

TEORIA

T

Rivista di filosofia
fondata da Vittorio Sainati
XXXIII/2013/2 (Terza serie VIII/2)

Hope and the Human Condition

Speranza e condizione umana

Edizioni ETS

Indice

Stefano Perfetti

Premessa / Premise, p. 5

Kenneth Seeskin

Messianism: A Brief History of a Complicated Idea, p. 9

Adriano Fabris

Spes contra spem.

The Loss of Future in Contemporary Religions, p. 19

Stefano Perfetti

Posthumanism, Materialism and Midrash: the dissolution of all hopes in Giacomo Leopardi's *Canticle of the Wild Cock*, p. 29

Gary Saul Morson

Absolute Hope, p. 47

Robert W. Wallace

Why did hope remain in Pandora's jar?, p. 55

Francesca Tataranni

Hope and Leadership in Ancient Rome, p. 65

Flavia Monceri

Hoping for the Best: Figures of Difference in Contemporary Films, p. 79

Laura Tundo Ferente

Sul rapporto fra Etica e Utopia e sulla coimplicazione utopica di desiderio-vincolo, p. 99

T

Posthumanism, Materialism and Midrash: the dissolution of all hopes in Giacomo Leopardi's *Canticle of the Wild Cock*

Stefano Perfetti

In this decayed hole among the mountains
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm no one.
Only a cock stood on the rooftree
Co co rico co co rico.

T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (ll. 385-393)

The *Canticle of the Wild Cock* (*Cantico del gallo silvestre*), written between November 10 and 16, 1824, was the final piece in the original series of Leopardi's *Operette Morali* (*Moral Essays*)¹, and was actually meant to give the philosophical journey of the entire book a proper conclusion. For, as Cesare Galimberti points out, (i) it «closes with an apocalyptic

¹ The *Canticle* is the last *operetta* to be written in 1824 and already in the first edition (Stella, Milan 1827) it rounds off the series opened with the *Storia del genere umano* (*History of Humankind*). The closing *Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro* (*Dialogue of Timander and Eleander*), although written before, in June '24, eventually was moved in the final position, as a coda, aimed at clarifying the spirit of the *Operette* and the critical attitude of their author. It was only in the posthumous edition (Le Monnier, Florence 1845) that, according to the will of the author, the editor Antonio Ranieri put the *Apocryphal fragment of Strato of Lampsacus* (composed in 1825 and unequivocal evidence of Leopardi's final materialistic transition) between the *Canticle* and the *Timander*. See L. Felici, *La voce dell'Origine. Il "Cantico del gallo silvestre"*, in Id., *L'Olimpo abbandonato, Leopardi tra "favole antiche" e "disperati affetti"*, Marsilio, Venice 2005, pp. 167-183, 167-170.

vision the series opened with the representation of the ἐν ἀρχῇ in the *History of Humankind*; and (ii) in a *lectio continua* of the *Operette*, the previous piece *In Praise of Birds* (*Elogio degli uccelli*) finds a fitting continuation in the *Canticle*, which contains a «message of a mythological bird, able to translate into words the discourse implicit in the language of the creatures of the air»². But two strong traits of discontinuity, also, emerge: Galimberti already pointed out that «the *Canticle* goes well beyond any satirical or moral concern, to focus its gaze on a metaphysical issue, even eschatological»³. And also, we can add, while the *In Praise of Birds* is still set *within* nature (it in fact speaks of nature taking the point of view of a natural being), on the contrary, the *Canticle* portrays the possibility of a lifeless, post-biological and, consequently, a totally dehumanized and radically anti-humanistic scenario. This outcome stems from the core philosophical and cosmological assumption of the *Canticle*: that life itself and self-consciousness (which is the apex of life), far from being a crowning, are just a temporary anomaly. This outcome is bitterly signified by the very choice of the *dramatis personae*: the Cock that proclaims «the wondrous and fearful mystery of the universal existence» («questo arcano mirabile e spaventoso dell'esistenza universale»)⁴ and, to a lesser but still significant extent, the Sun, the passive listener of a non-dialogue. Paradoxically, the Cock and the Sun are the only bearers of understanding of the cosmic arcane, while the anthropic perspective is exposed for being so illusory and transitory – almost instantaneous – in the economy of universal existence.

The thematic and structural organization of the *Canticle* is articulated in two movements, each introduced by two similar exclamations: «Su mortali, destatevi. Il dì rinasce» («Mortals, awake! The day breaks») and «Mortali, destatevi» («Mortals, arouse yourselves!»). The first movement deals with the dialectic of wake and sleep, and Leopardi here recognizes the impossibility of nocturnal illusions and predicts a *perpetual* sleep that will free humankind (and every other conscious living being, including the Sun) from pain. In the second movement Leopardi deals with the dialectic

² C. Galimberti, Introduction to the *Cantico*, in G. Leopardi, *Operette morali*, ed. by C.G., Guida, Naples 1983, p. 391.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Here and elsewhere I quote the Italian text from G. Leopardi, *Operette morali*, in *Tutte le opere di Giacomo Leopardi*, ed. by F. Flora, vol. I, Arnoldo Mondadori, Milan 1940 and the English translation from G. Leopardi, *Essays and Dialogues*, translated by Charles Edwardes, Trübner, London 1882. For a more contemporary translation, see G. Leopardi, *The Moral Essays/Operette Morali*, trans. by P. Creagh, Columbia University Press, New York 1983.

of life and death and predicts not only the extinction of life, but also the self-destruction of the universe.

