



Leopardi. L'alba del nichilismo

by Luigi Capitano, Naples-Salerno, Orthotes Editrice, 2016, 982 pp., €40 (paperback), ISBN 978-8893140621

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BOOK REVIEW

Leopardi. L'alba del nichilismo, by Luigi Capitano, Naples-Salerno, Orthotes Editrice, 2016, 982 pp., €40 (paperback), ISBN 978-8893140621

At almost a thousand pages, this bible-book on the prose and verse works of Giacomo Leopardi is a monument of twenty-first-century Leopardian studies. Out of a relentless investigation into the man, his vision, and his words, there emerges a philosophy, ripe for our post-modern disenchantment from Nietzschean disenchantment. Having largely gone unnoticed by reviewers, and hardly crossed Italy's borders, Capitano's magnum opus deserves attention despite its daunting bulk, which is redeemed by each page's being immediately engaging, allowing the reader to open the book randomly and become absorbed in a topical analysis which is a microcosm for the unifying lines of interpretation running through the book.

Half a century before Nietzsche, Capitano shows that the Italian poet-philosopher (where the dash is an inseparable glue) not only anticipated some of the fundamental traits of the nihilism usually identified with the great and damning Nietzschean turn in the twentieth century, but also – and more intriguingly – that Leopardi opened the path to a different appraisal of the concept. If Nietzsche's nihilism can be epitomised as the annihilating clash between man's finally realising his infinite capacities and a godless world in which none of those achievements mean anything, Leopardi's brand of nihilism, following Capitano, is the result of man's never winning against a godless nature, however much knowledge he is able to gain. This leaves humanity tottering between a lucid and vertiginous view into the abyss and a voluntary and equally lucid acceptance of ever-renewed illusions of self-realisation. Capitano thus gives a more tightly philosophical underpinning to the hackneyed formula 'cosmic pessimism', so often associated with Leopardi, in which wisdom of the world collapses into the acceptance of its absurdity. Sure enough, there are deep integrations of the absurd in Leopardi, but Capitano sees Leopardi as grappling not so much with the Sisyphean and defeatist absurdity of the meaninglessness of life, but rather with humanity's constant attempt, and never relinquished hope, of finding a meaning – and thus being victorious over nature. To this effect, Capitano brings out the many passages in verse and prose in which Leopardi belabours images of the deafness ('*sordità*') of nature (p. 618). The *ab-surdity* (now in its etymological dimension) is thus a deafness not in man but in nature itself. The joke is on humanity, and rather belies commonplace Leopardian pessimism; for anyone entering into a dialogue with the deaf (though not always dumb, since Nature talks back, e.g. in the moral fable, 'Nature and the Icelander', where nature speaks but does not listen), with no common language, is a voluntary victim of the illusion of possible communication – but importantly, not of defeatism or despair. We should rather be talking of a 'cosmicomical' vicious circle (p. 294), based on recognising the paradox according to which reason needs the imagination in order to destroy the illusions which the imagination creates, thereby creating new illusions which it then must destroy again, and so on and so forth; these are the 'uncontrollable nihilistic effects' (*ibid.*). The laughter which characterises modern man is not the desperate laughter in the face of utter hopelessness as in Nietzsche, but rather the laughter derived from the surplus of imagination which, we should realise, distorts reality and yet which we cannot shake off.

The book is divided into six parts, with internal subdivisions, whose progression relies on the application of the nihilist principle the book sets out to prove, gradually touching every institution and discipline from politics to fashion, philology to psychology, history and the sciences,

romanticism, and technology. The book thus moves forwards performatively, into increasingly detailed paradigms of negation. At the same time, the book reconstructs a Leopardian historicising narrative of the great stages which mark out humanity's march towards disillusionment: from a benign Qoheletic discovery of the vanity of life, still associated with a time of innocence, to the Greeks, more self-consciously shying away from truths they pretend not to see, to the Church's substituting the meaning of life with the promise of a life after death, at the price of an oxymoronic earthly life 'incompatible with life', bent on the pursuit of ugliness as the means to avoid 'infinite occasions for sin' (*Zibaldone*, p. 2457). The Enlightenment is not however a solution since its appetite for truth and knowledge yields only an emotional and intellectual desert.

This two-level structure – the one deepening the conceptual investigation, the other historicising it – is perhaps the most convincing element of Capitano's argument that Leopardi both anticipates and has an idiosyncratic vision of modern nihilism. For Nietzsche's nihilism is such a fertile concept because it is both a state of profound lucidity and the key for a historicising reading of the (anti-)progress of history. Here, we have Leopardi doing as much if not more. Capitano relays Nietzsche's awareness of Leopardi by underlining implicit echoes in Nietzsche of original Leopardian images of infinity (p. 322); he also shows how Nietzschean causal explanations are already present in Leopardi (p. 91). Though later philosophers have betrayed a spirit of competition with Leopardi, revealed in formulae such as Nietzsche's 'I am the first perfect nihilist of Europe' (from the preface to his *Will to Power*) or Schopenhauer's 'the three greatest pessimists, Leopardi, Byron and I',¹ it is clear that Leopardi is always appealed to as the underdog, all the better to highlight the worth of the later philosopher.

Capitano makes a strong case for a reevaluation of Leopardi's place on the philosophical podium of the nineteenth century, though he was not considered to even have one, either by Nietzsche or Schopenhauer, nor, later, Heidegger. And yet, Capitano deftly traces an invisible genealogy which ties Leopardi to Pessoa, Camus, and the anti-fascist philosopher Giuseppe Rensi – once marginal, now ever more central thinkers for a post-ideological, compass-less era. He also gives, in a fascinating appendix, a mini history of modern Italian intellectual debates springing from divergent catholic and communist receptions of Leopardian negative philosophy in post-war Italy. Those debates having now lost their contextual framework, Capitano's reworking of what remains and what is new in Leopardian reception is an important contribution to launching Leopardi into the twenty-first century as the thinker for times in which post-war references are obsolete, but the need to reimagine our relation to nature and find a purpose to our lives in a world in which technology threatens to make us redundant, is vital.

There are answers spun into the book. For Leopardi, nihilism is not a dead-end. He does not take at face value the ancient refrain, of Sophoclean fame, that not being born is best; rather, he insists that had we not been born we would never have known it were best not to be born, therefore we must live to imagine what it would have been like not to be. The erudition and wealth of references jam-packing every page are all at the service of presenting Leopardi as truly a philosopher for our times.

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¹In a letter to von Hornstein in *A. Schopenhauer Gespräche*, ed. by A. Hübscher (Heidelberg, 1933), p. 220.