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Thinking Matter: on Leopardi's Proto-Ecological Poetry of Inquiry

Abstract: The emphasis that the scholarship has placed on the integral autobiographic¹ character of Leopardi's *oeuvre* draws his work near to the contemporary Romantic context, one defined by the conflicting relationship between a hypertrophic poetic human subjectivity and a natural nonhuman object that, deprived of its own autonomy, is reduced to a mere representational embodiment of human imagination. With this article, I intend to offer an alternative interpretation of Leopardi's production by underscoring the crucial role that John Locke plays for Leopardi's philosophical understanding and aesthetic representation of nature.

By focusing on *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, along with Francesco Soave's translation of Locke's treatise, in the first part I propose three reasons to justify the influence that Locke exerts over Leopardi's materialistic speculations vis-à-vis the generally-agreed-upon role played by the French *Idéologues*. After glancing over the first two reasons, with the third one I identify the hypothesis about the existence of a thinking matter with one of the primary epistemological cornerstones of the relationship between Locke and Leopardi. In the second part of the article, I show how under the implicit sway of Locke, Leopardi's poetic production turns into an aesthetic space where proto-ecological responsibility becomes possible. I use *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* as a representation of a subjectivity intent to enfranchising nature and emancipating it from the hypertrophy that characterizes the canonically understood Romantic poetic subject. The result of such an effort is a kind of poetry that I call 'of inquiry' through which the subject gives back to nature its voice, one that is constituted by the very silent presentiality of the matter that constitutes it. Here, *Canto notturno* comes to represent the epitome of what I identify with an a-dialectally dialogical and ecologically aware poetry, one that is structured on the reciprocal interrogation between the human subject – who expresses itself through codified language – and the natural nonhuman – whose expressive means resides in its sensible and material physicality, in its own body.

Key Words: Ecocriticism, John Locke, A-dialectical Materialism, Silence, Romanticism, Poetry of Inquiry (Ecocritica, John Locke, Materialismo a-dialettico, Silenzio, Romanticismo, Poesia interrogante)

1. When Timpanaro turned his attention to the Italian milieu surrounding Leopardi,² he was seeking for philosophical sources alternative³ to the repeatedly stated influence played by the French

¹ Cf. D'INTINO 1996, ID. 2004, ID. 2012.

² For Leopardi's *Canti*, *Operette Morali* and *Pensieri* I use LEOPARDI Giacomo, *Poesie e Prose*, vol. I, ed. by RIGONI Mario Andrea, Milano, Mondadori, 2011 and LEOPARDI Giacomo, *Poesie e Prose*, vol. II, ed. by DAMIANI Rolando, Milano, Mondadori, 2009. For the other cited works, I use LEOPARDI Giacomo, *Tutte le Poesie, Tutte le Prose e lo Zibaldone*, ed. by FELICI Lucio, Roma, Newton & Compton, 2010. However, when citing *Zibaldone* I will refer to the pages of the actual manuscript preceded by *Zib*.

³ Cf. TIMPANARO 2011, 114-5: «dapprima lo Stato pontificio (Recanati, cioè Monaldo col suo enciclopedismo illuministico-reazionario e le sue pose da *ultra*; il classicismo marchigiano-romagnolo, cioè Francesco Cassi e Giulio Perticari; Roma, cioè il poligrafo arruffone Francesco Cancellieri e lo zio Carlo Antici, reazionario ma non così grettamente municipalista

contingent that is traditionally considered to be the primary referent for the constitution of Leopardi's Sensationalism and materialism.⁴ However, even if Timpanaro's 'localized' analysis is valuable, when reference to intellectuals who do not belong to the Italian panorama is needed, he does not fail to hinge upon the very French *Idéologues* he tries to avoid.⁵ By following Timpanaro's advice nonetheless, my aim here is to tread back to a source that precedes the *philosophes* to the extent that it represents «il progenitore di questa setta funesta di liberi pensatori: John Locke».⁶ As Bortolo Martinelli writes, «nel grande dibattito filosofico e scientifico del XVIII secolo il nome di Locke domina accanto a quello di Newton».⁷ È del tutto scontato perciò che Leopardi dovesse confrontarsi con il filosofo di Wrington negli anni cruciali della formazione del suo pensiero critico».⁸ The assumed knowledge of Lockean themes, however, only exhibits the expected exposure of Leopardi to Locke's work, but leaves unexplained its caliber for the work of Leopardi. In looking at *Elenchi di Letture, Disegni Letterari, Catalogo della Biblioteca Leopardi*, and *Zibaldone*, one notices that Locke does not appear in the literary projects and that he is only mentioned in the reading list compiled in February 1825 with his work «Della educazione dei fanciulli Ven. 1735. tomi 2».⁹ Then, why should one consider the British empiricist as one of the most prominent sources for Leopardi's Sensationalism and its metamorphosis into materialism? Certainly, Monaldo's library hosted two editions of Locke's *An Essay*: the 1723 French translation by Pierre Costet, *Essai philosophique concernant l'entendement humain*, and *Saggio filosofico sull'umano intelletto, compendiato dal Dott. Winnie e tradotto da Francesco Soave*. But is this enough? In the next sections, I will attempt a response by outlining three main reasons that justify the importance of Locke for Leopardi's work, namely 1) the chronological location that Locke occupies in *Zibaldone* and Leopardi's intellectual formation; 2) the explicit parallel that Leopardi draws between Locke's system and his own; 3) lastly, the philosophical value that Locke's hypothesis about thinking matter acquires for Leopardi's epistemology. Then, I will illustrate how Leopardi's assimilation of Lockean themes reflects on and influence part of his aesthetic production, allowing him to subvert the canonical dialectics that characterizes Romantic representations of the relationship between the human and nature.

come Monaldo: reazionario che sapeva il tedesco e voleva fare del nipote un campione della Restaurazione a livello europeo); poi Milano (cioè le scoperte del Mai che dettero impulso alla filologia leopardiana, e la battaglia tra i classicisti e romantici, e l'amicizia col maggiore rappresentante del classicismo illuminista, Pietro Giordani, mentre il classicista reazionario Giuseppe Acerbi aveva subito osteggiato il Leopardi); poi ancora, nel 1822-23, l'«antiquaria» romana, veduta questa volta da vicino nella sua meschinità; poi l'ambiente Bolognese, di tranquille amicizie letterarie, che contribuirono a creare nello spirito del Leopardi un periodo di relativa distensione e adattamento alla realtà della vita; fino alle ultime esperienze, aspramente polemiche, del cattolicesimo liberale fiorentino e napoletano».

⁴ Cf. Ivi, 117-8: «il sensismo e il materialismo leopardiano [...] non vanno ricondotti solo alla lettura diretta [which occurred only to an extent] dei grandi illuministi francesi del Settecento (anche qui sarebbe necessaria una ricerca che determinasse con più esattezza quali, tra gli illuministi settecenteschi più decisamente materialistici, furono noti al Leopardi), ma anche ai contatti fra il Leopardi e il classicismo illuminista dell'Ottocento, in cui la tradizione sensistica permaneva ben salda».

⁵ Emblematic in this sense is the characterization he gives of Pietro Giordani, who studied in Parma «dov'era stato così forte l'influsso del Condillac».

⁶ Ivi, 150. For the English edition of Locke's *An Essay* I use LOCKE John, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by NIDDITCH Peter H., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985; for Soave's translation of *An Essay* I use WYNNE John (ed.), SOAVE Francesco (trans.), *Saggio Filosofico di Gio: Locke su l'Umano Intelletto*, 3 vols., Venezia, Stamperia Baglioni, 1794.

⁷ Aarsleff shows that the pair Newton-Locke had become a commonplace since, almost, the entering of *An Essay* into the French Enlightenment *milieu*. As mentioned above, in his *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopédie*, D'Alembert states that Locke had «created metaphysics [i.e. philosophy], almost as Newton had created physics». However, in his *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, «Voltaire had already joined Newton with Locke, and this pairing became a commonplace – which shows how well the eighteenth century understood Locke's deed of disenchantment». Cf. AARSLEFF 1994, 255.

⁸ MARTINELLI 2003, 171.

⁹ LEOPARDI, *Elenchi di Letture*, in ID. 2010, 1118.

2. The first reason to underscore Locke's importance for Leopardi is related to the chronological location the former occupies within the latter's intellectual landscape. The three *Idéologues* that precede Leopardi's first mention of Locke in *Zibaldone*, and whose philosophical position is addressed with a certain degree of criticism, are Voltaire (already present in the first undated one hundred pages), d'Holbach (indirectly referred to in 1820 as one of the authors of *La Morale Universelle*) and Buffon (again in 1820 with regard to the controversies related to the separation of body and soul, a topic that highly pertains the debate that revolved around Locke's *An Essay*). Each one of these *philosophes* was profoundly influenced by Locke and might have very well represented for Leopardi and indirect means of exposure his thought. In *Zibaldone*, however, Locke's name first appears on March 18th, 1821: here Leopardi cites him in order to uphold an argument that revolves around the relationship between the richness of cultural processes and their dependence on a linguistic lushness originating in the proliferation of composite words. In this entry, furthermore, Leopardi writes down the reference text that will remain the explicit source for his work on Locke throughout the whole *Zibaldone*, namely Soave's translation of Wynne's abridgment of *An Essay*.¹⁰ With regard to this first mention, however, Muñiz Muñiz notes that «la prima citazione sicura del compendio si trova a p. 1028, in un pensiero datato 10 maggio 1821, giacché quella inserita in margine al pensiero di p. 807 (18 marzo 1821), corrisponde a una aggiunta posteriore».¹¹ The philological aptness of this observation, however, does not rule out the fact that Leopardi was not unfamiliar with the main ideas that constituted Locke's system even before reading Soave's translation of *An Essay*, as his direct and indirect acquaintance with the *Idéologues* and especially his philosophical formation can testify. In this regard, while in his 1812 *Sopra la Percezione, il Giudizio, e il Razioncinio*¹² a young Leopardi supports the critique of innate ideas by drawing from François Jacquier and Del Giudice's work,¹³ in *Sopra le Doti dell'Anima Umana*¹⁴ of the same year he explicitly mentions Locke. Even if these young exercises¹⁵ are filtered through the works of Jean Saury, Count Alfonso Muzzarelli and Aimé-Henri Paulian, *Sopra le Doti* testifies to the precision of the issues that represented Leopardi's matter of study. What is particularly significant in this *dissertazione* is the concern against which Leopardi argues, namely Locke's most controversial suggestion as to the possibility that matter may be endowed with the faculty of thinking. This suggestion had become of pivotal importance for the French reception of Locke's philosophy and had been made one of the central points of *An Essay* thanks to Voltaire's *Letter XIII*. Even though this letter is not mentioned in *Sopra le Doti* for the excerpt by Voltaire in the *dissertazione* is taken from *Dictionnaire Philosophique*,¹⁶ the pairing of the French and British philosopher on the very issue of

¹⁰ «Soave, append. al Capo 1. Lib.3. del Compendio di Locke, Venezia 37a ediz. 1794. t.2. p.12. fine-13». *Zib.* 807, 18 March 1821.

¹¹ MUÑIZ MUÑIZ 2013, 38.

¹² Cf. LEOPARDI, *Dissertazioni Filosofiche*, in ID. 2010, 722-7.

¹³ In this regard Martinelli observes that «la demolizione della teoria delle idee innate [...] era ormai diventata a tal punto *res communis*, che si poteva benissimo prescindere dal menzionare il nome del filosofo di Wrington». MARTINELLI 2003, 172.

¹⁴ From now on *Sopra le doti*. Crivelli describes this early work of Leopardi as a «dissertazione di ambito metafisico, che si apre con un proemio dedicato alle varie teorie di stampo materialistico che vorrebbero ridimensionale la nobiltà dell'anima umana e che prosegue con un'analisi e una confutazione delle obiezioni materialiste e libertine [...], discutendole attraverso l'argomento cosiddetto del 'comune consenso delle genti' e opponendo loro la teoria dell'origine divina dell'anima». CRIVELLI 2000, 66.