In this paper I would like to explore the following lines of inquiry: (i) an assessment of cultural substitutions and reversals in Leopardi's discourse, (ii) an analysis of techniques of argumentation, and (iii) the relationship between the *Canticle* and Leopardi's nihilism and materialism.

1. *Cultural substitutions and reversals*

The incipit of the *Canticle* might remind us of those erudite literary games of concealment one tends to associate with the Argentinian writer Jorge Louis Borges. For Leopardi invokes traditional rabbinic sources and pretends that the text of the canticle sung by the Cock is translated from «an old parchment manuscript [...] written in Hebrew characters, and in a language compounded of Chaldean, Targumic, Rabbinical, Cabalistic and Talmudic»; he even ventures to give the 'original' title «*Scir detarnegòl bara letzafra*, that is Morning Song of the Wild Cock». Leopardi goes on to say that he «interpreted» and «translated» this song «not without great exertion, and the interrogation of more than one Rabbi, Cabalist, theologian, jurist, and Hebrew philosopher».

But all these erudite details are something more than a literary *divertissement*⁵. Far from fashioning just an «obscure pastiche of ancient languages»⁶, here Leopardi gives «a free transcription from an Aramaic title – the language of Targum», drawing it from an «entry of the majestic *Lexicon Chaldaicum, Talmudicum et Rabbinicum* (1640) compiled by Johannes Buxtorf»⁷. In this bilingual work (Hebrew and Latin) of the great Swiss Hebraist of the 17th century, under the entry תַּרְנֻגִּיל (*tarnegòl*), Leopardi found a good wealth of information: not only the expression *tarnegòl bar* («sylvan

⁵ Galimberti, *op. cit.*, p. 393, n. 4: «È evidente il *divertissement* ottenuto con l'accostare tanti aggettivi inusitati e dal suffisso identico; è una riprova stilistica dell'umore insito nell'idea [...] della presunta scoperta di un manoscritto curioso».

⁶ N. Rennie, *Cock and Bull Cosmologies: Reading the Post-Enlightenment Universe*, in J. Levarie Smarr (ed.), *Writers Reading Writers: Intertextual Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Literature in Honor of Robert Hollander*, University of Delaware Press, Newark 2007, pp. 225-245, 226.

⁷ A. Prete, *Il deserto e il fiore: rileggendo Leopardi*, Donzelli, Rome 2004, p. 58. See also Id., *Corpo animale e disegno dell'alterità*, in Id., A. Aloisi (eds.), *Giacomo Leopardi. Il gallo silvestre e altri animali*, Manni, San Cesario di Lecce 2010, pp. 7-15, 9.

cock”, “cock of the woods”), but even the Aramaic words he combined to coin the title of the ancient manuscript⁸. Also, consider the following:

Apud Rabbinos frequens huius תרנגול ברא galli sylvestris mentio est. Avis cujusdam maximae, quae pedes in terra, caput inter nubila condit, mentio est apud Talm. in Bb. 73b [...].

Et gallus sylvestris, cuius pedes consistunt in terra et caput ejus pertingit in caelum usque, cantat coram me, Psal. 50, v. 11 [...]⁹.

It is apparent how the memorable *incipit* of Leopardi's *Canticle* stems from an almost *verbatim* repetition of Buxtorf's words:

Affermano alcuni maestri e scrittori ebrei, che tra il cielo e la terra, o vogliamo dire mezzo nell'uno e mezzo nell'altra, vive un certo gallo salvatico; il quale sta in sulla terra coi piedi, e tocca colla cresta e col becco il cielo.

[Certain Hebrew savants and writers affirm, that between heaven and earth, or rather, partly in one and partly on the other, lives a wild cock which stands with its feet resting on the earth, and touching the sky with its crest and beak.]

Furthermore, behind the deliberate display and manipulation of Semitic sources, in this prelude one also finds a more hidden system of substitutions and reversals of perspective.

Even if patterned on the wisdom literature of post-biblical Judaism, Leopardi's discourse conveys not a message of hope, but one of radical disenchantment. It is well known that kabbalistic literature truly bears traces of a cosmic rooster, «a heavenly cock crow which [...] awakens the choir of angels to the praise of God»¹⁰. But that same Cock, that in rabbinic literature was the bright symbol of awakening and regeneration, invites us here to dry up all hope. And those rejoicing and hallelujatic choirs of angels are here transformed into and reduced to the Sun, a mute cosmic luminary and silent witness of the reversed wisdom of the Cock.

Io dimando a te, o sole, autore del giorno e preside della vigilia: nello spazio

⁸ See Felici, *La voce dell'Origine*, cit., pp. 171-175; E. Giordano, *La voce del Gallo Silvestre*, in S. Neumeister (ed.), *Die ästhetische Wahrnehmung der Welt: Giacomo Leopardi / Giacomo Leopardi e la percezione estetica del mondo*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Wien 2009, pp. 101-118, 105.

⁹ J. Buxtorf, *Lexicon Chaldaicum, Talmudicum et Rabbinicum* (editio princeps: König, Basel 1640). I quote from the edition: Asher/London, Schaeffer/Leipzig, Schaeffer & Koradi/Philadelphia 1875.

