

Nietzsche's *Zukunftsphilologie*: Leopardi, Philology, History*

Angela Matilde Capodivacca

When the past speaks it always speaks as an oracle: Only if you are an architect of the future and know the present will you understand it.

--Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*

Why do we have to learn so much history? What's wrong with the future?

--Marcy in the movie *Legally Blonde 2* 0:34:46-50

In November 1492, Politian gave his inaugural lecture, *Lamia*, for a course on Aristotelian philosophy in which he advocated a new understanding of philology.¹ In this address, Politian redefined the relationship between philology, literature, and philosophy by affirming the preeminence of what he calls the *grammaticus* (grammarian, philologist)² over the philosopher as the best interpreter of all texts, philosophical works included. Politian writes:

Indeed, the functions of philologists are such that they examine and explain in detail every category of writers – poets, historians, orators, philosophers, medical doctors, and jurisconsults. Our age, knowing little about antiquity, has fenced the philologist in, within an exceedingly small circle. But among the ancients, once, this class of men had so much authority that philologists alone were the censors and critics of all writers. (2010, 245)

For Politian, philology is the art of reading through the past: philosophical analysis, history, anthropology, sociology, and so on are but ancillary to it.

Almost four hundred years later, in 1869, Friedrich Nietzsche made a similar move

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¹ Such a redefinition of the relationship between the linguistic-literary domain traditionally assigned to grammar, and philosophical investigation was partly necessitated by Politian's precarious position within the disciplinary structure of the University of Florence: hired to teach rhetoric, he was now crossing boundaries by lecturing on what we would today call analytical philosophy. For the *Lamia*, see Poliziano (1986 and 2010).

² As Aldo Scaglione has shown, Politian's use of the term *grammaticus* in this passage is idiosyncratic, coinciding with what we might now call a philologist: "Politian professes to be a *grammaticus* in the noblest and broadest sense in which we now apply the very term 'philologist' to the humanists.... In fact, the literary scholar, the philologist or *grammaticus*, is the true hero of Italian *Quattrocento* humanism" (1961, 62, 68).

in his inaugural address at the University of Basel, which had hired him, despite the lack of a doctoral degree, as professor of Greek language and literature. On May 28, Nietzsche gave his inaugural lecture, *Über die Persönlichkeit Homers* (On the Personality of Homer), subsequently published as *Homer und die klassische Philologie* (Homer and Classical Philology). The lecture aimed to provide a reassessment of the Homeric question in light of Nietzsche's larger reconsideration of the aims, modes, and methods of philological inquiry. Nietzsche writes: "It is but right that a philologist should describe his end and the means to it in the short formula of a confession of faith; and let this be done in the saying of Seneca which I thus reverse: 'philosophia facta est quae philologia fuit'" (1909; what was once philology has now been made into philosophy). Nietzsche reverses Seneca's famous assessment of the role of contemporary philology "quae philosophia fuit facta philologia est,"³ to reinscribe the relationship between philology, literature and philosophy. For Seneca, in fact, this statement is used as a reproach to those young students who 'nowadays' come to their teachers no longer in search of enlightenment for their minds but only to develop their wits and have thus transformed philosophy into 'mere' philology. Nietzsche saw his appointment as enabling a possible reversal of the relationship between the two disciplines, whereby philology would become primary for an overarching philosophical enterprise. Nietzsche concludes the lecture advocating "that each and every philological activity should be surrounded and limited by a philosophical world view" (1909).

After this lecture, Nietzsche eventually abandoned the plan to compose a standard philological volume with his colleague Hermann Usener and began his work on *Geburt der Tragödie* (*The Birth of Tragedy*), which presents a definitive departure from a standard philological approach, opening philology up to philosophy and poetry. For Nietzsche, as for Politian, philology embraces not only the history of language and of literature, but also that of historical events, philosophy, and politics, becoming a hermeneutics of history, and the basis for what he would later call 'genealogy.' The publication of *The Birth of Tragedy* on January 2, 1872, was received with silence and resentment in contemporary philological circles. Most famously, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, soon to become one of the most authoritative German philologists (and the teacher of Paul Oskar Kristeller), wrote a derisive thirty-two page review of the work titled *Zukunftsphilologie* (*Philology of the Future*).⁴ While for

³ Seneca writes: "There are indeed mistakes made, through the fault of our advisers, who teach us how to debate and not how to live; there are also mistakes made by the pupils, who come to their teachers to develop, not their souls, but their wits. Thus the study of wisdom has become the study of words [quae philosophia fuit facta philologia est]" (1925, III, 244-45). Notably, in this same letter, Seneca also envisions a "grammaticus futurus" (ibid.), a phrase that could be translated, borrowing from Nietzsche, as "the philologist of the future."

⁴ Rohde's favorable review of *Geburt der Tragödie* appeared on May 26. Four days later, von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff published his harsh criticism of Nietzsche's book, entitled *Zukunftsphilologie!* [*Philology of the Future!*]. Tellingly, he attacked Nietzsche's book on strictly philological grounds, whereas Rohde recommended the book as a philosophical work. Rohde's reply to Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, entitled *Afterphilologie* [literally "Ass-Philology"], appeared in mid-October. In a final reply, Wilamowitz-Moellendorff published a new pamphlet on February 21 called *Zukunftsphilologie II* [*Philology of the Future II*]. Nietzsche comments in a letter to Rohde dated October 25, 1872 on how the book was received "In Leipzig, there reigns *one* opinion about my book: according to this the excellent Usener, whom I so much respect, upon questioning from his students, has let slip [*verrath*], 'it is mere nonsense, of which nothing can be made: anybody who has written such a thing is dead as a scholar.' It is as though I had

Wilamowitz-Moellendorff the term *Zukunftsphilologie* was meant mockingly as a way of attacking Nietzsche's credibility as a philologist and ridiculing his observations on classical works, Nietzsche co-opted the term and in his notebooks he announced plans to write a meditation on the philologist of the future (1980, III, 43).

In *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future*, James Porter has recently argued that Wilamowitz-Moellendorff's *Zukunftsphilologie* is indeed crucial to Nietzsche's work. For Porter, Nietzsche does not abandon philology after the bad reception of his work on the development of the tragic mode, but, rather, tries to sketch a skeptical counter-philology understood as the privileged method for bringing into focus the modern historical imagination. Porter remarks, "one of [Nietzsche's] central concerns throughout his career...was to determine the ways in which philology and philosophy are symptomatic of modern cultural habits, ideologies, and imaginings" (2000, 4). It is, in this sense, that for Porter, Nietzsche engages throughout his career in a critique of modernity:

What is striking and original in Nietzsche's case is the way he succeeds in fusing the critique of modern ideology with a critique of classical philology, as if the one phenomenon were immediately reflected in the other. The stuff of the classics, he seems to be saying in all of his philology (with varying degrees of explicitness), gives us a unique purchase on modernity – its imagined identity and its aesthetically fashioned self-image. (ibid., 179)

Porter's study has the great benefit of reasserting the importance of philological reflections for Nietzsche's writing. Yet, his lack of attention to Italian authors – and in particular to Giacomo Leopardi – limits him chronologically to Nietzsche's early writings, and prevents him from recognizing how Nietzsche's approach to philology leads to a critique of the prevailing nineteenth century conceptions of history, which eventually brings about what he considered the turning point in the development of his thought: the idea of eternal return. By looking closely at how Nietzsche portrays his relationship to Leopardi, it becomes apparent that the critique of philology involves a thorough rethinking of the discipline of history throughout his oeuvre, whereby the "philologist of the future" becomes the philosopher of the future.

