

Cosmic Pessimism in Giacomo Leopardi's "Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia"

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ABSTRACT

The present paper analyses the lyrical expression of 'cosmic pessimism' contained in the "Night song of a wandering shepherd in Asia" of the Italian poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1836), a central figure of the European literary and cultural landscape of the first half of the 19th century, who was acclaimed as 'the greatest Italian poet after Dante' by the British cultural critic Matthew Arnold. The 'song', composed in the period 1828-1829, bridges neoclassic and romantic sensibilities: it is composed of 143 verses without rhyme, subdivided into six parts, called 'stanze' and the scenario is that of a night in a desert landscape where a flock is sleeping, while the shepherd addresses himself to the moon, posing her unanswered questions about the meaning of life.

INTRODUCTION

Pessimism is a recurrent theme in the history of western literature. Shakespeare's verses (Craig, 1974) from "Macbeth" (Act V, Scene V, 24-28) constitute a well-known example of literary pessimism:

'... Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing ...'

Several other illustrious examples of literary pessimism can be found among western writers and philosophers, as duly argued by the scholar Joshua Foa Dienstag (2006), in his book "Pessimism – Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit": he observes that *pessimism* is an anti-systematic philosophy which rejects the idea of *social progress*, which was born in France in the second half of the 18th century with the *Enlightenment*, as a twin sister of *optimism*: both utilize the same rational analysis of the human condition, coming to opposite conclusions. While animals live in the present, humans are conscious of the impermanent nature of life, which follows an ascending and a descending arc from birth to death. The philosophy of pessimism is correlated with the acquisition of the concept of the *linear progression* of time, which took place with the introduction of the first wall clocks in Italy at the eve of *Renaissance*, during the second half of

the 14th century: that discovery destroyed the perception of a *cyclical nature* of time by the primitives. The spreading of the scientific revolution in Western Europe during the 15th – 17th centuries (Heilbron, 2003), accompanied by an extraordinary scientific advancement, was the cause of the birth of the idea of *progress* among the majority of scholars, but also of *pessimism* among a minority of them. The scientific progress and its technological applications are seen by pessimists as irrelevant for human happiness.

Dienstag says also that several illustrious examples of literary pessimism can be found among western scholars and writers. He quotes the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Ellingson, 2001) and the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi (Croce, 1924; Robey & Hainsworth, 2002) as illustrious representatives of *cultural pessimism*, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (Copleston, 1946) and the Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud (1953) as exponents of *metaphysical pessimism*, while the Spanish writer and philosopher Miguel de Unamuno (1972), the Romanian (naturalized French) philosopher Emil Cioran (1968) and the French writer Albert Camus (1991) are labeled by him as spokesmen of *existential pessimists*. Dienstag introduces also a fourth category, the *Dionysiac pessimism*, best represented by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (Porter, 2000). All those scholars share the same refusal of the belief on the existence of a benevolent deity or an equally

benevolent nature, but differ among each other in their response to this philosophical truth.

Aim of the present research is to analyze Giacomo Leopardi's response, expressed through poems and essays (Leopardi, 1983, 1997, 2004) in the course of his short life: the strongly lyrical quality of his poetry, that bridged neoclassic and romantic sensibilities, made him a central figure of the European and international literary and cultural landscape during the first half of the 19th century, when he was welcomed by Schopenhauer, author of the philosophical treatise "The world as Will and Representation", as 'his southern cousin'. With Nietzsche, the philosopher of *nihilism* and the celebrated author of "The birth of Tragedy", Leopardi had in common the faith in art and poetry as 'the last remedy after the failure of all remedies'. In spite of having been acclaimed as 'the greatest Italian poet after Dante' by the British cultural critic Matthew Arnold (White, 1983), Leopardi's fame outside Europe is presently confined to the halls of university departments of 'Italian Studies'.

In Section 2 of this paper Leopardi's life and works will be briefly illustrated while, in Section 3, the "Night song of a wandering shepherd in Asia" will be analyzed: the choice of this poem is due to the fact that it is, in our opinion, the composition that best expresses in lyrical terms his *cosmic pessimism*. A Section of *Conclusions* and the *References* conclude the paper.