¹⁰ G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. R. Manheim, Schocken Books, New York 1965, p. 147.

dei secoli da te distinti e consumati fin qui sorgendo e cadendo, vedesti tu alcuna volta un solo infra i viventi essere beato? Delle opere innumerabili dei mortali da te vedute finora, pensi tu che pur una ottenesse l'intento suo, che fu la soddisfazione, o durevole o transitoria, di quella creatura che la produsse? Anzi vedi tu di presente o vedesti mai la felicità dentro ai confini del mondo? [...] Qual cosa animata ne partecipa; qual pianta o che altro che tu vivifichi; qual creatura provveduta o sfornita di virtù vegetative o animali? E tu medesimo, tu che quasi un gigante instancabile, velocemente, dì e notte, senza sonno né requie, corri lo smisurato cammino che ti è prescritto; sei tu beato o infelice?

[I ask of thee, Sun, author of day, and guardian of eve; in the course of the centuries measured out and consummated by thee, thus rising and setting, hast thou ever at any time seen one living being possessed of happiness? Of the numberless works of mortals which hitherto thou hast seen, thinkest thou that a single one was successful in its aim of procuring satisfaction, durable or temporary, for its originator? And seest thou, or hast thou ever seen, happiness within the boundaries of the world? [...] What living being, what plant, or other thing animated by thee, what vegetable or animal participates in it? And thou thyself, like an indefatigable giant, traversing swiftly, day and night, sleepless and restless, the vast course prescribed to thee; art thou content or happy?]

In a well-documented study, Delia Fabbroni-Gianotti Nisbet suggested that in the *Canticle* Leopardi «adopts the strategies [...] of midrashic exegesis» and re-interprets «haggadic sources pertaining to the sylvan cock»¹¹. In particular, she pointed out several analogies between the *Canticle* and the haggadic legend entitled “The Cock, The Greater Singer Of Hymns”. But, while this narrative had the figure of the Cock as «a messenger summoning men to renewal [...] whose language after the fall of Adam can be understood only by those who are pious», «Leopardi subverts the haggadic narrative at the same time as he recreates it, and by means of irony, he radicalizes it towards the negative»¹².

Furthermore, beyond the strategic subversion of Jewish sources, the philosophical reader cannot but think that this Cock endowed with reason, placed between heaven and earth, is the post-human replacement of the former role of the centrality of man so widespread in philosophical literature (from Anaximenes and Plato to Pico, Pomponazzi, Paracelsus and Bruno). Let us think for a moment to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (a work equally influenced by the Platonic tradi-

¹¹ D. Fabbroni-Gianotti Nisbet, *Heinrich Heine and Giacomo Leopardi. The Rhetoric of Midrash*, Peter Lang, New York-Bern 2000, pp. 91 and 100.

¹² Fabbroni-Gianotti Nisbet, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-101 and 64.

tion, the Bible, Kabbalah and Hermeticism): «God the Father, the supreme Architect,» after building the world «by the laws of His mysterious wisdom (*archanae legibus sapientiae*)», «wished that there were someone to ponder the plan of so great a work». For such a reason He creates the human being. But, having already distributed all archetypes, God fashions the human being «as a creature of indeterminate nature [...] assigning him a place in the middle of the world», with «the power to degenerate into the lower form of life, which are brutish» or «to be reborn into the higher forms which are divine», i.e. into the condition of the angels¹³. Pico's man is supremely happy, because he can climb the ladder of being, summing up in himself the life of plants and animal, yet projecting himself into the divine nature¹⁴.

I do not mean to suggest that the wild Cock might functionally replace Pico's microcosmic man in all his aspects. For sure the Cock does not move along the degrees of being: neither degenerates nor regenerates *in superiora*. But the replacement plays its role on another level, that of the visual angle. The cosmic anthropocentrism of the philosophical tradition is definitely turned into a sort of "cosmocentrism", in which the very thinking activity, the very judgment is no more performed by our species, but is replaced by a post-human thought, performed by the Cock, according to the visual angle of a dehumanized universe. In other words, even the figural and rhetorical device (the cosmic Cock proclaiming its message) is itself an integral part of the philosophical theme. The very game of substitutions and subversions enacts the transition from anthropocentrism to cosmocentrism, from a dwelling place conceived as fit to our own species to a world in which the very machine-like swarm of human life is nothing but a transitory and almost insignificant phenomenon.

¹³ G. Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man* [*Oratio de hominis dignitate*], trans. E.L. Forbes, in E. Cassirer, P.O. Kristeller, J.H. Randall jr (eds.), *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1943, pp. 224-225.

¹⁴ «O supreme generosity of God the Father! O highest and most marvelous felicity of man! To him is granted to have whatever he chooses, be whatever he wills.[...] If <the seeds he cultivates> be vegetative, he will be like a plant. If sensitive, he will become brutish. If rational, he will grow into a heavenly being. If intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God», Pico, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

2. Patterns of argumentation

We have already seen that the macrostructure of the *Canticle* is articulated in two movements, each introduced by two similar exclamations: «Su mortali, destatevi. Il dì rinasce» («Mortals, awake! The day breaks») and «Mortali, destatevi» («Mortals, arouse yourselves!»). Yet, despite this formal similarity, the two movements have different thematic inflections.

The theme of the first movement is the awakening as a passage from the false world to the true:

Su mortali, destatevi. Il dì rinasce: torna la verità in sulla terra, e partonsene le immagini vane. Sorgete, ripigliatevi la soma della vita; riducetevi dal mondo falso nel vero.

[Mortals, awake! The day breaks; truth returns to the earth and vain fancies flee away. Arise; take up again the burden of life; forsake the false world for the true.]