The first part of this essay, then, examines the importance of Leopardi for Nietzsche qua philologist. Rather than a way of downplaying the influence of Leopardi's thought on Nietzsche, I argue, the focus on philology is of special importance. Leopardi uses the issue of philology in both his little-known satirical epic, the *Paralipomeni* (treated in section i), and in the poem addressed to *Angelo Mai* (section ii) to present a critique of contemporary cultural, historical and political practices with a specific focus on language as the site of memory and of the self. Leopardi the critic focuses on how the practice of philology has become anachronistic: no longer connected to realms of philosophy, art, and poetry, in the modern era, philology had entered the realm of science and was no longer understood as an artistic production involving the imagination, but rather as a set

committed a crime; there has been ten months of silence now, because everybody believes himself to be so far beyond my book, that there is not a word to be wasted on it" (Whitman 1986, 455).

of tools employed to recover a “true” past. The science of philology is thus “anachronistic” in assuming that the past can be recovered by means of universal, rational, and objective skills, without the aid of the imagination.

By contrast, we could think of Leopardi’s conception of philology as “anachronic” following Sean Guard’s assessment of the necessary untimeliness (“anachrony”) of philology. The philologist, for Guard, is confronted with multiple temporalities in conflict, beginning with the ‘now’ of the textual encounter and the ‘then’ of textual production (2010, 12). Leopardi’s anachrony consists in emphasizing that, rather than being dialectically reconcilable, the antinomies of philology persist, undoing any simple conceptual structure or ideological ordering of time. Through the figure of the philologist as *Columbus Novus*, Leopardi advances an understanding of philology that sees time itself as an artistic creation that is not purely rational but also requires the use of the imagination. From this perspective, the philologist does not reconstruct the past but generates it as a dimension of the future.

Nietzsche, then, figures Leopardi as the ideal philologist, in order to make a claim similar to that of the Italian poet: philology needs to be redefined as a hermeneutical investigation of history that considers signs as anachronic productions, whose paradoxical temporality reflects the convergence and the dissonance between past and future.⁵ For both Leopardi and Nietzsche, the anachrony of philology requires a radical investigation of the relationship between self and history that would question both providential eschatology, and a simple substitution of the now as a quasi-transcendental telos in itself. Nietzsche invokes Leopardi as a prefiguration of the philologist of the future whose interpretation effects a doubling or bending of time: a pointing backward and forward that reactivates the past as a meaningful event for the life of the present, eschewing a teleological and/or monumental understanding of history.

The second part of the essay argues that Nietzsche’s reflections on Leopardi’s philology in the compilation of notes known as *We Philologists* are parallel to the critique of history presented in the second Untimely Meditation, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* ([1874] 1983; *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*; henceforth UM2), wherein Leopardi becomes the exemplar of an “over-historical” approach (treated in section iii). I would like to propose that the Nietzschean emphasis on the future found in both the notes on philology and in UM2, evolves in dialogue with Leopardi’s reflections on the meaning of philology and history, culminating in the *Gay Science* with the wager of the eternal return (treated in section iv). Like the “philology of the future,” and the “over-historical” approach, the idea of the eternal return is fundamentally anachronic, folding the past and future into the present. From this configuration, “genealogy” emerges as the method of a philology of the future, which pits a new understanding of time against a traditionally providential eschatology. Unlike Hegel’s dialectics of historical development and Darwin’s evolutionary concept of history, Nietzsche’s philology of the future questions the very project of finding the *arche*, the *Ursprung*, or point of origin and absolute beginning.⁶ Similarly in *Zarathustra*

⁵ My usage of the word “anachronic” here is indebted to Nagel and Wood (2010). In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida speaks of anachrony as “radical untimeliness, a temporality situated at the disjuncture of the present between the going by of what was and the arrival of what is coming” (1994, 25).

⁶ On Nietzsche’s critique of origins and his genealogical project see Foucault (1971). For Foucault, Nietzsche’s genealogical method criticizes the pursuit of the origins: “because it is an attempt to capture the

(as we will see in section v), the “eternal return” is presented as an alternative historical and philological mode that makes possible the “philosophy of the future,” which emerges as an answer to Leopardi’s pessimism. The “philosopher of the future” overcomes what he calls the “spirit of revenge” or *ressentiment* that bids the “over-historical” man to understand being as struggling against time, and thus pursue an eschatological perspective. In willing the eternal return, Zarathustra overcomes the “over-historical” stance against the past by discovering how, paradoxically, the past empowers the individual’s will to overcome that same past, making the singular individual present in the end of all history.

The second part of this essay argues that all three of the major formulations of Nietzsche’s eternal return – in UM2, *Gay Science*, and *Zarathustra* – are connected to Leopardi, thus underlining the continuity between the figure of the philologist of the future and the philosopher of the future. I do not, however, intend to trace the origin of the idea of the eternal return in Nietzsche; rather, I think that focusing on Leopardi might serve to underline how this idea evolves into a new hermeneutical approach to time and history. The eternal recurrence has been variously understood as a metaphysical stance (Heidegger 1979, 237), a thought-experiment (Arendt 1978, 2: 166), a game of make-believe (Sartre 1988, 379-380), an ethical demand (Hunt 1991), “the great selective thought” (Deleuze 1983, 68-69), or a generative re-mystification (Klossowski 1997). A close look at the Leopardian genealogy of Nietzsche’s thinking about the philology and history of the future shows that it *also* constitutes a hermeneutical perspective on the relationship between self and time. In turn, Nietzsche’s insights concerning Leopardi *qua* philologist of the future serve to shed light both on Leopardi’s critique of philology, still largely to be explored, and on his conception of history, bringing into the foreground works previously little known in the English-speaking world such as the *Paralipomeni*. Notably, Nietzsche’s predilection for the Leopardian critique of traditional philology poses a preemptive challenge to the subsequent debate among Benedetto Croce, Giovanni Gentile, and Antonio Gramsci concerning Renaissance historiography as well to even later ones on the same topic (e.g. Martin Heidegger vs. Ernesto Grassi, and Eugenio Garin vs. Paul Oskar Kristeller).

exact, and pure, [transhistorical, immanent] essence of things,” it assumes a world of forms preexisting the world of accident and succession i.e., history. But he who listens to history finds that things have no pre-existing essence, or an essence fabricated piecemeal from alien forms” (1984, 78). See also Douglas Thomas, who shows how in the *Genealogy of Morals*, “Nietzsche plays with these words extensively to demonstrate that the only effective way to look at the past is based on its dual character. The first part of this (*Herkunft*) looks at the past to liberate the future, the second (*Entstehung*) looks at the future in terms of the past. Neither represents an absolute beginning or origin (*Ursprung*). Nietzsche never lets the reader off that easily. At several points in the *Genealogy*, where it is clear he refers either to *Herkunft* or *Entstehung*, he substitutes *Ursprung*. This is what I refer to as collapsing the terms. By collapsing these ideas together, Nietzsche is in essence saying that what has always been considered an origin is nothing more than a beginning found in descent (*Herkunft*) or arising (*Entstehung*)” (1993, 105). Foucault himself acknowledges that the terminological distinction between *Ursprung* and *Herkunft* isn’t sustained by Nietzsche (1984).

i. *Leopardi qua Philologist*

Philologiae inter Italos rarum

Ac splendidum lumen, Leopardus

(Among the Italians, Leopardi is philology's

Exceptional, and shining light)

-- Jean François Boissonade de Fontarabie⁷

In 1872 Nietzsche was asked by Hans von Bülow to translate the *Operette morali* by virtue of the German philosopher being a “kindred spirit” to the Italian poet.⁸ Bülow writes to Nietzsche in a letter of November 1, 1874: “Schopenhauer’s great Latin brother Leopardi is still waiting to be introduced to our nation.... But a translation won’t be enough, as they say: a sympathetic fellow thinker is needed [*es bedarf eines Nach-und Mit-Denker*]” (1980, II, 601). Bülow further suggests that Nietzsche might play the same role for Leopardi as Schlegel did in disseminating Shakespeare’s work, in the process exerting “a decisive influence on the culture of the ‘nation’” (Rennie 2005, 274). In a letter written on January 2, 1875, Nietzsche declines, adducing his poor health and limited knowledge of the Italian language: “I myself know Italian not very well and in general, despite being a philologist, I am not a man well versed in languages (German is difficult enough for me).” In the same letter, however, he states that whenever he listens to a passage of Leopardi, he is overtaken by “great surprise and admiration” (1980, V, 5).