LEOPARDI'S LIFE AND WORKS

Born in 1798 in the small town of Recanati, in Central Italy, from a family of the small nobility, Giacomo Leopardi precociously devoted himself to 'mad and most desperate studies' of Latin and Greek classics and ancient Hebrew, to philology and world literature. Being affected by a severe spinal disease, those continual studies undermined his already fragile physical constitution and forced him to spend a great part of his youth in solitary confinement in his father's home. From 1824 to 1828 he was in Milan, working for the book publisher Stella and also visiting Bologna, Florence, Pisa and Rome. He was offered the professorship of Philosophy at Bonn or Berlin by the Ambassador of Prussia: he refused it because his physical health declined. After two additional years in Recanati, he moved to Florence from 1830 to 1832, and later to Naples, where he died in 1837. Although he did not have direct contacts with most of the intellectuals of his time, he came in touch with the main ideas of the *Enlightenment*, and through his own literary evolution created a remarkable poetic work. The strongly lyrical quality of his poetry made him a central figure of the European cultural landscape. The 'Night song of a wandering shepherd in Asia', composed during the period 1829 – 1830, is one of his poems, collected in a volume entitled "Canzoni" (*Lyrics*), published in 1830. His extremely rich literary production as a poet and essayist consists of "Primi Canti" (*First Songs*) (1818), "Idilli" (*Idylls*) (1819-1821), "Canzoni" (*Lyrics*) (1820-1830), "Operette Morali" (*Moral Essays*) (1824), "Canti Pisano-Recanatesi" (*Songs from Pisa and Recanati*) (1823-1832), "Ultimi Canti" (*Last Songs*) (1832-1837). The "Pensieri" (*Thoughts*) (1837) and his personal diary, the "Zi-

baldone di pensieri" (*Blend of thoughts*) (1818-1837), were published posthumously in 1898-99 (Leopardi, 1983, 1997, 2004).

Concerning a possible relationship between Leopardi's health conditions and his literary works, this issue was raised by some Italian psychiatric scholars after his death. A recent article (Armocida et al., 2016), published by *Neurological Sciences* and entitled "Genius and psychopathology of the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi (1798.1837): Paolo Mantegazza's (1831 – 1910) criticism on the Lombosian thought", recalled the words of the famous Italian neurologist Paolo Mantegazza (1896), who then wrote: 'Rather than in hereditary psychopathology, Leopardi's genius can be explained by his extraordinary sensibility and his exquisite aesthetic energies. It is here where the true springs of his poetic genius lies.'

As for Leopardi's *pessimism*, the poet got an inspiration from Rousseau's 'Discourse on the origin and basis of inequality among men', published in 1755 (see Ellington, 2001) and Schopenhauer's 'The world as will and representation', published in 1818-19 (Ellington, 2001; Gardiner, 1963): these philosophers rejected the prevailing *optimism* of the philosophical movement of *Enlightenment*, dating back to the 18th century. Starting from a personal position of extreme discomfort due to his precarious physical conditions, which stimulated during his young age the romantic idea of a heroic death against a life without expectations, he gradually came to a *pessimism* which included the entire humanity: though meaningless, the human living condition can improve if people help each other. According to the scholar of Italian literature Francesco de Sanctis (1858), a love for life and the illusions of art and poetry accompanied him in that phase. Leopardi went beyond Rousseau's dreams of a 'return to a primitive state of nature' and Schopenhauer's irrational 'act of will': in his "Zibaldone di pensieri" he suggested instead 'an aesthetic experience of truth', which the philosopher Carlo Ferrucci (1987) explains as follows: 'Once reality is recognized as a meaningless void, and philosophy directly confronts the nothingness of existence, then our only recourse is to create authentic meanings of our own. In other words, we know and understand through our imagination. Our knowledge of the world is subjective, or more precisely, conditioned by our subjective faculties: we are at once both poet and philosopher, the ultimate author of our own narrative and the creator of truths.' Leopardi calls *ultra-philosophy* this idea of a creative artistic activity as a way to overcome the unhappy human condition.

Deepening further the reflection on human pain, Leopardi arrived in his last years to the so called *cosmic pessimism*, that is to the conception that nature, cruel and indifferent stepmother to the pains of men and all living creatures, is in reality an obscure and mysterious force, a reminiscence of the Greek *Ananke* (the *Destiny*), which governs with inexorable laws the universe, including in it the gods of Olympus: 'even the gods don't fight against Ananke' (Segal, 1985). The short story entitled "Dialogue of Nature with an Icelander", composed in 1824 and included in the collection of "Operette Morali" (*Moral Essays*), and the two poems "Night

song of a wandering shepherd in Asia”, and “*La ginestra*” (*The broom*), composed in 1837, are evidence of this last phase of Leopardi’s pessi-mism. In the latter poem Leopardi calls for a great alliance of all human beings, a ‘*social chain*’ that should unite them all against the brute force of nature. His last philosophical message is a rationalism that refuses the Christian religious idea of ‘*Divine Providence*’ (Walker, 1911). The conquest of a ‘*just knowledge*’ should become the foundation of a new society, built exclusively with human strength.