Leopardi concedes that the awakening allows some delay between «intentions, aims, and labours», «pleasures and cares» and also «joyful hopes and sweet thoughts»; nevertheless he quickly concludes that the illusions of sleep, dream and awakening cannot be implemented in life. This abrupt conclusion is also emphasized by a slight logical fallacy:

Ma pochi sono soddisfatti da questo desiderio: a tutti il risvegliarsi è danno.

[Few, however, are satisfied in this desire; for all men it is a misfortune to awake.]

The tacit replacement of quantifiers (the implied «*many* are not satisfied» turned into «*all men* are dissatisfied») is a strategic excess-approximation. The final statement, even if expressed in categorical form («for all men it is a misfortune to awake») and reiterated in gnomic form («The poor is no sooner aroused than he falls again into the clutches of his unhappiness»), does not yet seem to possess the credentials for being a psychological truth valid for all persons. But the key to such a universalization is what we could label as ‘axiological nihilism’ (the idea that life is worthless in itself), which, in turn, is based on Leopardi’s own ‘theory of pleasure’¹⁵. Leopardi argues that because of the inaccessibility of «satis-

¹⁵ For the core of Leopardi’s ‘theory of pleasure’ see *Zibaldone*, ## 165-183 (July 23, 1820). See N. Rennie, *Speculating on the Moment: The Poetics of Time and Recurrence in Goethe, Leopardi, and Nietzsche*, Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen 2005, pp. 197-198. As highlighted by Rennie,

faction, durable or temporary» for «the numberless works of mortals» (a clear sign of the absence of «happiness within the boundaries of the world»), it would be preferable that «the sleep of mortals were continuous and identical with life». In other words, life during daytime is worthless (axiological nihilism), because happiness is unattainable during this time (theory of pleasure).

It should also be noted that the theme is developed by way of a rhetorical question which, using the language of idyll, portrays a lifeless earth:

Se il sonno dei mortali fosse perpetuo, ed una cosa medesima colla vita; se sotto l'astro diurno, languendo per la terra in profondissima quiete tutti i viventi, non apparisse opera alcuna; non muggito di buoi per li prati, né strepito di fiere per le foreste, né canto di uccelli per l'aria, né sussurro d'api o di farfalle scorresse per la campagna; non voce, non moto alcuno, se non delle acque, del vento e delle tempeste, sorgesse in alcuna banda...

[If the sleep of mortals were continuous and identical with life; if under the star of day all living beings languished on the earth in utter rest, and no work was wrought; if the oxen ceased bellowing in the meadows, the beasts roaring in the forests, the birds singing in the air, the bees buzzing, and the butterflies skimming over the fields; if no voice nor motion except that of the waters, winds, and tempests anywhere existed...]

And, in general, the first movement is filled with enumerations of desirable images, listed with trepidation and soon after become erased. It is a cruel *conatus interruptus*, according to Leopardi's well-known poetic strategy of the 'broken idyll' (as in several of his poems, like *La sera del dì di festa* or *A Silvia*).

The first movement does nothing but envisage a *perpetual* sleep, «iden-

Leopardi «summarizes his ideas in a syllogistic passage from 1821 (*Zib.* 646-647): “The living being loves itself without limits, and never ceases loving itself. Therefore it never ceases desiring for itself the good, and desires the good without limits. The good, in essence, is, none other than pleasure. However great and real this pleasure, it is always limited. As a result, no possible pleasure is proportionate and equal in measure to the love that the living being bears itself. Therefore no pleasure can satisfy the living being”: «Il vivente si ama senza limite nessuno, e non cessa mai di amarsi. Dunque non cessa mai di desiderarsi il bene, e si desidera il bene senza limiti. Questo bene in sostanza non è altro che il piacere. Qualunque piacere ancorché grande, ancorché reale, ha limiti. Dunque nessun piacere possibile è proporzionato ed uguale alla [647] misura dell'amore che il vivente porta a se stesso. Quindi nessun piacere può soddisfare il vivente». I quote from G. Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. by E. Trevi, Newton, Rome 1997. The text of this edition (enriched by useful indexes compiled by M. Dondero and W. Marra) is for the most part in line with the 'reference' critical edition established by G. Pacella (Garzanti, Milan 1991), but incorporates some corrections from the edition procured by R. Damiani (Mondadori, Milan 1997).

tical with life». And the visual angle, so to speak, remains within human psychology, within the illusory nature of our expectations. In other words, the theme of the first movement is fully explained in terms of the theory of pleasure (and, symptomatically, is expressed through the poetic strategy of the broken idyll).

The second movement is different. I would not say, with Galimberti, that now «a practical deduction drawn from previous negative meditations takes the form of an invitation to death»¹⁶. It is not an *invitation*, in which Leopardi assumes the role of a *peisithánatos*, a ‘death-persuader’¹⁷. As a matter of fact, the second movement contains a *seemingly* physical discourse that not only asserts the frailty and impermanence of organic life, but goes so far as to predict the extinction of the entire universe. If the first movement had been limited to the register of wisdom (on the basis of the psycho-physiological assumptions of the theory of pleasure), this second movement seems to go beyond them, interweaving the previous psycho-physiological and anthropological analysis with a new perspective that presents itself as *physical*, and is introduced by way of analogy.