While, as scholars have often remarked, Nietzsche’s admiration for Leopardi might very well stem from an affinity of spirit with a sympathetic fellow thinker,⁹ it is important to note that in this letter Nietzsche describes himself as a philologist and that it is from this perspective that he reacts so strongly to Leopardi’s work. This is a first telling clue that the impact of Leopardi qua philologist on Nietzsche should not be disregarded. In fact, whereas the scholars who engage in the issue of Leopardi’s relationship to Nietzsche tend to downplay this question, in the early seventies the name of Leopardi begins to appear frequently in Nietzsche’s writing precisely when he is discussing philology.¹⁰

⁷ Cited as the epigraph in Timpanaro 1978. Translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

⁸ Antimo Negri sees echoes of Leopardi in Nietzsche’s letters as early as 1869, in answer to Rohde’s mention of the Italian poet in a letter from November 5, 1869. While it is possible that Nietzsche might have known Leopardi’s works earlier either indirectly (e.g. through Schopenhauer) or directly, the first mention of Leopardi’s name appears in a letter to Erwin Rohde dated April 11, 1872 (1980, III, 306). According to Max Oehler (Nietzsche 1942, 42), Nietzsche had in his library the Le Monnier edition of Leopardi’s works edited by Antonio Ranieri from 1845 (Leopardi 1845-1853) and the German translation by Paul Heyse (Leopardi 1878).

⁹ See Giuseppe Gabetti (1923-4), Giuseppe Ungaretti (1970, 505-506), Lorenzo Giusso (1933, 216-17), Adriano Tilgher (1940), Antonio Negri (1987, 324), Hans Blumenberg (1969, 137-38), Antimo Negri (1994), Margherita Heyer-Caput (1991), Nicholas Rennie (2005). A detailed annotated bibliography on the relationship between Leopardi and Nietzsche up until 1994 is offered by Antimo Negri (1994, 39-68).

¹⁰ For instance, Antimo Negri affirms that Nietzsche’s evaluation of Leopardi qua philologist is “una supervalutazione” (1994, 18; an ‘over-evaluation’), and Timpanaro has rightly questioned which and how many of Leopardi’s philological efforts Nietzsche could have known, maintaining that at the origin of Nietzsche’s praises there is a confusion between Leopardi as philologist and as a classicizing writer (1978, 187-89).

Similarly, it should be underscored that Leopardi first becomes prominent in Nietzsche's work in his notes on philology (2006b). Nietzsche takes Leopardi as an emblem to be set against German contemporary philological practices, saying that "Besides the large number of unqualified philologists there is, on the other hand, a number of what may be called born philologists, who for some reason or other are prevented from becoming such.... Leopardi is the modern ideal of a philologist: The German philologists can do nothing!" (1911, 10). Rather than an isolated instance, this reflects a much wider concern with the methods and purposes of contemporary philology. Indeed, far from being a way to minimize Leopardi's contributions as a philosopher, as Severino (1990) maintains, or from merely expressing detached admiration for Leopardi's classicism, Nietzsche's praises of the Italian *qua* philologist deserve serious consideration in their own right.¹¹

For Nietzsche, contemporary German philologists are nothing but "babblers and triflers, ugly-looking creatures, stammerers, filthy pedants of everyday occurrences, quibblers and scarecrows, unfitted for the symbolical, ardent slaves of the State, Christians in disguise, philistines" (1911, 94). By contrast, the figure of Leopardi serves Nietzsche's need to envision a modern philologist who still reflects the great Italian tradition stretching back to the Renaissance and certainly including Politian. Nietzsche writes: "Could philology as knowledge still exist if its servants were not just salaried employees? In Italy there were true philologists. Who can possibly compare, for example, a German with Leopardi?" (1980, III, 56). Nietzsche seems to individuate Leopardi as an exemplar of this tradition when he writes in *The Gay Science*: "Chamfort, a man who was rich in depths and backgrounds of the soul – gloomy, suffering, ardent – a thinker who found laughter necessary as a remedy against life and who nearly considered himself lost in those days he had not laughed – seems much more like an Italian, related to Dante and Leopardi, than a Frenchman!" (Aphorism 95 [2001, 92]).¹² The Burckhardtian idealization of what Giambattista Vico calls the *sapientia italorum*, serves the purpose of marking a pre-modern space where philology embraced both poetry and philosophy.¹³

In the meditation on philology, published posthumously but written simultaneously with the UM2, Nietzsche asserts: "The decline of the poet-scholars is due in great part to their own corruption: their type is continually arising again; Goethe and Leopardi, for example, belong to it. Behind them plod the philologist-savants" (1980, VIII, 44). As is apparent in these notes, Nietzsche conflates Leopardi's vocation as philologist with his

¹¹ Severino interprets Nietzsche's comments as a way of downplaying his debt to Leopardi's philosophical contributions (1990, 20). Rennie feels instead that Severino "overestimates Nietzsche's awareness of Leopardi's 'philosophical contributions'" (2005, 272). For my part, I argue that the issue of philology is important in itself, and should not be read either in terms of or in contrast to philosophy.

¹² Sebastien-Roch Nicolas de Chamfort (1741–94) was a French writer, best known for witty and satirical aphorisms.

¹³ While a direct influence of Vico on Nietzsche's works remains doubtful, it is noteworthy that in *De Antiquissima Sapientia Italorum* (1710; On the Ancient Wisdom of the Italians) Vico links philosophy to philology in opposition to Descartes and rationalism. Like Politian, Vico uses the term 'philology' as a broad label, rather than in a narrow linguistic sense: "Philology is the study of speech and it treats of words and their history, then shows their origin and progress, and so determines the ages of languages, thus revealing their properties, changes, and conventions. But since the ideas of things are represented by words, philology must first treat the history of things, whence it appears that philologists study human governments, customs, laws, institutions, intellectual disciplines, and the mechanical arts" (Croce and Nicolini 1947-1948, 2: 308).

role as ‘poet-philosopher’ and a “thinking poet” (1980, III, 128), calling him in *We Philologists* “perhaps the greatest stylist of the century” (1911, 63, cf. 49).¹⁴ More precisely, Nietzsche sees in Leopardi a particular expression of what he describes as a specific Italian tradition that privileges the imagination as the point of encounter between philosophy and poetry.¹⁵ In a note from 1874, Nietzsche writes that by virtue of his imagination and his being a poet-philosopher, Leopardi’s German counterpart, Arthur Schopenhauer, “could have been born among Italians” (1980, VII, 810).¹⁶ In sum, Nietzsche’s admiration for Leopardi stems from his sense that the Italian’s work constitutes a privileged meeting place for philology, philosophy, and poetry.