¹⁵ Cf. Landolfi Petrone who describes the philosophical dissertations as «esercitazioni giovanili le prime escursioni nella storia della filosofia». LANDOLFI PETRONE 1993, 477.

¹⁶ In the *Catalogo della Biblioteca Leopardi in Recanati* edited by Andrea Campana, I could not find Voltaire's *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, a volume that Petrone retains being part of Monaldo's library. The passage in *Sopra le Doti dell'Anima Umana* reads: «Ma se il pensiero fosse una intrinseca modificazione della materia esser dovrebbe necessariamente una materia modificata, e perciò sarebbe esteso, divisibile, palpabile, il che è assurdo; dunque il pensiero non può per niun modo appartenere alla materia. Di questa ultima ragione crede però aver trionfato un famoso empio il *Sig.r Voltaire* colla seguente

thinking matter represents a decisive – and probably not fortuitous – indicator of, firstly, the manner in which Leopardi entered in contact with Locke and the aspects of Locke’s philosophy that interested him; secondly, the philosophical quality of such a contact; and thirdly, the breadth and accuracy of the issues at hand in the relationship between Leopardi and Locke. *Sopra le Doti* then testifies to an understanding of Lockean themes based not on a generalist and simplified introduction to Empiricism, but rather to Leopardi’s keen awareness about the elements that constitute the philosophical kernel of such theory as it had been transmitted by the mediation of the French *Idéologues*, and among them especially Voltaire.¹⁷ Furthermore, *Sopra le Doti* represents a relevant instance of the Locke-Leopardi relation for it condemns precisely the hypothesis¹⁸ that will be overturned and even radicalized by Leopardi in those years in which the British empiricist becomes an explicit point of reference for the constitution of his materialism.

The second reason that justifies Locke as one of Leopardi’s primary sources concerns the parallel that the latter draws between the necessary existence of a system and philosophical knowledge, along with the fundamental association between his critique of innate ideas and that built in *An Essay*. For Leopardi the professional philosopher is to be identified with a system-builder driven by logical inductive reasoning. As he writes on April 16th, 1820: «io dico che qualunque uomo ha forza di pensare da se, [...] in somma qualunque vero pensatore, non può assolutamente a meno di non formarsi, o di non seguire, o generalmente di non avere un sistema».¹⁹ There are two explanations for this observation, and here Leopardi follows an empirical methodology in order to justify his own statement: first, facts and history prove that each and every philosopher has built or supported a system;²⁰ second, even the carelessness of those who do not look for the truth by themselves, selecting among different systems in order to avoid any specific system, inadvertently give form to a system, perhaps fluid and protean but still a system. What then characterizes the system that every philosopher both naturally and necessarily builds according to Leopardi? A system is defined by a thread that runs through all the discrete particulars of a philosophical inquiry; it is the relationality that leaves the particulars in their individual and discrete state while weaving them into a meaningful perspective, a perspective that allows language to both formulate a discourse on reality and show the reciprocal dependence of each discrete particular upon the other ones. For Leopardi

mancare assolutamente di sistema [...], è lo stesso che mancare di un ordine di una connessione d’idee, e quindi senza sistema, non vi può esser discorso sopra veruna cosa. [...] Il sistema, cioè la connessione e dipendenza delle idee, de’ pensieri, delle riflessioni, delle opinioni, è il distintivo certo, e nel tempo stesso indispensabile del filosofo.²¹

objezione: “*La matière, dice egli, a nous d’ailleurs inconnüe possède des qua litès, qui ne sont pas matérielles, qui ne sont pas divisibles: elle a la gravitation vers un centre, que Dieu lui a donnée. Or cette gravitation n’a point de parties, n’est point divisible. La force mortice des corps oranisès, leur vie, leur instinct, ne son pas non plus des êtres à part, des être divisible: Vous ne pouvez pas plus coupe ren deux la vegetation d’une rose, la vie d’un Cheval, l’instinct d’un Chien, que vous ne pouvez coupe ren deux une sensation, une negation, une affirmation. Votre bel argument tire de l’indivisibilité de la pensée ne prouve donc rien de tout*”». LEOPARDI, *Dissertazioni Filosofiche*, in ID. 2010, 723.

¹⁷ Crivelli explains that the acquaintance with Voltaire’s thought at the time Leopardi was writing this work is due to some footnotes present Antonino Valsecchi’s treatise of catholic apologetics *Dei Fondamenti della Religione e dei Fonti dell’Empietà*. CRIVELLI 2000, 69.

¹⁸ Leopardi writes: «che ignorando noi la intima natura della materia conoscer non possiamo per niun conto se il pensiero sia ad essa conveniente». LEOPARDI, *Dissertazioni Filosofiche*, ID. 2010, 724.

¹⁹ *Zib.* 945, 14 April 1821.

²⁰ «Lasciando gli antichi filosofi, considerate i moderni più grandi. Cartesio, Malebranche, Newton, Leibnizio, Locke, Rousseau, Cabanis, Tracy, De Vico, Kant, in somma tutti quanti». *Zib.* 946, 16 April 1821.

²¹ *Zib.* 950, 16 April 1821.

A system in its necessarily empirical formulation, then, is the structured embodiment of a distance, an overview or, as Leopardi would define it, a *colpo d'occhio*,²² which characterizes the posture of a true philosopher. The concept of *colpo d'occhio*, understood as the ability to distinguish, unveil and expose those «molti e grandi rapporti»²³ that sidle through things, represents a theoretical notion of great importance for Leopardi, for, in being a cognitive residue of imagination, it grants the philosopher the ability to acquire an a-dialectical gaze. With the a-dialectical²⁴ quality that distinguishes Leopardi's intellectual posture I mean a mode of thinking and writing founded on the awareness and pursuit of a resilient *presentia oppositorum*. Within Leopardi's work, indeed, there exists the tendency to interrupt the Hegelian *Aufhebung* that generally characterizes both the Enlightenment and Romanticism's attitudes. Then, a system built on *colpo d'occhio* neither reduces the plethora of particulars into systemic uniformity nor transcends them through a perpetual assimilation at the service of a sublated meaning. Rather, *colpo d'occhio* molds a system that holds discrete particulars in a reciprocal tension, without transcending the oppositional character that defines said particulars seen from within the systemic relationality. In this view, Leopardi proposes an understanding of a system where the elements of the classically understood differential binaries are bound by an a-dialectical relationality:

la ragione ha bisogno dell'immaginazione e delle illusioni ch'ella distrugge; il vero del falso; il sostanziale dell'apparente; l'insensibilità la più perfetta della sensibilità la più viva; il ghiaccio del fuoco; la pazienza dell'impazienza; l'impotenza della somma potenza; il piccolissimo del grandissimo; la geometria e l'algebra, della poesia. ec.²⁵

In this context, Leopardi enlists Locke among those greatest thinkers considered to be philosophers insofar as they are system-builders. Now, one could gloss over such a consideration, but a few months after Leopardi returns to Locke and traces an explicit comparison between himself and the British philosopher, hinging on the systemic effort that defines their epistemologies. On September 11th, 1821, Leopardi underlines his debt to Locke with especial regard to the cognitive dependence of memory, the mind and the body on habit:

Scire nostrum est reminisci dicono i Platonici. Male nel loro intendimento, cioè che l'anima non faccia che ricordarsi di ciò che seppe innanzi di unirsi al corpo. Benissimo però può applicarsi al nostro sistema, e di Locke. [...] Si può dire che la memoria sia l'unica fonte del sapere [...]. E siccome ho detto che la memoria non è altro che assuefazione, [...] così vicendevolmente può dirsi ch'ella contiene tutte le assuefazioni, ed è il fondamento di tutte, vale a dire d'ogni nostra scienza e attitudine.²⁶

Even though Leopardi's acknowledgment of a debt is here limited to his theory of memory and habit, it is not hard to see how this entry is reminiscent of Empiricism's critique of innate ideas (i.e. Locke's

²² I will not translate this Leopardian expression for the peculiar meaning and importance it holds for his reflections. The *colpo d'occhio* in Leopardi represents a concept of not easy explanation. In fact, how does the dependency of the *colpo d'occhio* on imagination, illusions, enthusiasm, heroism, etc. (cf. *Zib.* 1833, 3 October 1821) can go together with the depletion of any sensitivity or attunement toward Nature that Leopardi mentions in the autobiographical description of his *conversio ad philosophiam*?

²³ *Zib.* 1853, 5-6 October 1821.

²⁴ I use the alpha privative 'a-' rather than the prefix 'anti-' because the prefix still responds to the same logic ascribed to dialectics. In this sense, the one scholar that most consistently refers to Leopardi's anti-dialectical character is Antonio Negri – cf. NEGRI 1987, 19 ff. The critic's use of the prefix, however, implicitly and explicitly shows his intension to emphasize Leopardi's dialectical vocation, one to which certainly Leopardi is not always congruent but that nevertheless plays a decisive structuring role within his system.

²⁵ *Zib.* 1839, 4 October 1821.

²⁶ *Zib.* 1675-6, 11 September 1821.

primary discovery according to Leopardi).²⁷ In fact, even *assuefazione* – a faculty inherent to the extent that is regularly identified with a «seconda natura»²⁸ in *Zibaldone* – cannot be ultimately conceived of as an innate procedure insofar as it, too, is after all subjected to experience and to its own habitual dynamism.²⁹ The radical critique of innateness, then, reveals itself to be another central thread that defines the systemic consonance that Leopardi discovers between Locke and the philosophical posture to which he famously ‘converted’ in 1819.³⁰

3. The third reason that justifies Locke’s relevance is the impact of his most controversial suggestion³¹ on Leopardi’s work, namely the possibility that matter may be endowed with the faculty of thinking. As already stated, Leopardi’s early philosophical dissertations (especially *Sopra le Doti*), written under the reactionary guidance of his preceptors, show the extent to which he was introduced to the characteristic ideas of the materialist outlook spreading from Locke through the *Idéologues* and the highly debated hypothesis of thinking matter. It is not improbable that Leopardi could have turned his attention to Locke and such a matter of contention even after the years of his education: although there is no direct documentation that testifies to this hypothesis, the direct reading of Voltaire and D’Holbach (who both precede a direct engagement with the British empiricist) might have furthered the possibilities of encountering Locke’s controversial idea, insofar as they were both enthusiasts with regard to such a Lockean scandalous hypothesis.

Be that as it may, at some point Leopardi decided to directly engage Locke’s *An Essay* – if one can strip a translation and commentary from their mediating role. In this regard, the relevance of Soave’s translation of the treatise – the only one cited in *Zibaldone* among the two versions to which Leopardi had access in his library – sheds an important light on the issue of thinking matter. While Martinelli believes that this crucial element of Locke’s philosophy had been passed over in silence³²

²⁷ *Zib.* 2707, 21 May 1823.

²⁸ *Zib.* 208, 11 August 1820.

²⁹ «Non solamente tutte le facoltà dell’uomo sono una facoltà di assuefarsi, ma la stessa facoltà di assuefarsi dipende dall’assuefazione. A forza di assuefazioni si piglia la facilità di assuefarsi, non solo dentro lo stesso genere di cose, ma in ogni genere». *Zib.* 1370, 22 July 1821.