The debate on Leopardi’s work was oriented, in 1900s, towards the finding of a consonance of his poems and philosophical works with the *Existentialist* thought: Leopardi, through his attention on the problem of *Nothingness* (Severino, 1990), like the Danish philosopher Soeren Kierkegaard, the author of “*Either – Or*” (Hong & Hong, 2000) and, later on, the Jewish Austrian writer Franz Kafka (Foulkes, 1967), not forgetting Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, can be seen as precursors of *Existentialism*.

NIGHT SONG TO THE MOON OF A SHEPHERD WANDERING IN ASIA

This poem is composed of 143 verses without rhyme and is subdivided into six parts, called ‘*stanza*’: the scenario is that of a night in a desert landscape, where the flock of sheep sleeps and from distance the moon dominates in the sky. A shepherd-addresses himself to the moon, implicitly referring to the myth that identifies it with the virgin huntress Diana, a silent, pensive, immortal young girl, whose whiteness is a symbol of her virginity but also of her distance from human affairs. The nightly landscape, lightened by the moon, strongly recalls the romantic images of the German painter Hans Caspar Friedrich (1774 – 1840). The idea came to Leopardi from an article on the Kyr-gyz, which appeared in September 1826 in the “*Journal des savants*”, one of the many magazines that the poet could read at the “*Gabinetto Vieusseux*” in Florence: in that article a traveler, Baron de Meyendorff, was writing about his ‘*Travel from Orenbourg to Bukhara, undertaken in 1821*’ (*Voyage d’Orenbourg à Boukhara, fait en 1820*). He wrote the following about the wandering shepherds in Central Asia: ‘*Many of them spend the night sitting on a stone, watching the moon and improvising rather sad words on tunes*’. The adopted fiction allowed Leopardi to make the singing of a ‘*modern primitive*’ who, to console himself from boredom and pain, uses the lyrical genre, ‘*the most primal of all*’ (as explained by him in the “*Zibaldone*”). A primitive person, not crushed by the weight of boredom and unhappiness, would live according to nature, while a modern person is a disillusioned being. The ‘*modern primitive*’ is full of unhappiness and aware of the ‘*acerbo vero*’ (*hard truth*). This song marks the lyric leading to a universal unhappiness. More than that, in the second part of the last *stanza*, the hypothesis that beasts are happier is superseded in favor of a finding of absolute and universal unhappiness.

In the first ‘*stanza*’, the shepherd turns to the moon with timid words, asking her about the meaning of her life: ‘*Why are you there, moon, in the sky? Tell me why you are there,*

silent moon. You rise at night, and go, contemplating deserts: then you set. Haven’t you had enough of the same old roads?’ Thereafter he compares his wandering through the deserts with the eternal, cyclic wandering of the star: ‘*It mirrors your life, the life of a shepherd. He rises at dawn, drives his flock over the fields, sees the flocks, the streams, the grass, then tired at evening he rests, expecting nothing more.*’ Finally, he poses to the moon, a divine creature who knows the secrets of life, his existential question: ‘*Tell me, moon: what’s worth the life of a shepherd, your life to you? Tell me: where does my brief wandering lead, and your endless course?*’

In the second ‘*stanza*’ human life is equated with the strenuous journey of an old sick man, persecuted by the adversities of the climate, with verses that do not possess the lyric power of those of the first *stanza*: ‘*Like an old man, white-haired, infirm, half naked and barefoot, with a heavy load on his shoulders, up mountains and down valleys, on sharp stones, in sand and thickets, toward wind and storm, when the days burn and when they freeze*’. But the wandering of that old man is meaningless: ‘*running onwards, panting, he crosses rivers and pools, stumbling, rising, hurrying, restless and without solace, wounded, bleeding; until in the end he gets where the road and all his efforts led him: a frightful, wide abyss, into which he falls, forgetting about everything.*’

In the third ‘*stanza*’ the torments of human existence are extended to a newborn child, which needs to be consoled of the evils of existence, from birth to adult life, but also these verses are rather conventional: ‘*Man is given birth with labour, and there’s a risk of death in being born. His first feelings are sadness and suffering; in the very first moment, mother and father begin to soothe him for being born. Then as he grows up, both take care of him, and, with gestures and words, they try to encourage him, console him merely for being human*’. At the end of the ‘*stanza*’, poetry makes a brief appearance through the disconsolate and subdued lament of the poet: ‘*If life is misfortune, why do we keep on living? Oh, untouched moon, such is our mortal condition. But you are not a mortal being, and might not care about my words.*’

In the fourth ‘*stanza*’ the shepherd asks for the second time the moon about the meaning of life and death: here, as in the first ‘*stanza*’, Leopardi’s lyrical power finally re-emerges with force: ‘*Yet you, lonely, eternal wanderer, so pensive, perhaps you understand what is this earthly life, this suffering, the sighs: what death means, this fading of our features, the vanishing from earth, the losing every accustomed, beloved acquaintance. I’m sure you understand the why of things, and you can see the fruits of morning, of evening, the silent, endless flow of time. I’m sure you know, what sweet love of hers the spring smiles at. As I gaze at you, hanging so silently, above the empty plain ... or see you steadily following me and my flock; when I see the stars bright in the sky, thinking I say to myself: What for these sparks, this infinite air; this deep, infinite clarity? What does this vast solitude mean? And what am I?*’ In the absence of an answer from her, he can only repeat: “*To me, life is pain*”.

