie’s “short-lived” in the most literal sense. Babut believes Dickie to have “thrown much doubt” on Fränkel’s idea.
II

Ephemerality, the Operette, and the Zibaldone (from 1823)

1. Ἐφήμερος, Pindar and Simonides – 1823-1824

That the Greek notion of the human condition conveyed in the trope of the leaves and in the word ἐφήμερος had a strong impact on Leopardi’s own conception of man’s nature and existence is shown not only by the extraordinary care that he dedicates to the two ideas in his Simonidean translations, but also by the recurrence of such motifs at critical points in his later work. I wish now briefly to discuss the presence of this idea in one of the Operette Morali, the Proposta di premi fatta dall’accademia dei sillografi, with the aid of a constellation of passages from other works as well. The Proposta delves into the idea of human ephemerality chiefly by skillfully playing with an image drawn from Pindar’s Pythian 8, an image that likens men to dreams of shadows (Pyth. 8.95) and that becomes for Leopardi the centre of reflections on the peculiarities of human existence. Such reflection is profoundly woven into the fabric of Leopardi’s contemporary interests: composed in 1824, the Proposta’s rethinking of the Pindaric gnome takes place shortly after – or perhaps even at the same time as – the translation of the two Simonidean fragments. In tackling the Pindaric gnome and the conception of human existence offered by the two Simonidean texts Leopardi is exploring common territory: the similarity between the two is underscored by the fact that the very same verse of the Pindaric ode (Pyth. 8.95) employed in the Proposta begins with the terms ἐφήμερος. This makes Pindar’s Pythian – and consequently its interpretation in the Proposta – another text fundamental to Leopardi’s reading of ἐφήμερος, and thus one worth considering alongside the two Simonidean translations.

The Proposta di premi fatta dall’Accademia dei Sillografi is a heavily satirical piece whose main target is modern man’s deluded faith in progress, and the vanity and

434 In the Pythian the characterisation which Leopardi employs – man as the dream of a shadow – appears as the response to the double question τί δέ τις; τί δ᾽ οὖν τις; But this definition comes in fact after the one given at the very beginning of verse 95, where βροτοὶ are called ἐπάμεροι. Cf. Gentili (1995), 585: “‘effimeri’, nel senso di ‘creature che mutano condizione in un giorno’”. The notion of man’s nature as ἐφήμερος is thus set in between the expression of the brevity (ἐν δὲ ὀλίγῳ) of human joy (τὸ τερπνὸν) and the aforementioned reference to human life as the dream of a shadow.

435 Polato (2007), 65-114 on Leopardi and Pindar is one of the best works on Leopardi and antiquity, and, despite some difference in interepretations, a fundamental work on the subject of this section.
ultimate insubstantiality of progress itself. Set in an ever-evolving age of the machine (in which man’s material needs are accommodated by a variety of devices) the Proposta foreshadows a future in which man’s spiritual needs too will be fulfilled by machines. This new state of human evolution sees men further and further removed from active participation in the affairs of human life, which is now almost entirely in the hands of the machines. Such a situation is the ultimate and intrinsic defeat of the idea of progress and is shaped by the conviction that no real internal progress is possible for mankind, whose unhappiness and flaws are so deeply rooted and so profoundly inherent in the human condition that the only way to improve it is to have the machines take over human activity whenever possible.

In the Proposta Leopardi describes the institution of the Accademia dei Sillografi and its newly launched contest for the creation of three revolutionary machines. Having illustrated the features that the first device ought to have – those of a true friend, loyal and trustworthy in every respect – Leopardi goes on to present the Accademia’s thoughts on the creation of such an appliance. Surely, thinks the Accademia, building the machine will be neither impossible nor very hard: the mechanical skills that have already allowed man to build marvellous and ingenious devices, such as those able to draw, write, or even play chess are proof. It is at this point that the author introduces two more arguments to prove the ease of production of the machine:

Ora a giudizio di molti savi, la vita umana è un giuoco, ed alcuni affermano che ella è cosa ancora più lieve, e che tra le altre, la forma del giuoco degli scacchi è più secondo ragione, e i casi più prudentemente ordinati che non sono quelli di essa vita. La quale oltre a ciò, per detto di Pindaro, non essendo cosa di più sostanza che un sogno di un’ombra, ben debbe esserne capace la veglia di un automato.

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437 See Melosi (2015), 70 notes 38-41.
438 Cf. Simonides 646 PMG for the idea of παίζειν ἐν τῷ βίῳ.
439 TPP (2013), 507. Cecchetti (1983), 81: “Now, in the judgment of many wise men, human life is only a game; and some even declare that it is more frivolous and that, among other things, the game of chess is more rationally constructed and its moves more wisely organized than those of human life – which, according to Pindar, is no more substantial than the dream of a shadow, and thus a robot should easily be able to discharge its function”.

131
Two different comparisons are put forward for the purpose of describing the lack of difficulty of the task. The first one draws on the aforementioned example of the chess-playing machines, suggesting that life is a game. The second comparison follows immediately, somewhat wedged inside the idea of the similarity between human life and a game of chess. The trivial character of human existence is validated by the fact that – besides being a game – human life does not have more substance than a “dream of a shadow”. The two ideas – the game and the dream of a shadow – are tightly interconnected: if human life is nothing but the dream of a shadow – a double layer of dormant insubstantiality – then a “waking automaton” (as Leopardi calls it) can certainly parallel, and possibly surpass, the performance of any man.440

As Leopardi himself makes sure to acknowledge, the second comparison is not his own, but Pindar’s.441 This simile is, in fact, a direct quotation of Pythian 8.95-96 – with the one difference, that in Pindar’s poem man is the dream of a shadow, whereas Leopardi makes “human life” the subject of the definition.442 The “mistake” appears not only in the Proposta, but also in the Zibaldone entry that precedes it, Zib. 2672, dated to February 1823:


440 Cecchetti (1983) fails to translate the Italian “veglia” (wakefulness), which is opposed to the idea of “dream” in the original.
441 Just as it had been for his use of the notion of ephemerality in his revival of Simonides, the Proposta shows Leopardi’s willingness to declare the source of the idea. Although the Proposta is rather unclear about the provenance of the two comparisons within the piece – whether they ought to be ascribed to the narrator or to the members of the Accademia – Leopardi is instead very careful in displaying their sources, which perform the role of auctoritates. The former is announced as matter of agreement amongst those who have wisdom “a giudizio di molti savi” (in the judgement of many wise men). Whereas this attribution remains rather vague, the latter idea is instead preceded by a specific reference to Pindar. Rather than weakening the argument, the pre-existence of the idea is for Leopardi an invaluable validation of its soundness. Polato (2007), 78 recalls how Leopardi could read in Barthélémon’s chapter the idea that Pindar was held as auctoritas by not only ancient poets but also philosophers.
As Guido Polato has correctly spotted, the difference in the quotation is a clear indication of the source of Leopardi’s reference to Pindar, the “même ouvrage” mentioned by Leopardi himself, who had been consulting the work of the Barthélemy for some time: the Zibaldone quotation comes in fact from the chapter “Suite des moeurs des Athéniens” of the Voyage.443

Pythian 8 is written for the occasion of Aristomenes of Aegina’s victory in the wrestling competition of 446 BC.444 The poem, besides being a celebration of Aristomenes’ success, is a reflection on the nature of victory that opens out to become a reflection on the contingencies of human life, a theme that finds explicit articulation towards the end of the poem.445 Just as the poet recollects the champion’s past victories (78-87) he goes back once and for all to the theme he has hinted at several times earlier in the poem: the instability of human fortunes.446 The theme is brought to full light from verse 88 onwards, and in particular in verses 92-96, where the idea is expressed in general terms that suggest the universal validity of the notion conveyed. Here occurs the passage referenced in the Proposta.

ἐν δ’ ὀλίγῳ βροτῶν
τὸ τερπνὸν αὐξηταῖ· οὕτω δὲ καὶ πίνει χαμαί,

443 The fact that Leopardi chose to reference Pindar’s idea in the form in which he had read it in the Voyage does not in any way mean that Leopardi never had access to the original work of Pindar, see instead Polato (2007), 67-68 and 73 on the editions available in Leopardi’s library.

444 On Pythian 8, cf. Fränkel (1946), 131-133, who starts with it his analysis of ὀρήμερος; he believes the Pythian to have “nothing whatever to do with the brevity of human life” and everything to do with the notion of “exposed and subject to every actuality as it arises”, i.e. our personality is shifting with the changing day. See also Pippin Burnett (2005), 220-238, more specifically 236-237 on the verses discussed here. Giannini (1982) is entirely concerned with verses 95ff and especially with the meaning of the phrase τί δέ τις; τί δ’ οὖ τις.

445 See Stern (1967), 41 on this theme in Bacchylides 5, variously related to Pindar, suggesting that this aspect of Bacchylides’ thought is in accordance with the general pessimism of the ode; it is to be noted that he sees Bacchylides’ repeated comparison and linking of men and plants as another aspect of such pessimism, a notion confirmed by Bacchylides’ wish to Hieron that he may have εὐδημονίας πέταλον (186). On the theme in Herodotus, Lloyd (1987), 23; Pelling (2006), 147-148.

446 Gentili (1995), 585 on vv. 95-97: “Il passo condensa le riflessioni fin qui fatte sulla mutevolezza della sorte umana”; ibid. on τί δέ τις; τί δ’ οὖ τις; “essere ‘qualuno’ (cioè famoso) o essere ‘nessuno’ (cioè ignoto) non ha valore definitivo perché l’uomo può essere sia l’uno che l’altro per volontà degli dei”. Pippin Burnett (2005), 226-227 on the historical circumstances of Aegina leading up to 446, also providing (n. 10, 227) a summary of the various scholarly positions regarding the extent to which we should read in the cautiousness of Pindar’s invitation to Aristomenes a reference to such circumstances.
The central idea in the image of man as the dream of a shadow is, unquestionably, one of insubstantiality: what can be more immaterial and tenuous than a shadow that does not even belong to the world of reality, but to the realm of dreams? But what does Pindar mean by insubstantiality, and how does he characterise such lack of substance?

Although scholars have differed (sometimes surprisingly, as in the case of Nagy’s reading mentioned in note 448) in their opinion, the answer seems to come naturally from the context of the phrase. Man is insubstantial insofar as he, and his own happiness, are subject to a cyclical reversal of fortunes. The phrase in question is in fact formally encased between two statements about the fluctuating nature of human affairs. First, the alternation inherent in the destiny of humans is encapsulated in the bipartite structure of verses 92-93 (ἐν δ’ ὀλίγῳ βροτῶν τὸ τερπνὸν αὐξηται: οὕτω δὲ καὶ πίνει χαμαί): in a short span of time human happiness can increase (αὐξάνω) or fall to the ground. This alternation between the presence and absence of joy is bound to be cyclical in the existence of the individual just as in the life of the species, and we can thus imagine these two states repeating themselves unceasingly throughout history. The passage is strongly reminiscent of the Homeric simile of the leaves, and this connection contributes to increase the sense of human precariousness channelled by the ode. It is

448 Cf. Pippin Burnett (2005), 236-237. Giannini (1982), 69 agrees that the general meaning of the passage is an “affermazione della labilità e della mutevolezza della condizione umana”; in general his reading of verse 95ff suggests that the whole passage is grounded on the “opposizioni polari” and “movimento pendolare a cui la vita umana è continuamente sottoposta per il volere del dio” (cf. page 74). Gentili (1995), 585 on σκιᾶς ὄναρ: “locuzione che denota il non plus ultra della vanità delle vicende umane”, quoting Theodore Metochites in the apparatus of his edition, ibid. 228 and in Müller (1966), 392. The idea of shadow hints also to lack of glory (as opposite of αὐγλα, v. 96). Nagy (1990), 195-196 proposes a radically different interpretation, according to this passage refers to us living (and in the moment of victory) as “the realization of the dreams dreamt by our dead ancestors”.
449 Cf. Sotiriou (1998), 114 on vv. 96-97: “Pindar will aber nicht, dass ein lobendes Gedicht, das den grossen athletischen Erfolg des Aristomenes im Ringkampf feiert, pessimistisch endet, und deshalb macht er zum Schluss eine freudige Feststellung”. I disagree with Polato (2007), 91 who believes the pessimism conveyed by the idea of “dream of a shadow” (especially as quoted by Barthélemy) “si fonda sulla rimozione dei versi che seguono”.
not only the binary organisation of the thought that reminds us of the two (recurring) states in the life of the leaves as described by Glaucus at 6.147-148 and Apollo at 21.464-466. What reminds the reader further of the Iliadic episodes – and in particular of the trope as employed by Glaucus – is the language used by Pindar to depict the crushing of human τερπνόν, which falls to the ground (χαµαί) just like the leaves of the Homeric simile had fallen on the ground (χαµάδες).

But of course αὐξάνω (93) is not only “to increase”, but also, and remarkably “to grow”, and in this new botanical image we have another allusion to the Homeric vegetation: without quoting Homer, like Simonides had done, Pindar achieves to resurrect the memory of the Iliadic passage.

The alternating quality of human affairs is then restated in vv. 96-97, as the poet – providing perhaps a parallel for verse 94 – reminds his audience that, just as an ἀπότροπος γνώμη can destroy man’s happiness, so can heaven-sent light (αἰγλα διώσδοτος) bestow serenity on humans. Yet ultimately man’s flimsiness is additionally reinforced by the sense of intrinsic subjection that underscores the final part of Pythian 8. Man is not the one in charge of his own destiny, which is instead allotted by divine sources, who in turn augment or decrease human happiness. Man’s utter lack of control over his own existence is also remarked by the mention of the fleetingness with which the affairs of human life can change course (ἐν δ´ ὀλίγῳ, 92), the same adjective used to characterise both the sole happy time of man (youth) and in general human life in the Stobean Simonides (11). It is not in man’s own hands to choose when to be happy, and neither is the power to decide for how long he can hold onto such pleasure once he has received it.

Both sides of this idea – the notion of the mutability of human fortunes and that of human subjection to external forces – play a significant role in the Proposta. They are both implied in the idea that human existence is a game, a game more disorderly than chess (and thus far more variable and unpredictable). Inherent in the functioning of a game like chess (and of many others too) is the fact that the game pieces are not the ones to actively play the match, but it is instead some external entity that has the power

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to manoeuvre them. The *topos* of life as a game must have been especially significant
for Leopardi, who used it at different times throughout his work,\(^{451}\) and in particular
profusely in the *Canti*: a game is the comparison for the “opre de’ mortali” in *A un
vincitore nel pallone* 32-33 (1821); in *La vita solitaria*, from the same year, the naïve
and enthusiastic attitude of the youth towards life is compared to a dance or a game
(51), but the poet makes it immediately clear that such an approach is the one taken by
“wretched mortals”, thus establishing a connection between the misery of existence and
its game-like quality; again, the image of life as a game resurfaces in Leopardi’s
production of the 30’s, both in *Il pensiero dominante* (47) and in the *Palinodia al
marchese Gino Capponi* (166).\(^{452}\) In several of these instances we perceive clearly that
the game is not an enjoyable one, or, even, that it is intrinsically evil: for an explicit
linguistic point, one can think for example of the adjective “reo” which Leopardi
chooses to define “gioco” in the *Palinodia*. Similarly, life had been called “tristo gioco”
much earlier in Leopardi’s writings, in the 1816 *Appressamento della morte* (Canto
Secondo, 61).\(^{453}\)

Aside from the ideas of passivity and negativity, there is one further meaning which –
adumbrated in some of the above quotations – powerfully shines out in a fragment of
the early and unfinished pastoral tragedy *Telesilla* (1816), centred on the forbidden love
of Telesilla, wife of Danaino, and Girone, Danaino’s best friend. Here it is not life
which is likened to a game, but instead the speaker’s (likely to be Girone) present
understanding of the extent of his past sufferings compared to the ones he is now
experiencing:

\[
\begin{align*}
E \text{ in mio poter fu posto ch’or ne fosse immune oh quanto oh quanto fui pazzo} \\
\text{che fora or quel dolore ch’io proverei? e che fu quello che ho provato per} \\
\text{l’addietro? Un’ombra un gioco. Questo si ch’è fieriss. travaglio. Oh se mai}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{451}\) Cf. Melosi (2015), 71 n. 42 suggesting that the motif “è centrale nella psicologia leopardiana, fin dalle
*Memorie del primo amore* del 1817, dove l’approccio con Gertrude Cassi Lazzari avviene giocando
una partita a scacchi tutt’altro che metaforica”, linking to Verdenelli (2004), 185-215; yet Melosi fails
to explore the presence of the theme in Leopardi’s work further, limiting herself to the *Memorie’s*
purely functional reference to the game of chess.

\(^{452}\) *A un vincitore nel Pallone* 32-33; *La vita solitaria* 50-52; *Il pensiero dominante* 44-52; *Palinodia al
marchese Gino Capponi* 165-169.

\(^{453}\) *TPP* (2013), 293.

This passage, part of the draft of a section of the tragedy which Leopardi never completed, is interesting to us because of the close connection it invokes between the image of the game and that of the shadow. Both are very clearly employed to convey the sense of how utterly insubstantial past misery is compared to present. To render the nothingness of previous torments in the face of those now endured, Leopardi chooses to use and combine the two images, as if one alone could not depict the full extent of the disparity: the idea of the shadow fully portrays the notion of flimsiness and lack of concreteness, and the image of the game supplies the description of the past sufferings with a sense of triviality. The juxtaposition of the two ideas helps the reader understand how he is supposed to interpret the mention of the game: beyond the obvious elements of triviality and frivolity, Leopardi wants the reader to grasp the ultimate inconsequentiality and unimportance inherent in games. This passage, despite being nothing more than the draft of an early work, is thus paramount for the interpretation of the two comparisons in the Proposta: it informs us indirectly and yet clearly about Leopardi’s understanding of the meaning of games. But there is more: a few lines below the reference to shadows and games, Leopardi draws in dreams too. It seems significant that Leopardi would have gathered the three ideas (“ombra”, “gioco”, “sogno”) which were going to appear so clearly connected in the Proposta in one passage, and a passage altogether concerned with describing various states and degrees of unreality and insubstantiality.\(^{455}\)

\(^{454}\) TPP (2013), 468. My translation, with uncertainties due to the fragmentary nature of the draft: “And I had the power to avoid this oh how crazy how crazy I was, what would now be the pain I would feel [if I had avoided it]? And what was that which I felt in the past? A shadow, a game. This [the present one] is indeed a most fierce distress. Oh, if only I had not done it. Oh how fortunate I would be! Certainly I am not fooling myself? I sinned. Giron, have you sinned? It feels like a dream. Ah, ah, who could have said? That I would sin as if I had not been innocent since my birth? The more I think about it the more I feel like I am another person. Oh my virtue, you have gone away! […]”

\(^{455}\) This conception of games is elaborated – and this time within the comparison with human life – in A un vincitore nel pallone, where human existence is nothing more than a game, thus underscoring its inherent insignificance.
The fact that Leopardi’s interpretation of the image – so closely connected in the Pindaric text to the definition of humans as ἐπάμεροι – revolves so heavily around the idea of the externally-commanded instability of human fortunes, suggests that he thought of the adjective ἐφήμερος as pertinent to this wider representation of reality. Just as the blind human intellect of Semonides (“nostro cieco pensiero”) fails to understand the real circumstances of its own existence – circumstances which are instead not only understood but actively brought about by the divine – so in the Proposta humans are the unwilling game pieces being played in a game whose rules they cannot make sense of – and that appears to them as irreparably chaotic and disorganised.

The two Simonidean translations and the Proposta are crucial evidence of Leopardi’s increasing captivation with the Greek conception of human existence around the end of 1823 and the beginning of 1824, and in particular of his preoccupation with the various shades of meaning revolving around the term ἐφήμερος. Both the translations and the use of Pindar in the Operette point to a deep consideration of the possible meanings of the term in the ancient texts; at the same time, the scholarly approach is eventually channelled – by means of a profound personal engagement – into a revival of the wisdom of the ancients, which, as the Proposta proves, is not only significant for the present, but also for a distant and possibly dystopian future.