³⁰ In a long passage noted on July 1st, 1820 Leopardi describes his ‘conversion’ to philosophy: «La mutazione totale in me, e il passaggio dallo stato antico al moderno, seguì si può dire dentro un anno, cioè nel 1819, dove privato dell’uso della vista, e della continua distrazione della lettura, cominciai a sentire la mia infelicità in un modo assai più tenebroso, cominciai ad abbandonar la speranza, a riflettere profondamente sopra le cose (in questi pensieri ho scritto in un anno il doppio quasi di quello che avea scritto in un anno e mezzo, e sopra materie appartenenti sopra tutto alla nostra natura, a differenza dei pensieri passati, quasi tutti di letteratura), a divenir filosofo di professione (di poeta ch’io era), a sentire l’infelicità certa del mondo, in luogo di conoscerla, e questo anche per uno stato di languore corporale, che tanto più mi allontanava dagli antichi e mi avvicinava ai moderni. Allora l’immaginazione in me fu sommamente infiacchita, e quantunque la facoltà dell’invenzione allora appunto crescesse in me grandemente, anzi quasi cominciasse, verteva però principalmente, o sopra affari di prosa, o sopra poesie sentimentali. E s’io mi metteva a far versi, le immagini mi venivano a sommo stento, anzi la fantasia era quasi disseccata (anche astraendo dalla poesia, cioè nella contemplazione delle belle scene naturali ec. come ora ch’io ci resto duro come una pietra); bensì quei versi traboccavano di sentimento. Così si può ben dire che in rigor di termini, poeti non erano se non gli antichi, e non sono ora se non i fanciulli o giovanetti, e i moderni che hanno questo nome, non sono altro che filosofi. Ed io infatti non divenni sentimentale, se non quando perduta la fantasia divenni insensibile alla natura, e tutto dedito alla ragione e al vero, in somma filosofo». *Zib.* 144, 1 July 1820.

³¹ Aarsleff maintains that «Locke’s suggestion about thinking matter became the most disputed issued raised by *An Essay*, both in England and especially on the Continent» (AARSLEFF 1994, p. 264) because of the second edition of the French translation of the passage in Book IV of *An Essay*, but also thanks to Voltaire’s largely read, appreciated and criticized Letter XIII in his *Letters concerning the English Nation*. The complicated editorial history of Voltaire’s *Letter XIII*, its reception, Voltaire’s significative debate with Father Tournemine are outlined in YOLTON 1991, pp. 39-55.

³² Cf. MARTINELLI 2003, 172.

by the work of Soave, John Yolton shows how the Italian translator actually was not foreign to the issue.³³ The text of Soave's edition confirms Yolton's claim:

ma quantunque io mostri [...], che la materia non può essere il primo Ente pensante, perché di sua natura è visibilmente destituita di senso: nondimeno ci sarà forse eternamente impossibile di conoscere, se Dio non abbia dato a qualche ammasso di materia preparato, e disposto espressamente la potenza di apprendere, e di pensare.³⁴

Moreover, Soave condenses his Condillac-inspired comments on such a hypothesis in a long footnote, further confirming the attention devoted by his translation to this thorny topic.³⁵ Despite the Condillacian tone that saturates Soave's observations, Leopardi's acceptance of the primacy of matter divulged by Empiricism, of the idea of thinking matter and the radical extent to which later it is developed – a position that clearly differentiates him from Condillac's disappointed amazement – bear witness to Locke's persuasiveness in his eye, on the one hand, and his *modus operandi* when coming to intellectual re-appropriation, on the other.

Leopardi begins to work on these ideas around the beginning of 1820, by inquiring: «Come potrà essere che la materia senta e si dolga e si disperdi della sua propria nullità?»³⁶ Here, one can already notice the first traces of an intellectual effort that will lead Leopardi to re-interpret the eighteenth-century theories of hedonism and eudemonism in an extremely personal manner and to re-elaborate them into his *teoria del piacere*. However, the final acceptance of Locke's suggestion in *Zibaldone* is not immediate or unnuanced, but it advances through increasingly radicalizing steps. Leopardi's appropriation of Locke's hypothesis undergoes degrees of assimilation that address the relationship between matter and the soul;³⁷ the impossibility for the mind to conceive or desire anything beyond matter;³⁸ the reduction of any faculty to matter;³⁹ the material origin of any linguistic rendering of any affect of the soul, and, hence, the linguistic dependency of spirit on matter;⁴⁰ the prominence and experiential precedence of matter over spirit;⁴¹ and the impossible existence of gradations that would

³³ YOLTON 1991, 2, n. 2. The note reads: «One other handy source available to the French readers was J.P. Bosset's *Abrégé de l'Essay de Monsieur Locke, sur l'entendement humain* (1720). The English abridgment by Wynne (1696) omitted the 4. 3. 6 passage on thinking matter, but Bosset's abridgment included a brief reference to that suggestion. Wynne does give an extended account of 4. 10, where Locke argues against the materialists who held that matter was eternal and might think. Many of the contentions about thinking matter are discussed by Locke in that chapter, but Wynne omits the earlier suggestion about the limitation of our knowledge not enabling us to rule out the possibility that God could add thought to matter. The Italian abridgment by Francesco Soave (3 vols., 1775), which states it is a trans. of Wynne, follows Bosset on the 4. 3. 6 passage. [...] Soave also adds in a note a long quotation from Condillac on this topic [...]. In that passage, Condillac expresses amazement that Locke could have entertained that possibility».

³⁴ SOAVE 1794, vol. 4, 86.

³⁵ «Io non so (dice l'Abb. di Condillac nel *Saggio sull'Origine dell'umane Cognizioni* Par. I, Sez. I, Cap. I) come Locke abbia potuto avanzare, che si sarà forse eternamente impossibile il conoscere, se Dio non abbia dato qualche ammasso di materia disposto a un certo modo la potenza di pensare. Non si dee immaginare, che a sciogliere tal quistione sia necessario conoscere l'essenza e la natura della materia. I ragionamenti che si fondano su questa ignoranza, sono affatto frivoli. Basta osservare che il Subbietto del pensiero (cioè l'Esser pensante) deve essere uno, e che un ammasso di materia non è uno, ma una moltitudine». *Ibid.*, n.1.

³⁶ *Zib.* 106, 26 March 1820.

³⁷ Cf. *Zib.* 281, 17 October 1820, where Leopardi integrates Buffon's claim against those metaphysical philosophers who argue in favor of pain experience by the soul at the moment of its separation from the body.

³⁸ Cf. *Zib.* 603-6 (4 February 1821), 3341 (2 September 1823), 3503 (23 September 1823).

³⁹ Cf. *Zib.* 1026 (9 May 1821), 1657 (9 September 1821), 1694 (13 September 1821), 3341 (2 September 1823).

⁴⁰ Cf. *Zib.* 1262 (1-2 July 1821), 4111 (1 July 1824), 4206 (25 September 1826).

⁴¹ Cf. *Zib.* 1616 (3 September 1821), 2479 (15 June 1822), 3308 (29-30 August 1823), 3936 (28 November 1823).

separate the material and the immaterial.⁴² Eventually, the extremization of Locke's suggestion reaches a stable and recapitulatory elaboration on March 9th, 1827:

Parrebbe che secondo ogni ragione [...], noi avessimo dovuto dire e tenere per indubitato, *la materia può pensare, la materia pensa e sente*. [...] Io veggo dei corpi che pensano e che sentono. [...] Dunque dirò: la materia può pensare e sentire. [...] Provatemi che la materia possa pensare e sentire. - Che ho io da provarlo? Il fatto lo prova.⁴³

Furthermore, in building on the steps undertaken throughout *Zibaldone*, on September 18th of the same 1827 Leopardi transforms Locke's most rejected hypothesis about the possibility for matter to think into a radical factuality: «Che la materia pensi, è un fatto. Un fatto, perchè noi pensiamo; e noi non sappiamo, non conosciamo di essere, non possiamo conoscere, concepire, altro che materia».⁴⁴ In this sense, the Italian writer goes farther than all those *Idéologues*, and among them especially Voltaire, who had simply sympathized and flirted with such a hypothesis. Even if at this later stage of materialistic radicalization Leopardi does not mention Locke, the entries in *Zibaldone* from 1827 show that he is still working around the dismantling critique of innate ideas – i.e. «la principale scoperta di Locke».⁴⁵ Moreover, rather than simply evoking commonplaces attributable to Locke, in 1827 Leopardi exhibits a clear awareness of Locke's weight for his own philosophical inquiry when, as Muñiz Muñiz shows, he adds the parenthetical «e di Locke» to an already seen entry from 1821 in order to emphasize the parallel between his philosophical system and that of Locke. Such a precise and unnecessary addition is probably motivated by the revision of the manuscript that Leopardi worked on from July to October 1827 for the drafting of the first index of *Zibaldone*. Indeed, under the item “Idee innate” of the 1827 index, Leopardi compiles a brief and selected list of entries in which Locke appears associated to innate ideas at least twice (specifically at p. 1139 and p. 2707). Then, the possibility to refamiliarize himself with the British philosopher in 1827 shows that, rather than just treating Locke as an uncritically digested source for intellectual suggestions, Leopardi had Soave's translation of *An Essay* in mind as a precise point of reference to the extent that, years after his first reading, he recognized a relationship of similarity between Locke's Empiricism and his own system. In this context, it is significant that the extreme character that Leopardi's materialism acquires in the entry of September 18th was written just three weeks before concluding the first index of *Zibaldone* (October 14th, 1827).

4. Now, Leopardi's familiarity with Locke has also aesthetic repercussions. While I do not claim that Leopardi's production represents a poetic application of Locke's philosophy, I certainly argue that the early encounter with the British empiricist, the acknowledged analogy between the two intellectuals' philosophical systems and especially the emphasis on thinking matter influenced Leopardi's aesthetic positions vis-à-vis the Romantic milieu with which his poetry dialogues. In this

⁴² Cf. *Zib.* 1636 (5 September 1821).

⁴³ *Zib.* 4252-3 (9 March 1827).

⁴⁴ *Zib.* 4288, 17 September 1827.

⁴⁵ *Zib.* 2707, 21 May 1823. In this regard, the very same March 9th in which he formulates one of the final articulations of his extreme materialism, Leopardi goes back to such a Lockean issue by using a very Lockean methodology, namely an example involving a child: «Il bambino, quasi appena nato, farà dei moti, per li quali si potrebbe intender benissimo che egli conosce l'esistenza della forza di gravità dei corpi, in conseguenza della qual cognizione egli agisce. Così di moltissime altre cognizioni fisiche che tutti gli uomini hanno, e che il bambino manifesta quasi subito. Forse che queste cognizioni e idee sono in lui innate? Non già: ma egli sente in se ben tosto, e nelle cose che lo circondano, che i corpi son gravi. Questa esperienza, in un batter d'occhio, gli dà l'idea della gravità, e gliene forma in testa un principio: del quale di là a pochi momenti gli parrebbe assurdo il dubitare, e il quale ei non si ricorda poi punto come gli sia nato nella testa. Il simile accade appunto nei principii e morali e intellettuali. Ma le idee fisiche ognun concede e afferma non essere innate: le morali, signor sì, sono. Buona pasqua alle signorie vostre». *Zib.* 4253-4, 9 March 1827.

sense, the assimilation and radicalization of the hypothesis about a thinking matter allow Leopardi to interject the main Romantic issues and address the central relationship between poetry and philosophy in order to re-signify and turn the classically Romantic relationship between the human and nature into a dialogical inter-dependence that ties these two through an a-dialectical manner. Within this a-dialectical space, the relationship between subject and nature develops according to dynamics structured on dialogical frictions and is expressed through a kind of poetry that I define ‘of inquiry.’