It was in this vein that Pietro Giordani began his preface to Leopardi’s *Studi filologici*: “Giacomo Leopardi, che avete conosciuto e ammirato e amato, fu (come ben sapete) sommo poeta, sommo filosofo, sommo filologo” (1845, vii; Giacomo Leopardi, whom you have known, admired and loved, was [as you know well], a supreme poet, a supreme philosopher, and a supreme philologist).¹⁷ Giordani is probably exaggerating in placing Leopardi’s philological contributions on par with his poetic and philosophical efforts. Indeed, most scholars think that Leopardi abandoned his philological activity in 1815, though Timpanaro appropriately remarks that the interest in philology is never completely left behind, given that in 1828 he was still reading and commenting on philological works (1978, 204). In any case, as we have just seen, it would be a mistake to dismiss Leopardi’s influence on Nietzsche’s critique of philosophy. Indeed it is precisely the intersection of the three fields mentioned by Giordani that is responsible for Nietzsche’s interest in Leopardi.¹⁸ At the same time, it would be equally reductive to consider Nietzsche’s interest in Leopardi qua philologist as limited to Leopardi’s philological contributions *stricte dictu*, given Nietzsche’s own broad understanding both of what counted as philology, and of what constituted the Italian philological tradition as embodied by Leopardi. Indeed, I hope to show that it is Leopardi’s critical approach to philology that Nietzsche shares and admires. Both thinkers use philology as a critical standpoint to analyze the mores of their society. Like Nietzsche, Leopardi’s philological interests stem from and stand for a critical approach to history that augurs a critique of modernity.

¹⁴ On the fundamental importance of the issue of style for Nietzsche, see Nehamas (1985). In a related vein, Giuseppe Mazzotta writes, “Leopardi’s Romanticism of pathos and empathy might well trace an alternate sensibility to – though not without complicity in – the dominant sadomasochism of the major European paradigms. This sensibility is reflected in Leopardi’s simultaneously passionate and meditative style of writing, a mixture of aphorisms and epigrammatic phrases with philosophical reflections about nature, time, beauty, nothingness” (2011, 173).

¹⁵ Celenza notes the importance of the future as one of the main tenets of Burckhardt’s vision of historiography (2004, 1). On the relationship between Nietzsche and Burckhardt, see Antonio Negri (1987, 10; 323; 348; 377; 392). Gossman argues that Burckhardt’s lectures on the Greeks might have been influenced by Nietzsche (2000, 251-95). See also the following works: Avon Martin (1945); Salin (1948).

¹⁶ The connection between Schopenhauer and Leopardi is well established. Francesco De Sanctis’ seminal essay, “Schopenhauer e Leopardi,” the first of such studies, was published in December 1858 (1983) and known to Schopenhauer himself, who comments in a letter to Ernst Otto Linder the following year that he had read it twice and greatly appreciated it, although he thought that De Sanctis did not give enough credit to Leopardi.

¹⁷ Timpanaro thinks Nietzsche might have read this article (1978, 187-189).

¹⁸ On the relationship between prose and poetry, Leopardi writes in a letter to Monaldo: “Io le giuro che l’intenzione mia fu di far poesia in prosa, come s’usa oggi; e però seguire ora una mitologia ed ora un’altra, ad arbitrio; come si fa in versi” (1998, I, 1362).

In this regard, Leopardi's last work, the *Paralipomeni of the Batracomachia*, completed the night before the poet's death (and published in 1842),¹⁹ is particularly significant. Under the guise of a philological discovery Leopardi writes a scathing critical analysis of the nationalistic aims he sees at the root of the development of the German philological tradition. Leopardi, who had translated in 1815, and then again in 1821-2, and 1826, the pseudo-Homeric poem of the fabulous battle between mice and frogs, feigns having found part of the story which had been omitted from the transmitted text.

Through the fiction of a philological discovery, and the allegorical fable it contains, Leopardi elaborates a mock epic that indicts the failure of the revolutionary movements in Naples. As the metadiegetic apparatus makes clear, however, the *Paralipomeni* offers a critique not only of contemporary historical events, and in particular the ineffectiveness of contemporary revolutionary movements to engender real political change, but also of the philological profession it mimics. For instance, the major conflict in the poem originates because of a German philologist:

Ma un tedesco filologo, di quelli
che mostran che il legnaggio e l'idioma
tedesco e il greco un dì furon fratelli,
anzi un solo in principio, e che fu Roma
germanica città, con molti e belli
ragionamenti e con un bel diploma
prova che lunga pezza era già valica
che fra' topi vigea la legge salica.

Che non provan sistemi e congetture
e teorie dell'alemannia gente?
Per lor, non tanto nelle cose oscure
l'un dì tutto sappiamo, l'altro niente,
ma nelle chiare ancor dubbi e paure
e caligin si crea continuamente:
pur manifesto si conosce in tutto
che di seme tedesco il mondo è frutto.
(*Paralipomeni*, I v. 121)

(But a German philologist, the kind
who shows that German lineage and speech
once were brothers to the Greek –
indeed the same, in the beginning – and Rome

¹⁹ Francesco Paolo Luiso (1899) has published the letters between Antonio Ranieri and Felice Le Monnier in which they speak of the *Paralipomeni* and the difficulty of publishing “la più pericolosa fra le scritture inedite del Leopardi” (12; the most dangerous among Leopardi's yet to be published works) in Italy because of censorship. Having lost hope of ever publishing the work in Italy, Ranieri sent it to Baudry to be published in Paris. Subsequently, Le Monnier would buy the rights to the Parisian edition and, to avoid censorship, would hide its true title, publishing it instead as “Volagarizzamento di Giovenale” (ibid).

was a Germanic city, with many and fine
arguments and fine diplomas
proves that from long ago
mice followed Salic Law.

What do systems and conjectures
and theories not prove about the German people?
For them, not only the obscure things – where
today we know everything, tomorrow nothing, –
but even in what is clear, still doubts and fears
and mist constantly reappear:
even so, everywhere everyone sees
that the world is fruit of German seed).²⁰

The connection that Leopardi individuates between politics and philology is not a minor issue. In the *Paralipomeni*, Leopardi's evaluation of German philology is intimately bound to his critique of the language of racist predominance that he perceived as haunting the German philological tradition.²¹ In a note to the *Paralipomeni* he writes:

Ariouropei. La giustificazione che così si indicherebbero le aeree estreme del dominio indoeuropeo (India e Islanda) è escogitata *a posteriori*: il vero motivo è il desiderio di attribuire alla stirpe germanica una posizione preminente (cited in Timpanaro 1978, 233)

(Aryan-Europeans. The justification that with this term we could indicate the extreme areas of Indo-European dominion is contrived *a posteriori*: the true motivation is the desire to attribute a preeminent position to the Germanic race).

Leopardi clearly states the relation between the institution of German scientific philology, the search for archetypical texts, and the construction, *a posteriori*, of the *arche* (both in the sense of origin and in the Aristotelian sense of an 'actuating principle') of German racial supremacy. Both the form and the content of the *Paralipomeni* would likely have appealed to Nietzsche, according to Giovanni Mestica, though it is uncertain whether or

²⁰ I thank my student Michael Knowles for this translation.

²¹ See Johann Gottfried Herder's *Sämmtliche Werke* (1887), Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* (2008), and Georg Voigt's *Die Wiederbelebung des classischen Alterthums: oder das erste Jahrhundert des Humanismus* (1859). See also Johann Wilhelm Kuithan, *Die Germanen und Griechen, Eine Sprache, Ein Volk, eine auferweckte Geschichte* (1822), and Karl Salomon Zachariae, *De Originibus Juris Romani ex Jure Germanico Repetendis* (1817). Porter notes that "the language of racism was surprisingly common in the philological tradition, thanks in part to the impetus, in the fields of ethnology and linguistics, of Herder and then later of the Indo-Germanicists Friedrich Schlegel and Franz Bopp" (2000, 275).

not he had read it (Mestica 1901, 463). In fact, as Porter shows, part of what is at stake in Nietzsche's conception of the philology of the future is "to reveal the anxieties that are constitutive of the logic of 'purity' that runs through so much of German culture at the time and through the philology that is one of its expressions" (2000, 274).