2. Plants and Insects: The Zibaldone (1826-1827)

Before turning to the final part of this chapter, I wish to point the reader towards one last instance of Leopardi’s engagement with the Greek notion of human existence conveyed by the trope of the leaves and by the notion of ephemerality, embodied in two passages of the Zibaldone (Zib. 4175 and 4270), which date to the years 1826 and 1827 respectively.
Zib. 4174 is perhaps one of Leopardi’s darkest attacks on existence. Every euphemism is dropped: beginning with the caustic and laconic “tutto è male” (everything is evil), the passage lists with relentless tenacity the full extent and the full details of the inbred evils of existence. Existence is evil, and so are the goal, the order, the condition, the laws and the natural course of the universe. The attack ultimately spirals into one all-encompassing conclusion: there is only one good, which is the lack of existence. It is this thought – the idea of the evil inherent in any kind of life – that is expanded and developed in the following page of the Zibaldone. Zib. 4175 is on the whole one consistent attempt at showing that existence is evil not just for the individual and not just for humans, but instead for every single component of the universe. The entire passage can be found at Appendix 5.

Overturning the classical image of the locus amoenus Leopardi chooses the image of a – seemingly idyllic – garden to represent the omnipresent pain of existence. The garden is pretty and well kept and we are observing it during a benevolent season, and yet it is a collection of brutal sufferings. In reading the note the reader is decidedly (albeit indirectly) reminded of the likening of men and leaves with which, by 1826, Leopardi had several times engaged. Although no direct comparison of humans and leaves occurs in the passage, the connection between the natural elements of the garden (which include leaves) and humankind is implicit in two ways. First, the demonstration of the common unhappiness of universal existence at the beginning of Zib. 4175 had taken its start from men (“Non il genere umano solamente ma...”), and from there it had progressively opened up to encompass larger and larger entities such as systems and worlds. The link between the garden, chosen as an example of a multitude of natural beings, and humans themselves, is in this sense straightforwardly part of the path which Leopardi clearly delineates. But what is more, the comparison is reinforced throughout the passage by the continuous anthropomorphisation of the elements of the garden: the tree is wounded (“ferito”), the grass trampled by the passer-by spills blood (“sangue”), the gardener chops off limbs (“membra”) from the plants he is pruning, culminating in the portrayal of the garden as a large hospital (“largo ospitale”). The individual beings

456 Interestingly the note ends on a (paradoxical) denial of strict pessimism: this is not the worst of all possible worlds, says Leopardi, because “Chi può conoscere i limiti della possibilità?”. 
of the garden feel the violence of life with the same sensations and reactions that man experiences towards the horrors of being.

One more feature invites comparison with one of the crucial moments of Leopardi’s engagement with the relationship between humans and leaves. The structure underlying the Zibaldone note and Leopardi’s rendition of Semonides’ poem present one remarkable similarity. Just as in XL the various evils that can befall man were introduced by the anaphora of (mostly demonstrative) pronouns (translating the Greek articles τούς and oi with pronominal value, also in anaphora), so in Zib. 4175 the list of the various suffering creatures that animate the garden is introduced by a long anaphora of demonstrative adjectives (“quella rosa”, “quel giglio”, quell’albero”, etc....). Like Semonides 1 W² and Leopardi’s XL (which, however, had focused more narrowly on humankind), Zib. 4175 explores the various declinations of the evil of existence. Plants, humanised and individualised, serve as a mirror for the torments which man is sometimes unable to see in his own life, to lead to the necessary conclusion – a theme central to Leopardi’s philosophy and to his revival of a Greek worldview – that it would be better for every being never to have been born.⁴⁵⁷

Zib. 4270, a note from the following year, 1827, is in various ways connected to many – if not all – the steps we have analysed as part of the history of Leopardi’s interpretation of the trope of the leaves and of the Greek notion of human ephemerality. The note is part of a number of pages that reflect on two intertwining yet clashing facts: on the one hand the decadence of the writing style from antiquity to modernity, on the other the increase in the publications of new books, resulting in the impossibly steep path to fame for the modern writer. Achieving the immortality granted to the great works of the past is, in Leopardi’s opinion, impossible in today’s world.⁴⁵⁸

La sorte dei libri oggi, è come quella degli’insetti chiamati efimeri (éphémères): alcune specie vivono poche ore, alcune una notte, altre 3 o 4 giorni; ma sempre si tratta di giorni. Noi siamo veramente oggidì passeggeri e pellegrini sulla terra: veramente caduchi: esseri di un giorno: la mattina in fiore, la sera appassiti, o secchi: soggetti anche a sopravvivere alla

⁴⁵⁷ This notion is examined in Chapter 5.
⁴⁵⁸ The theme is prominent in Il Parini, ovvero Della Gloria.
The problem lies in the new status and role of books in the modern world, for which the only apt description is comparison with a type of insects called “ephemeral” in light of the extraordinary brevity of their existence. But the conclusion about books becomes a verdict about human existence, as Leopardi shifts abruptly from books to men: the modern ephemerality of books contributes to the inbred ephemerality of men, making sure that even fame – which once upon a time outlived the earthly existence of an individual – is now outlasted by our very life span, in itself so undeniably brief. Even literary glory – the one feature to challenge the ephemeral status of humans – is forever lost in the modern world, only to bring man’s condition down to a further level of decadence. The reflection prompts a new definition of the human condition, which conveys the shortness of human existence by once again resorting to the world of flora (“the morning in flower, the evening faded, or dried up”). What is more, to seal the reference to vegetation, Leopardi ends the passage with the explicit quotation of verse 146 of Iliad 6.

There is yet one more link with Leopardi’s interpretation and understanding of the ties that connect men and leaves (and all other natural beings). The definition of men used in Zib. 4270 (“Noi siamo veramente oggidì passeggeri e pellegrini sulla terra: veramente caduchi”) echoes closely a passage of the Frammento apocrifo di Stratone da Lampsaco, number thirteen in the Operette, written towards the end of 1825. The Frammento – which Leopardi presents as the translation of a recovered fragment from the Greek philosopher Strato – is a deeply materialistic account of the genesis and the end of the world. As he tackles the former topic, Strato contrasts the immortal nature of

459 “The destiny of books today is like that of those insects called ephemerals (éphémères): certain species live a few hours, some one night, others 3 or 4 days; but it is always only a matter of days. In truth, we of today are travellers and pilgrims on the earth: our time is truly short: we are here for one day: the morning in flower, the evening faded, or dried up: destined also to outlive our own fame, and living longer than we are remembered. Today it can be said more truly than ever before: “Οἵη περὶ φύλλων γενεή, τοιήδε καὶ ἀνδρῶν” (Iliad, VI, v.146).” The grave accent on γενεή (with comma) is in Leopardi’s note.

matter – which never increases or decreases – with that of the “various modes of the existence of matter, as they can be in those we call material creatures”:

Per tanto i diversi modi di essere della materia, i quali si veggono in quelle che noi chiamiamo creature materiali, sono caduchi e passeggeri; ma niun segno di caducità né di mortalità si scuopre nella materia universalmente, e però niun segno che ella sia cominciata, né che ad essere le bisognasse o pur le bisogni alcuna causa o forza fuori di se. Il mondo, cioè l’essere della materia in un cotal modo, è cosa incominciata e caduca.\textsuperscript{461}

The antithesis between matter and its modes of expression is as stark as it could be: whereas matter is ever unchanging, material creatures are “caduchi e passeggeri”. It may or it may not be coincidence that Giovanni Cecchetti, translator of the Operette into English, chose to render this couple of adjectives as “ephemeral and transient”, thus referencing the very adjective that had been so strong a part of Leopardi’s reflection on human nature. The word-by-word correspondence with Zib. 4270 (“Noi siamo veramente oggidi passeggeri e pellegrini sulla terra: veramente caduchi”) can hardly be a coincidence.\textsuperscript{462} Rather this echo, just like the two passages’ common concern about the fleeting character of human and worldly existence, should prompt us to consider the years between 1823 and 1827 as the core of Leopardi’s long meditation on the quality and significance of the human condition. From the repeated readings of the Iliad to the intense labouring over the texts of Simonides (and Semonides), from the interpretation of Pindar’s \textit{gnome} to the invention of a Greek philosopher’s system parading the ephemerality of all beings,\textsuperscript{463} these years bear witness to Leopardi’s rediscovery of ancient Greek notions of existence, and of their conscious and programmatic revival throughout his works.

\textsuperscript{461} My italics. \textit{TPP} (2013), 578. Cecchetti (1983), 383: “Thus, the various modes of the existence of matter, as they can be seen in those we call material creatures, are ephemeral and transient; but no sign of decay and morality can be uncovered in matter generally, and therefore there is no sign that it had a beginning and that to exist it needed, or needs, any power outside of itself. The world, or rather the existence of matter in that particular form, is something transient that was begun.”

\textsuperscript{462} My italics.

\textsuperscript{463} Galimberti (1998a), 403-404 on the influence of D’Holbach’s \textit{Système de la nature} on Strato’s philosophical system in the \textit{Frammento}, and (convincingly) on Leopardi’s choice of Strato as the example of the materialistic philosopher.
III
Schopenhauer, Greek Leaves, and Leopardi

The Greeks, their thought, their literature and attitude to beauty appear consistently throughout Arthur Schopenhauer’s *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, but perhaps nowhere is their presence so extensive and acute as in the *Supplements to the Fourth Book*. Two chapters of the *Supplements* – Chapter 41 “Über den Tod und sein Verhältniß zur Unzerstörbarkeit unsers Wesens an sich” and Chapter 46 “Von der Nichtigkeit und dem Leiden des Lebens” – delve with particular intensity into ancient Greek thought. Among other references, Chapter 41 offers Schopenhauer’s interpretation of the Iliadic trope of the leaves and Chapter 46 provides – in the setting of examples of “großer Geister aller Zeiten” who shared Schopenhauer’s worldview – a brief and yet effective account of the ancient Greek pessimistic worldview. The last words of Chapter 46 are, remarkably, about Leopardi’s role in this history of pessimistic thoughts, but we shall come back to this passage at the end of this section. I wish here to discuss Schopenhauer’s engagement with Greek thought in these two chapters, and especially to observe how his interpretation of the simile of the leaves in many ways complements Leopardi’s.

In Chapter 41 Schopenhauer discusses the role of death in the life of the human species, especially insofar as consciousness of it prompts humans to metaphysical enquiry and to the formulation of religious and philosophical theories. With the aid of empirical data (such as the experiences of people experiencing death-like situations such as fainting, or the direct observation of dead bodies), and with the backup of famous thinkers (ranging from Socrates to Voltaire) or major religions such as Buddhism, Schopenhauer sets out to show what death really signifies for conscious living beings. The chapter is crammed with references to ancient Greek thought, from ideas from Socrates and Plato to the

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464 Some notion of Schopenhauer’s relationship with Greek thought (although with almost exclusive focus on Euripides’ *Bacchae*) can be found in Nussbaum (2006), and various articles on Nietzsche and the Greeks discuss Schopenhauer in passing. Yet as of today, and to the best of my knowledge, no work has yet solely and thoroughly explored Schopenhauer’s relationship with the Greeks. Cf. Cartwright (2010), 117, 133 on Schopenhauer’s study of Greek.

465 All quotations from Schopenhauer come from the German edition by von Löhneysen (1960-1965). The English translations consulted are Payne (1966); Norman et al. (2010), although the second volume, more relevant to this chapter, is yet to be published.
teachings of Epicurus.\textsuperscript{466} It is thus undeniable that the work of the philosophical schools of Greece permeates the discussion of death. And yet, on a different level, there is another sense in which Greek thought is fundamental to this chapter. In a less striking manner the reader is made aware that also the poetic wisdom of ancient Greece plays a crucial role in shaping Schopenhauer’s conception of death – just as it will do with his conception of life’s suffering in Chapter 46. Some of these poetic references lie on the outer shell of Schopenhauer’s relationship with Greek thought; so for example the mention of Odysseus’ strength in bending the bow – a reference to Odyssey 22 – is possibly more of a learned note than anything else.\textsuperscript{467}

Yet there is more. Shortly before the mention of Odysseus’ force – used as an example for the disappearance or perpetuation of energies or non-corporeal forces – Schopenhauer had been dealing with the similarity between the time of non-existence after death and that before birth. Reflecting on the fact that we do not fear the time before existence, but we dread that which comes after existence, Schopenhauer seems to invite the reader to use the little he knows about the first period of non-existence to shun terror about the second period, i.e. death. This is possible on the grounds of the quasi-total identity between these two parts of eternity, which, as Schopenhauer puts it, “are not distinguished by anything except by the intervention of an ephemeral dream of life”\textsuperscript{468}. In the midst of an attempt at a definition of death stands, in fact, a definition of life, which is the part we positively know. The juxtaposition of the image of the dream with the idea of ephemerality leads me to suggest that behind this one characterisation of human life stands Pindar’s definition of human existence in Pythian 8 (vv. 92-97), which Schopenhauer had already quoted from the Greek in his Book 1.5.\textsuperscript{469} At this point in the Supplements Schopenhauer is not concerned with defining life as much as he is...
with exploring death, but the analysis of the defining features of existence lies only a few pages away, in Chapter 46. As we shall see, the piercing characterisation of the brief span of existence as an ephemeral dream acquires a different flavour when seen in the light of the reflections on Greek conceptions of human life in Chapter 46, and so does Schopenhauer’s engagement with Greek thought in Chapter 41.

But there is something more that connects the two chapters and their outlook on Greek existential ideas – aside from the presence of Greek characters such as Odysseus or the allusion to Pindar. Chapter 41 had opened with the discussion of the meaning of death for mankind, after which follows the study of the significance of death for the wider system of nature. Schopenhauer’s analysis means firstly to highlight the patterns and the mechanisms that guide the functioning of natural life, whose symbol he identifies in the circle: nature does not conceive of the individuality of the single insect or dog, but only cares about their race or species, which is unhindered by the individual birth or death of each particular insect or dog. The death of individual beings does nothing to the system itself, since for the one creature that dies many others are generated and the overall balance of the system is preserved. It is at this point that Schopenhauer brings the focus back to humanity: the discussion of the role of death within the wider natural system is supposed to have supplied the data needed for the understanding of the role of death in human existence, and Schopenhauer seems to imply that man is in fact fully ready to accept this mechanism insofar as it concerns the animal and vegetal beings. Yet when it comes to the understanding of his own death, man clings to the belief in his own individual importance, and remains oblivious of the similarity between himself and the rest of nature.

Schopenhauer’s previous examples taken from natural life included a dog, a bird, a frog, and an insect. But this time, as he attempts to tackle the full extent of human delusion and to explain how man should instead look at his own existence and death, Schopenhauer chooses to talk about leaves. The man who thinks of future generations and fails to see the link between himself and them, between his own disappearance and the perpetuation of the species which is possible through future humans, is like a leaf

that, about to wither and fall, complains and cannot see the use of its death and of the life of the new green leaves. Schopenhauer’s language makes ample use of examples, comparisons, and metaphors; the trope of the leaves – to which he gives the voice of a deluded human – is thus entirely consistent with his usual style. But whereas the reader is not always given a chance to learn about the provenance of his examples, this time Schopenhauer explicitly references the source for the leaves trope.

Verse 146 from book 6 of the *Iliad* is quoted in full to conclude the section about leaves.\(^{471}\) We have already discussed the Homeric passage, but let us remind ourselves of one feature that makes it so important for Schopenhauer in this context. The circular motion that pervades the simile – the death of the leaves at 147, their rebirth at 148, and the new start of the circle brought about by 149’s reworking of 146 by inverting the position of ἀνδρῶν in the line – hints at the circularity of nature’s mechanisms. The simile gives us the sense that in the eternal cycle of births and deaths the (different and individual) leaves that are born and die form one continuum which propagates the species and makes up for the disappearance of the individual.\(^{472}\) It is this circularity inherent in the Homeric passage that Schopenhauer now reworks and concentrates on. The comparison with the leaves reminds men that although as individuals we are born, wither, and die, our race survives in the multitude of generations that precede and succeed us on the earth.\(^{473}\) And whereas the implicit comparison with the immortal gods – who are not subject to any of the described mechanisms – fosters a sense of gloomy necessity, the idea of rebirth in the new entities of the species opens to a new understanding of the mechanisms of the cosmos.\(^{474}\)

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\(^{471}\) Von Löhneysen (1960-1965), vol. 2, 610.

\(^{472}\) Cf. Lowry (1995), 198 on how leaves signify “large or indeterminate quantities”, cf. the process of generalisation described for ants in *Chapter 2*.

\(^{473}\) Cf. Vox (1979) analysing this aspect of the Homeric simile by drawing a comparison with Hesiod’s generations of men at *Op*. 109ff. The generations are different one from the other and yet they share their destiny, death: “le stirpi degli uomini, in quanto umane, si succedono effimere”. Yet Vox sees a major difference between the Homeric and the Hesiodic passage: the Iliadic genealogy traced by Glaucus is, as a whole, “unilateral” (insofar as it it avoids envisioning the end of Glaucus’ γενεή for encomiastic reasons). Hesiod instead is “tracing the non-encomiastic history of humankind”, and is more keen to mention the two “physiological complementary moments”, i.e. births and deaths (which, in Glaucus’ speech, are only present in the simile of the leaves).

\(^{474}\) Cf. Kirk (1990), 176 who sees instead in the passage “no suggestion of rebirth”. 
In the context of the encounter between the two warriors it is precisely the incessant turnover of generations that can guarantee the safety of both warriors. Glaucus’ introduction, consisting of his description of his lineage and ancestors, rather than ensuing combat prompts instead the discovery of mutual bonds of hospitality dating back to the far past of their ancestors (II. 6.215-218) and triggers the pair’s decision not to fight.\(^{475}\) It is the ancestors – those leaves that have already fallen to the ground – that secure present survival for the new generations. There is a positive side to the short-lived measure of human existence, and it lies in the bonds that genetically tie each generation to the following.\(^{476}\)

These features of the Homeric passage must have informed – if not in fact contributed to shaping – Schopenhauer’s notion of the cycle of natural existence. In the attempt to convince man of the vanity of his fear of death as loss of individuality, Schopenhauer seems to ultimately emphasise the moment of rebirth over that of death. The text of Schopenhauer leading up to the Iliadic quotation stresses the ideas of regeneration and growth inherent to – but not exclusive in – the Homeric simile:\(^{477}\) that which is the end for the individual is nothing but the progression of the species. Yet, this realisation cannot but be a confirmation of pessimistic interpretations of the destiny of man on earth: the acceptance of death as a common, natural, and unavoidable part of existence strikes the very core of the will to live which animates humans. Thus Schopenhauer’s exuberant testimony to the regenerative power of natural life is also, implicitly, proof of

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\(^{475}\) Although inherent to Glaucus’ story is also the fact that he has divine ancestry, as Piccaluga (1980), 249-251 detailedly shows; Piccaluga’s analysis of Glaucus’ genealogy also suggests that although many of Glaucus’ ancestors try to reach the divine status, many “tuttavia ricadono nonostante tutto nell’ineluttabile sorte degli uomini, quella di essere soggetti alla morte”.

\(^{476}\) Taking a slightly different perspective and yet supporting my point Piccaluga (1980), 248 suggests that the positive aspect implied by the passage (in the context of the comparison between mortals and immortals) is humans’ ability to procreate: “Ci si riferisce, in concreto, all’eventualità di scorgere, sullo sfondo di questo inesorabile proclama della finitezza del genere umano, la rivendicazione di quella specie di “surrogato di immortalità” concesso a questo, implicito nella facoltà di riprodursi, per cui, pur essendo effimeri come le foglie, appunto come queste gli uomini continueranno ad avvicendarsi sulla terra”.

the vanity of man’s will to individual existence and validation of the fact that “So weilt Alles nur einen Augenblick und eilt dem Tode zu.”  

Interestingly, the aspect of the trope explored by Schopenhauer is never explicitly tackled by Leopardi in connection with the trope itself. Nonetheless, the ideas underlying Schopenhauer’s interpretation of the comparison of men and leaves are central to Leopardi’s worldview: man’s unjustified conviction about his own superiority (and that of his own race) was expressed, amongst others in the *Operette*, by the dialogue of Sprite and Gnome just as by Schopenhauer’s talking leaf. More than anything however, there is no clearer expression of the belief in the survival of the species against that of the individual than the words that Leopardi attributes to Strato just a few lines after the passage previously analysed:

Ma imperciocché la detta forza non resta mai di operare ed modificare la materia, però quelle creature che essa continuamente forma, essa altresì le distrugge, formando della materia loro nuove creature. Insino a tanto che distruggendosi le creature individui, i generi nondimeno e le specie delle medesime si mantengono, o tutte o le più, e che gli ordini e le relazioni naturali delle cose non si cangiano o in tutto o nella più parte, si dice durare ancora quel cotal mondo.