In order to understand the theoretical coordinates of ‘poetry of inquiry,’ I will attempt a brief sketch of the Romantic perception of nature, which represents a key protagonist in Leopardi’s poetry and, as Schneider notices, should be understood perhaps as «the most inclusive and the most evocative»⁴⁶ idea among those associated with Romanticism. In restraining from historical generalizations, I look at what could be considered as the prevailing strands of the period’s culture and its mood, or *Stimmung* to use Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s⁴⁷ category. As Wellek observes, the analysis of an epoch – even with regard to all its irreducible complexities – has to consider the specificity and particularity of said epoch; these are generally expressed through the «the dominance (but not the total tight dictatorial rule) of a set of norms which, in the case of Romanticism, are provided sufficiently by similar of analogous concepts of the imagination, nature, symbol, and myth».⁴⁸ The idea of nature then represents one such a dominant aspect of Romanticism, not least because it nestles in itself the only other «rival»⁴⁹ notion of the period, that one of a creative mind and consciousness. Indeed, when addressing the representation of nature, one has to account for the subjectivity that engages it and that becomes the active, as well as self-aware, participant in the aesthetic reproduction of it.

Within the frame of Romanticism, the relationship between nature and subjectivity takes a specific and radical turn that testifies to the expansion of subjectivity’s primacy over nature and nature’s consequent metamorphosis into a vicarious delegate of subjectivity’s eminence and drives. As Northrop Frye remarks, while pre-Romantic writers conceived of nature as the work of God and «thus an objective structure or system for the poet to follow»⁵⁰ and imitate, with Romanticism the poet «must no longer look for the nature-spirits – for the Goddess Natura – on the farther side of the appearances».⁵¹ the subjects now must look within its own creative power, the poet now must imitate the nature held inside.⁵² As Schneider explains, «Romantic ‘nature’ is essentially a space of imagination [...]. During the Romantic period, nature in its physical appearance emerged as the privilege material for expressing a human subject [...] and expressing the unfathomable depth of the soul».⁵³ As a result, the natural world is reduced to a product of subjectivity and its imaginative capacity: the overly assertive Romantic subject’s act is augmented to the extent to which it stands in a «directionally creator relation»⁵⁴ to nature, by expanding over, engulfing and subsuming the otherness that is latent within nature.

The Romantic separation from the previous aesthetic tradition is both influenced and mirrored by the historical context, which sees both the French and Industrial Revolutions catch on as drastic and violent breaks with the old social, cultural, political, and economic order. The disillusionment and

⁴⁶ SCHNEIDER 2000, 92.

⁴⁷ Cf. GUMBRECHT, 2012. I also espouse Gumbrecht’s skepticism about the possibility to theorize or explain mood or atmosphere.

⁴⁸ WELLEK 1963, 109.

⁴⁹ SCHNEIDER 2000, 192.

⁵⁰ FRYE 1963, 10.

⁵¹ BARFIELD 1965, 132.

⁵² In this sense, Barfield notes that «if [Romantic] nature is to be experienced as representation, she will be experienced as representation of – Man». Ivi, 131.

⁵³ SCHNEIDER 2000, 92.

⁵⁴ BARFIELD 1965, 45.

anticlimax associated with the failure of those ideals that drove the French Revolution had to be overcome: the promise with which the Revolution was initially identified needed somehow to find consummation in a dimension different from the social or political one and was pushed further to the inside world of the mind.⁵⁵ This internalizing dynamism, the institution of a new conception of reason, along with the break from both the previous order and the failing promises of the Revolution, gave rise to a subject whose self-awareness was structured upon the loss of the original, primeval, and longed-for immediate relationship with nature. In this context, the relationship with nature acquires a dialectical character, one that Leopardi would question with his work. In this dialectical view, the existence of «nature as an aesthetic objectivation [...] always presupposes its loss and absence, it is marked by an unerasable difference for a rational subject who seeks in her precisely non-difference: the self-identity, self-manifestation, clarity of pure being».⁵⁶ In other words, nature «comes into full sight only in the perspective of a loss»⁵⁷ and is revealed only in being veiled, it exists only in and as the ideal understood in the terms postulated by Idealism. In this sense, it is not surprising that «German philosophical idealism acknowledged modern alienation as the necessary dialectical step towards a “higher” appreciation of nature.»⁵⁸ Then, both the Romantic hypertrophic subject and the permanent longing for nature that defines the subject’s modernity are characterized by a dialectical understanding of the subject’s relationship with a diachronic and synchronic otherness (history and a nature lost in an unrecoverable past).

The awareness of the distance that characterizes the modern subject and the loss of the original, un-separated relationship with nature is the experience that Schiller defines as ‘sentimental.’ The sentimental turns into a diaphragm between the primal unity shared by human subjectivity and nature – Schiller’s naïve – and becomes the theorized metaphor for the mutated perception of both the subject and nature, now seen as unnaturally but fatally divided. Schiller effectively summarizes the dichotomous condition of modern consciousness by shifting nature from being a determination of man’s act of perceiving to being the disjointed object of his apprehension: «They [the Ancients] felt naturally, while we [the Moderns] feel the natural».⁵⁹ However, as Wellek maintains, to a certain extent the «central creed of the great Romantic poets [could be seen as an] endeavor to overcome the split between subject and object, the self and the world, the conscious and the unconscious».⁶⁰ In this sense, in order to remedy the differential separation from the origin that takes form in the ‘sentimental,’ the artist must become, according to Schiller, the ‘Bewahrer der Natur.’ To an extent, Schiller’s view of the artist recalls that of Leopardi’s *Discorso di un Italiano intorno alla Poesia Romantica*,⁶¹ especially when the Italian writer states that

non basta ora al poeta anche sappia imitar la natura; bisogna che la sappia trovare [...] rimuovendo gli oggetti che la occultano, e scoprendola, e dissepellendo e spostando e nettando dalla mota dell’incivilimento e della corruzione umana quei celesti esemplari che si assume di ritrarre.⁶²

There is, however, a difference between Schiller and Leopardi’s conception of the poet and it lies in the phenomenology of the poetic endeavor: while the Schillerian artist is reduced to the

⁵⁵ As Frye observes, «the theme of revolution fulfilling itself [...] had to be transferred from the social to the mental world». FRYE 1963, vi.

⁵⁶ SCHNEIDER 2000, 94.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Ivi 98.

⁵⁹ SCHILLER 1993, 195.

⁶⁰ WELLEK 1963, 132.

⁶¹ Cf. LEOPARDI, *Discorso di un Italiano Intorno alla Poesia Romantica*, in ID. 2009. From now on *Discorso di un Italiano*.

⁶² LEOPARDI, *Discorso di un Italiano*, 386.

functional role of a possibly passive keeper (a guardian who worships an ultimately stale relic), the Leopardian poet is fully active and his action results into invention (in the etymological sense of ‘coming upon’). In this sense, Leopardi’s poet comes across, or finds the natural object as an autonomous object that precedes the subject but that, at the same time, proposes and offers itself to the subject’s perception. In this context, the recuperation of the suture of the lost bond with nature cannot be identified with the dusting off of a preserved prelapsarian condition. Consequently, Leopardi refrains from conceiving of the faculty of imagination as an overly empowered creative force that spurs from a hypertrophic subjectivity. Leopardi’s restoring poetic act is likely to be more conceptually attuned with the rediscovery or unveiling of the ancient mode of perception – where illusions deceive the imagination but not the intellect and where the dialogical relationship between the poetic subject and the natural object can be invented, i.e. found.

The Romantic dichotomy between sentimental and naïve, then, is structured on a dialectical movement for it requires the necessity of separation – the loss – as a possibilizing moment in the process of consummation embarked on by the relationship between subjectivity and nature. The unnatural tearing apart of the original unity with nature becomes the necessary moment in the teleological adventure of subjectivity’s consciousness: the sentimental condition experienced by the modern human, in this sense, comes to represent a «prerequisite»⁶³ stage that needs to be overcome in order to increment subjectivity’s self-consciousness, which would allow for the recovered and sublated, lost or naïve unity with nature to occur. As Schneider points out, the recovery via sublation of such unity and its consequent «utopian liberation»⁶⁴ through «a fully developed reason»⁶⁵ coincide with «the final overcoming of alienation on all levels of human life».⁶⁶ Reason, however, is not to be identified here with the aseptic procedure that alienates and degrades life to a mere mechanism; for the Romantics, reason is defined by the necessity of being sublated by poetry, which, in attempting to establish a new mythopoeia, reveals itself as intellectual intuition. It is, then, the new consciousness engendered by the transformative power of poetry that would dialectically guarantee the occurrence of the longed-for reconciliation, of the higher degree of knowledge, and of that reason that has finally been sublated. As Hartman maintains,⁶⁷ Romantic and dialectical consciousness coincides with imagination, and for the proponents of *Frühromantik* «imagination [was] a primordial unifying principle of spiritual creativity».⁶⁸ With such a conception of imagination the underground pivotal core of Romanticism surfaces and shows itself as consciousness defined by a «dialectic which favors [a structure based on a] ‘both/and thinking’».⁶⁹ In this context, «in the medium of imagination the mind confronts the world as its own production, ‘creator and receiver both’».⁷⁰ One may notice the paradoxical dynamic: in aiming at the recovery of nature’s objectivity, along with the original wholeness of subject and nature, poetry turns into a creative and internalizing act whose exclusive protagonist coincides with the solipsistic⁷¹ subjectivity endowed with the highest imaginative power.

In this regard, the necessary character of the ‘sentimental’ lived by subjectivity’s consciousness as a condition of a heightened awareness, the necessary separation from the original condition of unity with nature as a requisite for such a higher state of consciousness, and the deeper knowledge brought about by imagination via poetic sublation of the lost nature and defective reason, expose the deep and

⁶³ SCHNEIDER 2000, 94.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Cf. HARTMAN 1962, 556.

⁶⁸ SCHNEIDER 2000, 100.

⁶⁹ WELLEK 1963, 130.

⁷⁰ SCHNEIDER 2000, 100.

⁷¹ Cf. BLOOM 1970, 6.

unavoidable dialectical structure of Romantic thinking. The Romantic attempt to overcome the split with nature and the effort to endow nature with an independent objectivity are then nullified by the very dialectical frame that defines Romantic thought, one where poetic reconciliation, or, better, imagination conceived as transcended state of consciousness, ultimately evinces a «narcissistic relation to itself».⁷²

5. If it is true, as Negri underlines, that «la ‘separazione’ leopardiana del/nel ciclo culturale europeo del XIX secolo è la posizione privilegiata della critica»,⁷³ if Leopardi transgresses the continuous transcendence presupposed by the dialectical *Geist* of Romanticism, such a transgression generally acquires an a-dialectical character originated in an emphasis on the unassimilable otherness of nature and a rebuttal of the sentimental character of poetry. In a way, the very *teoria del piacere* already shows the a-dialectical core of Leopardi’s production. Indeed, the infinite desire for infinite pleasure that Leopardi identifies as innate and coincident with existence exposes an experiential region that cannot be subjected to sublation: every attempt to adequately respond to such a desire for pleasure is meant to ultimately convey dissatisfaction due to the inadequacy of particular pleasures vis-à-vis the infinity of desire.

Independently from the desire for pleasure, however, Leopardi admits the existence of an imaginative faculty able to conceive those infinite pleasures that cannot be found in reality («il piacere infinito che non si può trovare nella realtà, si trova così nella immaginazione»)⁷⁴ It seems, then, that imagination would be able to somehow represent the dialectical counter part of the infinite desire: however, imagination «non può regnare senza l’ignoranza, almeno una certa ignoranza, come quella degli antichi. La cognizione del vero cioè dei limiti e definizioni delle cose, circoscrive l’immaginazione».⁷⁵ In this regard, the condition that defines the modern experience – i.e. the necessary ‘sentimental’ look over nature and subjectivity, the lost unity with nature, and the heightened reason transfigured by poetry – does not represent for Leopardi a higher level of consciousness: this latter, actually, allows the subject to become aware of the presence of an ineludible and un-sublatable desire for *the* infinite pleasure within oneself. Such a desire, in a way then, stands in relationship of contrast with the *Aufhebung* professed by the generally idealistic character of Romanticism: Leopardi’s understanding of the desire for pleasure, in fact, could be better compared with a rupture from an imposed transcendence, a pause in the necessary development of seamlessly interlocking moments of sublation that characterizes European Romantic thinking. It is in this sense that Leopardi identifies the conscious experience of the infinite desire for infinite pleasure with *noia*. In Leopardi’s *teoria del piacere* it is not a heightened knowledge, «la profondità della mente»,⁷⁶ that leads to the consummation of the desire for pleasure. On the contrary: the impossibility to satisfy such a desire leaves the human with only one option, distraction. This latter, may it be in the form of mitigation, anesthetization or deceit, represents a rejection of the necessity required by dialectics; distraction, in a way, could be identified with the attention toward the unnecessary. While for the dialectics that imbues Romanticism the poetic reconciliation with nature, the recuperation of the naïve via the sentimental, the recovered unity «between the external and the internal, to which all knowledge and experience of the spirit aspires»⁷⁷ exemplify conquered moments of the infinite consummation that will be achieved at the end self-consciousness’ adventure, for Leopardi «l’infinito non è mai attuale, non è mai concluso».⁷⁸

⁷² BEHLER 1973, 116.