Once asserted that sleep is a necessary restoration, and that the phases of the day can be seen in analogy with the cyclic phases of life («la sera è comparabile alla vecchiaia; per lo contrario, il principio del mattino somiglia alla giovinezza»: «The evening is comparable to old age; and on the other hand, the dawn of the morning resembles youth»), Leopardi shows that these natural cycles are imperfect and ineffective. For, if the whole course of every individual existence is a story of aging and, eventually, drying up, by summation we must also admit of a progressive aging, if not of the universe itself, at least of all its parts:

Ogni parte dell’universo si affretta infaticabilmente alla morte, con sollecitudine e celerità mirabile. Solo l’universo medesimo apparisce immune dallo scadere e languire.

[Every part of the world hastens untiringly, with diligence and wonderful celerity, towards death. The world itself alone seems exempt from decay.]

¹⁶ Galimberti, *op. cit.*, p. 398 n. 17.

¹⁷ *Peisithanatos* was the nickname of Hegesias of Cyrene, the Cyrenaic philosopher of the 3rd century BCE, for which the true pleasure is a quiet apathy which loosens the grip of pain and sorrow. In order to attain a definitive liberation from pain, he supported the liceity and rationality of suicide in a (lost) work with the emblematic title *Apokarterón: Death by Starvation*. Cf. Cic., *Tusc. disp.* I, 38, 84; Epiphani., *Adv. haeres.*, III, 2, 9 and other witnesses in G. Giannantoni (ed.), *I Cirenaici. Raccolta delle fonti antiche*, Sansoni, Florence 1958.

Leopardi not only limits his discourse to the decay of natural beings; by analogical extension, he sketches a global picture of a *mundus senescens*, ‘an aging world’, slowly extinguishing and dying:

Ma siccome i mortali, se bene in sul primo tempo di ciascun giorno racquistano alcuna parte di giovinezza, pure invecchiano tutto dî, e finalmente si estinguono; così l’universo, benché nel principio degli anni ringiovanisca, nondimeno continuamente invecchia. Tempo verrà che esso universo, e la natura medesima, sarà spenta.

[But just as mortals in the first part of each day regain some portion of their youth, yet grow old as the day progresses, and are at length extinguished in sleep; so although in the beginning of the years the world becomes young again, none the less it perpetually ages. The time will come when this world, and Nature herself, shall be extinguished.]

This is the structure of the argument from analogy:

(i) the recovery of physical forces through the daily sleep-wake cycle is not enough to compensate for the overall decaying trend of each individual existence, which is a slow drying out process.

Similarly,

(ii) the entire universe «perpetually ages» and goes inexorably towards its extinction.

The theme of a *mundus senescens*, an ‘aging world’, already explored in Judeo-Christian, patristic and medieval traditions of thought, had been rediscovered in eighteenth-century philosophical debate¹⁸. But it is not our aim now to investigate the philosophical sources of Leopardi’s discourse. Rather, at this point the philosophical reader who tackles this chilling theme of the self-destruction of the universe must confess some puzzlement. According to Francesco De Sanctis, the great Italian literary critic of the 19th century, «there is no poetical work of Leopardi that does not conceal some deeply abstract and philosophical concept. [...] But this representation would be not at all distinct from philosophy, if the conceptually

¹⁸ This debate on the aging world goes from the two fragments of Leibniz on the *Apokatástasis pánton* (1715) to Kant’s *Die Frage, ob die Erde veralte, Physikalisch erwogen* (1754) and his later *Das Ende aller Dinge* (1794), and also includes the voices of Weitenkampf, Bonnet, and Lavater. See. F. Desideri, *Quartetto per la fine del tempo. Una costellazione kantiana*, Marietti, Genoa 1991, pp. 127-188.

abstract thought would remain abstract in its form as well. Now here we see the genius of this poet – concludes De Sanctis – who gives the most abstract things a material and sensible form, mostly new and unusual»¹⁹. But this is exactly the problem: to determine the extent to which the final shocking images of the self-destruction of the universe are a physical hypothesis, philosophical truth, or figurative hyperbole. For Leopardi himself, in a footnote to the last lines of the *Canticle*, warns the reader that

Questa è conclusione poetica, non filosofica. Parlando filosoficamente, l'esistenza, che non è mai cominciata, non avrà mai fine.

[This is a poetical not philosophical conclusion. Speaking philosophically, existence, which has had no beginning, will have no ending.]²⁰

If we take this warning seriously, we must ask ourselves how to demarcate the figural domain (the «poetical conclusion») from the truth attained by «speaking philosophically».

Let us compare three textual segments.

(i) ... del mondo intero e delle infinite vicende e calamità delle cose create, non rimarrà pure un vestigio; ma un silenzio nudo, e una quiete altissima, empiiranno lo spazio immenso. Così questo arcano mirabile e spaventoso dell'esistenza universale, innanzi di essere dichiarato ed inteso, si dileguerà e perderassi.

[... in the whole world there shall not be left a vestige of the infinite changes and catastrophes of created things. A naked silence and an utter calm shall fill the vast space. Thus, this wonderful and fearful mystery of universal existence shall be unloosed, and shall melt away before it be made manifest or be comprehended.]

(ii) Questa è conclusione poetica, non filosofica. Parlando filosoficamente, l'esistenza, che non è mai cominciata, non avrà mai fine.