Both Schopenhauer’s understanding of Greek thought and Leopardi’s role in this analysis of the history of the pessimistic worldview becomes more apparent in Chapter 46, which explores the theme of the “vanity and suffering of life” (“Von der Nichtigkeit und dem Leiden des Lebens”). The chapter, which is as much a vindication of pessimism as it is a rebuttal of optimistic theories, eventually aims at demonstrating that

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478 Von Löhneysen (1960-1965), vol. 2, 611. Redfield (1975), 102 analyses insightfully both sides of the Iliadic episode: on the one hand he sees it (and Glaucus’ speech in particular) as a praise of kinship; on the other hand he shows clearly the pessimistic notion underlying the episode’s ultimate reflection: “only within the order of culture do men have proper names and individual identities; as creatures of nature they are perfectly ephemeral. Nature cares nothing for the life of the individual and everything for the life of the species. To speak of the generations of men as like the growing of leaves is to see oneself as, after all, insignificant”.

479 Another central passage is Zib. 4169, cf. Di Meo (2001), 82-83.

480 *TPP* (2013), 579; Cecchetti (1983), 385: “But since that power never ceases to act upon and to change matter, it destroys those very creatures that it continuously forms, and from their matter it forms new creatures. Thus, although individual creatures are destroyed, as long as their genera and species are mostly preserved and as long as laws and the natural relations of things remain wholly or mostly unchanged, we can say that the world still exists.”
this is the worst of all possible worlds, that life consists mainly of evils, and that, as a consequence, it would be better for mankind not to be born and for this world not to exist.\textsuperscript{481} The demonstration of such assumptions takes place on various levels.\textsuperscript{482} Schopenhauer’s first argument is the impossibility for humans to experience real happiness, happiness which is conceivable only at different points in time – the past or the future, and never in the present – and never by itself, but only in relation to the absence of suffering and pain. Then (sorely intertwined with the absence of real happiness) comes the explanation of the violent dominion of evils, anguish, and pains that rules the world of men, sufferings which are both inflicted upon men by external forces and events and exacerbated by the destructive behaviour of men towards other men. Seen in this light, concludes Schopenhauer, life is nothing but the paying off of a debt contracted with birth, a debt that pains the borrower only to ultimately end with death.\textsuperscript{483} As the reasoning progresses, Schopenhauer shifts his attention from time to time to the existence of man and to that of the world.

By the end of the chapter Schopenhauer feels he has sufficiently proven his points, either through the example of real life situations, the authoritative words of famous thinkers (ranging from Diogenes, to Hume, to Voltaire), or by refutation of specific optimistic theories. But it is at this point that, to further support his argument and to show the reader that such an understanding of the world predates his own theories, Schopenhauer provides evidence of “great men of all ages” who expressed similar concerns about the state of the world:\textsuperscript{484}

\textsuperscript{481} Note how this chapter opens with another definition of life as “dream”, cf. Von Löhneysen (1960-1965), vol. 2, 733.

\textsuperscript{482} At this point the image of the leaves has not yet left Schopenhauer’s mind: a poem by Byron (number 126 of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, in Dearbon (1835), 37) is quoted in full by Schopenhauer as vivid expression of these truths about the world in the poem men are rained upon with sorrows and diseases “like dew”, thus feeding into the image of the tree, its branches and leaves of a few verses above.

\textsuperscript{483} Von Löhneysen (1960-1965), vol. 2, 742-741. On the idea of life as a debt see Cons. Ap. 10. It is difficult to say whether the Consolatio ad Apollonium could be a direct source for the idea; Schopenhauer certainly knew Plutarch’s Moralia, from which he quotes often in the Supplements. Janaway (2006b), 318 and n. 2 sees this tendency “to speak more often in the vocabulary of value” as typical of Schopenhauer.

\textsuperscript{484} Cf. Dahlkvist (2007), 95: “most of the pessimists go to some length yo show that most of the great minds in the history of mankind have been proto-pessimists”, quoting Agnes Taubert’s statement that “Der Pessimismus is so alt wie die Reflexion der Menschen über sich und sein Leben”. One should recall that Leopardi himself wrote something similar in his Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico, TPP
What follows is in fact a series of quotations of various lengths, which, by Schopenhauer’s programmatic declaration, start with the Greeks, who “although [...] they decidedly stood at the point of view of the assertion of the will, were yet deeply affected by the wretchedness of existence”. The quotations follow one another without any strict chronological order. Herodotus’ statement about the Thracian custom of mourning the new-borns (Hdt. 5.4.2) is followed by a poem transmitted by Plutarch and then topped up with a Mexican tradition much resembling the aforementioned Thracian custom; to this again Schopenhauer connects Swift’s “custom of keeping his birthday not as a moment of joy but of sadness” and his habit of reading on that day a Biblical passage related to the theme (Job 3). The first few lines following Schopenhauer’s remark about the great men of all ages start in fact with the Greeks, but then wander off into a complex *mise en abyme* of references on the idea of the necessity of mourning birthdays; the references reduplicate, intersect, and craftily fit one inside the other like Russian dolls. The choice of referencing thinkers across the ages serves a double and somewhat contrasting purpose: on the one hand the antiquity of some of the quotations provides validation to Schopenhauer’s point. On the other hand the multitude of quotations coming from all corners of human history dissolves the significance of linear time: from the beginning of recorded history great minds have agreed about Schopenhauer’s assumptions and the freedom with which he skips from quotation to quotation highlights the unity and a-temporality of such an understanding of the world.

But it is the Greeks who resurface once more after Swift’s anecdote. After Plato’s
Apology 40c-e and Heraclitus B48 DK\textsuperscript{488} comes a series of poetic quotations: Theognis 425-428 and Sophocles’ Oedipus Colonus 1225 (both on the idea of \( \mu \eta \ \varphi \nu \nu \alpha \iota \)), Euripides’ Hippolytus 189 on the painful nature of human life, and finally Homer with the verses on the miserable condition of human beings among other creatures from Odyssey 18.\textsuperscript{489}

Overall, the balance of quotations tilts heavily towards the Greek texts: they are for the greatest part explicitly quoted rather than merely referenced, as most of the other texts are, and they outnumber any other literary or philosophical tradition recalled by Schopenhauer. The prominence given to the Greek quotations is probably owed to the extreme clarity and directness of the Greeks’ sentiment towards non-existence and to the diffusion of such sentiment in their writing, facts that Schopenhauer had clearly noticed. More than merely suggesting that death is preferable to the vanity and suffering inherent in life, the Greeks repeatedly and lucidly stated that never to exist would be the very best for man. It becomes now apparent that some of the core principles of this worldview (which now Schopenhauer clearly traces back to the Greeks) featured throughout Chapter 46 well before Schopenhauer admits their connection to the Greek conception of human existence. The connection between the end of Chapter 41 and the very end of Chapter 46 lies not only in the crucial presence of Greek thought, but also in the aspects of Greek thought that Schopenhauer chooses to lay emphasis on. Schopenhauer’s pessimistic reading of the Homeric trope of the leaves fits perfectly with the worldview conveyed by Chapter 46’s quotations. It seems then no coincidence that the Iliadic passage is treated or quoted in conjunction with many of the other pessimistic statements – such as the ones regarding the idea of better not to be born – in both Barthélemy’s chapter and in Burckhardt’s account of Greek pessimistic thought.\textsuperscript{490}

As the chapter now approaches its conclusion Schopenhauer provides a few further references to “großer Geister”: Pliny, Shakespeare, Byron, and Gracian. But the very last paragraph of the chapter is devoted to a sole author, Leopardi:

\textsuperscript{488} Number 48 in Kirk (1954), 116; Schopenhauer has \( \beta \iota \theta \iota \) instead of \( \tau \omega \xi \theta \).

\textsuperscript{489} Schopenhauer quotes Theognis 425 with the variant \( \dot{\alpha} r \chi \nu \nu \ \mu \nu \nu \) at the beginning of the verse, cf. the apparatus in West (1989), 194.

\textsuperscript{490} Burckhardt et al. (2005), 358.

No individual quotation is singled out from the works of the Italian thinker, and Schopenhauer’s own words justify the impression that he is thinking of the entirety of Leopardi’s work and thought as he knew it. Schopenhauer’s admiration for Leopardi shines through in other places in the works of the German philosopher, where it is repeatedly addressed as a “similarity of spirit”. In the letter sent to Schopenhauer urging him to read the works of the Italian thinker in February 1858 – the same year in which Schopenhauer added the final paragraph on Leopardi to Chapter 46 – Adam von Doß called Leopardi “this southern doppelganger in pessimism”, a definition echoed in Schopenhauer’s letter to David Asher (3 January 1859), where the German philosopher calls Leopardi “meinen Geistesverwandten”. The two authors’ interests in Greek thought, its heritage, and its relevance for modernity meet at several points, not least in their common attention to the meaning and significance of the trope of the leaves. But Schopenhauer’s fondness for Leopardi relates not only to the themes explored by the Italian thinker, but also to the imaginative and multifaceted manner in which Leopardi explores such themes. As we have seen, the way Leopardi so variously tackled the Greek idea of human ephemerality seems like the perfect illustration of such an attitude;

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491 Von Löhneysen (1960-1965), vol. 2, 754. The passage is discussed by Dahlkvist (2007), 97-98, who specifies that this entire paragraph is “an addition included in the third edition of the book, from 1858” and who links Schopenhauer’s interest in Leopardi to letter of 20 February 1858 from Adam von Doß which he cites from Hübscher (1978), 154 (which I unfortunately could not get access to).

492 On the relationship between Schopenhauer and Leopardi see De Sanctis’ (2007), 52: “Leopardi e Schopenhauer sono una cosa. Quasi nello stesso tempo l'uno creava la metafisica e l'altro la poesia del dolore. Leopardi vedeva il mondo così, e non sapeva il perché. [...] Il perché l'ha trovato Schopenhauer con la scoperta del Wille”. On De Sanctis’ dialogue, Dahlkvist (2007), 100-101. Ibid. 95-102 is possibly the most detailed account of the relationship between the two authors.

493 Again citing from Hübscher (1978), 440 in Dahlkvist (2007), 99; cf. ibid. 99-102 on Schopenhauer’s conviction of his similarity with Leopardi on account of the shared pessimism, providing anecdotes reported by contemporaries of Schopenhauer.

494 Ibid. 98-99, Schopenhauer owned the first two volumes of Leopardi’s Opere, containing the Canti, the Operette, the Pensieri, and some of Leopardi’s translations from Greek and Latin.
the same themes are toured and probed from multiple perspectives and in a mesmerising number of settings. The scholarly approach is harmonised with the inventive (and in a way unscholarly) act of (mis)attribution ideas to ancient philosophers; poetry – both in the act of translation and in that of creative reinterpretation – and prose are equally valid exploratory tools. Leopardi’s relationship with the intellectual history of pessimism, and in particular with the part that the Greeks played in this history, is another tile in the mosaic of pessimistic inventiveness which Schopenhauer praised so wholeheartedly: the continuous exchange between the words of the ancients and the needs and understanding of modernity triggers the fact that Leopardi’s “system” of pessimism contains not only nominally, but in fact structurally and essentially the wisdom of the ancients.
CHAPTER 4

Human Questions, Divine Answers: Silenic Wisdom and the Worth of Existence

“And that is the very thing that alarms me,” returned Dantes. “Man does not appear to me to be intended to enjoy felicity so unmixed; happiness is like the enchanted palaces we read of in our childhood, where fierce, fiery dragons defend the entrance and approach; and monsters of all shapes and kinds, requiring to be overcome ere victory is ours.

A. Dumas (1844) The Count of Monte-Cristo

I

Leopardi and the μὴ φῶναι: Brief Notes on an Encounter

Non siamo dunque nati fuorchè per sentire, qual felicità sarebbe stata se non fossimo nati? Striking in its composed violence, the note is dated February 18th 1821; no further comments or reference are added, and the question echoes unanswered on page 676 of the Zibaldone. In a manner nearly absurd given its laconic brevity, the note grapples with issues – life and its value, existence and non-existence, and, last but not least, the complex web that forms human ideas about the nature of happiness and its attainability – the gravity of which is also almost completely at odds with the various annotations that crowd the very same page. The question as Leopardi formulates it is not strictly rhetorical; the reader gets glimpses of both the (ever so slight) struggle of the author in embracing the affirmative answer and its tragic implications, and the author’s pained disbelief at the full vanity in which human life is cast by such insight. It is precisely the affirmative answer and the belief at its core that represent the note’s paradoxical centre of attraction, the monstrous and yet fatally hypnotic possibility that it would in fact be better for man not to have been born.

495 In Chapman and Hall (1846), 27-28.
496 A variety of annotations on entirely unrelated subjects, ranging from the saying Quot homines, tot sententiae to M.me de Lambert’s reflections on womanly love.
And despite its seeming loneliness in the context of *Zibaldone* 676, this theme – the paradox embedded in the happiness that comes with non-existence and its ties with ideas about the human condition – is in fact a magnetic pole throughout Leopardi’s work, and an utterly crucial element in his thought. The reader of the *Operette*, of the *Canti*, and of the *Zibaldone* will remember it cropping up at multiple points. Even just a look at one of the last passages observed in *Chapter 3* of this thesis (the Leoparidean description of the suffering garden) provides an apt example of the wide-ranging presence of this idea. The raging (and yet profoundly lucid) attack on existence that fills three pages (*Zib.* 4174-4176) of the *Zibaldone*’s manuscript – starting with the outcry “everything is evil” and then blooming into the extensive symbolic depiction of the suffering garden – had closed on the comparison between the garden itself and a hospital, whose inhabitants ought to feel that non-existence would have been preferable to existence (“certo è che il non essere sarebbe per loro assai meglio che l’essere”).

The vividly pictorial way by which Leopardi describes the garden and wraps up the significance of its existence does full justice to the importance of this idea in his wider work: hand in hand with the denunciation of the harm inherent in existence – so central in the garden passage – the notion that it would be better not to be born is in fact both pivotal and ubiquitous in Leopardi’s thought. Just as in the present case, it invariably represents the resting point of any argument about the value of life; very few other ideas in the whole of Leopardi’s works are scrutinised as intensely, and reworked so often and so passionately, as the case for non-existence.
1. Biographical Data and Biblical Wisdom

Salomon et Job ont le mieux connu et le mieux parlé de la misère de l'homme, l'un le plus heureux et l'autre le plus malheureux; l'un connaissant la vanité des plaisirs par expérience, l'autre la vérité des maux.

B. Pascal, Pensées 221

Both the Zibaldone and Leopardi’s letters bear witness to the fact that our theme had become precociously central to the poet’s mind. As early as 1819 a 21 year-old Leopardi – who had just failed in his attempt to escape the paternal home in Recanati – was writing to his younger brother Carlo that “It would have been better (humanly speaking) for them and for me, if I had not been born, or that I had died a long time ago.” What is especially striking in his personal history is the fact that Leopardi was directly and precociously exposed not only to facts and events that may have triggered such a pessimistic worldview, but really to the notion, to the pondered idea that it is preferable not to exist. An especially significant medium was the (religious) education imparted to Leopardi by his mother. From Leopardi’s writings the reader learns how Adelaide Antici steadily inculcated into her children the idea that existence is in itself sin, evil, and danger, and that departure from life (especially a premature one, such as that of infants) must be rejoiced over. Both Adelaide’s words and behaviours, described in a variety of settings by Leopardi, testify to one essential belief, though she seems to always have stopped short of this extreme formulation: it would be better for humans not to be born.

Even though space only allows us to note this point briefly, it is worth remembering that

497 In the edition by Kaplan (1982), 190.
499 Two Zibaldone passages are especially telling in this respect. One is Zib. 353-355, describing the rejoicing attitude of a very religious mother towards the loss of her children (or risk thereof). In Leopardi’s insightful words, the mother’s behaviour is a testimony to the almost perfect equation between sin and existence: life equals numberless chances of temptation and sin; Giacomo deduces from such conduct the unequivocal belief that, by dying, the children not only have lost nothing, but really have gained much. Whether we want to believe or not that the mother depicted in the page is in fact his own, it remains unquestionable that Leopardi was not only precociously drawn to ponder over the matter of bereavement, but also exposed to behaviours that questioned the natural reaction to (especially untimely) death.
Biblical wisdom played an important role in triggering Leopardi’s obsession with the theme. The notion so actively believed by Leopardi’s mother appears with articulate limpidity in the Ecclesiastes itself (4.2-3) – which Leopardi repeatedly cites in his notes. Likewise the figure of Job, a pious man struck by countless banes, is chosen in Zib. 504 to exemplify the reaction of strength of the ancients (who searched for reasons and faults outside themselves, in the adverse gods and fate), is remembered for his defiant cursing of his birth, and reappears (more or less overtly) elsewhere throughout Leopardi’s work. Not least, the Book of Job appears (albeit quite covertly) in Leopardi’s Detti memorabili di Filippo Ottonieri, an 1824 piece in the style of memorabilia displaying the life philosophy of Ottonieri. Ottonieri is a modern Job on a smaller scale, who, shortly after alluding to the Biblical book in his description of life as a night spent sleeplessly on an uncomfortable bed, turns to reinterpret the Zibaldone

500 Brief selection of general literature on the subject: Casoli (1990); Negri (1997); Niccoli and Salvarani (1998); Rota (1998).
501 Cf. Ecclesiastes 4.2-3 on which Presti (2016), 174; In general on Leopardi and Job and Leopardi and the Ecclesiastes Marcon (2007a), drawing a parallel between Solomon and Leopardi; Presti (2016), especially 170-177, who strongly disagrees with Marcon’s religious reading of Leopardi’s relationship with the Ecclesiastes. It must be mentioned that we find little help for the present research in Marcon’s works, that seem for the most part based on rather loose text comparisons and analogies, for which they have been criticised by Biscuso in his 2010 review. The impact of his mother’s teachings interweave in his writings with his reflections on religion: by February 1822, 23 year-old Leopardi (Zib. 2381-2383) can see the practical application of what he has distilled from his mother’s acts and words in other aspects of Christianity, and in particular in the renunciation of existence operated by Christian monasticism. For Leopardi on Solomon and Homer see the Epilogue to this thesis.
504 Cf. Galimberti (1998), 322 n. 36 who reports Della Giovanna’s (1899) suggestion of the Book of Job as a reference for this passage, but seems more inclined to think that “il comune spunto si spiega, oltre che con ascendenze letterarie […], con la spontanea forza icastica del paragone.” Recently, Presti (2016) analyses the allusion to the Book of Job and links the passage with Zib. 4104. The Book of Job, which had been so relevant in the composition of the note Leopardi wrote one month earlier (Zib. 504), supplies here another layer of comparison, engaging with the Socratic image. The image of tormented and sleepless nights is twice present in chapter 7 of the Book of Job: first, it is a restless night which longs for the wake of dawn (3-4), second comes the night plagued by terrible dreams and visions. It is significant that in the Book of Job too the sleepless nights are a metaphor for the nature of existence: chapter 7 is introduced by “Does not man have hard service on earth?” to which follows a
note on which this chapter started, Zib. 676. This time, rather than leaving the (rhetorical) question open as he had done in the Zibaldone note, Leopardi casts it as Ottonieri’s assertive and witty response to “to what purpose are men born?” Ottonieri responds: “To find out how much better it is not to be born”.

2. The μὴ φῶναι: Existing Research, Barthélemy, and a Problem in Focus

A third and potent role in the formation of Leopardi’s ideas of the evaluation of existence and non-existence is played by his wide-ranging readings, which exposed him to various and diverse interpretations of this notion. Amongst the various literary and philosophical traditions, just as Schopenhauer will later note, the ancient Greeks figure prominently for both the space they dedicate to the exploration of this notion and for the precocious entry of such meditations into the landscape of Western literature. Because of the undeniable relevance of this theme in Leopardi’s work, and perhaps due to the provocative nature of the μὴ φῶναι itself, two works of scholarship have directly tackled the theme of this chapter, i.e. the connection between Leopardi’s view of existence, non-existence, and birth, and the ancient sources that proclaim that it is best for man not to be born.