⁷³ NEGRI 1987, 10.

⁷⁴ *Zib.* 167, 12-23 July 1820.

⁷⁵ *Zib.* 168, 12-23 July 1820.

⁷⁶ *Zib.* 176, 12-23 July 1820.

⁷⁷ SCHNEIDER 2000, 104.

⁷⁸ NEGRI 1987, 11.

To be sure, *teoria del piacere* has also repercussions on the hypertrophic subjectivity brought about by dialectics. In his early and unpublished *Discorso di un Italiano*, Leopardi already exhibits his a-dialectical materialism which stands in opposition to the internalizing attitude of Romantic subjectivity. While the *sprezzatura* employed by the ancient poets in order to imitate nature allowed them to write as if they were under dictation, as if their subjectivity were moving on the sly, the dialectical frame of Romanticism allows only for the loud and narcissistic voice of the subject to come forth.⁷⁹ To Leopardi, the bombastic voice of Romantic poets finds its origin in a spiritualizing attitude rooted in the dialectical transcendentalism that dematerializes nature: «già è cosa manifesta e notissima che i romantici si sforzano di sviare più che possono la poesia dal commercio coi sensi [...] e di farla praticare coll'intelletto, e strascarla dal visibile all'invisibile e dalle cose alle idee, e trasmutarla di materiale e fantastica e corporale che era, in metafisica e ragionevole e spirituale».⁸⁰ Leopardi's critique extends to the very recuperation of the naïve via sentimental that represents a pivotal moment of the dialectical necessity of Romantic aesthetic idealism. In this regard, *Discorso di un Italiano* denounces the cherished and necessary application of the sentimental attitude avowed by Romantic poets as opposed to the accidental sentimental instances present in the poetry of the ancient.⁸¹

It is at this point that the influence of Locke's suggestion about the existence of a thinking, hence autonomous, matter comes into play. In fact, while the only subject that holds citizenship in Romantic nature-poetry is a solipsistic subjectivity, which engulfs nature and its ultimate otherness, Leopardi looks at nature not as a mere projection or construct of the mind. His poetic attempt seeks to find in the nature-object a dialogical interlocutor, «a responding partner to whom we are bound in an unthinkable depth of affinity and who still keeps her essential independence from us».⁸² It is the aesthetic attempt that I would define as 'poetry of inquiry' – i.e. the recuperation of the dialogical relationship between the poet-subject and nature-object – which refrains from the subservient assimilation of the poet into the sublimity of nature and of nature into the hypertrophic solipsism of the subject. Indeed, Leopardi's 'poetry of inquiry' conceives of and aims at expressing the subject and the object as existing in an unresolved and hence a-dialectical tension toward each other. In this regard, the poetic subject is engaged in restoring a mythological gaze, the re-contextualization of the dialogue with nature into a modern consciousness by means of the illusion of the imagination. Poetry, here, is committed to give back nature its own language, to invent (i.e. to come upon) the language of nature – which will be different from that of the human – in order to render the radicality of a dialogue where the subject and the object coexist as othernesses, partaking in a reciprocal and un-sublated protension. In criticizing Ludovico di Breme, Leopardi writes: «se il poeta vuol dipingere e farla [nature] parlare,

⁷⁹ «Appresso loro [the Romantics] parla instancabilmente il poeta, parla il filosofo, parla il conoscitore profondo e sottile dell'animo umano, parla l'uomo che sa o crede per certo d'essere sensitivo, è manifesto il proposito di apparire come tale, manifesto il proposito di descrivere, manifesto il congeniamento studiato di cose formanti il composto sentimentale, e il prospetto e la situazione romantica, e che so io, manifesta la scienza, manifestissima l'arte per cagione ch'è pochissima». LEOPARDI, *Discorso di un Italiano*, 400.

⁸⁰ Ivi, 350. In this regard, Esposito writes: «Se nel mondo antico l'energia naturale della vita si dispiega nel primato della corporeità, nel massimo dispiegamento dei sensi e nel libero sviluppo dell'immaginazione, la civiltà moderna – anticipata in questo sia dal platonismo che dal cristianesimo – è internamente attraversata, se non anche costituita, da un movimento di spiritualizzazione che, senza del tutto eluderla, destabilizza la sfera del corpo, assoggettandola a un potere ad esso trascendente». ESPOSITO 2010, 112-3.

⁸¹ «I romantici vogliono che il poeta a bella posta scelga, inventi, modelli, combini, disponga per fare impressioni sentimentali [...] che prepari e conformi gli animi de' lettori espressamente ai moti sentimentali, che ce li svegli pensatamente e di sua mano, che insomma il poeta sia sentimentale saputamente e volutamente, e non quasi per ventura come d'ordinario gli antichi [...]. Ora io non dirò di questo sentimentale o patetico quelle cose che tutti sanno; che poco o niente se ne può ritrovare non solo appresso i barbari, ma appresso i nostri campagnuoli». LEOPARDI, *Discorso di un Italiano*, 394.

⁸² SCHNEIDER 2000, 100.

contuttoch'egli la conosca ben dentro, contuttoché se ne stimi, e sia vago di farne mostra, non la dee perciò dipingere né indurre a favellare in modo come se queste qualità del poeta fossero sue». ⁸³ Convinced that poetry is the 'commerce with senses,' the voice and language of nature almost acquire physical texture in Leopardi's poetry: while the conscious subject expresses itself through a verbal and codified language, nature is endowed with the language of the senses, the language of matter and, as the analysis of *Canto Notturmo* ⁸⁴ will hopefully show later, the language of silence, which is the language of open possibility.

6. The preparatory draft of *Discorso di un Italiano* seems to structure the a-dialectical relationship between subjectivity and nature on the opposition between poetry and philosophy, ⁸⁵ a conviction that is resolute at least up until 1821, as *Zibaldone* shows. ⁸⁶ However, in order to better understand what 'poetry of inquiry' is, it is necessary to clarify what Leopardi intends poetry and philosophy to be. Indeed, for the Italian author poetic discourse cannot be merely circumscribed to the realm of lyric poetry. In this regard, Eleandro's dialogue with Timandro in *Operette Morali* explains well the ostensible discordance between poetry and philosophy: «Se alcun libro mi potesse giovare, io penso che gioverebbero massimamente i poetici: dico poetici, prendendo questo vocabolo largamente; cioè libri destinati a muovere la immaginazione; e intendo non meno di prose che di versi». ⁸⁷ Poetry, therefore, belongs to, draws from and acts upon the imaginative world by engendering illusions that could be identified with «quelle opinioni, benché false, che generano atti e pensieri nobili, forti, magnanimi, virtuosi, ed utili al bene comune o privato; quelle immaginazioni belle e felici, ancorché vane, che danno pregio alla vita; le illusioni naturali dell'animo». ⁸⁸ It is important to note, however, that Leopardi's seeming elimination of the difference between the genre of lyric-poetry and prose when speaking of poetry at large is not meant to neglect the existing distinctness of the genres, for the decisiveness of *immaginazioni* still requires to be articulated through a formal structure. The specificity of lyric poetry is not discarded here but rather develops into «la sommità della poesia, la quale è la sommità del discorso umano». ⁸⁹ Inasmuch as it is no longer considered as a vague and indefinite mode of expression, poetry acquires a concrete formal character that allows to convey certain truths that would remain nebulous without a specific formal physicality. In addition, the poetic style functions as an antidote to the very hypertrophy of subjectivity, for the form represents the «garanzia di oggettività di un discorso che si oppone e supera altri discorsi, astratti (come quello filosofico) [and] approssimativi (come quello romantico)». ⁹⁰

⁸³ LEOPARDI, *Discorso di un Italiano*, 401.

⁸⁴ LEOPARDI, *Canto Notturmo di un Pastore Errante dell'Asia*, in ID. 2011, 84-8.

⁸⁵ Cf. for example: «A tener dietro con diligenza ai ragionamenti del Breme [...] evidentemente par che venga a concludere, che la poesia nostra bisogna che sia ragionevole, e in proporzione coi lumi dell'età nostra, e in fatti dice che ce la debbono somministrare la religione, la filosofia, le leggi di società ec.». *Zib.* 18.

⁸⁶ Cf. *Zib.* 1231, 27 June 1821: «la filosofia nuoce e distrugge la poesia, e la poesia guasta e pregiudica la filosofia. Tra questa e quella esiste una barriera insormontabile, una inimicizia giurata e mortale, che non si può né togliere di mezzo, e riconciliare, né dissimulare».

⁸⁷ LEOPARDI, *Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro*, in ID. 2009, 173.

⁸⁸ *Ivi*, 181.

⁸⁹ *Zib.* 245, 12-13-14 September 1820. In a passage from *Zibaldone*, as he approaches the composition of *Canto Notturmo*, Leopardi addresses again the fundamental importance of the concrete form through which the poetic discourse ought to be embodied: «la novità della più parte de' pensieri degli autori più originali e pensatori, consiste nella forma». Cf. *Zib.* 4503-4, 10 May 1829. Indeed, as he reiterates in another passage from his philosophical diary, «togliete i pregi dello stile anche ad un'opera che voi credete di stimare principalmente per i pensieri, e vedete quanta stima ne potete più fare». Cf. *Zib.* 2798, 19 June 1823.

⁹⁰ FICARA 1996, 28.