Of course, the choice of a text attributed to Homer to frame the question of philology is also significant, much as was the case for Nietzsche's introductory lecture on the "The Personality of Homer." Leopardi's title *Paralipomeni* is meant to be a play on the celebrated *Prolegomena ad Homerum* by Friedrich August Wolf, often considered the founding work of classical philology as a scientific discipline. In this poetic critique, Leopardi inserts himself into a canon of illustrious predecessors such as Schiller and Goethe. For instance, while at first Goethe supported Wolf, in the *Epigrammatisch* he writes, "Homer wieder Homer" (Homer against Homer), a poem quoted by Nietzsche in his inaugural lecture (1909):

With subtle wit you took away
Our former admiration:
The *Iliad*, you might say,
Was a mere collection.
Think it not a crime in any way:
But the passionate adoration of youth
Leads us to know what it is true,
And feel the poet's unity.
(1983, 19; translation amended)

In Italy, criticism of Wolf was compounded by an offense given to the sense of national *amor proprio*, since the German claimed not to have read Vico until 1781 when the Italian Cesarotti gave him a copy. Although it is doubtful that Vico's positing of the Homeric question had a direct influence on Wolf, Benedetto Croce notes that the Danish philologist and archaeologist Georg Zoega knew Vico's work well and he "corresponded with Heyne, who afterwards accused Wolf of having derived from his own lectures the theory set forth in the *Prolegomena*" (Croce 1913, 270).

Leopardi, however, does not seem to regard either issue as crucial. Instead of lamenting the loss of the archetypal author of the Western canon or attacking Wolf on Vico's account, in the *Paralipomeni* Leopardi hinted that Wolf had not taken his criticism far enough, since it merely replaced Homer's authority with his own, that of the scientific philologist, much like the "philologist" mouse who asserts his authority in the work. This claim is first apparent in the title. Whereas Wolf's title *Prolegomena* comes from the Greek *prolegein*, "to say beforehand" (from *pro*, before + *legein*, to speak), *Paraleipomena*, instead refers to supplements, literally, 'things left out,' from the neuter plural of the passive present participle of *paraleipein*, "to leave out." As this etymology shows, unlike *prolegomena*, *paraleipomena* are not meant to be part of a linear teleological narrative, but they are what "stand beside," that is, they are "supplemental" in Rousseau's sense, as "an inessential extra added to something complete in itself"

(Culler, 1989).²² For Leopardi, philology is not a science as the German tradition would have it and cannot offer *prolegomena* but only *paraleipomena*.

It is important to stress, though, that Leopardi's criticism is not aimed at the German tradition, but at the idea of origin itself and of philology understood more generally as a *science*. Indeed, on the one hand, Leopardi was no less critical of Italian contemporary philological practices and, on the other, he actually hoped to obtain a post in philology in a German university through the intervention of Christian Karl von Bunsen.²³

Criticisms of the decadence of Italian scholarship abound in Leopardi's work, which seems to exceed the *ubi sunt* motif. Leopardi often criticizes Italian scholars for having become archeologists of the past, focusing on collecting its vestiges rather than trying to reenact its glory. For instance, in a letter written to his father Monaldo dated December 9, 1822, Leopardi writes:

Non ho ancora potuto conoscere un letterato Romano che intenda sotto il nome di letteratura altro che l'Archeologia. Filosofia, morale, politica, scienza del cuore umano, eloquenza, poesia, filologia, tutto ciò è straniero in Roma, e pare un giuoco da fanciulli, a paragone del trovare se quel pezzo di rame o di sasso appartenne a Marcantonio o a Marcagrippa (1998, 584)

(I still have not been able to find a Roman scholar who would not limit literature to archeology. Philosophy, ethics, politics, the science of the human heart, eloquence, poetry, philology: all of these disciplines are foreign in Rome and seem trifles compared to finding out if that piece of copper or stone belonged to Marc Antony or Marcus Agrippa).

Leopardi often condemns the decline of the Italian philological tradition of the Renaissance into the mindless collection of antiquity, for example in the canzone, "Ad Angelo Mai," which, I shall argue, is crucial to Nietzsche's conception of the "philology of the future" as a pathway toward a "philosophy of the future." Let me anticipate by noting that in UM2, written contemporaneously to the notes on philology, Nietzsche similarly juxtaposes the "tendency which directed the Italians of the Renaissance and reawoke in their poets the genius of ancient Italy to a 'wonderful new resounding of the primeval strings'" to the "blind rage for collecting, a restless raking together of everything that has ever existed" (1983, III, 75).

²² See Derrida (1976). Derrida argues that what is complete in itself cannot be added to, insofar as a supplement can only occur where there is an originary lack.

²³ See the letter to Leopardi by Karl Bunsen on January 27, 1826 (1998, 1060), in which he tries to convince his friend to consider a post in Berlin or Bonn, to which Leopardi answers on February 1st that his fragile constitution could not possibly cope with the German climate (1998, 1064). In 1823 Leopardi wrote his brother Carlo on February 12, 1823: "He [Barthold Georg Niebuhr] told me that mine is the true manner to approach philology, that I am on the true road. He persistently begged me not to abandon this road and not to worry if Italy should not praise me, since all of the Italians are off the road, and I will not lack praise from foreign scholars etc." (1998, 668; translation mine).

ii. Mai as 'Columbus Novus'

*Dear Friend! —spoke Columbus —trust
No Genoese again!
He gazes endlessly into the blue yonder,
What's furthest tempts him too much!
Courage! I'm on the open sea,
Behind me lies Genoa,*

...

Never may we return.

--Nietzsche, "Freundin! – sprach Columbus – traue" in *Ditirambi di Dionisio* (1982; translation mine)

Composed in January of 1820, Leopardi's poem "Ad Angelo Mai quand'ebbe trovato i libri di Cicerone *della Repubblica*" celebrates Angelo Mai (1782–1854), who became the custodian of the Vatican Library in 1819 and was a famous discoverer and editor of ancient manuscripts.²⁴ The occasion for the poem, as indicated by the title, was Mai's announcement, in a letter to the Pope on December 23, 1819, of the unearthing of some sections of Cicero's *De Republica*, a famous work of antiquity known previously only in the fragment of the *Somnium Scipionis*.²⁵ The missing parts of Cicero's work had been sought for a long time, and Mai uncovered a substantial portion of it: the *incipit* of book II and III and the *explicit* of book II.

Leopardi seems to have received the news of the discovery enthusiastically and in a letter to Mai, he wrote:

Ella è proprio un miracolo di mille cose, d'ingegno di gusto di dottrina di diligenza di studio infatigabile, di fortuna tutta nuova ed unica. Insomma, V.S. ci fa tornare ai tempi dei Petrarca e dei Poggi, quando ogni giorno era illustrato da una nuova scoperta classica, e la meraviglia e la gioia de' letterati non trovava riposo (1998, 361)

(You are truly a miracle of a thousand of things: of wit, of taste, of doctrine, of diligence, of indefatigable study, of a completely new and unique stroke of luck. Indeed, your eminence makes us return to the times of the Petrarchs and the Poggios, when each day was illuminated with a

²⁴ In his previous post as custodian of the Ambrosiana library, held from 1813 until 1819, Mai brought back to light *M. Corn. Frontonis Opera Inedita, cum Epistolis item Ineditis, Antonini Pii, Marci Aurelii, Lucii Veri et Appiani* (1815), and fragments of Cicero's judicial orations *Pro Scauro*, *Pro Tullio*, *Pro Flacco*, and his *In Clodium et Curionem*, *De Aere Alieno Milonis*, and *De Rege Alexandrino* (1814).

²⁵ The song was published in July of 1820 in Bologna, and then revised and published anew during Leopardi's lifetime, in 1824 (Bologna), 1831 (Florence), and 1835 (Naples).

new classical discovery, and the wonder and joy of literary men had no rest).