The first is Alberto Grilli’s “Leopardi, Platone, e la filosofia greca”, from the proceedings of the 5th Convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani. The second is

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505 TPP (2013), 559. The two sentences differ in one respect. Whereas the Zibaldone note openly speaks of happiness (that happiness which is certainly impossible once one is born, but of which one paradoxically imagines non-existence to be made of), Ottonieri employs the word “spediente”, which pertains rather to the semantic field of the idea of “usefulness”. One could imagine Ottonieri to be voicing an even darker notion than the one drafted by Leopardi three years before: happiness is so out of the question that the criteria of usefulness is the one now used to define the gap between existence and non-existence.


507 And we have seen in Chapter 3 III.

508 This is especially unusual given the general lack of research on the subject of Greek pessimistic thought in Leopardi’s work.
Guido Polizzi’s “La scoperta del ‘meglio non essere mai nati’”, presented at the 12th Convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani and strongly connected to the research that was to result in his 2011 Giacomo Leopardi: la concezione dell’umano, tra utopia e disincanto, a work I mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis. Both articles concentrate heavily (if not exclusively) on one moment in the history of Leopardi’s contact with the μὴ φῶναι, i.e. on his reading of Chapter 26 and 28 of Barthélemy’s Voyage in 1823, in the conviction (shared by a great part of the scholarship) that this is the moment of Leopardi’s encounter with this notion in Greek thought. The main focus of their analysis is a series of pages in the Zibaldone (2671ff), written in Rome in December 1823, which document with annotations and word-by-word transcriptions Leopardi’s reading of these chapters in the Voyage. The passages copied or referred to by Leopardi contain references to some of the central occurrences of the μὴ φῶναι in ancient literature.

Despite the importance of this material for any study on this subject, in taking this stance the two articles fall short of the task in two respects. First, they neglect a great deal of crucial evidence, failing to consider the elements in Leopardi’s work and thought which address this idea before 1823 and the reading of Barthélemy, and how those elements connect with ancient sources. The second shortcoming is a side product of the two articles’ rigorous philological approach, aimed at assessing whether or not Leopardi ever came into direct contact with the sources mentioned by Barthélemy (especially Grilli) and at scrutinising the details of Leopardi’s contact with Barthélemy’s text itself (especially Polizzi). Obsessed with the Zibaldone pages and the relevant sections of Barthélemy, these scholars fail to acknowledge, but most importantly to discuss, the role that the μὴ φῶναι plays in the Canti and in the Operette

509 Stefano Brogi (2012) briefly tackles Leopardi’s interaction with the μὴ φῶναι in the context of his focus on the idea of the nolo renasci, indeed present in Leopardi’s work. Given the strong connection between the notion of the nolo renasci and that of the μὴ φῶναι one could have hoped Brogi would treat the theme himself; yet, he merely refers back to Timpanaro’s work and to Barthélemy’s Voyage, in Brogi (2012),15-16 and note 10.

510 The reading took place during Leopardi’s trip to Rome at the end of 1823; the edition he consulted, printed in Paris, is referenced at Zib. 2670.


512 Cf. Grilli (1982), 58 who spends only a brief paragraph mentioning the aforementioned letter to Carlo and Zib. 353-354.
in a series of passages that testify to the enormous (albeit less literal) impact that the μὴ φῦναι had on Leopardi. Failure to observe these passages (otherwise highly commented upon) through the lens of the μὴ φῦναι results in a restricted view of Leopardi’s interpretation of Greek pessimistic thought (and of the μὴ φῦναι in particular) and a lack of appreciation of the nuances of such interpretation. This chapter aims at remedying such shortcomings by focusing on a selection of passages where Leopardi uses the μὴ φῦναι, in one way or another to connect his insights with those of antiquity. The chapter is organised in short sections, which do not aim to fully explore each issue. Rather, they centre on a number of original observations, hoping to enrich the standard interpretations of these passages, and ultimately to bring to light some of the flickers that testify to the continual link between Leopardi and ancient pessimistic thought.
II

Greek Stories of Non-Existence

1. Sappho, Existence, and Homeric Pessimism

The path of fascination with both the poetry and the (real and mythical) persona of Sappho that was to lead Leopardi to the composition of his *Ultimo canto di Saffo* (1822) started at least as early as 1814, the year of his first translation from the Lesbian poetess.\(^{513}\) As we read in the unpublished foreword to it, the *Ultimo canto* – the very peak of this path – is meant to sing of the unspeakable misfortune inherent in ugliness.\(^{514}\) In it Sappho is in fact a splendid and suffering soul in an ugly body, depicted by Leopardi as she speaks (to herself, to us, to the gods, fate, and nature) about her unhappiness at the dawn of the day that will see her suicide.\(^{515}\) This is not the place for a detailed treatment of Leopardi’s complex relationship with Sappho’s work and life, a subject that has intrigued generations of scholars and that continues to spark new research, nor do we have room for a thorough analysis of the *Ultimo canto* itself.\(^{516}\) Rather, the nature of this poem gives us the chance to make a few brief observations regarding the way in which insights into the meaning of existence and its connection with suffering are, for Leopardi, always rooted in the wisdom of antiquity.

Two interconnected movements of thought mark Sappho’s last song and her insights into existence. First is the pained and yet lucid connection Sappho draws between her unhappiness and her own existence, a connection that has already been made by the time she is singing in front of us. One thing is now limpidly clear to Sappho: her own suffering – which sprung from the unbridgeable gap between the beauty of her soul and the unseemliness of her body, and consequently her tragic and unreciprocated love – is


\(^{514}\) *TPP* (2013), 471-472.

\(^{515}\) As Leopardi himself declares, his main source is Ovid’s *Heroides* 15.

\(^{516}\) A selected bibliography on the poem (excluding the commentaries on the *Canti*): Dell’Aquila (1979); Blasucci (1987); Lonardi (1992); Gigante (2003); Felici (2002) reprinted in Felici (2005); Lonardi (2005); Raboni (2012); Presti (2016), 27-31.
one and the same as her life.\(^{517}\) Her grief and misery commenced with her very existence, and are inextricable from it.

This insight resonates throughout the Canto, manifesting itself insistently in the form of the emphatic appearance of the theme of birth, which recurs with almost rhythmical insistence throughout the poem, as obsessive in the head of the reader as it is in Sappho’s. We see it first in verses 37-39, expressing the notion that not only birth, but the moment such birth was decreed to happen and the individual’s life was set into existence, are at the core of one’s unhappiness (“What monstrous fault, what impious transgression/ Stained me before my birth \([\text{natale}]\), making the Heavens/ So ill-disposed and fortune turn her face?”).\(^{518}\) It appears once more at vv. 47-49: “We are neglected/ Children \([\text{prole}]\), and born \([\text{nasce}m]m\) to weep, whose raison d’être/ Rests with the gods.”\(^{519}\) The theme crops up not only at different points throughout the poem, but also at different stages in its drafting, as we can see in a previous version of the aforementioned verses 37-39, where verse 37 appears as “Which fault, before I opened my eyes to the \([\text{day}]\)”.\(^{520}\) The recurrent reference to the moment of birth is an indirect and yet revealing testimony to the importance of this moment as symbolic of Sappho’s acquired insight.

But there is a second, wider movement of thought sweeping through the \([\text{Ultimo canto}]\). The clue is – among others – in that first person plural that Sappho repeatedly adopts, and on which interpreters have long dwelled.\(^{521}\) “We are neglected/ Children, and born

\(^{517}\) Cf. Raboni (2012), 119 on the connection between the \([\text{Ultimo canto}]\) and the Inno ai Patriarchi, both discussions of man’s unhappiness as the result of something that predates birth (in the Inno it is, in a Christian perspective, the original sin).

\(^{518}\) My italics.

\(^{519}\) Cf. (my italics) Il sogno (1820-1821), v. 55: “\([\text{Nasce}m]mm\) al pianto/ Disse, ambedue; felicità non rise/ Al viver nostro; e dilettosi il cielo/ De’ nostri affanni” and the Inno ai patriarchi, v. 7, composed a few months after the \([\text{Ultimo canto}]\): “Immedicati affanni/ Al misero mortal, nascere al pianto;/ E dell’etereo lume assai più dolci/ Sortir l’opaca tomba e il fato estremo,/ Non la pietà, non la diritta impose/Legge del cielo.”

\(^{520}\) My translation. In the original: “Qual fallo mai, qual si nefando eccesso/Macchioni anzi il natale, onde si torvo/Il ciel mi fosse e di fortuna il volto?”

\(^{521}\) Cf. among others Dell’Aquila (1979), who also explores the relationship between the use of plural and autobiographism; Lonardi (1992), 180-181: “Il riferimento si muove con ambiguità ‘ricca’ tra l’io singolo, il duale (io Saffò parlo a te Saffò) e tutti noi, tutti nati al pianto”; Felici (2002), 348 “ora un
to weep, whose *raison d’être* / Rests with the gods”; we, and not I, is what Sappho sings. Sappho’s realisation is that not only is she not alone in her fate, but her unhappiness is ontologically the very substance of life, affecting every person from the dawn of existence. The universal nature of Sappho’s definition of life as expressed in vv. 37-39 is reiterated again at 61-62, as she addresses the one who has rejected her: “Live happily, if ever on this earth/ A happy mortal lived”. Her wish of happiness for Phaon is poisonously entangled with an idea that, despite being formulated as hypothetical, does not lose its menacing and gnomic tone: “no mortal man can be happy” is the subtext of Sappho’s words. The fact that Phaon shares none of Sappho’s personal grounds for unhappiness – as far as we know he is neither ugly nor suffering from unrequited love – is not a guarantee of his future happiness, because no mortal is exempt from the misery inherent in birth and human life. The continuous intertwining of these two insights – the connection between pain and existence on the one hand, and the universal nature of such an axiom on the other – makes the *Ultimo canto* a perfect specimen of Leopardi’s deep and complex relationship with the idea of the identity between life and unhappiness, and thus an ideal springboard for this chapter’s observation of Leopardi’s thoughts on the preferability of non-existence.

522 The fact that Sappho is not singing merely of herself is accepted by scholarship. Two especially enlightening discussions are Blasucci (1987), esp. 844-845 and Raboni (2012), 117 who suggest the universal value at the core of the *Ultimo canto* as the reason for the poem’s place in the final edition of the *Canti*. Raboni (2012), 120 suggests that the change (with the removal of the first person singular possessive pronoun) to verse 37 from “Qual de la mente mia nefando errore” to the final “Qual fallo mai, qual si nefando eccesso” is motivated by the same intent.

523 Cf. Dell’Aquila (1979), 19: “pessimistica visione di una condizione umana destinata al dolore”; Lonardi (1992), 181: “Saffo giunge a questa uscita dall’io verso tutti nell svolgersi stesso del suo canto-riflessione. Daprima può pensare come è appunto degli antichi secondo Leopardi, che la sventura sia solo sua.” (It must be noted that this thesis profoundly disagrees with Lonardi’s suggestion that, for Leopardi, the ancients only realised the individual’s suffering. As this whole thesis shows, although he began by supposing the ancients happier than the moderns, Leopardi saw in antiquity the first conscious realisation of the universal character of human misery: one example among all, the “principato dell’ infelicità” identified by Homer, at the very onset of ancient literature, cf. *TPP* (2013), 593 and at *Chapter 2* III.2 in this thesis.)

524 In the original: “Vivi felice, se felice in terra/ Visse nato mortal.” In a note to the verse, Leopardi explains – once again resorting to the theme of birth – that the addition of “nato” to “mortal” was necessary to distinguish humans and gods. My translation of the note (capitalisations by Leopardi): “The Gods, according to the ancients, were BORN, and not MORTAL; and many of these had lived for some time ON EARTH; and many were earthly and always lived there, such as the nymphs of the woods, rivers, sea, etc. Pan, the sylvan gods, etc. etc.”
To reach any certainty about the fact that Sappho’s plural – appearing as early as verse 8 – is not merely an idly used “royal we”, but rather a deep marker of comprehension of human life, the reader needs to listen to the Greek wisdom which softly but clearly murmurs in between Leopardi’s – and Sappho’s – words. But this wisdom is not (Leopardi’s) Sappho’s (or rather, not only Sappho’s, at least for what Leopardi could have known about her): rather it is the cumulative and deeply assimilated force of Greek poetry – and of one poet in particular, Homer – that speaks to us through Sappho’s voice, conveyed more or less consciously by Leopardi to strengthen the poetess’s claim. The presence of this ancient wisdom is the other reason for starting this chapter with this poem: Sappho’s insights cannot be fully understood if one fails to perceive that they are grounded in Leopardi’s wider reception of ancient ideas about the worth of existence, thus making the Ultimo canto an exemplary case of Leopardi’s relationship with and use of his sources. The wide impact of ancient sources on the Ultimo canto – chiefly Ovid and Virgil – has been explored extensively, and we shall thus limit ourselves to sketching some of the connections that link the Ultimo canto’s insights with ancient thought.

One of the clearest signs of the presence of ancient ideas is the mention of the jars of Zeus at 63-64, an allusion to the speech of Achilles to Priam in Iliad 24.527ff: two jars lie at Zeus’ feet, one of evil and one of good, and from them comes the lot of mankind. The voice is that of Achilles, but it is an Achilles who is speaking not just for himself, but for Priam, Hector, for his own father and for the whole of humanity; an Achilles who in the course of the epic has learned and changed, to the point of being chosen as the one to utter one of the most sweeping, strong, and controversial ideas about humanity in the whole of the Homeric poems. But the point here is that this (quite overt) reference helps explains another, tying Sappho’s conception of life very tightly with that of Achilles. In Achilles’ speech the tale of Zeus’ urns comes as an explanation for his previous, harsh statement at 24.525-526 (ὡς γὰρ ἔπεκλώσαντο θεοὶ δειλοῖσι βροτοῖσι/ ζῶειν ἥχυνμένος), an etiology for man’s necessary and inescapable unhappiness. Similarly, Sappho’s recourse to the myth of the two jars expands what the poetess has slowly been building from the start of the poem, from the idea that man is
born to weep (47-48) to the certainty that no man, not even those superficially blessed with more abundant gifts, can ever be happy (61-62). It is not by chance then that one section of verses 47-49 is glossed in a note by Leopardi with an explicit reference to Homer and to the formulaic verse (θεῶν ἐν γούνασι κεῖται) that acted as a direct source for Leopardi’s 48-49.\

Both this realisation and Sappho’s wish for Phaon with its underlying definition of the human condition, are Leopardi’s reinterpretation of Iliad 24.525-526; Sappho feels things differently from Achilles, and their situations are not similar, but nevertheless her grasp of life echoes directly that of the Greek hero. Perceiving Achilles’ voice – and, with it, the entirety of Achilles’ deep insights into the human condition at this point in book 24 – is thus vital to appreciating both the universalism at the core of Sappho’s lament and the ageless significance that Leopardi attributes to it.

Something more can be said concerning Sappho’s use of the myth of the two jars of Zeus and its significance for Leopardi’s reception of Homer. Here is what Sappho says at 62-65: “Jove has not sprinkled/ Me with the liquor meaning happiness/ From his ungenerous jar, from when illusions/ Died with my dreaming youth.” The Iliad tells of Zeus’ two jars (δοιοὶ πίθοι); yet Leopardi’s Sappho alludes to the myth in a specific way, i.e. by only mentioning the one jar – that of good, from which she has received so little – and by conspicuously refusing to name the other. The absence of the second jar – all the more glaring if we bear in mind how famous a passage Achilles’ speech in Iliad 24 is – has the effect of bringing the reader’s attention to the jar which is not mentioned. The effect is further emphasised if we think that in one of the versions preceding the final publication Leopardi chose the word “ampolla” to describe the jar of good things; the fact that good comes from a phial – a container that cannot hold more than a few drops – can only make us wonder (again, by contrast) about how large the other

525 E.g. Il.17.514, Od.1.267.
526 Cf. Leopardi’s own note on why Sappho calls Zeus’ jar a “phial”: “Homer says a cask, Sappho a phial, which is, as you see, far less: (to know) the reason she wishes to call it so, ask those who know about life” (my translation). See Felici (2002), 326; Lonardi (2005), 129 on the role played by Vincenzo Monti’s translation of the Iliad (1810 and following) on Leopardi’s language choices, among which “doglio”.

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The receptacle must be. The choice of giving the jar of evils indirect and yet powerful prominence is obviously programmatic, aimed at making its absence a statement, a silent but irresistible apophasis of the real substance of the lot given to humanity.

A similar glaring absence features in Achilles’ explanation of the tale of the two jars, which describes two possible outcomes for humans: man can either receive a mixed lot, meeting now evil, now good, or he can be given only evils. Nowhere is the possibility that someone could be given only good things ever hinted at in Achilles’ speech; it is precisely this absence that acts as the best possible elucidation of Achilles’ bleak maxim at v. 525 (ὁς γάρ ἐπεκλώσαντο θεοὶ δειλοῖσι βροτοῖσι ζῶειν ὑχυμένοις). In this case too it is an absence that exposes in all its cruelty the ordeal intrinsic to human life. And it is this belief and understanding of the human condition that is the vital interpretative key to the connection between Sappho’s statement about the human possibility of happiness and her reuse of the story of Zeus’ jars. Leopardi’s Sappho testifies to her author’s complete and dauntless appreciation of the bleak philosophy propounded by Homer’s Achilles. This belief is the one underlying Sappho’s words and Leopardi’s thought, and it is distinctly Homeric. The comprehension of the fact that real happiness is utterly outside the grasp of humanity and that it is, in fact, the very antonym of the human condition comes to Leopardi – at least at this point in time and in this context –

527 The fact that Leopardi eventually settled for “doglio” does not weaken our argument. In fact, the fact that very little good comes from a larger container only speaks of the stinginess of he who is in charge of it. Besides, the fact that Leopardi began by thinking of the jar as a “phial” only supports the view that from the very beginning Leopardi thought of Sappho’s conclusions as universal: the size of the jar is the same for everybody, not just for Sappho. The second version of the Ultimo canto thus seems to me to stress the negative role played by external and superior forces in the life of humans. In the Canto itself the external giver is a poignantly mixed crowd that ranges from “nature” to “Jove”, to “fate”, as if to encompass every external force man as ever thought of, and to signify their cohesive and relentless disregard for human happiness; on these external forces’ relationship with Leopardi’s concept of “Natura”, cf. Felici (2002), 357.

528 Cf. Pindar Pyth. 3.82-83: ἐν παρ᾽ ἕκλον πήματα σύννοο δαιόνται βροτοῖς ὑθάνατοι, on which see Young (1968), 50-51 arguing that in describing three jars (one of good and two of evil things) – Pindar interprets accurately Il. 24.527 and that such understanding corresponds to “the attitude of most Greeks toward life itself”. Cf. Fränkel (1975), 118 n. 11 on the fact the jars of the Iliad become one jar of evil things in Hesiod’s myth of Pandora at Op. 82, 94; cf. also Hesiod Op. 179 saying that ἄλλ᾽ ἐμης καὶ τούτι μεμίζετε ἐσθάλα κακοίσιν, although at 175 it described a time of sorrow in which χαλεπὰς δὲ θεοὶ δόσουσι μερίμνας.
through Homer. Achilles’ deep insights into the human condition are the substratum of the pessimistic philosophy of Ultimo canto. So deeply has Leopardi listened to the profoundly pessimistic message voiced by the Homeric hero that he can now seamlessly improvise on it with his Sappho.

2. “Favole” or the Art of Facing the Truth: A Note on Interpreting Fiction

The issue at the core of the Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico is one that runs through much of Leopardi’s production, and one that we have observed at work in the Ultimo canto di Saffo in the previous section: whether life is per se worth living or whether existence is only desirable when gifted with happiness (a possibility that, as the reader already knows, Leopardi denies a priori). The trigger to the piece is, once again, a Zibaldone note (Zib. 352, that eventually finds space in the Dialogo itself in the author’s note 2) describing both a Mr Hufeland’s lessons on “the art of prolonging life” and Leopardi’s opinions on such an idea. The dialogue is a complex re-enactment of this note, where one party, the Scientist, argues for Hufeland’s theory. His counterpart, the Philosopher, decidedly conveys Leopardi’s own belief, as one can gather from the Zibaldone’s clearly stated conviction that “life in itself has no importance whatever” (Zib. 351): existence is (or rather would be) worth it only when happy, and until this is possible, one ought rather to find a way to shorten life.