The other element of the theoretical negotiation that Leopardi addresses is philosophy, which, at least at first, is seen as «figlia prediletta della ragione, [che] raccoglie e distilla e quintessenzia in sé tutti i difetti e i vizi e i veleni di sua madre».⁹¹ Philosophy destroys illusions and, in generating knowledge and consciousness, hinders every condition of possibility for a real poetic production, exhibiting the capacity to be «la dottrina della scellerataggine ragionata».⁹² However, the relationship between poetry and philosophy is articulated within a fundamentally a-systematic system and does not remain a static and monolithic dichotomy. In *Zibaldone*, Leopardi analyzes such a relationship by means of theoretical trajectories that alternate moments of opposition and moments of reconciliation between the two disciplines. In a page written only a few months before *Operette Morali*, Leopardi states:

È tanto mirabile quanto vero, che la poesia la quale cerca per sua natura e proprietà il bello, e la filosofia ch'essenzialmente ricerca il vero, cioè la cosa più contraria al bello; sieno le facoltà le più affini tra loro, tanto che il vero poeta è sommamente disposto ad esser gran filosofo, e il vero filosofo ad esser tran poeta, anzi né l'uno né l'altro non può essere nel gener suo né perfetto né grande, s'ei non partecipa più che mediocrementemente dell'altro genere.⁹³

By apparently contradicting himself, yet clearly displaying the complexity and a-systematicity of his understanding of poetry and philosophy, Leopardi also maintains that the one who is not imbued with imaginative and poetic experiences necessarily lacks *colpo d'occhio* and consequently cannot become a full-fledged philosopher.⁹⁴ Through the introduction of the metaphorical category of *colpo d'occhio* Leopardi seems to begin defining the theoretical and aesthetic kernel that characterizes the reconciliation between poetry and philosophy. This unifying procedure represents the aesthetic dynamic that allows the new poet-philosopher to employ a kind of reason freed from a merely analytical behavior and able to cognitively reorganize reality according to both new rational and poetical connections rooted in *idee concomitanti*. As Leopardi writes in an already quoted passage:

Chiunque esamina la natura delle cose colla pura ragione, senz'aiutarsi dell'immaginazione né del sentimento [...] non potrà mai dalle sue osservazioni e dalla sua analisi tirare una grande e generale conseguenza; [...] Io voglio anche supporre ch'egli arrivino colla loro analisi fino a scomporre e risolvere la natura ne' suoi menomi ed ultimi elementi, e ch'egli ottengano di conoscere ciascuna da se tutte le parti della natura. Ma il tutto di essa, il fine e il rapporto scambievole di esse parti tra loro, e di ciascuna verso il tutto, lo scopo di questo tutto, [...] nella cognizione delle quali cose dee consistere lo scopo del filosofo [...] è impossibile il ritrovarle e l'intenderle a chiunque colla sola ragione analizza ed esamina la natura.⁹⁵

It seems then that the greatest philosophers, those who more deeply have investigated reality's connectional structure, are those who possess the vastest *colpo d'occhio*. The greatness of these philosophers, however, is bound to their ability to intersect their gnoseological penetration with their imagination: it is no coincidence that they «furono espressamente notabili e singolari anche per la facoltà dell'immaginazione [...], si distinsero per una vena e per un genio decisamente poetico».⁹⁶

⁹¹ TILGHER 1979, 67.

⁹² *Zib.* 125, 16 June 1820.

⁹³ *Zib.* 3382-3, 8 September 1823.

⁹⁴ Cf. *Zib.* 1833, 3 October 1821: «non ha mai avuto immaginazione [...], chi non conosce l'immenso sistema del bello, chi non legge o non sente, o non ha mai letto o sentito i poeti, non può assolutamente essere un grande, vero e perfetto filosofo, anzi non sarà mai se non un filosofo dimezzato, di corta vista, di colpo d'occhio assai debole».

⁹⁵ *Zib.* 3237-9, 22 August 1823.

⁹⁶ *Zib.* 3245, 22 August 1823.

Within the process of understanding the complexity of reality, and especially its dialogical intrinsic dimension – hence the relationship between subjectivity and nature – philosophy and poetry cannot only be merely united, but ought to be profoundly interrelated, necessary to one another. As Severino observes, this occurs «non solo perché la poesia è il *contenuto* della filosofia, ma anche perché ne è la *forma*».⁹⁷ In this context, philosophy does not achieve a higher degree of perfection via poetic sublation: the task of philosophy for Leopardi does not lie in demonstrating the «absolute identity between the world and the spirit»;⁹⁸ rather, philosophy has to stand in a constantly unresolved dialogical relationship with poetry in order to intercept and imitate the a-dialectically dialogical structure of the real.

These remarks allow to unfold the aforementioned concept of ‘poetry of inquiry.’ This latter comes into play as a style in the Merleau-Pontian sense of a «certain manner of being»⁹⁹ and, therefore, as a style of writing. In this context, ‘poetry of inquiry’ is charged with the arduous task of recuperating the dialogue between the nature-object and poet-subject, the task to re-craft nature’s language, and so restore not the ancient unity but the mythic possibilizing attitude experienced by the ancient. In this sense, one can find the philosophical premises of such ‘poetry of inquiry’ in an 1826 excerpt from *Zibaldone* that is usually considered to be the clearest example of Leopardi’s universal pessimism:

Tutto è male. Cioè tutto quello che è, è male; che ciascuna cosa esista è un male; ciascuna cosa esiste per fin di male; l’esistenza è un male e ordinata al male; il fine dell’universo è male [...]. Non v’è di buono che quel che non è; le cose che non son cose [...]. L’esistenza, per sua natura ed essenza propria e generale, è un’imperfezione, un’irregolarità, una mostruosità. Ma questa imperfezione è una piccolissima cosa [...] a paragone dell’infinità vera, per dir così, del non esistente, del nulla. Questo sistema, benché urti le nostre idee, che credono che il fine non possa essere altro che il bene, sarebbe forse più sostenibile di quello del Leibniz, del Pope, ec. *che tutto è bene*. Non ardirei però estenderlo a dire che l’universo esistente è il peggiore degli universi possibili, sostituendo così all’ottimismo il pessimismo. Chi può conoscere i limiti della possibilità?¹⁰⁰

As scholars have shown, the entry does represent Leopardi’s most explicit declaration of the nothingness and wickedness that imbue reality (considering especially the fact that it is immediately followed by the long description of the suffering garden). Yet, this very passage contains also a both unexpected and undeniable counterproposal to the theoretical pessimistic premises that open these reflections. In borrowing Roberto Esposito’s words, the entry shows Leopardi’s position in comparison to the contemporary cultural frame and reveals how «neanche la realtà più incontrovertibile occupi interamente la scena escludendo un punto di vista diverso attraverso cui filtrarla. Nel reale c’è sempre un varco, un residuo, una linea di fuga lungo la quale la visione delle cose può presentarsi diversa da ciò che è».¹⁰¹ In this sense, this excerpt might metonymically represent the development of Leopardi’s thought, from what is usually identified with his cosmic pessimism to a posture of theoretical openness, which could be considered as the basis of his ‘poetry of inquiry.’ The unknowable limitlessness and the absolute openness posited at the end by the philosophical category of possibility take on a poetic form two years later with *Canto Notturmo*, whose structure is fundamentally organized on a succession of unanswered questions that embody what I call ‘poetry of inquiry.’ As Alessandro Marignani remarks, «la domanda, l’interrogazione, agita all’origine la scrittura

⁹⁷ SEVERINO 1990, 314.

⁹⁸ SCHNEIDER 2000, 105.

⁹⁹ MERLEAU-PONTY 1968, 115.

¹⁰⁰ *Zib.* 4174, 19 April 1826.

¹⁰¹ ESPOSITO 2010, 117.

di Leopardi, e non si risolve mai entro la competenza della formula retorica, ma anzi è sempre la traccia di un dilemma che rimane fondamentale [...] insolubile». ¹⁰² The unceasing questioning on which Leopardi's poetry is constructed, therefore, gives flesh to a philosophical attitude of radical openness to possibility, an existential and aesthetic posture that starkly contrasts with the necessity congenial to the dialectics of Idealism. Here, 'poetry of inquiry' becomes the aesthetic expression of an ever solved, ever sublated – i.e. answered – inquiry that «si estende ad innervare la struttura stessa del pensiero» ¹⁰³ of Leopardi. However, while Marignani maintains that Leopardi's ceaseless «*questionnement*» ¹⁰⁴ signals the author's nietzschean-Socrates-like ultimate skepticism and, therefore, aims at debunking the very mythopoetic structure of his own writing – something understandable if we think about the epideictic textual rhythm of *Operette Morali* – I believe that the latent side of this *questionnement* actually intends to recreate the mythic perception which looked at nature as endowed with agency by means of the openness of its referent and dialogical signifier.

To be sure, the presence of the interrogative dynamic between subjectivity and nature that defines *Canto Notturmo* already appears as a structuring element in *Operette Morali*, wherein *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* is perhaps the clearest example. In a primeval and deserted set similar to the one staged in the lyric poem, the reader witnesses to the incessant questioning of Nature on the part of the Islander. Yet, the seemingly similar interrogative organization of the dialogue paradoxically does not allow for an actual dialogue to be established. Nature's cryptic answers in the *operetta* are modulated according to the typical tone of a mythological oracle and its replies to the Islander's interrogatory ratify human condemnation to anonymous obliteration, a dynamic that coincides with the redefinition of subjectivity as a cog in the biological machine. After discovering Nature's inconsiderate indifference, the subject is assimilated and literally re-inscribed in a «circuito di produzione e distruzione». ¹⁰⁵ In this dialogue, then, the relationship between subjectivity and nature remains undialogical for it dialectically concludes with the annihilation of one of the two terms of said relationship. Consequently, this dialogue – and metonymically *Operette Morali* as a whole – negates both any solution to the cognitive anxiety expressed by the subject and the possibility for an actual dialogue constituted by the interrelated co-presence of the othernesses that partake in intersubjective relationship. Therefore, the philosophical undertone, the content and the form characterizing *Operette Morali* do not yet elicit the possibilizing and cognitive openness that defines the dialogizing structure of *Canto Notturmo*. Furthermore, the *questionnement* characterizing the collection of dialogues still portrays nature as a projection of subjectivity's mind insofar as it speaks with the codified human language: in spite of its physical presence remarked by the narrator's description, ¹⁰⁶ Nature still does not speak its own personal language, i.e. that language of matter that in *Canto Notturmo* would be emphasized by silence, endowing it with an existence independent from subjectivity's power. Indeed, even though the poem is structured on an interrogating dynamic seemingly analogous to the one of the *operetta*, the lyrical rendering manages to achieve what, paradoxically, the dialogue does not: an actual dialogical openness.

¹⁰² MARIGNANI 2016, 129.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ LEOPARDI, *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*, in ID. 2009, 82.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. when the Islander «vide da lontano un busto grandissimo; che da principio immaginò dovere essere di pietra, e a somiglianza degli ermi colossali veduti da lui, molti anni prima, nell'isola di Pasqua. Ma fattosi più da vicino, trovò che era una forma smisurata di donna seduta in terra, col busto ritto, appoggiato il dosso e il gomito a una montagna; e non finta ma viva; di volto mezzo tra bello e terribile, di occhi e di capelli nerissimi; la quale guardavalo fissamente; e stata così un buono spazio senza parlare, all'ultimo gli disse». Ivi, 76.

7. Starting from the very conative *incipit* («Che fai tu, luna, in ciel? Dimmi, che fai, | silenziosa luna?» ll. 1-2) the reader participates in the development of a dialogical dynamic whence the interrogated natural object (the moon) occasions the self-reflective discovery that the subject undertakes, leading him back to cogitate upon himself: «A che tante facelle? | Che fa l'aria infinita, e quel profondo | infinito seren? Che vuol dire questa | solitudine immensa? Ed io che sono?» (ll. 87-89). The dynamic that unravels since the beginning of the poem appears to resonate with a genuine philosophical reflection, impression that is reinforced by the reiterated use of verbs related to a mental inquiry (e.g. «pensando» l. 85; «ragiono» l. 90, to quote the most glaring occurrences). What seems to be staged here is the philosophical performance originated in an encounter as Emmanuel Levinas describes it: «Even the philosophy that questions meaning of being does so on the basis of the encounter with the other» and it manifests itself as a «disturbance produced in me, in the tranquility of the perseverance of my being [...] by the interruption of the “conatus essendi”». ¹⁰⁷ In this sense, the shepherd's immediate linguistic turn to the interrogative mode signals the disturbance exerted by the moon on his silent and labored ¹⁰⁸ life, one that now is embodied by the questioning grammar of philosophy. From within this perspective, the unquestionable silence of nature actively participates in, if not actually engenders the openness to possibility seen as a foundation for the recovery of the non-indifferent mythic gaze of the ancient (i.e. «quando ciascun oggetto che vedevamo ci pareva che in certo modo accennando, quasi mostrasse di volerci favellare; quando in nessun luogo soli, interrogavamo le immagini e le pareti e gli alberi e i fiori e le nuvole»). ¹⁰⁹ 'Poetry of inquiry,' in this sense, coincides with a linguistic act that expresses the possibility for the subject to be responded, which implies the possibility for the subject not to be responded and the correlated silence as language of nature. Once the question has been posed – i.e. available to be answered – the only activity the subject is required to execute is that of waiting for an answer. The silence of the moon, then, decisively emphasizes the subjects' availability to be responded, the suspended condition of waiting that the shepherd inhabits since the outset of the poem.