In this letter, Leopardi describes Mai as the heir of the tradition of Renaissance humanism, envisioned in Politian's inaugural lecture, a joyous age, which, in the poem, he contrasts starkly with the present.

Yet, Leopardi both compares Mai to his early modern predecessors and places him in a position of absolute difference from them. In the letter, he continues:

Ma ora in tanta luce di erudizione e di critica, in tanta copia di biblioteche, in tanta folla di filologi, V.S. sola in codici esposti da più secoli alle ricerche di qualunque studioso, in librerie frequentate da ogni sorta di dotti, scoprir tesori che si piangono per ismarriti senza riparo sin dal primo rinascimento delle lettere, e il cui ritrovamento non ha avuto mai luogo nelle più vane e passeggiere speranze de' letterati, è un prodigio che vince tutte le meraviglie del trecento e quattrocento (ibid., my emphasis)

(*But now* with such enlightenment of erudition and critical discourse, with such abundance of libraries, in such a crowd of philologists, only you, Sir, have managed to discover the treasures that were thought lost beyond repair from the first rebirth of letters in codices available for research to any scholar, in libraries frequented by all sorts of learned men; this discovery that did not take place even in the most vain and fleeting hopes of scholars, is a prodigy that surpasses the wonders of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries).

The long, over-elaborate sentence, so unlike Leopardi's usually elegant prose in its piling up of counterexamples and excessive praise, serves to insinuate the idea of a possible philological collaboration between Mai and himself, later mentioned as a possibility in the letter.²⁶ At the time in which the letter was written, in fact, Leopardi was working on emending Mai's text and published his notes in an 1822 article titled *M. Tullii Ciceronis de Republica* (Zerbini, 1882, 110). Yet, it also points to an attempt to compensate for the ambivalence that Leopardi felt toward Mai's prodigious discovery in an age that, to the poet, differs so profoundly from the Renaissance.

This point becomes clearer if we consider how, in Leopardi's poem to Mai, the "ma ora" of the letter is contrasted to the disjunctive "ma allor" that introduces the figure of Columbus, the only non-literary figure in the great pageant of Italian geniuses of which Angelo Mai is the epigone: Dante (61-66), Petrarch (66-75), Columbus (76-105), Ariosto (106-120), Tasso (121-150), and Alfieri (151-174). The figure of Columbus is central to the poem both in its central positioning and in its length, two stanzas. For Leopardi the

²⁶ In this regard see also Leopardi's letter to Mai on March 30, 1821, where he asks the great philologist for a letter of recommendation for a position as Professor of Latin (1998, 490-92).

figure of Columbus is crucial in demarcating a watershed between two ages, and it is worth citing the passage at length:

*Ma tua vita era allora con gli astri e il mare,
ligure ardita prole,
quand'oltre alle colonne, ed oltre ai liti
cui strider l'onde all'attuffar del sole
parve udir su la sera, agl'infiniti
flutti commesso, ritrovasti il raggio
del Sol caduto, e il giorno
che nasce allora ch'ai nostri è giunto al fondo;
e rotto di natura ogni contrasto,
ignota immensa terra al tuo viaggio
fu gloria, e del ritorno
ai rischi
(76-87; my emphasis)*

*(But your life, then was with stars and sea,
bold son of Liguria,
when beyond the columns and the shores
where it seemed one heard the waves
roaring as the sun set,
you ventured out onto the boundless ocean
and happened on the light of the vanished Sun,
and the day that starts when He's reached the end of ours;
and having broken nature's every bond,
a boundless, unfamiliar earth was the glorious
reward for your voyage and your perilous return.)
(Tr. Galassi; translation amended)*

Several features of these two stanzas are of interest. First, the repetition of the adverb “beyond” in a single line – “Quand'oltre alle colonne, ed oltre ai liti” (79) – recalls Dante's *Inferno*, canto 26, when Ulysses speaks of the straits of Gibraltar as the place “dov' Ercule segnò li suoi riguardi / acciò che l'uom più oltre non si metta” (2004, 108-109; where Hercules set up his boundary stones / that men might heed and never reach beyond). By Leopardi's time, the connection between Dante's Ulysses and Columbus was a well-established one. A widespread historicist thesis, current even today, maintains that the figure of Dante's Ulysses was re-appropriated *in bono* in light of the discovery of new lands beyond the Pillars of Hercules by Columbus. For example, Pasquale Sabbatino asserts that “in the Cinquecento, history has gained the upper hand over myth, and the reality of the New World has definitively cancelled the transgression, the sin, and the tragedy of Dante's Ulysses” (2004, 100; translation mine). “Plus Ultra” becomes the motto of the Spanish Crown's imperialistic agenda, and most scholars would agree that the sixteenth century witnesses a progressive re-valuation of the figure of Ulysses,

eventually culminating in Bacon's encomium of the voyage beyond the confines of the Mediterranean. For the philosopher Hans Blumenberg, for instance, Dante's Ulysses becomes nothing less than the foundational myth of the modern man (1985, 339–40).

For Leopardi as well, the revaluation of the hero both originates with and ushers in the modern era.²⁷ But the Italian poet would not agree either with Adorno and Horkheimer's claim that Ulysses is the first man of the Enlightenment, (1983, 43-80) or with John Alcorn and Dario Del Puppo's definition of Columbus as a romantic hero.²⁸ Leopardi takes a peculiar stance toward the rewriting of Dante's Ulysses as Columbus, whereby Columbus is seen as the last Renaissance man. Rather than something to be celebrated as the hallmark of human ingenuity and curiosity, Columbus' discovery opens an unbridgeable rift between ages, on account of which Leopardi laments: "Ahi ahi, ma conosciuto il mondo / non cresce, anzi si scema, e assai più vasto/ l'etra sonante e l'alma terra e il mare/ al fanciullin, che non al saggio, appare" (87-90; alas, the world when once known doesn't expand: / it shrinks; and the echoing heaven / and the gentle earth and sea / seem far vaster to the infant than to the sage). In this respect, then, Columbus' voyage is of special interest as a metaphor for Leopardi's reflections on history and philology.

The "ma allor" which introduces the figure of Columbus as a new Ulysses serves in fact to introduce an abyssal rupture between ages: the pre-modern age of imagination and the modern age of reason. For Leopardi, modernity, in the Italian tradition conventionally understood to begin in 1492, is contradistinguished by the defeat of the imagination. When Columbus discovers the New World:

E figurato è il mondo in breve carta;
ecco tutto è simile, e discoprendo,
solo il nulla s'accresce. A noi ti vieta
il vero appena è giunto,
o caro immaginar; da te s'apparta
nostra mente in eterno; allo stupendo
poter tuo primo ne sottraggon gli anni;
e il conforto perì de' nostri affanni
(97-105)

(and the world is described on one brief page;
look, now everything is the same,
and discovery only adds to nothingness.
Truth is taken from us
in the moment it arrives,
o sweet imagination; our mind's cut off

²⁷ For the development of the myth of Ulysses, see Boitani (1994).