¹⁹ «Non ci è lavoro poetico del Leopardi in cui non si rinchiuda un concetto profondamente astratto e filosofico. [...] Ma questa rappresentazione non sarebbe per nulla distinta dalla filosofia, ove il pensiero, astratto nel concetto, rimanesse pure astratto nella forma. Or qui si scorge l'ingegno di questo poeta il quale dà alle cose più astratte una forma materiale sensibile e quasi sempre nuova e pellegrina». This passage from a course of Rhetoric held in Naples in 1841 can be found in C. Muscetta, *Leopardi. Schizzi, studi e letture*, Bonacci, Rome 1976, p. 102.

²⁰ This footnote was added in the second edition of the *Operette morali* (Piatti, Florence 1834). As Felici points out (cit., pp. 181-182): «la nota stabilisce un legame concettuale con il *Frammento apocrifo*, assente nell'edizione del '34 e pubblicato postumo nell'edizione del '45 [ma scritto nel 1825]. Nel *Frammento*, infatti, si affermerà con decisione non solo l'eternità della materia, [ma] anche il suo inesauribile potere di generare nuove forme di vita» [«this note establishes a conceptual link with the *Apocryphal Fragment*, not included in 1834 edition and published posthumously in 1845 edition [but written in 1825]. For the *Fragment* will decidedly assert not only the eternity of matter, but also its inextinguishable power to generate new forms of life].

[This is a poetical not philosophical conclusion. Speaking philosophically, existence, which has had no beginning, will have no ending.]

(iii) Pare che l'essere delle cose abbia per suo proprio ed unico obbietto il morire. Non potendo morire quel che non era, perciò dal nulla scaturirono le cose che sono. Certo l'ultima causa dell'essere non è la felicità; perocché niuna cosa è felice.

[It seems as though the existence of things has death for its sole and proper goal. Since that which never was cannot die, therefore all things that exist sprang out of nothing. The ultimate cause of being is not happiness, for nothing is happy.]²¹

The first segment (which is the closing sentence of the *Canticle*) is definitely a «poetical conclusion». This is what Leopardi himself tells us in the footnote to this sentence – text (ii) – and this is also revealed by the great number of poetic images that immediately recall memorable lines from Leopardi's own poems (the *Canti*).

But what about the third segment (taken from the beginning of the second movement)? Let us focus on the argumentative structure of this passage. In true satirical style of the *Operette morali*, the sentence in the middle sounds like the parody of an apodictic argument: since what does not exist cannot die, things came to be just in order to die. But, in fact, this proposition is framed by two sentences. The second is the categorical recapitulation of a negative conclusion reached through the theory of pleasure and, according to Leopardi, is reinforced by our daily experience: it is a fact that nothing is happy, thus existence *certainly* does not have the goal of happiness. The first sentence is introduced by a hypothetical clause («it seems as though»), to mitigate its desolating content: it seems that the existence of things (an existence «sprang out of nothing») has the sole goal of annihilation.

3. *The Canticle between nihilism and materialism*

From nothing to nothing. A nihilistic path. But the author also warns us not to take the seemingly physical and cosmological tone of his discourse at face value. If so, what is the true meaning of this discourse? Different interpretations have been proposed. Antimo Negri, reading this passage (and the final images of the *Canticle*) in Kant-inspired terms, concludes

²¹ In order to mirror more closely Leopardi's text, I have heavily modified Edwardes' translation here.

that Leopardi aims at overcoming the immediate evidence of the phenomenon (the cyclical renewal) in order to reach the noumenic truth of the end of all things, the universal extinguishment; Negri believes that the «naked silence», the «utter calm» and the «vast space» of the final lines are «speculative figures, though expressed through sublime poetical ‘fiction’». These images, he adds, are «ideas [...] in the Kantian sense», in which «the ‘poetical conclusion’ must yield to the ‘philosophical conclusion’»²². But, in doing so, he does not take into account the final footnote of the author and gives a philosophical overdetermination to what Leopardi himself described as a poetical conclusion (thus attained via a game of images, indetermination, and hyperbole).

A different interpretation is offered by Cesare Galimberti who, in his note *ad locum*, recalls a passage from Leopardi’s *Zibaldone* (#1341 of July 18, 1821):

In somma il principio delle cose, e di Dio stesso è il nulla. Giacché nessuna cosa è assolutamente necessaria, cioè non v’è ragione assoluta perch’ella non possa non essere, o non essere in quel tal modo ec.²³

[In sum, the principle of things and of God himself is nothingness. Because nothing is absolutely necessary, i.e. there is no absolute reason why anything may or may not be in such a way etc.]

These sharp and extreme conclusions seem to echo fragments from medieval scholastic debates on the relationship between the necessity and contingency of things. Their blueprint was Avicenna’s idea that «everything in this world is contingent in itself, but necessary with reference to its causes, leading back ultimately to the First Cause, the Necessary Being, whose timeless existence eternally authors the finite and determinate reality that we know»²⁴. And this is Leopardi’s ‘disenchanted’ reformulation: none of the things that exist has its *raison d’être* in itself; in absence of a

²² A. Negri, *Interminati spazi ed eterno ritorno. Nietzsche e Leopardi*, Le Lettere, Florence 1994, pp. 182-184.

²³ I quote the Italian text from G. Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. by E. Trevi, *op. cit.*, n. 15. This and the following translations from the *Zibaldone* are mine.