Rather than repeating the narcissistic move of Romantic consciousness, the mythic return upon oneself in *Canto Notturmo* portrays a subject existing within the realm of possibility and exhibits an open anticipation for a possible and external answer that would provide him with the longed-for identity («Ed io che sono?»). In this sense, it is the reiterated availability displayed by the repeated questioning that allows the shepherd to experience his own identity. The poetic return of subjectivity upon itself then does not occur according to the tones of a hypertrophic mind for the reiteration of the questions thwarts the very risk of such a possibility: through the coming into being of his identity, the subject discovers that his identity is one in becoming, never fully confined in any given definitions; his identity as an answer – for it should be given to him by the moon – befalls not once and for all, but comes only from within the reiterating questioning of the other that structures the dialogical grammar of the poem. It is not, in fact, for subjectivity to decide upon its own identity by means of an intimist self-reflection performed by consciousness: while «the man prophesized by the Romantics is a central man who is always in the process of becoming his own begetter», ¹¹⁰ for the Leopardi of

¹⁰⁷ LEVINAS 1999, 97.

¹⁰⁸ The *conatus essendi*, or effort to be, of the shepherd is evidently expressed by ll. 21-38, with the Petrarchan image of the wandering old man, and enriched and expanded immediately after by the more descriptive ll. 39-60: «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. | Poi che crescendo viene, | L'uno e l'altro il sostiene, e via pur sempre | Con atti e con parole | Studiasi fargli core, | E consolarlo dell'umano stato: | Altro ufficio più grato | Non si fa da parenti alla lor prole. | 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? | Intatta luna, tale | E' lo stato mortale».

¹⁰⁹ LEOPARDI, *Discorso di un Italiano*, 359.

¹¹⁰ BLOOM 1963, 24.

Canto Notturmo the subject's identity, i.e. the most intimate structure, ought to be given or at least disclosed by the presence of the other. In this regard, the interrogation is the sign of the answer's necessary givenness, the sign that the answer is being given, and keeps being given, but only partially. Therefore, there is no ultimate answer to the question of the subject's identity, there is not final consummation to the quest for identity. Furthermore, one may notice how the persistent silence of the moon underlines the absence of the sublating moment that would allow the subject to finally access a higher stage of self-consciousness – hence giving rise to a condition of assimilation of nature on part of the subject or vice versa (as it happens to the Icelander). In *Canto Notturmo*, instead, the dialectical synthesis is hindered by the withholding of the answer, which remains hidden behind the untranslatable bodily and, therefore, linguistic silence of the moon.

In spite of this a-dialectical irreconciliation, the moon and the shepherd do participate in a dimension of sharedness defined by their bodily and an ambulatory character: «Somiglia alla tua vita | La vita del pastore» (ll. 9-10). Differently from Nature in *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*, the moon is not anthropomorphized and, hence, does not 'use' its own body as humans do, despite the shared itinerant deambulation. Yet, the nonhuman body of the moon is as material, biological and thoughtful as that of the human, even though it belongs to a matter of a different kin and does not partake in a semiotic cluster of signification where the presentiality of the body is accompanied by the action of language: the moon's language is a pure symbolic stance, the simple corporeal space it inhabits. Nevertheless, the function of language remains that of opening the possibility for dialogue, one that is not structured on the delivery of knowledge (the shepherd does not acquire any new knowledge from its interpellation of the moon) but rather one that displays the gratuity of the answer and the subject as a awaiting agent. In this context, the response that the hearer is free to give (and free not to give) is what establishes and defines the possible answer as an act of givenness. Indeed, the silent body of the moon emphasizes that the answer can only be given freely, not produced and snatched by the speaker for the very fact that he is speaking. In this sense, a speech coincides with an act of plea: it is a plea for an answer, it is a plea that asks for something that is not a thing insofar as it cannot be fabricated but only be gratuitously given.

Canto Notturmo then shows that the centrality of the oppositional correspondence between the inquiry of the shepherd and the silence of the moon emerges as the condition of possibility for the dialogical act, conceived as unceasing welcoming of the other's presence, as an unremitting protension and openness toward the other as the other. The shepherd's questions do not merely constitute the very first step of a linguistic stretching-toward but – even if unanswered or answered in the language of silence by a moon that is «muta» (l. 80) and «silenziosa» (l. 2) – become the sign of an interpellation that has already begun. Within the conative dimension of *Canto Notturmo*, the corporeal presence of the moon engenders the questions of the shepherd insofar as its sensible physicality already coincides with expression. The materiality of the moon anticipates the inquiring act of the shepherd, which results in a response to the questioning physicality of the moon. Here, in exposing its material bareness to the human, Nature precedes the responsive attitude of the subject, who, in responding through his questions, is taken in into a dialogue whose beginning precedes him. Silence, then, is not just the inarticulate absence of verbalized contents, but rather it is both the space of thinking (the moon is «pensosa» l. 62) and a dialogical state that leaves room to the bare, physical and pre-verbal presence of the moon as language. Within this a-dialectically dialogical frame, then, one may observe how «the gesture [i.e. the body of the moon] is in front of me like a question, it indicates to me specific sensible points in the world and invites me to join it there».¹¹¹ In this sense, the answer for which the subject-shepherd awaits could be identified with the very act of waiting for the answer; the answer is the very dialogue in which the shepherd is partaking through his questions, which are in turn answered by the

¹¹¹ MERLEAU-PONTY 2012, 190.

thick, corporeal silence that has generated them; an answer that is already coming into being through the actual presence of the natural object to which the subject's questions are directed. Possibility, thus, becomes the possibility for an unconstrained dialogue to come into being, the possibility for the speechless moon to be the answer to the shepherd's ceaseless questions by means of the very facticity of its physical presence, i.e. by means of its bare being, a materially present being that Leopardi not accidentally qualifies as «eterna» (l. 61). Here, the moon discloses itself as the possible answer to the shepherd by unraveling its silent and bare presence throughout the poem.

In this sense, the Romantic idea of the recuperation of a lost origin via sublation is, again, called into question: the loss of the original relationship of unity with nature does not coincide with the loss of the origin. With *Canto Notturmo* the origin, the answer to the subject's identity is present, though silent, in the matter of the moon. As Merleau-Ponty observes,

it is not by depositing the whole of my thoughts in words from which it can be extracted by others that I communicate with them. With my throat, my voice, my intonation, and, of course, with the words, [...] I compose an enigma that has only one solution such that the other person [...] can manage to take it into his own repertoire and say it with me, and this is what it means to understand.¹¹²

This alternative to Romantic idealism is what Esposito identifies with the specificity of Italian thought understood through the perspective of «attualità dell'originario».¹¹³ This latter, as Fabio Camilletti and Martina Piperno suggest, has nothing to do with a revivalist «mitologia dell'origine»¹¹⁴ but rather conceives of the origin as «sempre coeva in maniera latente, a ogni momento storico, e perciò riattivabile come risorsa energetica, piuttosto che subita come ritorno spettrale».¹¹⁵ In this regard, the questions of the shepherd in *Canto Notturmo* could be identified with the invocations aimed at 'reactivating' an origin that, in so far as it is latent, inhabits the realm of possibility and, hence, of inexistence.

8. The presentiality of the moon as coeval origin, then, is indicated by the sequence of the questions. However, the pleas through which the shepherd addresses the moon aim at displaying the whole array of conviction and hesitation usually associated to the category of possibility. In this manner, the reiterated presence of adverbs of doubt and certainty further undermines any necessity related to a dialectical understanding of the subject-object relationship: «E forse del mio dir poco ti cale» (l. 60); «tu forse intendi» (l. 62); «e tu certo comprendi» (l. 68); «Tu sai, tu certo» (l. 73); «Mille cose sai tu, mille discopri» (l. 77); «Ma tu per certo, | giovinetta immortal, conosci tutto» (ll. 98-99). As already noted, the very complexity and absolute openness associated to possibility that is enhanced by the silent presence of the moon cannot be found in the philosophical dialogues that compose the literary laboratory of *Operette Morali*. Here, although Leopardi endows nature with a voice (more noticeably in the dialogue between Nature and the Icelander, but in other pieces too), the interaction that formally structures the verbal exchanges never turns into genuine dialogue. The impossibility that defines the dialogical interaction between nature and the human is patent, starting with *Dialogo di un Folletto e di uno Gnomo* through *Dialogo della Terra e della Luna*, *Dialogo tra Due Bestie. p.e. un Cavallo ed un Toro*, *Dialogo di un Cavallo e un Bue*, all the way up to *Cantico del Gallo Sihestre*. On the one hand, in these *operette* the human belongs to an extinct species, one that has already been absorbed by the cycle of production and destruction that constitutes the core dynamism of nature. On the other hand, the very

¹¹² MERLEAU-PONTY 1991, 29-30.

¹¹³ ESPOSITO 2010, 24.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Ivi, 25.

fact that nature – and its manifestations – speaks a verbally codified language signals the fact that human subjectivity retains some significative dominance over nature, whose independent objectivity is still but a construct of the mind. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the un-dialogical character of these dialogues – caused also but not only by the extinction of one of poles of the exchange – reflects the sharp separation between poetry and philosophy that still characterizes *Operette Morali*, as indicated by the contrast between the close of *Cantico del Gallo Silvestre*¹¹⁶ and a footnote added by Leopardi to the dialogue (which metonymically concludes the whole work since *Cantico* was meant to be the ideal conclusion of the 1824 edition of *Operette Morali*): «Questa è conclusione poetica, non filosofica. Parlando filosoficamente, l'esistenza, che mai è cominciata, non avrà mai fine».¹¹⁷ With *Canto Notturmo*, instead, the related impossibility for a dialogue that defines *Operette Morali* is recontextualized into lyric poetry.

Such a lyric recontextualization, however, does not merely represent a transposition of themes and modes into a different genre. Lyric poetry actually allows to access expressive possibilities previously interdicted. *Canto Notturmo*, in a way, is structured on a dynamic rather common to the artistic grammar of Leopardi, i.e. the subject is struck in awe by the presence of nature or one of its proxies. Yet, this *topos* seems to acquire a different character thanks to 'poetry of inquiry.' In this regard, the outset is significant, for the immediate vocative («Che fai tu luna in ciel? Dimmi, che fai, | silenziosa luna?» ll. 1-2) introduces and situates the two principal characters in a scene that promises to unravel the lyric discourse according the paradigms of a real conative-responsive dimension. As a Romantic *topos*, the interaction between subject and object engendered by subjectivity's awe can also be observed in other Leopardian works, both poems and proses. Here, I will only look at three examples, which I believe are the most immediate and clear ones. The first case is the idyll *Alla Luna*. In this poem, the difference of outcome pertaining to the conative-responsive dynamic described with respect to *Canto Notturmo* becomes immediately evident. The conclusion of *Alla Luna* seems to be decisively obvious: in this poem the satellite mainly represents a pretext for the subject to return upon itself and initiate a retroreflective process that would lead to a certain degree of self-conscious augmentation. After the initial amazement, the subject ventures into the odyssey of self-recognition by means of a merely mnemonic exploration, a «rimembrar» (l. 124) which has the subjective «ricordanza» (l. 125) as only and self-referential protagonist. Such a conversion of subjectivity's gaze can immediately be found in the second hemistich of the first line, wherein the poetic voice reflects on its sentimental reaction after the encounter with the moon: «O graziosa luna, io mi rammento» (l. 1). The following lines are but an expression of the separation from nature experienced by the subject, a severance whose consequent pain and sorrow are projected into a mnemonic past and somehow redeemed by it. In this sense, *Alla Luna* is still defined by a kind of nostalgia for a remote and by now lost past time shared by Romantic sentimentalism.

