A Few Thoughts on Leopardi's Linguistic Philosophy

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The essay describes, on the one hand, how much technical and scientific knowledge played an important role in Leopardi's formation—demonstrated in the first place by the *Dissertazioni filosofiche* and Storia dell'Astronomia—and, on the other hand, highlights how they then influenced his philosophical reflection represented both by his materialist conception of man, and by the thoughts on language in a unitary vision of man and of his expressive abilities. As regards this last area, we have concentrated our analysis on two fundamental themes: 1. the distinction between words and terms; 2. the dialectical conception of language that holds together apparently antithetical aspects, such as those of vagueness and semantic uniqueness or beauty and usefulness.

Keywords: philosophy of language, stylistic, semantic, language and thought

Leopardi and the Scientific Knowledge

The methods and notions of scientific enquiry were always a part of Leopardi's consciousness, and were fundamental to his education, as his 1812 *Dissertazioni filosofiche* (Leopardi, 1995) attests. The themes it explores are many and varied, comprising both aspects of physics (such as motion, gravity and colliding bodies, as well as light and astronomy) and questions of speculative philosophy, like reflections on the souls of animals and on our capacity for critical thought and judgment.

Leopardi's education was in any case based on the Enlightenment model of the *philosophe*, and included the world of science without the separation between humanities and hard sciences typical of the intellectual endeavours of our day. His interest in the world of science influenced his thinking in two fundamental ways. The first concerns his method of developing ideas: the conception of the *Zibaldone* as a "laboratory notebook" reflected how scientific research was understood and practiced in his era. In fact, an appropriate epigraph to Leopardi's diary might be the motto of the Galilean Accademia del Cimento (Academy of the Experiment): "Trying and Trying Again". The second regards the themes and authors he prioritised in his studies, and it is no coincidence that the ones he referred to most were Algarotti, the populariser of Newtonianisim in Italy, and above all Galileo who, although rarely cited in the diary, Leopardi knew very well, as demonstrated by the 1827 *Crestomazia dellaprosa* in which he is far more present (Leopardi, 1968): The section of the book dedicated to "speculative philosophy" contains 16 passages by Galileo, drawn mainly from the *Assayer*, the *Dialogue concerning the two chief world systems* and *Pensierivari*. Galileo's oeuvre became a model not only in terms of style, but also of thinking—a sort of empirically-based "reasoned scepticism" with some elements of materialism (Polizzi, 2015, p. 20). Leopardi counted the great Pisan philosopher and physicist, along with Newton, Locke and Descartes, among the authors who had changed the face of philosophy[1].

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[1] See Leopardi (2013, p. 1857). As is customary, the page from the original is cited (henceforth indicated as *Zib*).

Buffon and Copernicus were also important. It seems clear that Buffon's principal work, the *Histoire naturelle*, was fundamental reading for Leopardi (D'Intino & Maccioni, 2016). The opus offered a complete, updated encyclopaedia from which he drew a great deal of information and stimulation on the themes most important to him: the criticism of anthropocentrism; the study of animals as a touchstone for better understanding human behavioural and cognitive dynamics; the conception of nature not as a rigid, definitive system but rather as a dynamic process in continuous transformation. As for Copernicus, Leopardi demonstrated a thorough knowledge of his work as early as 1813, when he dedicated a chapter of the *History of Astronomy* to him (1969). The book was long considered a lesser effort, but recent criticism tends to recognize its significance and value in reconstructing Leopardi's work method and early critical development (Crivelli, 1995). Copernicus is also the protagonist of the homonymous operetta (1983, pp. 513-536) that presents him as an example of the extent to which scientific discoveries can influence our conceptions of man and the universe: by demonstrating the falsity of the Ptolemaic system, he revealed a "plurality of worlds" and transformed our ideas of motion and Earth's place in the universe[2].

In addition to astronomy, Leopardi was also interested in chemistry from a young age, an interest sparked by the research efforts of Lavoisier, the Italian edition of whose *Trattato elementare di chimica* was in the library of Leopardi's family home, along with numerous collections of manuals and volumes that were among the most up-to-date descriptions of studies on the subject at the time (Crivelli, 1995). Chemistry played two meaningful roles: First, in the process that led on the one hand to a disengagement from the Aristotelian conception of nature, and on the other hand to an unreserved acceptance of the Newtonian system; and second, in his conception of materialism, which determined his continuing, long-term association with various strains of Enlightenment philosophy (Casini, 2018). "Leopardi's elected maestros of philosophy were always the 18th-century materialists and sensists, who he came to know first through their Catholic adversaries, and then directly" (Timpanaro, 1969, pp. 183-185). This influence is particularly evident in the *Frammento apocrifo di Stratone da Lampsaco* (Leopardi, 1983), which alludes to the existence of a universal matter made up of a limited number of elements which, differentiating themselves from one another and in continuous movement, give rise to various and ever-varying forms. Thus, the destruction of earlier forms is continuously compensated by the production of new formations[3]. This dialectical conception of matter resonated in more than one respect with Epicureanism, by way of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, which was one of the author's essential reference points (Timpanaro, 1995). Strato advanced the thesis of the spontaneity and creative activity intrinsic to matter, which was clearly formulated in Leopardi's diary with a decidedly atheistic significance, going beyond the body/soul dichotomy that was so deeply rooted in western philosophy[4].