529 Leopardi mentions the encounter between Priam and Achilles multiple times, e.g. Zib. 99; 261; 1083; 2767ff; 3162.
530 Cf. Gigante (2003), 55 n. 24 commenting on Lonardi (1969) and on the role of Homer for Leopardi’s thought.
531 In Cecchetti’s translation the two characters are “scientist” and “philosopher”. We shall keep to this translation while bearing in mind the implications of the original names.
534 On the topic of suicide in the dialogue cf. Biscuso (2006), 12-13, linking the present dialogue with the Dialogo di Plotino e Porfiro, also suggesting that suicide is for Leopardi foreign “al sentire umano” and that (n. 44) “non a caso nel Dialogo di un Fisico e di un Metafisico chi si suicida sono dèi, come Chirone, o esseri mitici come gli Iperborei, privi di effettive caratteristiche umane (sono immortali ed esenti da infermità o altri mali”; cf. Marcon (2007b), 61 who quotes Leopardi’s Disegni letterari:
Since their fundamental disagreement cannot be solved by the initial confrontation, the Scientist tries to shake his opponent’s convictions by posing the possibility of eternal life for man (“If man could and did live forever – I mean to say, without dying, and not after death – don’t you think that he would like it?”). The Philosopher’s reply to the Scientist’s challenge is a turning point in the dialogue: “To a fictitious premise, I’ll reply with fiction”, says the Philosopher. From here on, the Philosopher’s response is grounded on exempla, which are drawn, as he himself admits, from what he calls “favole”; since nobody has lived forever, only the fabulous characters of literature can offer insight into such an unrealistic premise. The Philosopher lists, in order, the stories of the 18th century alchemist Cagliostro, of the centaur Chiron, of the Hyperboreans, of Cleobis and Biton, of Agamedes and Trophonius, and finally of a number of populations said to live a maximum of forty years.

The significance of Leopardi’s seamless introduction of the idea of “favole” – and the choice of which fictions to introduce – has been overlooked by critics. In her recent commentary to the Operette, Laura Melosi quickly disposes of the issue by explaining “favole” in a footnote as “in popular culture ‘false tales’, stories without real foundation […]”. Yet what is here once again at stake is the relationship between poetry and philosophy, which fuse in this dialogue like no other to make a united front against the fatuous idiocy of the Scientist’s view of life, dumbly blinded by τὰ φυσικά.


536 Interestingly Chiasson (2005), 42-43 suggests that Herodotus alerted “his audience at the outset to the legendary nature of the story to follow”; cf. Fowler (1996), 78 and Hdt. 1.31.2.

537 On this myth, see Sourvinou-Inwood (1979);


How are we supposed to interpret the Philosopher’s notion of “favole”, and consequently, what are we supposed to make of the ones he uses? I suggest that two interconnected passages from the Zibaldone can help us answer such questions. The first passage (Zib. 637) is an early (1821) reflection on the meaning of the myth of Eros and Psyche, that Leopardi interprets as symbolising the harm inherent in the knowledge of man’s fate on earth. This myth, that he sees as a “progeny of the most ancient wisdom and knowledge of the nature of man and of this world”, Leopardi calls “favola”.\footnote{“[…] appena posso discredere che quella favola non sia un parto della più profonda sapienza, e cognizione della natura dell’uomo e di questo mondo”. For reasons I fail to comprehend, the 2013 Zibaldone translation has “part” for “parto”.
} Further confirmation that “favola” can be for Leopardi an explicit token signifying depth of philosophical perception, and that Zib. 637 is not an isolated thought, comes from one of the notes adduced at the outset of this thesis.

One of Leopardi’s most profound reflections on ancient poetics, Zib. 2940 observed the inextricable bond existing in antiquity between poetry and philosophy, and more particularly between poetic forms and philosophical ideas and enquiries. The note originated from Leopardi’s discussion (2939) of the many myths, tales, and stories that in antiquity (both in Biblical and in Greek and Latin texts) spoke of the connection between man’s knowledge and use of reason on the one hand and man’s unhappiness on the other. According to Leopardi, the harm inherent in a lucid understanding of the fate of man in the world is at the root of the ancients’ tendency to disguise the truth with poetry. One of the examples of these “truths […] announced in verses” is – two years after the 1821 note – once again the myth of Eros and Psyche, and, more importantly, a myth which is still referred to with the word “favola”.

The Philosopher’s remarkable insistence on the word “favola” – a term that he first introduces into the dialogue and which crops up five times in the first section of his reply alone – should alert the reader to the fact that Leopardi means to make a point with it. Far from signifying mere triviality and fantasy, “favola” is in this context a token of wisdom and a warranty of philosophical veracity. The metaphysical dignity that Leopardi’s reflections grant to the poetic and fictional world described by the
Philosopher empowers the substance of the “favole” themselves, informing the reader of how he is supposed to receive them.

There is something to be said about which “favole” the Philosopher chooses. In his Zibaldone reflections, Leopardi had seen in antiquity (again both classical and biblical) a special genius in fostering the spark that derives from the connection between poetry and philosophy.\(^{541}\) This conception of ancient poetics is reiterated in the Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico through the Philosopher’s selection of exempla, consisting for the main part (five out of six instances) of ancient material, testifying to Leopardi’s understanding of ancient wisdom as the perfect incarnation of ancient poetics. In turn, it explains the Philosopher’s – as well as Leopardi’s – appeal to antiquity: it is not for lack of other options, but rather in light of the uniqueness of antiquity’s grasp of both the human condition and the way to convey it.

### 2.1. Lucian’s Chiron: Anything But Life

The second exemplum provided by the Philosopher is that of the centaur Chiron, a story that Leopardi gathers from one of Lucian’s Dialogi Mortuorum (as he himself specifies in a note to the dialogue):\(^{542}\) “[…] the great sage, Chiron, who was a god, with the passing of time grew tired of life, secured Jove’s permission to die, and died.”\(^{543}\) The Philosopher’s account summarises (at the same time as it elaborates) on the Lucianic dialogue, a discussion of Chiron’s choice to renounce immortality and to die, taking place in Hades between him and Menippus. The dialogue is built on a subtle and continuous paradox, which is rooted at the core of the idea of Dialogues of the Dead: although they are dead, Menippus and Chiron are in a locus, and can interact, and even discuss. More than any other in the Dialogi Mortuorum, the one between Menippus and

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\(^{541}\) Leopardi could read an interpretation of this very point – utterly pivotal throughout his own work – in Plutarch’s De audiendis poetis 36d-f, which he was reading in the very same days in which he was consulting Barthelemy’s French edition in Rome. It is a tempting idea to see in Plutarch’s definition of the use of poetry as a validation for philosophy a trigger also for Schopenhauer’s recourse to poetic sources in his list of pessimistic große Geiste aller Zeiten; Plutarch’s work figures in fact as one of his sources.

\(^{542}\) The note: “Vedi Luciano, Dial. Menip. et Chiron. opp. tom. 1, p. 514.” as we know from his Elenchi di letture in TPP (2013), 1113ff, Leopardi had been reading Lucian with some constance from 1819.

\(^{543}\) TPP (2013), 527.
Chiron fully and consciously exploits the premise of the whole work – the idea that death is a type of existence, at least insofar as it grants the characters the possibility to discuss – as an integral part of the dialogue’s topic, i.e. the differences in nature and worth between life and death.

Thus Menippus’ questioning and challenging of Chiron’s choice hinges precisely on the similarity between the life Chiron has abandoned and the one he is currently “living”, a similarity which the centaur does not seem aware of and that provokes Menippus’ repeated nudges. The lack of ποικιλία – a lack which is the ancient precursor of Leopardi’s noia and Schopenhauer’s Langeweile – has pushed Chiron to give up immortality, but, as Menippus insinuates, is at risk of presenting itself again in this other life which Chiron is leading in Hades. The idea that something in Chiron’s bargain has gone wrong becomes all the more explicit towards the end of the dialogue, as Menippus suggests that Chiron could find himself in the position of having to look for άλλον βίον.

On the one hand then, Lucian seems to question (and possibly deride) Chiron’s decision, which has only led the centaur from one life into another. And yet, as usual, Lucian’s irony aims at multiple (and almost conflicting) targets. Just as we can read in the dialogue a mockery of Chiron’s short-sightedness, we can also get a hint of the slight\
\textsuperscript{544} caricature of a passage from one of Lucian’s favoured satirical victims, Homer. The Homeric nekyia of Odyssey 11 is obviously an immediate precedent of a work like the Dialogi Mortuorum. But besides being in general a piece of reception of Odysseus’ encounter with the Underworld, the dialogue of Menippus and Chiron seems to play especially with the vision conveyed by many of the ghosts of Odyssey 11. One of Menippus’ questions interrogates Chiron on whether he does not miss seeing the light of day (οὐχ ἧδυ ἦν ζώντα ὁρᾶν τὸ φῶς; 1). The mention of the light of day resonates heavily with one of the sorest points for the spirits encountered in the Homeric nekyia. First Teiresias at 11.93, followed by Odysseus’ mother at 11.223, and finally by Achilles at 11.498, the ghosts of Hades hold φῶς/ φάος – the light of day, but also, one

\textsuperscript{544} Lefkowitz (1969), 84 makes a similar point about Bacchylides 5. 161-162 “ἀλλίου […] φέγγος”, suggesting that “Heracles’ pity for Meleager and the formulaic phrase “light of the sun” again recall the scene where Odysseus and Heracles meet in Hades (Odyssey 11.617-626).
should bear in mind, a synecdoche for life itself — as one of the most dearly missed features of life on earth. It is not by chance that Lucian’s own nekyia (the Nectyomantia, explicit parody of the Odyssean episode) begins with Menippus’ mention of light (ἐς φάος, Nec. 1). The Homeric characters’ insistence on the precious nature of light/life seems to be joked about by Lucian; Chiron answers Menippus’ question with a brief and perfunctory οὔκ, and then proceeds unscathed with his own explanation for hating life. One could thus read in the Lucanian dialogue also an ironic reversal of the Homeric characters’ nostalgia for the world of the living, an irony and a reversal that would have certainly appealed to Leopardi.

Leopardi’s alertness to Lucian’s sharp and multifaceted irony and to the various levels of interpretation of the dialogue seeps through in the Philosopher’s characterisation of Chiron as “saggio”. In the Lucanian dialogue, Chiron is not only never labelled as sage; rather, the centaur is the victim of Menippus’ cutting irony, who, inviting Chiron to be συνετός, is indirectly suggesting that the centaur might not have been all that smart in the first place, renouncing life for another (possibly equally monotonous) existence. Just as with Lucian, we are left wondering about Leopardi’s exact interpretation of Chiron’s choice. Whether he is suggesting that Chiron is in fact smart (because any existence is better than this existence), satirising on the god’s spoiled perception of existence, or simply smilingly winking at Menippus’ clever rebuttal of the centaur’s choice, Leopardi has chosen Chiron for the dense tangle of poetic ideas on the worth of existence. Perhaps, this multiplicity is what Leopardi (and Lucian) might have preferred: there is no simple answer to the questioning of existence.

546 One could be reminded of Anaxagoras’ response to the question τίνος ἐνεκ’ ἄν τις ἐλοιτο γενέσθαι μᾶλλον ἢ μὴ γενέσθαι in Aristotle Eud. Eth. 1.1216b, indicating the contemplation of the sky and the cosmos as sufficient reasons for choosing existence. Anaxagoras’ opinion is referenced one section after Aristotle’s discussion of the reasons why men might prefer non-existence: πολλὰ γὰρ ἐστὶ τοιαῦτα τῶν ἁπάντων, <ὁδί ὅ> προέρχεται τὸ ἦν, ὅλον νόσους περιωδυνίας χειμώνας ὡστε δήλον ὅτι κἂν ἐξ ἀρχῆς αἰρέτων ἦν, ἐξ τῆς αἰρέσεως ἐδίδου, διὰ γε ταῦτα τὸ μὴ γενέσθαι. (1.1215b) on which Laurenti (1985), 53.
547 Menippus answers indirectly to Chiron’s own remark in section 1, Ἐρω πρῶς σὲ οὐκ ἀνένευν ζήνα.
548 Compare with Fénelon’s pious and optimistic Chiron in his Dialogues des morts 3, on which Weinbrot (2005), 76-77.
The idea that even gods could be drawn – for a variety of reasons – to renounce existence, makes one striking appearance in the *Odyssey*. Yet it is not boredom but suffering – the suffering inherent in his existence – that pushes the god Hephaestus to wish he had not been born.\(^{549}\) While there is no proof that this episode was on Lucian’s mind as he composed the dialogue of Menippus and Chiron, or indeed in Leopardi’s mind as he retold the centaur god’s mishap with existence, it is beyond reasonable doubt that both authors shared a profound familiarity with the Homeric epic;\(^{550}\) it is thus worth briefly reminding ourselves of this episode, which grapples with themes extremely relevant to both authors’ reflections.

Demodocus’ song, performed at the Phaeacian court in the presence of Odysseus, recounts the affair between Ares and Aphrodite, and of Hephaestus’ discovery and punishment of the cheating couple.\(^{551}\) But when the success of his trick faces him with the bare and unforgiving reality of his wife’s infidelity, Hephaestus cries out to the assembled gods (8.311-313):

\[
\text{αὐτὰρ \ οὐ \ τί \ μοι \ αἴτιος \ ἄλλος, }
\text{ἄλλα \ τοκή \ δύω, τὸ \ μὴ \ γενασθαι \ δοφελλόν.}
\text{ἄλλ’ \ ὀψεθ’, \ ἵνα \ τὸ \ γε \ καθεύδετον \ ἐν \ φιλότητι.}
\]

Conscious that Aphrodite’s unfaithfulness is primarily caused by his own physical lameness and monstrosity (8.307-311), Hephaestus’ lament is grounded on the recognition that the very cause of his suffering is his own essence and that the only ones to blame are those who begot him.\(^{552}\) Thus the lament over an unfaithful wife becomes a reflection on the persistence of one’s existential marks. Hephaestus’ wish is of course

\(^{549}\) I am here reassessing some of the material discussed by Yoav Rinon’s article on “Tragic Hephaestus”, Rinon (2006), although Rinon fails to discuss the god’s wish not to have been born. Rinon (2008) also fails to mention the part of Hephaestus’ speech in *Od. 8* which concerns his wish never to have been born.

\(^{550}\) Leopardi mentions Demodocus at *Zib.* 130 and 4328.

\(^{551}\) For interpretations of the connection of the second song of Demodocus to the context of book 8 and to the *Odyssey* in general see Burkert (1960); Braswell (1982); Newton (1987); Brown (1989); Rinon (2008), 114-126.

\(^{552}\) See Halliwell (2008), 83 n. 78.
prompted by the god’s unique status; alone among the gods he shares two of mankind’s prerogatives, i.e. physical limitation and the fatigue of work. It is this extreme and unparalleled proximity to human life that prompt his peculiar exposure to suffering. The god’s terrible – and quasi-human – wish not to have been born can only be explained in this light. This divine recognition is thus extremely informative of (some of the) Homeric ideas on human life: if even a god is led to wish never to have been born, how powerful and ineludible must be the suffering intrinsic to human life?

2.2. Of Gods and Life: A Note on Divine Opinions

Commentators agree unanimously about the fact that Leopardi did not derive the story of Cleobis and Biton directly from Herodotus’ Histories, but rather from pseudo-Plutarch’s Consolatio ad Apollonium. The fact that the myth came to Leopardi from the Consolatio and not from Herodotus can be confirmed – more than by the simple impossibility of proving he ever read Herodotus, on which Timpanaro and others seems to rely – by the verbal similarities between the Operette’s and the Consolatio’s versions. The oxen (βόες) of Herodotus 1.31.2 become mules (ὀρεῖς) in the pseudo-Plutarchean text and consequently in the translation consulted by Leopardi. The idea behind the Greek ὑποδύομαι – which describes the brothers’ action of going underneath the carriage to carry it on their shoulders – is translated by Leopardi with the very same verb “sottentrare” chosen by Adriani.

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553 Which is discussed by Rinon (2006) and (2008), 127-144. Rinon speaks explicitly of Hephaestus as “tragic” and his 2006 article is targeted to show how the tragic character of Hephaestus is based on his experience of “irretrievable loss as well as constant pain”.

554 It is certainly true that the other gods too can experience suffering through closer contact with humanity: Zeus can be distressed for the death of his son Sarpedon (Il. 16.458-461) and Aphrodite can sense physical pain if injured in battle (Il. 5.343). Any contact with mankind is likely to bring to the gods a brief taste of the very consistency of human life, suffering. Yet whereas for the rest of the gods this taste is impermanent and ephemeral, Hephaestus is condemned to essentially and eternally share something human within himself.

555 On the myth of the two brothers, see especially Regenbogen (1930); Lloyd (1987); Sansone (1991), stressing the ritualistic character of the story; Shapiro (1996) on the consonance between the beliefs upheld by Solon and by Herodotus; Stahl (1975), despite briefly tackling the myth; Chiasson (2005); Pelling (2006) although not directly tackling the myth, provides a useful springboard for the analysis of Solon’s wider speech.

556 Adriani (1825), 315: “i muli che tiravano il carro”. 
I wish to add one brief but significant point to this discussion. It seems to me that the best proof that (at least at the time of the composition of this dialogue) Leopardi had not read the story of Cleobis and Biton in the Herodotean original is the fact that Leopardi’s version fails to include a detail that not only would have suited the narrative of the Leopardian dialogo extremely well, but that is in itself strikingly fitting with Leopardi’s wider thought. Having described the two youths’ efforts in carrying their mother to the temple, Herodotus (1.31.3) says that τελευτη του βιου άριστη επεγένετο, διδεξε τε έν τούτοις ο θεος ως αμεινον ειη ανθρωπω τεθναναι μαλλον η ζωειν. Cleobis’ and Biton’s death is in Solon’s words the proof that the god (here Hera) believes that it is best for men to die rather than to live.557

This detail – the fact that the divine itself (with all the necessary implications) is the one to admit and decree that man would be better off outside existence – is nowhere in Leopardi’s retelling of the myth of Cleobis and Biton.558 And yet the connection between divine status (signifying both entitlement to immortality and superior insights) and the worth of life clearly features in the dialogue, since one of the Philosopher’s first exempla is the god Chiron. The emphasis on Chiron’s divinity is marked: “Now think; if gods repine at immortality, how would men like it?” asks the Philosopher.559 But even more telling of Leopardi’s keen interest in the role of the divine with respect to the value of life is what we read in the Dialogo della natura e di un’anima,560 written only one month previously, and tackling the direct correspondence between excellence and unhappiness. Nature – a god-like figure in Leopardi’s thought, as we have already observed in the Ultimo canto – is forced to break the news to the Soul about to enter existence that she is doomed to be miserable. But this fate does not await just this soul –

557 Lloyd (1987), 25: “The function of this detail in the story is to show that there was nothing in the lives of Cleobis and Biton that would make death a blessing for them in particular […] The point is that death is best for everyone, even for those with an adequate livelihood.” Cf. Lloyd’s comparison of Hdt. 1.86.3 with Aristotle Nic. Eth. 1100a 10-17.
558 The detail is absent from the Consolatio. The retelling of the story in the Voyage mentions it indirectly saying that the two youths are made to sleep and die “comme si les dieux n’avoient pas de plus grand bien à nous accorder, que d’abréger nos jours”. The detail as told in the Voyage is significantly different, because it omits the divinity’s own opinion, on which the strength of the Herodotean passage is based.
who is nevertheless destined to a deeper unhappiness in light of her excellence – but really any soul that comes to life. Twice Nature utters with gnomic certainty the fate of men: “And of necessity all men are born and live unhappy”, at the beginning of the dialogue, and again at the end of it “All souls of men are given prey to unhappiness through no fault of my own”. \(^{561}\)

Just as Herodotus’ Hera (who, like Leopardi’s Nature, is divine and yet not directly responsible for the quality of the human condition) had stated that death was better than existence for humans, Nature incontrovertibly affirms that life and unhappiness are inseparably tied. This type of external validation of man’s painful insight about the harmful nature of existence lies at the core of both stories. One could hardly believe that, had Leopardi read the Herodotean version (strikingly similar to the one of the Consolatio, except for the lack of this specific part), he would not have been struck by how well the divine statement would fit the narrative of the dialogue. Ultimately, to “prove” Leopardi’s lack of contact with the details of Herodotus’ passage helps to highlight Leopardi’s intellectual proximity to the thought portrayed by Herodotus, a thought which Leopardi independently portrays in the Dialogo della natura e di un’anima.