In the fifth 'stanza' a comparison between the shepherd and the flock is presented. The flock is able to rest because it has no memory of pain and does not experience boredom: 'Oh, happy flock of mine, you rest, unaware, I guess, of your wretchedness'. The shepherd, on the contrary, suffers of an existential boredom, a depression, that does not give him peace.

In the sixth 'stanza' the shepherd expresses with very poetic verses an impossible desire: 'Perhaps, if I had wings, to fly above the clouds, and count the stars, one by one, or roam from crest to crest like thunder, I'd be happier, sweet flock of mine, I'd be happier, snow white moon.' But the conclusion is merciless: 'Perhaps my thought strays from truth, gazing at others' fate: perhaps, in any shape, in any state, inside one's lair or cradle, the day of birth is evil to one that's born.'

As briefly recalled in Section 2, the same cosmic pessimism can be found in prose in the "Dialogue of Nature with an Icelander, where this man, despite having lived far from the human consortium (i.e. in a remote, isolated place) and having never claimed anything other than a mere survival, still cannot avoid the jaws of nature, to which he addresses a final question, destined, however, just like the cosmic ones of the Asian shepherd, to remain unanswered: "Who likes or who benefits this unhappy life of the universe, preserved with damage and death of all the things that compose it?" The indifference with which nature destroys the Icelander is similar to that of the moon of the *Night Song*: it is present and at the same time absent, unable to offer any answer to the questions of the shepherd.

CONCLUSIONS

The American philosopher Eugene Thacker (2015) published an essay entitled "Cosmic Pessimism", where he wrote: 'Pessimism is the night-side of thought, a melodrama of the futility of the brain, a poetry written in the graveyard of philosophy. Pessimism is a lyrical failure of philosophical thinking, each attempt at clear and coherent thought is sullen and submerged in the hidden joy of its own futility... Pessimism is the philosophical form of disenchantment—disenchantment as chanting, a chant, a mantra, a solitary, monophonic voice rendered insignificant by the intimate impenetrability surrounding it.'

I am inclined to believe, on the contrary, that his cosmic pessimism is not the expression of a disconsolate acceptance of the tragic human reality, but a rational belief, balanced with a deep empathy towards the whole living creatures, as shown by the following verses of his last poem, entitled "Il tramonto della luna" (*The waning of the moon*)¹, composed in Naples in 1836 and constituting his farewell to life:

<i>Quale in notte solinga,</i>	As on a lonely night,
<i>Sovra campagne inargentate ed acque,</i>	the moon descends over the silvery waters and fields,
<i>Là 've zefiro aleggia,</i>	where the breeze sighs,
<i>E mille vaghi aspetti</i>	and distant shadows make
<i>E ingannevoli obbietti</i>	a thousand vague aspects,
<i>Fingon l'ombre lontane</i>	and deceptive objects,

<i>Infra l'onde tranquille</i>	among the tranquil waves,
<i>E rami e siepi e collinette e ville;</i>	the branches, hedges, hills, and villages:
<i>Giunta al confin del cielo,</i>	and, lost at the sky's end,
<i>Dietro Apennino od Alpe, o del Tirreno</i>	behind Alps or Apennines, or
<i>Nell'infinito seno</i>	in endless Tyrrhenian deeps,
<i>Scende la luna; e si scolora il mondo;</i>	sets, and dims the world
<i>Spariscon l'ombra, ed una</i>	so that shadows scatter, and a single
<i>Oscurità la valle e il monte imbruna;</i>	gloom darkens valley and mountain,
<i>Orba la notte resta,</i>	so night remains alone,
<i>E cantando, con mesta melodia,</i>	and the carter on the road salutes,
<i>L'estremo albor della fuggente luce,</i>	with mournful song, the last gleam
<i>Saluta il carrettier dalla sua via;</i>	of vanishing light that led him on:
<i>Tal si dilegua, e tale</i>	so melts away,
<i>Lascia l'età mortale</i>	and leaves
<i>La giovinezza.</i>	our mortal state, our youth.

END NOTES

1. Translated by A.S. Kline (2003).

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