²⁸ Alcorn and Del Puppo write: "Columbus, the 'ligure ardita prole,' is a symbol of daring. A modern Ulysses, he personifies the risk-taker who undertakes great actions; he is a figure worthy of both the Romantic notion of hero and the Enlightenment ideal of intellectual progress. Yet in a set of brilliant verses Leopardi tempers his portrait of Columbus by expressing a sense of loss in the great discovery, a perverse effect of Columbus's epistemic journey" (1995, 36).

from you forever; farewell, the years removed us,
and your power so mighty once, is gone;
without this last comfort, in our troubles, we are left forlorn.)
(2010; translation amended)

The centrality of the figure of Columbus as the chief divide between epochs thus links the question of philology with what we could denote as the symptomatology of the modern “subject” and the ailments and illusions of the modern age.²⁹

In a remarkably insightful note to his poem, Leopardi writes that Petrarch’s speculative allusion to the “gente che di là forse aspetta” (people who perhaps await beyond)³⁰ is a witness to the difference between the past and present role of the poetic imagination:

Quel forse, che oggi non si potrebbe dire, fu sommamente poetico; perché dava facoltà al lettore di rappresentarsi quella gente sconosciuta a suo modo, o di averla in tutto per favolosa: donde si dee credere che, leggendo questi versi, nascessero di quelle concezioni vaghe e indeterminate, che sono effetto principalissimo ed essenziale delle bellezze poetiche, anzi di tutte le maggiori bellezze del mondo (1987-1988, I, 149)

(That “perhaps,” which today one could no longer say, was most striking and most poetic, since it left the imagination free to represent unknown people of its own accord, or to consider them no more than a fabulous invention. Thus, we should believe that, while reading these verses, vague and indeterminate notions were born that are the principal effect of poetic beauty, indeed of all the greatest beauty of the world).

In the modern age the truth of history has become the opposite of that of the imagination: Columbus represents the destruction of myth, and the passage from an era of mythos to one of logos.

This theme is further taken up in a notebook entry dated July 12-23, 1820, where Leopardi states: “La cognizione del vero cioè dei limiti e definizioni delle cose, circoscrive l’immaginazione” (1988, I, 167; the idea of truth that is of the limitation and definition of things, circumscribes the imagination). And in the dedication to the first edition of “Ad Angelo Mai,” Leopardi writes tellingly: “la facoltà dell’immaginare e del

²⁹ Antimo Negri (1994: 139-179) has dedicated a wonderful and detailed study to the question of modernity in Leopardi and Nietzsche via the figure of Copernicus, arguing that Nietzsche takes from Leopardi (the belief that Copernicus’ discovery was not “just” an astronomical discovery but a revolution in metaphysics, one that decenters forever the place of humanity in the cosmos. See also Rennie (2005, 129-164).

³⁰ In the *Canzoniere* Petrarch watches the sun setting on the western horizon as imagination speculates on what could be beyond: “Ne la stagion che ’l cielo rapido inchina/ verso occidente, et che ’l dì nostro vola/ a gente che di là forse l’aspetta” (1976, 116: At the time when the sweet heaven inclines toward the West and our day flies to people who perhaps await, beyond).

ritrovare è spenta in Italia, ancorché gli stranieri ce l'attribuiscano tuttavia come nostra speciale e primaria qualità" (ibid., 55-56; the faculty of imagining and discovering is extinguished in Italy, even though foreigners attribute it to us as our most special and primary quality). As Franco Ferrucci has argued, Leopardi inherits from Vico a belief that philology can only be productive as "a mythopoetic memory of the past, rather than as a rational science without daring or passion" (1983, 113).

The gap between present and past is unbridgeable through the means and methods of reason alone, and Leopardi therefore envisions a redefinition of philosophy as *ultrafilosofia*. On June 7, 1820, Leopardi writes: "Perciò la nostra rigenerazione dipende da una, per così dire ultrafilosofia, che conoscendo l'intero e l'intimo delle cose, ci ravvicini alla natura. E questo dovreb'essere il frutto dei lumi straordinari di questo secolo" (1991, I, 127: therefore our regeneration depends upon what one might call an 'overphilosophy,' which, knowing things completely and profoundly, brings us closer to nature. And this should be the accomplishment of the extraordinary luminaries of this century). The term "ultrafilosofia" here is particularly interesting both as a foreshadowing of Nietzsche's understanding of *über* (e.g. *übermensch*), and as an implicit reference to the figure of Columbus, the new Ulysses, who went beyond the pillars of Hercules, traditionally indicated with the warning "nec plus ultra."³¹ The Latin adverb "ultra" from "uls" indicates a 'going-over,' a 'going beyond:' for both Leopardi in the poem to Angelo Mai and, for Nietzsche, the overcoming of the limits of philosophy is figured, through Columbus, as a crossing over the boundaries of time.

In the poem, the expression of such an 'over-philosophy' seems to be a philosophy of history reoriented to life, potentially embodied in an idealized Mai. Leopardi concludes his display of the great spirits of the past with an invocation to his addressee to resurrect the dead, auguring that the illustrious philologist might become such an 'over-man.'

O scopritor famoso,
seguì; risveglia i morti,
poi che dormono i vivi; arma le spente
lingue de' prischi eroi; tanto che in fine
questo *secol di fango* o vita agogni
e sorga ad atti illustri, o si vergogni.
(175-180)

(O famous explorer,
go on; wake the dead,
since the living are asleep: arm the mute
tongues of former heroes: so that, at last,
this *age of mud* may either thirst life, and rise

³¹ This is the only recorded occurrence of the word *ultrafilosofia* in Leopardi's works (present in a note in the *Zibaldone* dated June 7, 1820 [1973, 115]). Gabetti was the first to suggest that Nietzsche dedicated his life to putting Leopardi's *ultrafilosofia* into practice (1924, 15). On Leopardi's concept see Bini (1997) and Brose (1998).

to noble action, or sink in shame).

Mai's discovery of Cicero has no value in itself unless Mai is capable of becoming a *Columbus Novus*, the new explorer adventuring beyond the Pillars of Hercules of the past. Yet, the same hesitation perceivable in Leopardi's letter is also present in the poem, complicating the identification between Columbus and Mai to the point that it is hard to maintain, as Alcorn and Del Puppo have argued, that for Leopardi, "Mai is a real-life, modern-day Clio who symbolizes philological inquiry" (1995, 26). While, as the comparison between the Muse of History and the philologist implies, any philological approach necessarily entails a philosophy of history, what we could call Leopardi's *ultrafilologia* eschews any simple resolution to the historical divide it introduces. Indeed, the attention to adverbs of time in the poem alerts the reader that another pun might be at play on the name Angelo Mai. On the one hand, Angelo could refer to the Angel – the messenger, the divine *nunzio* of history – a figure later employed by Walter Benjamin to indicate the one who should "awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" ([1940] 1969, 257-258). On the other hand, however, the double entendre of the last name – "mai," never – also seems to imply that Angelo Mai is probably not such an angel (the pun is obliquely evoked in the sound of the opposition between the two temporal indicators "ma allora" and the "ma ora")

The role of history has often been identified as the central problem of the poem to Mai. For example, Roger Baillet has stated that history is the "the song's content of suffering, bound by the poetry that makes use of it, and transformed through the filter of memory: a living experience of youth and not a mature historical reflection on the past" (1989, 95; translation mine). Francesco De Sanctis, instead, and much earlier, located a philosophy of history precisely in the youthful quality of the poem: "La canzone è un primo poema del mondo, così com'è visto dal giovine. È come una filosofia della storia, dove tutto è coordinato, come in uno schema" (1983, 119; the song is a first poem of the world, as the youth see it. It's like a philosophy of history wherein everything is coordinated as in a schema). More recently, Alcorn and Del Puppo have argued that it is particularly useful to read the song in light of Nietzsche's historical categories in UM2 where Nietzsche writes: "History pertains to the living man in three respects: as a being who acts and strives, as a being who preserves and reveres, as a being who suffers and seeks deliverance. This threefold relationship corresponds to three species of history – insofar as it is permissible to distinguish between a monumental, an antiquarian, and a critical species of history" (cited in Alcorn and Del Puppo 1995, 67). Alcorn and Del Puppo then assert that: "Leopardi rejects the antiquarian mode. His approach is largely monumental, though with an element of critical history.... Leopardi's poem illustrates two conflicting views of history: the philosophical perspective (or critical history) and the heroic view (or monumental history). The poet prefers the latter given his desire for action, but recognizes that as a thinker influenced by the Enlightenment he cannot escape the former" (1995, 23).