3. Pessimism and “Greekness”: a Thracian Anecdote

The Storia del genere umano, the first of Leopardi’s Operette, narrates the various ages in the prehistory of humankind, from a childish and happy golden age to man’s progressive discovery of the world’s physical and theoretical limitations, which pull humanity down into despair. From then on, the Storia recounts the numerous attempts of the gods at modifying the state of man’s life, these attempts’ constant and inevitable failure, and the increasing misery of man’s condition. To fully render the boredom and the hatred for life that engulfs humanity, Leopardi tells the reader that it is during one of these attempts that the custom originated of mourning the day of birth of an infant, and of celebrating the deaths of humans:

Leopardi himself provides a note to the *Storia* supplying a number of sources for his anecdote – whose historical accuracy serves him well in the setting:


But, aside from the sources he provides in the note, and as is often the case with Leopardi’s published works, the roots of this passage can be traced back also to two pages in the *Zibaldone*. The first, dating to 1822, is *Zib*. 2607, a note treading once again the fine line between the reception of personal experience, of Biblical sapience, and of ancient wisdom. Like the other *Zibaldone* passages mentioned earlier in this chapter, it conceives of the entrance into life as the beginning of all sufferings (as seen in the text, with “burden”, “sorrows, and ills, and passions”, “suffering”, “damage”). Like *Zib*. 676 – and as if no other reaction was possible in this matter but an incredulous questioning – the note does not close on a statement, but on a series of questions. Not one but three questions are stacked one upon the other to convey the essential absurdity of human existence, an absurdity that no answer or statement can account for.

562 In *TPP* (2013), 494. Cecchetti (1983), 29, 31. “It was then that among some ancient peoples the custom began whereby, when a child was born, relatives and friends would gather together to mourn him; and when someone died, the day was celebrated with festivities and speeches and congratulating the deceased.”


564 In the later (1829) *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell’Asia* Leopardi will tackle once again both the idea that birth is the beginning of all suffering (and that man ought to be consoled for coming into life) at esp. 39-54, and the notion that a life full of misery is not worth living (at the core of the *Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico*): “Nasce l’uomo a fatica,/ 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./ [...]Ma perchè dare al sole,/ Perchè reggere in vita/ Chi poi di quella consolar convenga?/ Se la vita è sventura,/ Perchè da noi si dura?! at 39-56 and at 143 “[…]E’funesto a chi nasce il dì natale.” My italics.

565 *Zib*. 2607: “Per Dio! perché dunque nasce l’uomo? e perché genera? per poi racconsolar quelli che ha generati del medesimo essere stati generati?”. “Good God! Why then is man born? And why does he procreate? To console those he has given birth to for having been born?”
The other source is *Zib. 2671*, part of the series of annotations from the reading of Barthélemy’s chapters 26 and 28 that Leopardi made in Rome in February 1823, a note that in turn incorporates a number of ancient sources:


This first excerpt comes from Chapter 26 (*De l’éducation des Athéniens*) of the *Voyage*. The chapter describes Athens’ (and occasionally other cities’) system of education, from the very birth of an infant onwards. The narrative interweaves general information about the standard treatment of children, sourced from a variety of ancient writings on the subject, with the account of the birth of his friend Apollodorus’ son as witnessed by Anacharsis himself. In this setting – where it is not unusual to hear of customs of other peoples as a comparison for those of the Athenians – Barthélemy inserts the passage quoted by Leopardi.

The way the anecdote in the *Storia* is formulated reflects very clearly the fact that Leopardi must have drawn directly from one (or more) of the primary sources; differently from Barthélemy in fact, the *Storia* passage is bipartite in structure, highlighting not only the behaviour at the birth of a child – which is the focus of the French author, as his Anacharsis is presently witnessing the birth of a child in his guest’s house – but also the ritualistic traditions that occur at the death of an individual. This binary arrangement dates back to the original source of the Thracian anecdote, *Herodotus 5.4.2*, and is carried through much of its reception, to include the text of

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\(^{566}\) The passage from Strabo is 11.11.8, quoting Euripides fr. 449, cf. Lasserre’s (1975) commentary in vol. 8.
Pomponius Mela that Leopardi references in the *Storia.* The passage is part of Herodotus’ description of the Thracians during Megabazus’ march into their territory; in particular, Herodotus focuses on the customs of the different Thracian tribes, among which are the Trausi. Here is the excerpt from Herodotus 5.4.2:

τὸν μὲν γενόμενον περιεχόμενοι οἱ προσήκοντες ὀλοφύρονται, δόμα μιν δεὶ ἐπείτε ἐγένετο ἀναπλῆσαι κακά, ἀνηγεόμενοι τά ἀνθρωπία πάντα πάθεα· τὸν δ’ ἀπογενόμενον παιζοντές τε καὶ τῷ ἡμέρας γη κρύπτουσι, ἐπιλέγοντες διὸν κακῶν ἡξαπαλλαχθεὶς ἠστὶ ἐν πάσῃ εὐδαμονίῃ.

The very same binary structure is visible also in a fragment of Euripides’ *Cresphontes,* another of the sources mentioned by Leopardi as he copies the text of Barthélemy’s *Voyage.* According to our sources, the *Cresphontes* told the story of the protagonist’s return to his homeland to regain the throne usurped by his father’s slayer, Polyphontes. Fragment 449 (I read from Collard’s edition) consists of four verses, whose contextual interpretation is particularly difficult given that we lack the rest of the speech that, judging from the papyrus, encircled the short *gnome.*

ἐχρῆν γὰρ ἡμᾶς σύλλογον ποιομένους
tὸν φάντα ὕρηνεν εἰς δα’ ἔρχεται κακά,  
tὸν δ’ αὐτὰ θανόντα καὶ πόνον πεπαυμένον  
χαίροντας εὐφημοῦντας ἐκπέμπειν δόμων.

The way in which relevant scholarship has viewed the relationship between Leopardi and this passage calls for some observations. In his aforementioned article, where he meticulously analyses the impact of the various ancient sources behind this anecdote in the *Storia,* Grilli, among others, notices how Leopardi copied the reference to the *Cresphontes* so exactly from the *Voyage* that he replicated a mistake contained in the

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567 Pomponius Mela *De situ orbis libri III* 2.2. Cf. Timpanaro (2008), 16 and n. 37 on how Leopardi “Lesse per esempio qualcosa di Erodoto, ma assai meno di quanto si sia supposto”; ibidem, 60 n. 25 on Leopardi’s project of translating Herodotus. *Ibidem,* 158 n. 39 Timpanaro explains in detail why he disagrees with Setti (1906)’s idea that Leopardi read all of Herodotus

568 See *TrGF* Kannicht (2004), 486-487 for *testimonia.* On the fragment see Harder (1985), 92-98 who also lists other *loci* that discuss the tradition of mourning births; Collard, Cropp and Lee (2009), 142-143. On the use of passages such as this in consolatory literature, cf. Kassel (1958), 75-76, Lattimore (1962), 205-210.
Grilli’s reading is somewhat confused: on the one hand he deduces that Leopardi never worked out what the correct reference was, and that direct contact with the text of Euripides must be excluded. Yet, Grilli himself reveals that Leopardi attentively read the fragment of the *Cresphontes* (in the Latin version) in Cicero’s *Tusculanae* 1.115, and that he was in fact strongly influenced by it when writing up his *Storia* anecdote. Leopardi does not reference the *Tusculanae* (possibly, and tellingly, because he knew the source so well and had used it so profusely in the past) but Grilli convincingly highlights the textual similarities between Cicero’s version of Euripides and Leopardi’s texts. I wish to add, since it has not been pointed out before, that Leopardi had at least two more opportunities to read the original text of Euripides: first, in the (many times quoted) edition of Stobaeus’ *Anthologium*, which preserves the second verse of the Euripidean fragment at Stob. 4.34.75 (a chapter especially favoured by Leopardi who references it multiple times) in the context of Plato’s *Axiochus* 368a and (the full fragment) at 4.52b.42. Leopardi could also read it (although devoid of its first line) in Plutarch’s *De audiendis poetis* 36e-f. Neither of these authors mentions the source as Euripides’ *Cresphontes* (4.34.75 and Plutarch’s text lack any reference, and 4.52b.42 in the Gessner edition reads “Sophoclis, al. Euripidis in Themistocle”). Ascertaining with absolute conclusiveness whether Leopardi did, or did not, read the Greek original of the Euripidean fragment while at the same time being conscious that the text he was reading was in fact the *Cresphontes* is ultimately trivial. What remains is the fact that, besides reading the idea as Euripides phrased it in Cicero’s translation, Leopardi had repeated chances to come across it elsewhere. The perspective on existence expressed by the *Cresphontes*’ passage – whether read only in Latin, or only read partially, or even read...
in the ignorance of its authorship – must be considered when looking at Leopardi’s idea of the custom or necessity of mourning birth and celebrating death.

Let us go back to where we left off. Barthélémy is not the only one to perceive the similarity between the Herodotean tale and the tragic excerpt. In the very same section of his Supplements which we discussed in Chapter 3, when composing his catalogue of pessimistic große Geiste aller Zeiten, Arthur Schopenhauer had started it with the Greeks and more particularly with selected quotations on the necessity to mourn existence.575 On this topic Schopenhauer weaves together two modern sources (a Mexican custom and an anecdote from the life of Jonathan Swift) and two ancient ones: Herodotus’ anecdotes about the ritual of the Trausi tribe at Hdt. 5.4.2 and TrGF fr. 449 from Euripides’ Crenshonites as related by Plutarch in his De audiendis poetis 36e-f.576

The two passages are indeed remarkably similar. Both centre on the notion that existence is a bane, whose beginning ought to be mourned and whose end celebrated. The striking similarity between the two passages – highlighted by Barthélémy’s choice to present them together – has been observed before.577 As Annette Harder pointed out, such similarity goes beyond the topic to include the formal structure and details of the phrasing.578 Scholars like Harder thus believe that the two passages are directly related, and in particular that Herodotus’ anthropological anecdote influenced Euripides’ verses.

But the similarity between the tragic text and the presumably pre-existing Thracian custom sparks an obvious question, already addressed by various scholars: what is the connection between the ritual described by Herodotus and Greek customs and

575 Cf. Chapter 3 III. Schopenhauer then goes on to a series of references on the μὴ φῶναι.
577 Cf. Harder (1985); Browning (1961). Notice that Barthélémy’s paraphrase of Hdt. 5.4.2 only includes the first half of the notion; the presence of the second half augments the resemblance. The commentary in the 2000 Belles Lettres edition of Euripides’ fragments points too at the similarity with Herodotus and suggests the latter as a source for the tragic fragment.
578 Harder (1985) suggests so on the grounds that “Herodotus tells a ‘historical fact’, which is then adapted by Euripides to fit a statement on the sadness of life”.

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Speaking exclusively of the Herodotean passage, Elizabeth Irwin has similarly highlighted its “capacity […] to evoke two contrary responses, difference from and identity with the Greeks”.

What is the connection between these barbarians’ custom and “Greekness” lato sensu?

As well as being validated by modern commentators – who agree that the pessimistic view of life expressed by the Thracian rituals is in accord “with one side of Hellenic sentiment” – the consonance between the belief upheld by such rituals and Greek thought is explicitly stressed by Barthélemy himself in the aforementioned passage. Judging from the happiness of Apollodorus’ family, the reader could be drawn to believe that Barthélemy believed the practice to be fully alien to the Greeks’ understanding of life. And yet, as he references the Thracian custom, Barthélemy does not neglect to remark that such belief is in fact entirely consistent with the thought and wisdom of ancient Greece. It is to support this point that Barthélemy adds a number of references to Greek works, among which is Euripides’ *Cresphontes*.

Did Leopardi see the custom (or the idea at its core) as Greek in any sense? Two details in the *Storia* prompt us to think he probably did. Having developed the custom of mourning birth and celebrating death – and having thus theorised the link between

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579 Cf. Bianchi, Horewtiz and Girardot (1971), 233 n. 10: “The ancient authors also remember the curious Thracian custom (not necessarily anticosmic, perhaps simply apotropaic) of crying at the birth of children and of rejoicing at funerals. But Herodotus (5. 4) applies that as the distinctive fashion of the Trausoi in contrast to other Thracians.”


582 Irwin and Greenwood (2007), 62. *Ibid.* see also the quote from How’s and Wells’ commentary (1912): “This Trausic custom, like Suttee (chap. 5), evidently rests on the faith in a better life beyond the grave, held also by the Getae (iv. 95), and embodied in the Thracian cult of Dionysus (Rohde, *Psyche*, ii. 1). This belief is primitive and widespread (H. Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, chaps. 13, 14; Tylor, *P.C.* chaps. 12, 13), while the pessimistic view of the present life (cf. Soph. *O.C.* 1225; Theogn. 425) is in accord with one side of Hellenic sentiment (Butcher, *Gr. G.* 154f.), and with H.’s own oft-repeated opinion (cf. introd. § 36). Euripides turns this custom to account, whether he learned it from the work of H. (Stein) or at the Macedonian court (Blakesley).” Hornblower’s (2013) commentary: “The general gloomy idea that not to be born is best is found elsewhere in Greek literature (e.g. Thgn. 425-428, Bacchyl. 5.155-62); the parallel between Hdt. and Eur. consists in similar elaboration of detail.”

583 In Chapter 26 Barthélemy (1789-1790), tome 3, 3: “Ces plaintes effrayantes ne sont que trop conformes aux maximes des sages de la Grèce”.

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existence and unhappiness – this generation of men turn “to impiety”. The author of the Storia inserts here a brief reflection on the origins of unhappiness and of impiety, judging that “wrong are those who believe that human unhappiness was originally born of iniquity and of the offenses committed against the gods; but on the contrary, the wickedness of men originated from their calamities and not from any other source.” Human unhappiness has not originated – says the narrator – from man’s wickedness against the gods; on the contrary, it is the result of the calamities (in itself a word that highlights man’s passive status and the presence of external forces at work in human existence) befalling man. It does not seem farfetched to see in this debate about the first origin of human misery an echo of the speech of Zeus at Od. 1.32ff, and of its discussion of the source of human unhappiness. Just as Zeus had not denied that man’s own doing plays only a part in man’s unhappiness – thus admitting the role of divine forces in the making of human misery – the Storia’s narrator draws an unbreakable link between the divinely decreed condition of men and suffering.

But there is a second and more compelling link between the Storia’s use of the Thracian custom and Greek myth and thought. The wickedness of this very generation of men is punished by the gods with a flood, which Leopardi characterises as “Deucalion’s flood”, specifying that the only two survivors of the human race were Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha. Leopardi’s main source for the myth of Deucalion and the flood – Ovid’s Metamorphoses book 1 – openly specifies that, among other things, the location of the couple’s survival is in Greece (Mount Parnassus, Met. 1.316-317), that Deucalion is no less than Prometheus’ progeny, and thus that both the myth and the setting are Greek. But more than knowing and accepting that the myth he is reworking is Greek, Leopardi twists the Ovidian tale in a manner that is nothing but Greek. Whereas Ovid’s Deucalion (Met. 1.363-364) had prayed to play an active part in the recreation of humanity (O utinam possim populos reparare paternis/ Artibus atque animas formatae

584 TPP (2013), 494. Cf. Aristophanes’ speech in Plato Sym. 190c-191b, on the ἄνδρόγυνος’ impiety being punished and leading (as a result) to unhappiness.
585 We mentioned this passage already in Chapter I II.2 regarding the speech of Philocles in the Voyage.
586 Cf. Anderson (1997), 181 on the older sources of the myth in Apollodorus 1.7.2 and Hyginus 152.
587 Cf. Anderson (1997), 181 on Apollodorus’ emphasis on the fact that Deucalion is the son of Prometheus.
588 Cf. Anderson (1997), 181 on how “in the more Roman account of Hyginus, the landfall is Mount Etna in Sicily”.

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infundere terrae!), Leopardi’s couple wish they had perished along with the rest of mankind, call aloud for death to come and take them, but, more importantly, declare “to themselves that nothing could be more beneficial to the human race than its total extinction”.

The fact itself that the son of Prometheus – the god symbolising human advancement – is chosen to loudly claim the benefits of the annulment of mankind is highly revealing of Leopardi’s aims. The reversal of the Ovidian myth is complete and revolutionary. Greek wisdom – the wisdom Leopardi had also observed distilled in Barthélemy’s list of Greek sources on the μὴ φῶνα – takes the place of the forward-looking and optimistic attitude of the Ovidian character.

The portrayal of the generation of men who, in the Storia, are made to devise the “Thracian” custom resonates with various elements of Greek mythology, literature, and thought, leading us to believe that Leopardi fully shared Barthélemy’s opinion about the harmony between this custom and a Greek worldview. It becomes in this sense important to note that at least two of Leopardi’s potential sources for Euripides fr. 449 (Cicero’s Tusculanae and Stobaeus 4.52b.42) mention Euripides as the author of the fragment. Could Leopardi derive from this the idea that there was a link between such attitudes towards life and death and the Greek mind?

The possible direct link between the Herodotean passage and the fragment of the Euripidean play reinforces both Barthélemy’s and the modern scholars’ point: although the custom portrayed by the historian is that of a non-Greek people, the very Greek Euripides can conceive of presenting it to a Greek audience within the story of the Heraclid Cresphontes, rightful king of Messenia. Whatever one may believe with regard to the original placement of the passage, the undeniably philosophising tone of the fragment has led interpreters to attribute it to major characters or to minor characters...

589 They also “sat on the top of a cliff and called death with vehement desire”, in Cecchetti (1983), 31. TPP (2013), 495: “[…] affermando seco medesimi niuna cosa potere maggiormente giovare alla stirpe umana che di essere al tutto spenta, sedevano in cima a una rupe chiamando la morte con efficacissimo desiderio […].”

590 Cf. Blundell (1986), 168-170 on Prometheus as “mythological representation of progress”, and suggesting that the combined myths of Prometheus and Pandora myths represent progress’ intrinsic “ambiguity”. Cf. also Awad (1963), 43-44 on the fact that modern retellings of Prometheus’ myth see the liberation of the Titan as the beginning of a Golden Age.

591 Harder (1985), 95 usefully lists all the various scholarly opinions on the matter.
endowed with special wisdom, and often at key times in the architecture of the play. The presence of this kind of “philosophising” in such a setting testifies to the fact that the Greek audience had at least the ability to relate to this idea. This point, and the fact that Euripides was not only very well acquainted with the idea, but also ready to present it (albeit through the words of a character) to an Athenian audience, is shown by the idea’s recurrence in a fragment of his Bellerophon (fr. 285), which I mentioned at the outset of Chapter 1.592

As Euripides’ example testifies, there is then an unspoken but enduring connection between the Thracian custom and the worldview it conveys and Greek thought and culture, a connection that is reinforced by the repeated association of the two in their reception by future interpreters. To those who, like Barthélemy, Schopenhauer, and Leopardi, are lucidly alert (although in different ways) to the darkly pessimistic side of Greek culture, there is something exquisitely Greek in the idea of mourning birth and celebrating death.593

4. A Homeric Topos: Epic Wishes and the Questioning of Existence

This chapter ends with an open suggestion, an idea that is necessarily speculative. The Homeric epics – whose influence on Leopardi’s work has been discussed at length throughout this thesis – have so far been entirely neglected when looking at the possible influences behind Leopardi’s conception of existence and non-existence. This failure is easily explained by the state of research in the field of Classics itself, where to this day, and to the best of my knowledge, no work has ever tackled the role of the μὴ φῶνα in the Homeric epics, or even admitted that such a role is there to be tackled. The reason for this is, perhaps, that the epics only present a nuanced and subtle reflection on the μὴ φῶνα: nowhere in the epics do we find such an indisputable, adamant gnome as the one uttered by Silenus or Oedipus, a maxim valid for the whole of mankind. Yet both epics are punctuated with individual characters questioning the value of their own existence and both powerfully tackle the consequences of existence for man. Perhaps because of

592 Which Leopardi could read in Stobaeus 4.33.16 and 4.34.38
593 One other instance, which is not analysed here, is Leopardi’s translation of Alexis fr. 145, TPP (2013), 448.
the fact that their use of the μὴ φῦναι is (at least formally) restricted to individuals, and because none of these individuals ever directly suggests that this would be the best for all men, these passages have often been interpreted as merely formulaic and rhetorical, and the two epics have not been considered when looking at the history of this topos. Yet in many cases either the speaker chosen to convey such truth about himself, the context in which the idea is inserted, or the special relationship of such statements with other passages in the epics, make of that personal epiphany something much deeper, and extend its importance way beyond the life of a single individual, ultimately to say something about human life itself.