His affinity with the *philosophes*—from Rousseau to Condillacto D'Alembert—is further confirmed by the recurrent oppositional use in the *Zibaldone* of the terms "system" and "systematic". Leopardi used the latter term to refer to an inductive technique borrowed from the experimental scientific method, which endeavoured to make connections between different phenomena, and which he recognised as extremely useful. He used "system" to indicate a rigid deductive construction constituted by pre-established principles, typical of the Cartesian rationalism from which he had decidedly distanced himself[5].

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[2] *Zib.*, p. 975.
[3] *Zib.*, pp. 630-631.
[4] *Zib.*, p. 4288. On this point, I allow direct readers to Prato (2012).
[5] *Zib.*, pp. 946-948 and pp. 1089-1091.

The Philosophy of Language

Leopardi's understanding of the specific forms and methods of experimental research had a comprehensive influence on the philosophical considerations he expounded in *Operette morali* and the *Zibaldone*, and also contributed to the development of a numerous series of thoughts, written between 1820 and 1823, on the theme of language and languages and their cognitive and identity-building functions (Basile, 2018). These ideas have long been neglected and underappreciated by Leopardi scholars, some of whom considered them unsystematic and valid more as a prefiguration of his later stylistic choices than for their theoretical importance, following Croce's conception of poetry as pure intuition (Croce, 1922). Croce, as we know, had no interest at all in Leopardi as a philosopher, and even compared his *Operette* with Monaldo's *Dialoghetti*, thus lumping one of the most meaningful and profound works of Italian literature in with a rather unoriginal work of mere compilation.

The importance and value of his many writings on language and languages[6] only began to gain recognition in the second half of the 20th century, with scholars highlighting some of their most significant points, which continue to be of great interest to 21st century readers: the arbitrariness and semantic indeterminacy of the linguistic sign; the theory of metaphor; the theory of translation; and the cognitive function of language. Developing these themes, Leopardi recognised that human thinking is linguistic thinking, with regard to which the word is not an external symbol that expresses a predetermined idea, but rather a part of its very constitution and the function of language in thought is not instrumental, but rather constitutive[7]. Words participate in the organization of thought, which would not exist without them. To objectivise itself and be "present" in the mind, thought requires the material support of words, which, as signs, can be perceived through the senses. When we think, we use words—even though we do not pronounce them, we hear them in our minds. This interpretation is perfectly in line with the semiotics of the sensists, like Condillac, for example, for whom thought is inseparable from signs, and it is far removed from a conventional, instrumentalist view of language.

Scientific knowledge also played a significant role in the development of his poetic theory of the difference between "terms" and "words", reprised from Beccaria's 1770 *Ricerche intorno alla natura dello stile* (Beccaria, 1958, pp. 191-336), and for which Leopardi must also have taken inspiration from Cesarotti's 1785 *Saggio sulla filosofia delle lingue* di Cesarotti[8]. This distinction reflects the analogous contraposition between the common and poetic use of language on one hand, and the use of technical and scientific languages on the other. The former is based on the semantic indeterminacy of words which depends on the context in which they are used, as well as the various intentions and mentalities of the user; this vagueness of meaning constitutes the natural condition for verbalization and has an essential aesthetic value peculiar to poetry and literature[9].

The second way in which language functions is distinguished by preciseness and delimitation of meaning, the semantic univocality that determines and defines "the thing from all sides"[10]. This is why terms are the link between rational, scientific argumentation and terminological precision; their presence is essential to the constitution of a "Universal European Dictionary", which was of great importance to Leopardi since, comprising the lexicon of philosophy and of the exact sciences, represents the only real precondition for the

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[6] See Gensini (1984). This study is still today the only true monograph dedicated to this important aspect of our author's thinking.
[7] *Zib.*, p. 1657.
[8] A modern edition of Cesarotti's text is in Puppo (1966).
[9] *Zib.*, p. 1235.
[10] *Zib.*, pp. 109-110.

development and improvement of knowledge[11]. A specific class of terms would correspond to "Europeisms"[12] which are part of a common scholarly language. Purist tradition—which Leopardi repeatedly criticised—kept this type of nomenclature out of the Italian language at the time, and this meant that Italian culture was isolated with regard to modern approaches to science and philosophy. So, insisting on the importance of sectorial languages (like those of chemistry and economics) was also a way to de-provincialise the Italian language and make it better suited for participation in discussions in progress in more advanced Europe (Nencioni, 1987).