²⁴ L.E. Goodman, *Avicenna*, updated edition, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 2006, p. xiii. See also A. Bertolacci, “Necessary” as primary concept in Avicenna’s *Metaphysics*, in S. Peretti (ed.), *Conoscenza e contingenza nella tradizione aristotelica medievale*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2008, pp. 30-50. Scholastic debates on necessary being and contingent being had been further developed in modern philosophy by Leibniz’s doctrine on the ‘possibles’; see M. Ruggenini, *Perché qualcosa piuttosto che niente? Leibniz e l’onto-teo-logia moderna*, in «aut-aut», 254-55 (1993), pp. 101-123.

being that has its own necessity in itself (i.e. God), from which all other beings may receive their derivative necessity by participation, things are left drifting in their contingency, where each can be but can also fail to exist²⁵.

Such (negative) ontotheological meditations may well be the theoretical premises of the discourse of the *Canticle*. We might add that, unlike ancient Greek philosophy, the metaphysical ideas developed within monotheistic and creationistic horizons inevitably cannot but emphasize the hiatus between the contingency of creatures and the necessary being of the Creator and, also, end up conceptualizing the creation as a pure production from nothing²⁶. When God disappears from such a metaphysical picture, we are left with the scene of a myriad of existences, devoid of foundation, above the abyss of nothingness²⁷.

But linking the meaning of the second movement of the *Canticle* to these ontotheological reflections of 1821 is not enough. The theoretical horizon of 1824 is no longer the metaphysical experimentation of an ontotheology with no room for God. The theme of the *Canticle* is the universal extension of the theory of pleasure. In other words, the true philosophical meaning, conveyed by poetic discourse, is the negative axiological prospect of a dehumanized universe. Echoing Leopardi's own *Dialogue between a Sprite and a Gnome* (composed in February 1824), the *Canticle* focuses on the theme of a universe with no room for man. Through the tragic poetic fiction of the ultimate death of the universe Leopardi exposes the

²⁵ On Leopardi's nihilism (and contemporary philosophical interpretations of it, such as those of Emanuele Severino and Sergio Givone), see L. Felici, *Il nulla e il riso*, in *Il riso leopardiano. Comico, satira, parodia*, Atti del IX Convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani (Recanati 10-22 settembre 1995), Leo S. Olschki, Florence 1998, pp. 11-24.

²⁶ See Ruggerini, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-104.

²⁷ In further meditations of the *Zibaldone* dated between June and September 1821, realizing that a similar line of thinking has devastating effects on religion and on any metaphysical worldview, Leopardi tries to save a role for God by thinking His infinite omnipotence as the infinite possibility. Cf. *Zibaldone*, ## 1645-1646, 5-7 September 1821: «Se esiste l'infinita possibilità esiste l'infinita onnipotenza [...]. L'una e l'altra sono, possiamo dire, la stessa cosa. Se dunque è necessaria l'infinita possibilità, preesistente al tutto, indipendente da ogni cosa, da ogni idea ec. [...] lo è dunque ancora l'onnipotenza. Ecco Dio: e la sua necessità dedotta dall'esistenza, e la sua essenza riposta nell'infinita possibilità». [«If there is an infinite possibility, then the infinite omnipotence exists [...]. Both of them are, we can say, the same thing. If, therefore, the infinite possibility (preexisting to all, independent of any thing, any idea etc.) is required, [...] omnipotence is required as well. Here is God and His necessity deduced from the existence, and His essence put in the infinite possibility».] See further reflections on this point in M.A. Rigoni, *Sul nulla e la negazione nel pensiero di Leopardi*, in M. de las Nieves Muñoz Muñoz (ed.), *Giacomo Leopardi. Poesia, pensiero, ricezione*, Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Barcellona (5-7 marzo 1998), Insula, Leonforte 2000, pp. 105-111, esp. 107-108.

inconsistency of the human point of view on the world. The cosmological perspective, though in the foreground, remains just a figural amplification of a negative anthropological conclusion²⁸. From now on – after the *Canticle*, I mean – Leopardi is ready for materialistic and post-metaphysical outcomes. Cesare Luporini rightly observed that the *Canticle* is indeed the expression of a «total sense of nothingness», a «total and all-embracing nihilism, ontologically anchored in a negative way,» but the *Canticle* is not yet an expression of materialism. This will unfold only in the subsequent *operetta morale*, the *Apocryphal fragment of Strato of Lampsacus* (autumn 1825), thanks to the assumption of the eternity of matter and the plurality of worlds²⁹. So the *Canticle* may be considered as the culmination of Leopardi's nihilism (a philosophical journey that he accomplished in 1824, before his materialistic transition in 1825)³⁰.

4. Conclusion

That the extinction of the universe is not a “philosophical” conclusion is also witnessed by a passage of the *Zibaldone*, in which Leopardi again deals with the themes of the *Canticle*, this time in unequivocal terms, that is not in poetical language. This is a note taken on April 5-6, 1825 (# 4130):

il fine della natura universale è la vita dell'universo, la quale consiste ugualmente in produzione conservazione e distruzione dei suoi componenti, e quindi la distruzione di ogni animale entra nel fine della detta natura almen tanto quanto la conservazione di esso, ma anche assai più che la conservazione, in quanto si vede

²⁸ Cf. Prete, *Il deserto*, cit., p. 31: «Una fisica poetica che nel *Cantico del gallo silvestre* immagina la fuga dei mondi verso il “silenzio nudo” degli spazi infiniti».

²⁹ See, on this point, N. Rennie, *Speculating on the Moment*, cit., p. 151 and note 78; M. Moneta, *L'officina delle aporie. Leopardi e la riflessione sul male negli anni dello Zibaldone*, Franco Angeli, Milan 2006, esp. pp. 198-200.