The cry of a character questioning existence resonates fourteen times in the epics (nine in the Iliad, five in the Odyssey). In all of these instances, the moment of reflection and insight finds its outlet in the making of a wish. One can distinguish two groups. The first group is made of four proper examples of the μὴ φῦναι, with characters wishing they themselves or somebody else had never been born. The second group (made of ten instances) presents instead characters questioning the value of their existence by wishing they themselves or somebody else had died already or could die at present. Although this second group would ideally be worth exploring too as deeply revealing of the Homeric conceptions of the individual’s existence and of the universal relationship between existence and suffering, in this context we need to concentrate concisely on the first group only.

As he wishes he had never been born at Od. 8.311-313, the god Hephaestus is mirroring and imitating the humans he so painfully resembles; the same wish as his appears three times in the Iliad. At 3.39 Hector – the one who not only shares a familiar bond of birth, but who will feel the practical burden of Paris’ behaviour soonest and hardest – wishes

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594 The very fact that the linguistic formulation changes tells us that each of these passages has authority and relevance of its own.
595 II. 3.39; 18.86-87; 22.481; Od. 8.311-313.
596 II. 3.172-175; 3.428-429; 6.280-285; 6.345-348; 21.279-283; 24.764. Od. 1.59-60; 5.306-312; 18.202-205; 20.61-63. Other passages in the epics share some of these passages’ features, but do not fit the group as neatly; I have chosen not to include them here.
his brother had never been born.\textsuperscript{597} The wish, voicing a desire shared by many, is echoed again in a different form – wishing for Paris’ \textit{death} – by Hector himself at 6.285 and by Helen at 3.428-429, and highlights the fact that Paris’ lack of courage and forethought are matched by his failure to realise the extent of the negative impact of his own self. At \textit{Il}. 22.481 it is Andromache who utters the wish for herself, as she discerns the doomed link between her husband and herself, making Hector the next in the line of people close to her to be slain by Achilles. Andromache holds no responsibility for the current situation: if she had not been born Achilles would have probably still killed her father and her siblings, and he would still be chasing Hector on the plain. Free from any direct regret or responsibility, Andromache’s wish voices simply the purest correspondence between (her) existence and suffering. It should be noted that although she never expresses the wish not to have been born, Helen is the single Homeric character who explicitly reflects on the possibility of non-existence versus existence most frequently (four times).\textsuperscript{598}

We are left with what is perhaps the most remarkable instance, that of Achilles. More so than in any other case, the tale of Achilles’ wish never to have been born is inextricably entangled with the story of his self-development in the course of the epic. Much happens between the offended and self-concerned hero of book 1 and the profound

\textsuperscript{597} Unable to wish for his brother to have been ἄγαμος, given Paris’ nature as γυναιμανής. Hector wishes Paris had never been begotten. Kirk’s commentary insists on the fact that the emphasis is placed by Hector on ἄγαμος rather than on ἄγονος, that the idea of ἄγαμος is not consistent with Hector’s speech as a whole, and that the whole idea is very likely to be merely a rhetorical formulation. Yet the wish that Paris had been ἄγαμος is almost an \textit{adynaton} given his very nature of γυναιμανής: that he had not been born seems thus the only way of preventing future sorrowful events. Hector’s speech to his mother Hecabe as he walks into Troy again in book 6 clarifies further the reasons behind Hector’s wish at 3.39-40: at 6.280-285 he wishes Paris could die eaten up by a gape in the earth below him, as Paris is a πῆμα (calamity, bane) to the Trojans.

\textsuperscript{598} Aside from the case mentioned above, 3.172-174; 6.345-348; 24.764. This is, of course, not by chance. Helen’s tragic causative role in the events of the \textit{Iliad} allows her an extraordinarily marked understanding not only of her existence, but also of the deeper meaning of the events of the war at Troy, a level of insight perhaps only shared by Achilles. Helen’s deeper insight is also manifest in the repeated connections she draws between suffering and the role of songs, see Clader (1976); Griffin (1980), 96-97, 102; Macleod (1982), 1-8; Pantelia (2002), 25-26; Hallivell (2011), 72, 76, 89-91. See also Garvie’s (1994) commentary on \textit{Od}. 8.580, which lists other instances in which Helen shows peculiar wisdom about the essence of the world. Compare also Helen’s actions and speech during the banquet at Menelaus’ court at \textit{Od}. 4.221ff. On “Helen and blame for war” see Taplin (1992), 96-100. See also further below in section 6.
The trigger behind Achilles’ dramatic metamorphosis is the realisation – dawning on him only with the death of Patroclus – that he belongs to mankind and is, as such, subject to the lack of control and to the unpredictability inherent in the human condition, whereby humans do not get to decide their destiny. As he speaks to Thetis in book 18, Achilles is faced with the truth of his responsibility for his companion’s death – a death that followed from Achilles’ own request to Thetis in *Iliad* 1 (Il. 18.74-77). He is thus confronted with the extent of his delusion about his own condition and with a newly-gained cognizance of the vanity of what he has obtained (18.86-87): just when one believes oneself to be in control of life’s mechanisms, life proves that cannot happen. Faced with this inescapable truth, the only thing to do is to wish life itself could be erased right from its very roots: Achilles wishes the marriage between his parents had never taken place and that, consequently, he had not been born: αἰθό ὀφιλεῖς σῷ μὲν ἀϑοί μετ’ ὀθανάτης ἀλήσι / ναιείν, Πηλεὺς δὲ θνητήν ἀγαγέσθαι ἄκοιτιν (Il. 18.86-87). Life is not what Achilles believed it to be, a thing to be moulded and shaped to one’s (semi-divine) liking. As he himself says as he laments once more the death of Patroclus at 18.328, ἀλλ᾽ οὐ Zeus ἀνδρεσσι νοήσατα πάντα τελευτά. Human desires – here symbolised by Menoetius’ thwarted wish to have Patroclus back and by Achilles’ own desire to see himself avenged – can (and often will) be frustrated.

Achilles’ μὴ φὸναι is thus the embodiment of the hero’s awareness of his irretrievably human status, causing him to share the condition of all other mortals, whose aims and desires can be effortlessly thwarted. As such, the hero’s wish is central to his developing

599 Cf. Most (2003), 66-67 maintaining that the change in Achilles’ attitude is prompted by his acknowledgment of, and pity for, the sufferings of his fellow human beings, beginning with Patroclus and extending then to the Greek army. Rinon (2008), 13-14 instead individuates the reason of Achilles’ change in the hero’s progressive recognition of his own repeated ill-synchronisation with the kairos, i.e. his repeated refusal to relinquish his anger and accept compensation. Cf. also Kim (2000) on Achilles’ development in the epic, with a focus on the role of pity and the connection between the embassy of book 9 and his final insights.

600 Edwards (1991), 157 believes that the stress in Achilles’ speech is on the “sympathy” for his mother’s sufferings because, had Peleus married a mortal wife, Thetis “would not have to grieve for him (Achilles) forever, as Thetis will”. This interpretation underestimates the literal meaning of Achilles’ wish, a failure that is also due to the fact that Edwards does not compare this instance of the will not to have lived with the other examples in the *Iliad*, thus making of this an isolated and unimportant remark.
conception of human existence and of the gods’ attitude towards men, and an essential step for the deep insights he will display in the speech to Priam in *Iliad* 24.\textsuperscript{601} This wish contains *in nuce* and yet unmistakably the roots of that Homeric pessimism that Leopardi repeatedly shows himself to have detected and assimilated. Once we grasp the extent to which the Homeric poems do tackle the idea of non-existence and its benefits for humankind, we can suddenly make better sense of the *Certamen*'s episode from which *Chapter 1* of this thesis took its start. Far from being incongruous with his work and thought, Homer’s response to Hesiod synthesises – in a language and in a form enriched by the literature intervening between Homer and the *Certamen* itself – the composite multitude of reflections on existence and non-existence that punctuate the Homeric epics.\textsuperscript{602} Such reflections are essential for the development of the idea of the μὴ φύναι within Greek and Latin literature and for the unparalleled role they played in Leopardi’s thought.

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\textsuperscript{602} It is remarkable that Greene (1935), 31 n. 2 (a note listing the occurrences of the μὴ φύναι in Greek Literature) does not connect Homer’s maxim in the *Certamen* with any of the passages discussed in this chapter, but merely with *Il.* 23.71.
EPILOGUE

Although, as we have seen, Leopardi never explicitly suggests that his interpretation of the μῆ φῶνα comes from the text of Homer, one passage in the Operette draws a powerful connection between the Greek poet, the μῆ φῶνα, and, more widely, the Greek pessimistic worldview. This passage is part of the Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico (1832), last of the Operette. Separated by a few years from the other Operette, Tristano’s dialogue is an ardent declaration of fervour towards the beliefs that the whole Operette so varyingly display, a testament to their enduring validity, and a most compelling reiteration of their fundamental arguments.

The piece enacts a conversation between Tristano – author, as we gather, of a melancholic book conveying his despairing view of life and powerful alter-ego of Leopardi himself – and a friend, vehement believer in progress and in the superiority of the present century, and obstinately intent on deflecting Tristano from his pessimistic view of the world. For a good part of the dialogue Tristano acts as if he had been convinced, as if he had eschewed his dark worldview and embraced his friend’s faith in the achievement of the 19th century. Ultimately, though, the veil is dropped and Tristano’s real stance is made visible. The reader thus hears Tristano’s pessimistic creed twice, once as he forsakes it, and then again when it is revealed that he has never stopped living by it. Throughout, and even during the pretended act of renunciation, Tristano’s words flicker with a passion all too clearly directed to the pessimistic philosophy he is supposedly forsaking.

Se questi miei sentimenti nascano da malattia, non so: so che, malato o sano, calpesto la vigliaccheria degli uomini, rifiuto ogni consolazione e ogn’inganno puerile, ed ho il coraggio di sostenere la privazione di ogni speranza, mirare intrepidamente il deserto della vita, non dissimularmi nessuna parte dell’infelicità umana, ed accettare tutte le conseguenze di una filosofia dolorosa, ma vera. […] Io diceva queste cose fra me, quasi come se quella filosofia dolorosa fosse d’invenzione mia; vedendola così rifiutata da tutti, come si rifiutano le cose nuove e non più sentite. Ma poi, ripensando, mi ricordai ch’ella era tanto nuova, quanto Salomone e quanto Omero, e i poeti e i filosofi più antichi che si conoscano; i quali tutti sono pieni pienissimi di figure, di favole, di sentenze significanti l’estrema infelicità umana; e chi di loro dice che l’uomo è il più miserabile degli animali;
Amidst the memories of his (seemingly past) pessimism, Tristano remembers the discovery (or, as he calls it, the recollection) of the fact that his worldview had preceded him. At this crucial point in the Operette, Leopardi blends in his Tristano both his long-lived conviction in the combined powers of poetry and philosophy, and his debt to antiquity for its grasp of the human condition.

It is here that Homer appears, together with Solomon, to introduce Leopardi’s own version of Schopenhauer’s list of the pessimists of all ages: Tristano speaks of his worldview as “filosofia”, just as Leopardi had called his Operette “cosa filosofica”, and yet the two auctoritates called to epitomise Tristano’s worldview are the writer of religious wisdom Solomon, and ὁ ποιητής, Homer. The choice of Homer is the ultimate embodiment of Leopardi’s reflection on the genetic similarity between the role of the poet and that of the philosopher, as he expressed it (among others) in Zib. 1650, from which this thesis began.

But beyond personifying (as he had in Zib. 1650) the fusion of the forces and roles of poetry and philosophy, Homer is chosen to portray the entirety of ancient pessimistic

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603 My italics. TPP (2013), 603. Cecchetti (1983), 489: “Whether these feelings of mine are the result of illness, I don’t know; what I do know is that whether ill or healthy, I despise the cowardice of men; I reject all the consolations and all the childish deceptions and have the courage to endure the deprivation of all hope, to look intrepidly at the desert of life, not to dissimulate to myself any part of human unhappiness, and to accept all the consequences of a philosophy that is painful but true. […] This is what I said to myself, almost as if that painful philosophy were of my own invention – when I saw it rejected by everyone, just as novel and unheard of things are rejected. But then, thinking it over, I remembered that it was as new as Solomon and Homer and the most ancient poets and philosophers we know, all of whom teem with figures, with fables, with sayings, pointing out the extreme unhappiness of man. One of them says that man is the most miserable of animals; another that it is better not to be born or, if born, to die in the cradle; still another that whoever is dear to the gods dies young; and finally others say innumerable other things of the same nature. I also remembered that from those times until yesterday or the day before, all poets and all philosophers and all writers, great and small, one way or another, had repeated and confirmed those doctrines.”
thought, and to be the name and the face for the quotations that Tristano presents as ancient examples of his worldview. The three quotations can be traced back respectively to Homer himself, to one of the many voices of the μὴ φοῦναι within Greek literature, and to Menander. The concepts expressed in two of these passages exist in cognate forms in the Biblical tradition, and, most importantly, in two works traditionally ascribed to Solomon himself, the *Ecclesiastes* – containing, as we have mentioned already, a version of the μὴ φοῦναι – and the *Book of Wisdom*, which elaborates on the idea that those dearest to God join him sooner. And yet both Leopardi’s phrasing of these ideas and the fact that he used some of these passages elsewhere in his work – providing, in those instances, clearer allusions or references to the Greek sources – tell us that his Tristano was thinking of these ideas first and foremost as Greek.

Just as it will be for Schopenhauer’s *große Geister aller Zeiten*, for Leopardi too the Greeks – and Greek poetry in particular – are the real epicentre of pessimistic thinking throughout the ages. Within the Greeks, Homer stands tall, not only as the symbol par excellence of the thought, wisdom, and culture of ancient Greece. Crucially, and by representing Leopardi’s whole work, Tristano recognises and attests to the magnitude and profundity of the Homeric epics’ influence in the history of pessimistic thought.

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604 Homer *Il.*, 17.446-447 and *Od.*, 18.130-131, expressing a notion which, as we have seen, is at the core of Porphyry’s admiration of Homer in the *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*; Menander *Dis. Ex.* 4 in Sandbach (1972), 41-42 (ὅν οί θεοί φιλούσιν ἀποθνήσκει νέος), which Leopardi used also as epigraph to his *Amore e Morte* (1832) and which he could read in Stobaeus 4.52b and at *Cons. ad Ap.* 119e. Cf. Audano (2014b).

605 *Ecclesiastes* 4.2-3 and *Book of Wisdom* 4.7-15.

606 I am thinking of the *Dialogo di Platino e di Porfirio* for the Homeric passages in *TPP* (2013), 593 and of the epigraph to *Amore e Morte* for Menander’s fragment.
## APPENDIX

1. **Sources in the section of J. J. Barthélemy’s *Voyage* Chapter 28.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Idea</th>
<th>Source Provided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Disciple of Heraclitus</td>
<td>All living beings are in a constant state of war or ruin. All living beings perpetuate a state of mutual persecution and destruction.</td>
<td>Mimnerm. ap. Stob. serm. 96, p. 528. Simonid. ap. eund. p. 530. [Mimnermus fr. 2 W; Simonides fr. 8 W.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Disciple of Democritus</td>
<td>The death of the individual – observed in the flow and succession of the generations – does not matter and should not afflict us more than the succession of the ocean’s waves or the fall of the leaves.</td>
<td>Plin. hist. nat. lib. 7, cap. 55, t. 1, p. 411. Bruck. hist. philos. t. 1, p. 1195. [Nat. Hist. 7.55]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Disciple of Democritus</td>
<td>Each being lives again once his atoms unite again in a different form.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Another speaker</td>
<td>We interpret the world according to our feelings (hatred, love, joy, sadness).</td>
<td>Aristot. de. Rhet. lib. 1. c. 2. tom. ii, p. 515. [Aristotle Rh. 1.2.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Another speaker</td>
<td>The only motives behind existence are destruction and reproduction.</td>
<td>Aesop. ap. Stob. serm. 103, p. 564. [Stobaeus 4.41.61]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Disciple of Plato</td>
<td>Life is at once comedy and tragedy.</td>
<td>Plat. in Phileb. t. 2, p. 50. [Plato Phileb. 50b]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. **La ginestra**

Qui su l’arida schiena
del formidabil monte
sterminator Vesevo,
la qual null’altro allegra arbor nè fiore,
tuoi cespi solitari intorno spargi,
odorata ginestra,
contenta dei deserti. Anco ti vidi
de’ tuoi steli abbellir l’erme contrade
che cingon la cittade
la qual fu donna de’ mortali un tempo,
e del perduto impero
par che col grave e taciturno aspetto
faccian fede e ricordo al passeggero.
Or ti riveggo in questo suol, di tristi
lochi e dal mondo abbandonati amante,
e d’afflitte fortune ognor compagna.
Questi campi cosparsi
di ceneri infeconde, e ricoperti
dell’impietrata lava,
che sotto i passi al peregrin risona;
dove s’annida e si contorce al sole
la serpe, e dove al noto
cavernoso covil torna il coniglio;
fur liete ville e colti,
e biondeggiar di spiche, e risonaro
di muggito d’armenti;
fur giardini e palagi,
agli ozi de’ potenti
gradito ospizio; e fur città famose
che coi torrenti suoi l’altero monte
dall’ignea bocca fulminando oppresse
con gli abitanti insieme. Or tutto intorno
una ruina involve,
dove tu siedi, o fior gentile, e quasi
i danni altrui commiserando, al cielo
di dolcissimo odor mandi un profumo,
che il deserto consola. A queste piagge
venga colui che d’esaltar con lode
il nostro stato ha in uso, e vegga quanto
è il gener nostro in cura
all’amante natura. E la possanza
qui con giusta misura
anco estimar potrà dell’uman seme,
cui la dura nutrice, ov’ei men teme,
con lieve moto in un momento annulla
in parte, e può con moti
poco men lievi ancor subitamente
annichilare in tutto.
Dipinte in queste rive
son dell’umana gente
le magnifiche sorti e progressive.

Qui mira e qui ti specchia,
secol superbo e sciocco,
che il calle insino allora
dal risorto pensier segnato innanti
abbandonasti, e voltì addietro i passi,
del ritornar ti vanti,
e procedere il chiami.
Al tuo paragoleggiar gl’ingegni tutti,
di cui lor sorte rea padre ti fece,
vanno adulando, ancora
ch’a ludibrio talora
t’abbian fra sè. Non io
con tal vergogna scenderò sotterra;
ma il disprezzo piuttosto che si serra
di te nel petto mio,
mostrato avrò quanto si possa aperto:
ben ch’io sappia che obblio
preme chi troppo all’età propria increbbe.
Di questo mal, che teco
mi fia comune, assai finor mi rido.
libertà vai sognando, e servo a un tempo
vuoi di novo il pensiero,
sol per cui risorgemmo
della barbarie in parte, e per cui solo
si cresce in civiltà, che sola in meglio
guida i pubblici fatti.
Così ti spiacque il vero
dell’aspra sorte e del depresso loco
che natura ci diè. Per questo il tergo
vigiliaccamente rivolgesti al lume
che il fe palese: e, fuggitivo, appelli
vil chi lui segue, e solo
magnanimo colui
che se schernendo o gli altri, astuto o folle,
fin sopra gli astri il mortal grado estolle.