"Terms" depend on "words" in that they are a sub-category of lexical elements constructed that spring from a non-rigidly-established origin (Gensini, 1998, p. XXXVII): The mobility and semantic freedom of language is what permits its formal restriction. In this dialectical conception of language, these two opposite poles, maximum and minimum semantic freedom, which in turn reflect the antithetical relationship between imagination and reason, can co-exist, as they are both indispensable for its proper functioning[13].

Leopardi shows great sensitivity regarding these two aspects of language, recognizing them as equally important, and being aware of the fact that the vagueness of "words" and the univocality of "terms" contribute in different but complementary ways to the vividness and richness of language. His valorisation of "terms" stems from his naturalism, which is based on a deep understanding of the uniqueness and complexity of the natural, physical and human world (Bollati, 1968, p. XCI). Leopardi does not adhere to the ideal of a strictly poetic language based on the free dynamics of words, but on the contrary, he observes that the best of all languages is the one that manages to hold together the two only apparently irreconcilable poles of the univocality and the indeterminacy of meaning[14].

The Universal Language

On this point, it is important to clearly distinguish the universality of terms from the concept of a universal language; the two cannot be confused, because terms pertain to specific sectors of a historical-natural language, while "universal language" (which is what it is), being the fruit of artifice and demanding to replace actual languages, ends up being an example of an objectionable cultural and expressive homogenisation. In fact, Leopardi was against the institution of a universal language, which he considered a "chimera", an artifice, the consequence of "metaphysical" reason's demand to replace the natural variety of imagination with an abstract uniformity. Such a language, modelled solely on reason, would be poorer and sparser than any other spoken language in the world[15], and would also be useless, given that with use, it would immediately tend to differentiate itself and lose its uniformity[16].

Leopardi criticised what had been one of the most important themes of Enlightenment culture since the early 17th century, affirmed by authors of the calibre of Descartes, Mersenne, Kircher, Leibniz, and Wilkins (Eco, 1993), with particular reference to Giovanni Andrés' *Dell'origine, progressi e statoattuale di ogniletteratura* (1783-1800) and Soave's *Saggio sulla formazione di una lingua universale* published in the appendix to the translation of Locke's essay which he edited, and which is cited several times in Leopardi's

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[11] *Zib*., pp. 1224-1228.
[12] *Zib*., p. 1213.
[13] *Zib*., pp. 2131-2132.
[14] *Zib*., p. 643.
[15] *Zib*., p. 3253.
[16] *Zib*., p. 3261. The affinity between philosophy and poetry is frequently reiterated in both the *Zibaldone* and *Il Parini ovvero della gloria* where it plays a fundamental role in the complex argumentative thread of the text.

diary (Soave, 1825). These themes still resonate today, demonstrating the topicality of Leopardian thinking both at the strictly linguistic level and in terms of language and culture's connections with the socio-political ethos of a nation.

Conclusion

The dichotomy between nature and reason, between body and soul, like that between indeterminacy and univocality of meaning in a language, reflects the analogous contradiction between poetry and philosophy, which has had great relevance in our long cultural tradition. Leopardi rejected this dichotomic view, and even in the case of the relationship between poetry and philosophy, took a unified approach based on his conception of imagination. As a cognitive faculty, imagination proves necessary to both poetry and philosophy: The poet and the philosopher share a talent for finding links between the most diverse things, for discovering new points of view from which to observe the exterior world[17]. Philosophy cannot do without poetry, because historically, philosophy was derived from poetry—thought, in its primitive form, wrapped in imagination[18].

The philosophy Leopardi refers to in this instance is a mixture of imagination and sentiment, a "half-philosophy"[19]—the models for which include Plato, Socrates, Pascal and Rousseau[20]—that maintains a practical concreteness, precisely because it is tied to the sphere of passions and the senses. Leopardi would have shared Herder's intent to contrast abstract philosophy with the idealism of a philosophy connected to human practice, and not circumscribed within all-encompassing, omni-resolving systems. Leopardi opposes the analytical spirit that aims to dissect the world without truly understanding it with that of the philosopher-poet who is able to grasp the truth of things with a single glance[21]. And this unifying view of human nature—operating in the linguistic, gnoseological and ontological spheres—is an element of originality in Leopardi's oeuvre that remains decidedly relevant today, for us, his 21st century readers.

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[17] *Zib.*, pp. 1650-1651. The affinity between philosophy and poetry is frequently reiterated in both the *Zibaldone* and *Il Parini ovvero della gloria* where it plays a fundamental role in the complex argumentative thread of the text.

[18] *Zib.*, pp. 2939-2941.

[19] *Zib.*, p. 520.

[20] *Zib.*, pp. 1359-1360, and p. 3245.

[21] *Zib.*, p. 1855.

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