In the poem *L'infinito*, which represents the second example, the retroreflective predominant dynamic of *Alla Luna* acquires an almost «incestuous»¹¹⁸ character. In *L'infinito*, subjectivity's centripetal energy leads self-consciousness into a deeper and more intimate dimension, a «higher stage of knowing which is the recognition that the objective world is its own work».¹¹⁹ The transcendental moment of consummation here does not have an upward direction; as Frye observes, in fact, during Romanticism «the superior world is “inside,” and [...] the natural metaphorical direction of the inside

¹¹⁶ «Così questo arcano mirabile e spaventoso dell'esistenza universale, innanzi di essere dichiarato né inteso, si dileguerà e perderassi». LEOPARDI, *Cantico del Gallo Silvestre*, in ID. 2009, 165. From now on *Cantico*.

¹¹⁷ LEOPARDI, *Note alle Operette Morali*, in ID. 2009, 227.

¹¹⁸ SCHNEIDER 2000, 106.

¹¹⁹ Ivi, 104.

world is downward, into the profounder depths of consciousness».¹²⁰ Therefore, even with *L'infinito*, the external reality is reduced to a literary ruse in order to sentimentally aestheticize a movement of the mind, which is already sentimental by its own nature. In this sense, there is a moment in the poem that decides for the final internalizing direction of the poetic discourse:

5 Ma sedendo e mirando, interminati
 spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani
 silenzi, e profondissima quiete
8 io nel pensier mio mi fingo; ove per poco
 il cor non si spaura.¹²¹

The key lexeme here is clearly the verb *fingersi*: in fundamentally staging a «narrazione [...] di un processo spirituale»,¹²² the poem is organized on a constant oscillation between the external reality and the inner hypertrophic mind, signaled by the numerous deictic adverbs and adjectives («quest'ermo» l. 1; «questa» l. 2; «quella» l. 5; «queste-quello» l. 9; «questa» l. 13; «questo» l. 15). As Tilgher notes, «con il silenzio infinito degli spazi immaginari il poeta è spinto verso una nuova fantasticheria. Lascia il piano della percezione, del reale [...] lascia il piano della comparazione intellettuale [...] e scivola verso un nuovo sogno ad occhi aperti».¹²³ Even the subject of *L'infinito* then is one that phagocytizes and subsumes through its own reveries the external world that had generated the first awe. By the end of the poem, in fact, this world is definitively projected into the imaginative space of an intimist mind: «Così tra questa | immensità s'annega il pensier mio» (ll. 13-14). Indeed, the poem closes with the subject sweetly sinking into the depths of his inner and infinite self-consciousness.

The *operetta Elogio degli Uccelli*¹²⁴ represents the last example where subjectivity's awe in front of nature actually develops into a dialogical impossibility for reasons related to the elision of one of the interlocutors. The very instant of overpowering sentimental intensity is located at the outset of the piece: «Amelio, filosofo solitario [...]; scosso dal cantare degli uccelli per la campagna, a poco a poco datosi ad ascoltare e pensare, e lasciato il leggere; all'ultimo pose mano alla penna, e [...] scrisse le cose che seguono».¹²⁵ Differently from the predominantly hypertrophic subject of the two previously analyzed idylls, the sentimental intensity subjectivity undergoes reaches an extent such that Amelio finds himself both unable to generate any poetry and subjected to the centrifugal force of his unrealizable zoomorphic desire: «io vorrei, per un poco di tempo, essere convertito in Uccello, per provare quella contentezza e letizia della loro vita».¹²⁶ Furthermore, what follows the first lines is the philosophical dialogue with which Amelio engages the reader, one written in prose. While in *Alla Luna* and *L'infinito* the subject introjects the external reality into the intimacy self-consciousness, in the *operetta* Amelio is, at least in his desire, fully projected outside of himself. In this way the independent existence of the natural object is somehow salvaged by the prose of *Elogio degli Uccelli*, although the intersubjective relationship between the subject and nature ends up throwing off balance toward the latter, for Amelio longs to be subsumed into sameness with nature. The common outcome of these three examples is a radical separation, a severance that defines the relationship that subjectivity and nature entertain with each other – caused by the dialectical annihilation of one of the two elements of said relationship – along with the technical interrelation of lyrical poetry and philosophy. It seems,

¹²⁰ FRYE 1963, 8.

¹²¹ LEOPARDI, *L'infinito*, in ID. 2011, 49.

¹²² TILGHER 1979, 184.

¹²³ Ivi, 186.

¹²⁴ LEOPARDI, *Elogio degli Uccelli*, in ID. 2009, 153-60.

¹²⁵ Ivi, 153.

¹²⁶ Ivi, 160.

then, that before and throughout *Operette Morali* the sublation associated to classical dialectics imposes itself over the struggling relationship that ties the subject and nature, one that sees the irremediable prevailing of either the speaking self or the natural reality.

In this regard, the ‘poetry of inquiry’ that structures the dialogical dimension of *Canto Notturmo* represents a radical alternative to the aesthetic results seen so far. Here, the persisting physicality of the moon, emphasized by a silence that does not dilute the presentiality of matter into the subject’s verbal articulation, occasions the persistence of the shepherd’s invocations – a total of sixteen – and grows into the realization of a kind of poetry that recuperates that commerce with the senses that Leopardi sees dominant in the ancient mythic poetry. What I call ‘poetry of inquiry’, then, is identified with the kind of poetry whose structural and content bases articulate themselves via a reciprocal – and usually unsolved – interrogation between subject and object, as *Canto Notturmo* illustrates. Such an interrogation is occasioned by the irreducibility of the two constituents of the dialogue, which do not morph into projections of the other term’s engulfing energy. In other words, the shepherd is not just another cog in nature’s cycle of production and destruction, as well as nature is not simply a moment in the odyssey of subjectivity’s self-consciousness liable to sublation. In this sense, the moon’s silent language signals the existence of an ultimately unassimilable mystery in nature, whose language of mere corporeal presence resists any translation – i.e. assimilation – on the part of the speaking subject. Leopardi’s ‘poetry of inquiry,’ then, articulates the resilience of matter against transcendence, a resilience that allows for such a mystery to show through the physicality of the moon, remaining however ultimately unseizable for the codified style¹²⁷ of the human. In *Canto Notturmo* the moon steadily offers itself – along with the ungraspable kernel that can only be glimpsed at – to the shepherd without denying the constitutive character that defines it: its objective and independent material presence. In this regard, the interpellations that the shepherd and nature reciprocally direct one another in their specific languages enact a genuine dialogical act, i.e. a space wherein the addresser and the addressee open up to each other and are given room to speak their own language. To be sure, the shepherd turns back to himself after glancing in awe at the moon, but the fact that the answer related to his identity ought to be given to him by a nature that speaks its own language emphasizes a pause in the dialectical process of hypertrophic increase of self-consciousness.

The novelty of *Canto Notturmo*, then, is not to be found in the recuperation of the ancient experience of unity between the human and nature: the wandering shepherd is clearly distinct and independent from the moon and his flock. The modern awareness that imbues the poem, rather than being the ransom of the naïve via a necessary self-conscious sentimental attitude, is defined by that philosophical openness to possibility that Leopardi opposes to Leibniz and Pope in *Zibaldone* 4174 («Chi può conoscere i limiti della possibilità?»).¹²⁸ Such an attitude of total openness repeats and coincides with the ancient attitude of contemplation: indeed, the shepherd’s active engagement with the object-nature is deeply philosophical (i.e. it is originated by and structured on questions). The philosophical questioning of the shepherd, however, is but a response to the preceding striking presence of the moon. In other words, the activity of philosophy here is spawned from the passivity of contemplation, or better, the modern philosophical attitude in *Canto Notturmo* becomes a form of contemplation. In a poetic space wherein «ciascun oggetto che vedevamo ci pareva che in certo modo accennando, quasi mostrasse di volerci favellare»,¹²⁹ imagination occasions the a-dialectical space of dialogical responsiveness. Here, the interlocutors of the dialogue have the possibility to express themselves as themselves and the subject, in being struck in awe, is responsible for interpreting the

¹²⁷ I mean style in a Merleau-Pontian way, that is a way of being-into-the-world that consolidates physical and linguistic gestures.

¹²⁸ *Zib.* 4174, 19 April 1826.

¹²⁹ LEOPARDI, *Discorso di un Italiano*, 359.

open possibility that the silence of nature signifies without internalizing the natural otherness. In this regard, the closing stanza of *Canto Notturmo* gives poetic form to the shepherd's epistemological relationship with the moon, not as pure and ecstatic contemplation, but rather, as the philosophico-poetic contemplation which Leopardi identifies with *colpo d'occhio*:

Forse s'avess'io l'ale
Da volar su le nubi,
135 E noverar le stelle ad una ad una,
O come il tuono errar di giogo in giogo,
Più felice sarei, dolce mia greggia,
Più felice sarei, candida luna.
O forse erra dal vero,
140 Mirando all'altrui sorte, il mio pensiero:
Forse in qual forma, in quale
Stato che sta, dentro covile o cura,
È funesto a chi nasce il dì natale.

Subjectivity, then, experiences a renovated dialogical possibility. Indeed, this closing stanza further articulates Severino's conviction as to the evidence that «infinito diventa la forma del canto»,¹³⁰ a poetic phenomenon that conceptually interweaves the whole substratum of the poem, that is initiated by the unanswered questions of the shepherd, and that is emphasized – almost as a consequence – by the boundless openness introduced by the reiteration of the dubitative adverb («forse») in the close. Here, the epistemological suspension established by the adverb prevents the transcendental *Aufhebung* between subjectivity and nature. In sparing both the shepherd and the moon from sublation, the 'forse' that seals *Canto Notturmo* does not convey uncertainty or doubt: it is rather a logical delay, one that signals the philosophical position of contemplating await structured on equally valid scaffolding hypotheses. On the one hand, then, the adverb expresses the process of thinking that both human subjectivity and nonhuman nature entertain. On the other, 'forse' becomes the metonymical token of a subject that is not distracted, but radically attentive and boundlessly open before a pregnant silent nature. 'Poetry of inquiry,' in this sense, portrays a subjectivity that is fully engaged with an object-nature fully endowed with traits canonically attributed to the human, namely thinking and agency. 'Poetry of inquiry,' then, finds itself endowed with an irremediably ethical task, that of being the linguistic embodiment of an encounter with nature and of maintaining the a-dialectical tension between the two, reciprocally foreign, subjects of a relationship. As Levinas writes, «it is between strangers that the encounter takes place; otherwise, it would be kinship».¹³¹ As argued earlier, it is the recognition of the givenness ascribed to the stranger-other that occasions a posture of responsiveness and consequent responsibility toward the precedence of an external natural reality that presents itself as other: a 'let it be,' as it were, laden with dialogical protension.

Indeed, Leopardi's 'poetry of inquiry,' as it is actualized in *Canto Notturmo*, gives a radical expression to Locke's hypothesis about thinking matter. In this poem, what was only a suggestion is actualized by an aesthetic and dialogical space, one where both the bare and sensorial existence of nature and subjectivity's self-reflexivity are validated as themselves. In this sense, *Canto Notturmo* becomes a poetic proposition of freedom: the liberation of nature and subjectivity that the Romantics attempted to achieve, turns here into the freedom of the subject to go toward the object (through questions) and of the interrogated object to answer with its resiliently corporeal and silent language. In standing as an alternative to Romanticism's aesthetic theorizations, Leopardian language becomes

¹³⁰ SEVERINO 1990, 335.

¹³¹ LEVINAS 1999, 98.

a gestural interpellation, the act of going-toward-the-other embodied in a linguistic style. As Jacques Rancière would suggest,¹³² in this instance imagination allows the creation of a space of responsiveness and material presentness, opening up the space of a responsibility that here Leopardi proto-ecologically directs toward nature.

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¹³² Cf. RANCIÈRE 2014, 12.

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