Uom di povero stato e membra inferme
che sia dell’alma generoso ed alto,
non chiama sè nè stima
ricco d’or nè gagliardo,
è di splendida vita o di valente
persona infra la gente
non fa risibil mostra;
ma se di forza e di tesor mendico
lascia parer senza vergogna, e noma
parlando, apertamente, e di sue cose
fa stima al vero uguale.
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
empie le carte, eccelsi fatti e nove
felicità, quali il ciel tutto ignora,
non pur quest’orbe, promettendo in terra
a popoli che un’onda
di mar commosso, un fiato
d’aura maligna, un sotterraneo crollo
distruge sì, che avanza
a gran pena di lor la rimembranza.
Nobil natura è quella
che a sollevare s’ardisce
gli occhi mortali incontra
al comen fato, e che con franca lingua,
nulla al ver detraendo,
confessa il mal che ci fu dato in sorte,
e il basso stato e frale;
quella che grande e forte
mostra sè nel soffrir, nè gli odii e l’ire
fraterne, ancor più gravi
d’ogni altro danno, accresce
alle miserie sue, l’uomo incolpando
del suo dolor, ma dà la colpa a quella
che veramente è rea, che de’ mortali
madre è di parto e di voler matrigna.
Costei chiama inimica; e incontro a questa
congiunta esser pensando,
siccome è il vero, ed ordinata in prìa
l’uman compagna,
tutti fra sè confederati estima
gli uomini, e tutti abbraccia
con vero amor, porgendo
valida e pronta ed aspettando aita
negli alterni perigli e nelle angosce
della guerra comune. Ed alle offese
dell’uomo armar la destra, e laccio porre
al vicino ed inciampo,
stolto crede così qual fora in campo
cinto d’oste contraria, in sul più vivo
incalzar degli assalti,
gl’inimici obbliando, acerbe gare
imprendere con gli amici,
e sparger fuga e fulminar col brando
infra i propri guerrieri.
Così fatti pensieri
quando fien, come fur, palesi al volgo,
e quell’orrore che primo
contra l’empia natura
strinse i mortali in social catena,
fia ricondotto in parte
da verace saper, l’onesto e il retto
conversar cittadino,
e giustizia e pietade, altra radice
avranno allor che non superbe fole,
ove fondata probità del volgo
cosi star suole in piede
quale star può quel ch’ha in errore la sede.

Sovente in queste rive,
che, desolate, a bruno
veste il flutto indurato, e par che ondeggi,
seggo la notte; e su la mesta landa
in purissimo azzurro
veggio dall’alto fiammeggiar le stelle,
cui di lontan fa specchio
il mare, e tutto di scintille in giro
per lo vòto seren brillare il mondo.
E poi che gli occhi a quelle luci appunto,
ch’a lor sembrano un punto,
e sono immense, in guisa
che un punto a petto a lor son terra e mare
veracemente; a cui
l’uomo non pur, ma questo
globo ove l’uomo è nulla,
sconosciuto è del tutto; e quando miro
quegli ancor più senz’alcan fin remote
nodi quasi di stelle,
ch’a noi paion qual nebbia, a cui non l’uomo
e non la terra sol, ma tutte in uno,
del numero infinite e della mole,
con l’aureo sole insiem, le nostre stelle
o sono ignote, o così paion come
essi alla terra, un punto
di luce nebulosa; al pensier mio
che sembri allora, o prole
dell’uomo? E rimembrando
il tuo stato quaggiù, di cui fa segno
il suol ch’io premo; e poi dall’altra parte,
che te signora e fine
credi tu data al Tutto, e quante volte
favoleggia in piacque, in questo oscuro
granel di sabbia, il qual di terra ha nome,
per tua cagion, dell’universe cose
scender gli autori, e conversar sovente
col’ tua piacevolmente, e che i derisi
sogni rinnovellando, ai saggi insulta
fin la presente età, che in conoscenza
ed in civil costume
sembra tutte avanzar; qual moto allora,
mortal prole infelice, o qual pensiero
verso te finalmente il cor m’assale?
Non so se il riso o la pietà prevale.

Come d’arbor cadendo un picciol pomo,
cui là nel tardo autunno
maturità senz’altra forza atterra,
d’un popol di formiche i dolci alberghi,
cavati in molle gleba
con gran lavoro, e l’opre
e le ricchezze che adunate a prova
con lungo affaticar l’assidua gente
avea provvidamente al tempo estivo,
schiaccia, diserta e copre
in un punto; così d’alto piombando,
dall’utero tonante
scagliata al ciel profondo,
di ceneri e di pomici e di sassi
notte e ruina, infusa
di bollenti ruscelli
o pel montano fianco
furiosa tra l’erba
di liquefatti massi
e di metalli e d’infocata arena
scendendo immensa piena,
le cittadi che il mar là su l’estremo
lido aspergea, confuse
e infranse e ricoperse
in pochi instanti: onde su quelle or pasce
la capra, e città nove
sorgon dall’altra banda, a cui sgabello
son le sepolte, e le prostrate mura
l’arduo monte al suo piè quasi calpesta.
Non ha natura al seme
dell’uom più stima o cura
che alla formica: e se più rara in quello
che nell’altra è la strage,
non avvien ciò d’altronde
fuor che l’uom sue prospie ha men feconde.607
Ben mille ed ottocento
anni varcàr poi che sparirò, oppressi
dall’ignea forza, i popolati seggi,
e il villanello intento
ai vigneti, che a stento in questi campi
nutre la morta zolla e incenerita,
ancor leva lo sguardo
sospettoso alla vetta
fatal, che nulla mai fatta più mite
ancor sede tremenda, ancor minaccia
a lui strage ed ai figli ed agli averi
lor poverelli. E spesso
il meschino in sul tetto
dell’ostel villereccio, alla vagante
aura giacendo tutta notte insonne,
e balzando più volte, esplora il corso
dal temuto bollor, che si riversa
dall’inesausto grembo
sull’arenoso dorso, a cui riluce
di Capri la marina
e di Napoli il porto e Mergellina.
E se appressar lo vede, o se nel cupo
del domestico pozzo ode mai l’acqua
fervendo gorgogliar, desta i figliuoli,
desta la moglie in fretta, e via, con quanto

607 My italics.
di lor cose rapir posson, fuggendo,
vede lontan l’usato
suo nido, e il piccol campo,
che gli fu dalla fame unico schermo,
preda al flutto rovente,
che crepitando giunge, e inesorato
durabilmente sovra quei si spiega.
Torna al celeste raggio
dopo l’antica oblivion l’estinta
Pompei, come sepolto
scheletro, cui di terra
avarizia o pietà rende all’aperto;
e dal deserto foro
diritto infra le file
dei mozioni colonnati il peregrino
lunge contempla il bipartito giogo
e la cresta fumante,
che alla sparsa ruina ancor minaccia.
E nell’orror della secreta notte
per li vacui teatri,
per li templi deformi e per le rotte
case, ove i parti il pipistrello asconde,
come sinistra face
che per vòti palagi atrà s’aggiri,
corre il baglior della funerea lava,
che di lontan per l’ombre
rosseggia e i lochi intorno intorno tinge.
Così, dell’uomo ignara e dell’etadi
ch’ei chiama antiche, e del seguir che fanno
dopo gli avi i nepoti,
sta natura ognor verde, anzi procede
per si lungo cammino
che sembra star. Caggiono i regni intanto,
passan genti e linguaggi: ella nol vede:
per l’uom d’eternità s’arroga il vanto.

E tu, lenta ginestra,
che di selve odorate
queste campagne dispensate adorni,
anche tu presto alla crudel possanza
soccomberai del sotterraneo foco,
che ritornando al loco
già noto, stenderà l’avaro lembo
su tue molli foreste. E piegherai
sotto il fascio mortal non renitente
il tuo capo innocente:
ma non piegato insino allora indarno
codardamente supplicando innanzi
al futuro oppressor; ma non eretto
con forsemmato orgoglio inver le stelle,
nè sul deserto, dove
e la sede e i natali
non per voler ma per fortuna avesti;
ma più saggia, ma tanto
meno inferma dell’uom, quanto le frali
tue stirpi non credesti
o dal fato o da te fatte immortali.

Translation of Strophe 5
Just as a tiny apple in late autumn
(Ripeness is now enough
To make it fall, without more help, to earth)
Drops where a tribe of ants have made their home,
Hollowed – their work was huge –
In the soft soil; and drops
On stored-up riches which those careful creatures
Amassed so rapidly and with such effort
And with such prudence in the summertime,
To lay their labour waste
At one blow; so, plummeting from above
Thrown from the thundering womb
Into the depths of sky;
Ashes and pumice and stones – in avalanching
Ruinous night, involved
With boiling rivulets,
While, down the mountainside
And raging over grass,
Molten boulders en masse,
Melting metal, and sand that was alight
Swept like a river in spate –
Smashed those cities upon whose farthest shore
The moving ocean washed,
Confounded and covered them
In a few seconds; so that now the goat
Browses above, and new
Cities arise which have their very base
On those long buried whose demolished walls
The rugged mountain crushes underfoot.
Nature has no more care
For man, and no more love
Than for the ant: and if she massacres
Men and women less often,
That is because our race
Is simply not so very numerous.

3 a. Simonides 8 W
ἐν δὲ τὸ κάλλιστον Χίος ἔστειλεν ἄνήρ·
"οἵ περ φύλλων γενεή, τοίῃ δὲ καὶ ἄνδρῶν"·
παῦροι μὲν θυμηῖν οὐάσι δεξάμενοι
στέρνοις ἐγκατέθεντο· πάρεστι γὰρ ἐλλὲς ἐκάστωι
ἀνδρῶι, ὡς νέων στήθεσιν ἐμφύεται. 5
θυμηῖν δὲ ὅφρα τις ἀνθὸς ἔχει πολυμερὸν ἥβης,
κοῦρον ἔχουν θυμὸν πόλλ’ ἀτέλεστα νοεῖ·
οὗτε γὰρ ἐλπίδ’ ἔχει γηρασμένοι οὕτε θανεῖται,
οὐδ’ ὧγις ὅταν ἦ, φροντίδ’ ἔχει καμάτου.
γῆποι, οἷς ταύτῃ κεῖται νόος, οὔδ’ ἵσαν 10
ὡς χρόνος ἔσθ’ ἥβης καὶ βιότου ὀλίγος
θυμηῖς, ἀλλὰ σὺ ταῦτα μαθὼν βιότου ποτὶ τέρμα
ψυχῆ τῶν ἄγαθῶν τλῆθι χαριζόμενος.

3 b. Leopardi, XLI Dello stesso
Umana cosa picciol tempo dura,
e certissimo detto
disse il veglio di Chio,
conforme ebber natura
le foglie e l’uman seme. 5
Ma questa voce in petto
raccolgon pochi. All’inquieta speme,
figlia di giovin core,
tutti prestiam ricetto.
Mentre è vermiglio il fiore
di nostra etade acerba,
l’alma vota e superba
Cento dolci pensieri educa invano,
nè morte aspetta nè vecchiazza; e nulla
cura di morbi ha l'uom gagliardo e sano.
Ma stolto è chi non vede
la giovanezza come ha ratte l'ale,
e siccome alla culla
poco il rogo è lontano.
Tu presso a porre il piede
in sul varco fatale
della plutonia sede,
ai presenti diletti
la breve età commetti.

All human things last only a short time;
The old blind man of Chios
Spoke but the simple truth:
As are the lives of leaves,
So are the lives of men.
But few there are who take
Those words to heart; while everyone receives
Unruly hope, the child
Of youth, to live with him.
As long as our first age
Is fresh and blooming still,
The vacant headstrong soul
Will nourish many pleasant dreams, all vain,
Careless of death and age; the healthy man
Has no regards for illness or disease.
But he must be a fool
Who cannot see how rapidly youth flies,
How close the cradle lies
To the funereal fire.
So you who are about
To step into the land
Where Pluto holds his court,
Enjoy, since life is short,
The pleasure hard at hand.

4 a. Semonides 1 W²
ὥ παῖ, τέλος μὲν Ζεὺς ἔχει βαρύκτυπος
πάντων δ’ ἔστι καὶ τίθησ’ ὀκῆθι θέλει,
νοὸς δ’ οὐκ ἐπ’ ἀνθρώποις, ἀλλ’ ἐπὴμεροι
ἄ δή βοτὰ ζωοῦσιν, οὐδὲν εἰδότες
Octo εκαστον εκτελευτησει θεος.
Ελπις δε παντας κατευθει τρεφει
Απρηκτον ρημαινοντας· οι μεν ημερη
Μενουσιν Ελθειν, οι δ' Ετεον Περιτροπας·
Νεωτα δ' ουδεις δεισι ου δοκει βροτων
Πλουτοι τε καγαθοισιν Εξεσθαι φιλος.
Φθανε δε τον μεν γηρας Αξιλον λαβον
Πριν τερμ' ικηται, τοις δε δυστηνοι βροτων
Φθειρουσι νοουσι, τοις δ' Αρει δεδημενοις
Πεμπει μελαινης Αιθης υπο χθονος·
Οι δ' εν θαλασσηι Λαλαπι Κλονεόμενοι
Και κυμαιν πολλοσι πορφυρης άλος
Θνησκουσιν, έντ' αν μη δυνησονται ζωειν·
Οι δ' αγχονην Αγαντο δυστηνοι μωραι
Καιταιρετοι Λειπουσιν ηλιου φαως.
Ουτω κακων Άπ' ουδεν, άλλω μωραι
Βροτοηι κηρες κανεμπαραστοι δωι
Και Πηματ' εστιν. ει δ' εμοι πιθοιατο,
Ουκ αν κακων Ερωιμεν, ουδε' επ' Άλγεισιν
Κακοις Εχοντες Θυμον αικιζοιμεθα.

4 b. Leopardi, XL Dal greco di Simonide
Ogni mondano evento
è di Giove in poter, di Giove, o figlio,
che giusta suo talento
ogni cosa dispone.
Ma di lunga stagione
nostro cieco pensier s’affanna e cura,
benché l’umana etate,
comme destina il ciel nostra ventura,
di giorno in giorno dura.
La bella speme tutti ci nutrica
di sembianze beate,
onde ciascuno indarno s’affatica:
altri l’aurora amica,
altri l’etae aspetta;
e nullo in terra vive
cui nell’anno avvenir facili e pii
con Pluto gli altri iddi
la mente non prometta.
Ecco pria che la speme in porto arrive,
qual da vecchiezza è giunto
e qual da morbi al bruno Lete addotto;
Questo il rigido Marte, e quello il flutto
del pelago rapisce; altri consunto
da negre cure, o tristo nodo al collo
circondando, sotterra si rifugge.
Così di mille mali
i miseri mortali
volgo fiero e diverso agita e strugge.
Ma per sentenza mia,
uom saggio e sciolto dal comune errore
patir non sosterria,
nè porrebbe al dolore
ed al mal proprio suo cotanto amore.

Whatever happens here
Is in the power of Jove, O son of man,
And he decides it all
According to his will.
But blindly we take thought
And struggle after things of distant date,
Although it is our fate,
As Heaven determined was to be the way,
To live from day to day.
Hope is attractive, and she suckles us
On fine appearances;
So all of us live striving, and in vain:
One waits a better dawn,
And one a better age;
And no one lives on earth
Who for the future does not have in mind
A generous god of wealth
And other gods as kind.
But one, before these hopes have been fulfilled,
Is overcome by age,
And one is led to Lethe by disease;
One man is snatched by cruel Mars, and one
By the tempestuous sea; another, worn
By gloomy care, or twisting round his neck
A dreadful know, seeks refuge underground.
A savage, various band
Of mortal miseries
Harries our wretched race and hunts it down.
And so, in my opinion,
A wise man, rescued from the common error, 35
Would not agree to suffer,
Nor give to his affliction
And to his own distress so much affection.

5. **Zibaldone 4175-4177**

Non gli uomini solamente, ma il genere umano fu e sarà sempre infelice di necessità. Non il genere umano solamente ma tutti gli animali. Non gli animali soltanto ma tutti gli altri esseri al loro modo. Non gl’individui, ma le specie, i generi, i regni, i globi, i sistemi, i mondi.

Entrate in un giardino di piante, d’erbe, di fiori. Sia pur quanto volete ridente. Sia nella più mite stagione dell’anno. Voi non potete volger lo sguardo in nessuna parte che voi non vi troviate del patimento. Tutta quella famiglia di vegetali è in istato di souffrance, qual individuo più, qual meno. Là quella rosa è offesa dal sole, che gli ha dato la vita; si corruga, langue, appassisce. Là quel giglio è succhiato crudelmente da un’ape, nelle sue parti più sensibili, più vitali. Il dolce mele non si fabbrica dalle industriose, pazienti, buone, virtuose api senza indicibili tormenti di quelle fibre delicatissime, senza strage spietata di teneri fiorellini. Quell’albero è infestato da un formicaio, quell’altro da bruchi, da mosche, da lumache, da zanzare; questo è ferito nella scorza e cruciato dall’aria o dal sole che penetra nella piaga; quello è offeso nel tronco, o nelle radici; quell’altro ha più foglie secche; quest’altro è rosso, morsicato nei fiori; quello trafitto, punzecchiato nei frutti. Quella pianta ha troppo caldo, questa troppo fresco; troppa luce, troppa umidità, troppo secco. L’una patisce incomodo e trova ostacolo e ingombro nel crescere, nello stendersi; l’altra non trova dove appoggiarsi, o si affatica e stenta per arrivarmi. In tutto il giardino tu non trovi una pianticella sola in istato di sanità perfetta. Qua un ramicello è rotto o dal vento o dal suo proprio peso; là un zeffiretto va stracciando un fiore, vola con un brano, un filamento, una foglia, una parte viva di questa o quella pianta, staccata e strappata via. Intanto tu strazi le erbe co’ tuoi passi; le stritoli, le ammacchi, ne spremi il sangue, le rompi, le uccidi. Quella donzelletta sensibile e gentile, va dolcemente sterpando e infrangendo steli. Il giardiniere va saggiamente troncando, tagliando membra sensibili, colle unghie, col ferro. (Bologna. 19. Aprile. 1826.).

Certamente queste piante vivono; alcune perché le loro infermità non sono mortali, altre perché ancora con malattie mortali, le piante, e gli animali altresì, possono durare a vivere qualche poco di tempo. Lo spettacolo di tanta copia di vita all’entrare in questo giardino ci rallegra l’anima, e di qui è
che questo ci pare essere un soggiorno di gioia. Ma in verità questa vita è trista e infelice, ogni giardino è quasi un vasto ospitale (luogo ben più deplorabile che un cimiterio), e se questi esseri sentono, o vogliamo dire, sentissero, certo è che il non essere sarebbe per loro assai meglio che l’essere. (Bologna. 22. Apr. 1826.).

Not only individual men, but the whole human race was and always will be necessarily unhappy. Not only the human race but the whole animal world. Not only animals but all other beings in their way. Not only individuals, but species, genera, realms, spheres, systems, worlds.

Go into a garden of plants, grass, flowers. No matter how lovely it seems. Even in the mildest season of the year. You will not be able to look anywhere and not find suffering. That whole family of vegetation is in a state of souffrance, each in its own way to some degree. Here a rose is attacked by the sun, which has given it life; it withers, languishes, wilts. There a lily is sucked cruelly by a bee, in its most sensitive, most life-giving parts. [4176] Sweet honey is not produced by industrious, patient, good, virtuous bees without unspeakable torment for those most delicate fibers, without the pitiless massacre of flowerets. That tree is infested by an ant colony, that other one by caterpillars, flies, snails, mosquitoes; this one is injured in its bark and afflicted by the air or by the sun penetrating the wound; that other one has a damaged trunk, or roots; that other has many dry leaves; that other one has its flowers gnawed at, nibbled; that other one has its fruits pierced, eaten away. That plant is too warm, this one too cold; too much light, too much shade; too wet, too dry. One cannot grow or spread easily because there are obstacles and obstructions; another finds nowhere to lean, or has trouble and struggles to reach any support. In the whole garden you will not find a single plant in a state of perfect health. Here a branch is broken by the wind or by its own weight; there a gentle breeze is tearing a flower apart, and carries away a piece, a filament, a leaf, a living part of this or that plant, which has broken or been torn off. Meanwhile you torture the grass by stepping on it; you grind it down, crush it, squeeze out its blood, break it, kill it. A sensitive and gentle young maiden goes sweetly cutting and breaking off stems. A gardener expertly chops down trunks, breaking off sensitive limbs, with his nails, with his tools. (Bologna, 19 April 1826.)

Certainly these plants live on; some because their infirmities are not fatal, others because even with fatal diseases, plants, and animals as well, can manage to live on a little while. The spectacle of such abundance of life when you first go into this garden lifts your spirits, and that is why you think it is a joyful place. But in truth this life is wretched and unhappy, every garden is like a vast hospital (a place much more deplorable than a
cemetery), and if these beings [4177] feel, or rather, were to feel, surely not being would be better for them than being. (Bologna, 22 April 1826.)
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