³⁰ See C. Luporini, *Assiologia ed ontologia nel nichilismo di Leopardi*, in Id., *Decifrare Leopardi*, Macchiaroli, Naples 1988), pp. 227-234, 232-234; also in C. Ferrucci (ed.), *Leopardi e il pensiero moderno*, Feltrinelli, Milan 1989. I disagree, therefore, with Alessandro Carrera's idea that: «Il *Frammento* pone così con chiarezza la distinzione tra *mondo* e *materia* che il *Cantico* non aveva affrontato per non turbare la poeticità della descrizione dell'annientamento finale». [«The *Fragment* thus draws a clear distinction between *world* and *matter* that the *Canticle* had not addressed not to disturb the poetical description of the final annihilation».] See A. Carrera, *La favola e il mondo vero: la questione della verità in Leopardi e Nietzsche*, in Id. (ed.), *Giacomo Leopardi, poeta e filosofo*, Atti del convegno dell'Istituto Italiano di Cultura, New York, 31 marzo - 1 aprile 1998, Cadmo, Fiesole 1999, pp. 81-108, esp. 104-105.

che sono più assai quelle cose che cospirano alla distruzione di ciascuno animale che non quelle che favoriscono la sua conservazione; in quanto naturalmente nella vita dell'animale occupa maggiore spazio la declinazione e consumazione ossia invecchiamento (il quale comincia nell'uomo anche prima dei trent'anni) che tutte le altre età insieme (v. Dial. della natura e di un Islandese, e Cantico del Gallo silvestre), e ciò anche in esso animale medesimo indipendentemente dall'azione delle cose di fuori; in quanto finalmente lo spazio della conservazione cioè durata di un animale è un nulla rispetto all'eternità del suo non essere.

[the end of the universal nature is the life of the universe, which equally consists in the production, conservation and destruction of its components; and then the destruction of each animal serves the end of that nature at least as much as the preservation of it, but also much more than the conservation, as it is seen that there are far more things that conspire to the destruction of each animal than things that promote its preservation; as in nature declination and consummation, i.e. aging (that in man begins even before the thirtieth year), take up more space than all other age groups together (see Dial. of Nature and an Icelander, and the Canticle on the Wild Cock), and it happens in the animal even independently of the action of external things, because eventually the space of conservation, i.e. duration of an animal, is nothing if compared to the eternity of its not being.]

We have additional confirmation of these theses in the *Zibaldone*, at the notes ## 4174-4178, written down in Bologna between April and May of 1826. One finds here the image of the garden, all «in state of *souffrance*,» the conviction that «each thing exists for something bad» and that

non gli uomini solamente, ma il genere umano fu e sarà sempre infelice di necessità. Non il genere umano solamente, ma tutti gli animali. Non gli animali soltanto, ma tutti gli esseri al loro modo.

[not men only, but humankind was and will always be necessarily unhappy. Not only humankind, but all animals. Not only animals, but all beings in their way.]

One also finds the idea that

l'universo non è che un neo, un bruscio in metafisica. L'esistenza, per sua natura ed essenza propria e generale, è un'imperfezione, un'irregolarità, una mostruosità.

[the universe is nothing but a mole, a grain of dust in metaphysics. Existence, by its very and general nature and essence, is an imperfection, an irregularity, a monstrosity.]³¹

³¹ Carrera, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-103, suggests a striking parallel between the *Canticle* and Nietzsche's theme of knowledge as a transitional and mendacious moment in world history: cf. the incipit of F. Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* [*Wahrheit und Lüge im außer-*

The theme of life as a momentary nonsense, that Leopardi had discovered and explored at length in his psychological theory of pleasure, is translated here into metaphysical (i.e. ontological) inessentiality and physical frailty. This conclusion, before receiving its physical foundation, had been achieved by Leopardi through the (reversed) cosmogony of the poetical conclusion of the *Canticle*. Only afterward will Leopardi give this poetic fable a conceptual and physical development. But already in the figural discourse of the *Canticle*, in its alienating substitutions and in the chilling final annihilation, a full-fledged dehumanized cosmic nihilism is displayed. In the following years Leopardi will provide conceptual consistency to this truth that he had already attained by figural, poetical strategies.

Abstract

In the Canticle of the Wild Cock (1824), one of his Moral Essays, Giacomo Leopardi portrays the possibility of a lifeless, post-biological and totally dehumanized world. Life itself and human self-consciousness are depicted as temporary anomalies within the economy of universal naked material existence. At this stage, not having yet at his disposal the conceptual instruments to give these conclusions a materialistic physical foundation, Leopardi reaches them through poetical and rhetorical strategies. In particular, he reverses the midrashic figure of a cosmic rooster: far from being a symbol of awakening and regeneration, this Cock proclaims a chilling message, according to the visual angle of a dehumanized universe, and invites us to dry up all hope. This paper analyzes: (i) cultural substitutions and reversals in Leopardi's discourse, (ii) his techniques of argumentation, and (iii) the relationship between the Canticle and Leopardi's nihilism and materialism.

moralischen Sinn]: «In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the highest and most mendacious minute of "world history" – yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die. One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature ...», trans. W. Kaufmann, Viking Penguin, New York 1976.

Edizioni ETS
Piazza Carrara, 16-19, I-56126 Pisa
info@edizioniets.com - www.edizioniets.com
Finito di stampare nel mese di novembre 2013