However, if for Nietzsche monumental history teaches us that the "greatness that once existed was in any event once *possible* and may thus be possible again" (UM2, cited in *ibid.*, 69) in the poem to Mai, Leopardi seems to criticize the pursuit of monumental history as impossible for the modern thinker, except as an essentially quixotic

enterprise.³² Nicholas Rennie aptly remarks that “In his story of Columbus, Leopardi elaborates a philosophy of history that seems to preclude the construction of historical narrative, and in so doing he demonstrates why moderns can no longer reconstitute the teleology of classical epic in their own age” (2005, 169). Indeed, Cesare Federico Goffis has proposed that Leopardi’s poem engages in an oblique polemic with Ugo Foscolo and that “Ad Angelo Mai” is a rewriting of “Dei Sepolcri” (1983, 687-88). Whereas Foscolo wishes to construct myths of memorial continuity, Leopardi shows the impossibility of bridging the gap between past and present. Whereas the sight of the monumental pantheon of dead cultural heroes inspires a feeling of blessedness in Foscolo (193) as well as hope for the future, Leopardi draws attention to the “monumento” as a sign of moral decay, of atrophied memory and failed imagination. For him, idleness and neglect (“ozio”) envelope the monuments to the past: *ozio circonda/ i monumenti vostri; e di viltade/ siamo fatti esempio alla futura etade*” (43-46; neglect surrounds your monuments/ and we are made all/ exemplars of baseness for the future). In Leopardi’s view, the attitude taken by the present toward the past can serve the future only as a negative example.

Leopardi’s insertion of the theme of the future is of particular interest here. The search for the past can easily be legitimized in relationship to what is to come, provided that it can be seen to serve as a springboard to the creation of a better future, by making it possible to avoid repeating previous mistakes or by inspiring noble actions, as in Foscolo’s vision. Yet Leopardi seems to negate the possibility of reviving such an understanding of history and exemplarity. At the beginning of the poem, Leopardi traces the distinction between the quixotic Mai and himself precisely in terms of an attitude toward the future:

Di noi serbate, o gloriosi, ancora
qualche speranza? in tutto
non siamo periti? A voi forse il *futuro*
conoscer non si toglie. Io son distrutto
né schermo alcuno ho dal dolor, che *scuro*
m’è l’*avvenire*...
(31-36; my emphasis)

(Glorious ancestors, is there
still hope of us? Are we not completely dead?
Perhaps the *future*
is not unknown to you? I am distraught
with no refuge from grief, *obscure*
for me is the time to come...).

³² In a similar vein, Nietzsche writes in his notes that the “reverence for classical antiquity...is a monumental example of Quixotism; and that is what philology is at its best.... One imitates something that is purely chimerical, and chases after a wonderland that never existed” (1911, 7).

The assertion that Mai's revival of the past might bring about the philologist's knowledge of the future, is undermined by irony and skepticism. For Leopardi the future holds nothing but darkness, a concept that finds formal expression in the rhyme *futuro-scuro* (33; 35).

The mention of the future, though, is of particular relevance, as it brings to bear a set of questions on the nature of philology and history. Does the past still have the ability to speak to the future and for the future? Are philological discoveries able to resurrect the past as a function of the future by instilling the desire for true life into the present era of "mud." The answer in the poem seems to be negative, as a *Columbus Novus* is necessarily untimely in the modern age. Leopardi writes:

Altri anni ed altro seggio
conviene agli alti ingegni. Or di riposo
paghi viviamo, e scorti
da mediocrità: sceso il sapiente
e salita è la turba a un sol confine,
che il mondo agguaglia
(171-179)

(Other years and another place
befits such high genius. Now in idleness
we live content, and guided
by mediocrity: the wise man has descended
and the mob instead has ascended, converging on a single frontier,
that reduces all the world to sameness).

Several features of this stanza seem of particular interest given the role of history for conceiving modernity as well as for interpreting the relationship between Leopardi and Nietzsche. For instance, modernity is described with a certain disgust for the leveling of all men to a mediocre sameness; at the same time Leopardi describes contemporary genius as fundamentally untimely in the present age.

Leopardi's initial, apparently encomiastic, address to Mai is in fact overcast with shadows. The poem begins:

Italo ardito, a che giammai non posi
di svegliar dalle tombe
i nostri padri? ed a parlar gli meni
a questo secol morto, al quale incombe
tanta nebbia di tedio? E come or vieni
sì forte a' nostri orecchi e sì frequente,
voce antica de' nostri,
Muta sì lunga etade? e perché tanti

Risorgimenti?
(1-9; my emphasis)

(Valiant Italian, do you never tire
of bringing our ancestors to life again;
and letting them speak to this
dead age overcast
with the haze of tedium? Why do they come
to our ears so strongly now, so often,
those ancient voices of ours,
mute for so long?
Why so many *resurrections*?)

As in the *Paralipomeni* this passage stages the issue of philology as intrinsically linked to that of politics. Leopardi uses the word “Risorgimento” (resurrection, from *resurgere*: “to resurrect”), with evident allusion to the word “Rinascimento” (rebirth, from *rinascere*: “to be borne again”). He thus creates a parallel between the recovery of older texts from beneath subsequent palimpsests (famously Mai discovers the *De Republica* in the tenth century Vatican codex 5757, concealed under a commentary of St. Augustine on the Psalms) and contemporary political movements that advocated a political “resurgence” of a unified Italian peninsula, suggesting Leopardi’s ambivalence toward both the scholarly and the political enterprises.³³ To use Nietzsche’s words from *We Philologists*, the Leopardi of “Ad Angelo Mai,” perceives clearly that:

Philology as the science of antiquity does not, of course, endure forever;
its elements are not inexhaustible. What cannot be exhausted, however, is
the ever-new adaptation of one’s age to antiquity; the comparison of the
two. If we make it our task to understand our own age better by means of
antiquity, then our task will be an everlasting one.... This is the antinomy
of philology: people have always endeavored to understand antiquity by
means of the present – and shall the present now be understood by means
of antiquity? (1911, 7)

Here Nietzsche reflects on the relationship between the past and modernity claiming that the principle of “life” is a more pressing and higher concern than that of “knowledge,” and that the quest for knowledge should serve the interests of life. In fact, when we look at Nietzsche’s interpretation in UM2 of Leopardi in the next section, we shall see that

³³ In his famous essay on *Il risorgimento d’Italia negli studi, nelle lettere e nei costumi dopo il Mille* (1786), Saverio Bettinelli uses the term “Risorgimento” to indicate the Renaissance. In the works of Vittorio Alfieri and Ugo Foscolo, instead, the term already assumes a political subtext, although it is only with Vincenzo Gioberti (1843) that it will gain currency as the name of a contemporary political movement. In this regard see Salvatorelli (1963). The theme of “risorgimento” is taken up again by Leopardi in the poem “Il Risorgimento” (1828) which traditionally is said to inaugurate Leopardi’s return to lyric poetry after many years and the beginning of what is usually called the “stagione dei grandi canti.”

what is at stake is not a model of history, monumental or not, but, rather, an *over-historical* attitude. The fundamental question of the opening stanza of “Ad Angelo Mai,” in fact, is not whether it is possible to reawaken the past but how and why one chooses to do so; thus Leopardi changes the issue from one of possibility to one of desirability. Through the figure of Mai, the poet questions the philological endeavor: what, again, is the purpose of philology in relation to the dilemma of modernity?

iii. *The Over-Historical: Nietzsche on Leopardi and History* (Untimely Meditations II)

Jam tomorrow and jam yesterday, but never jam today.
--Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

In the poem to Mai, Leopardi seems to reject both the antiquarian and the monumental approaches to history. Nonetheless, Alcorn and Del Puppo’s choice of these Nietzschean categories to focus on the understanding of history in the poem is particularly fecund because, as Margherita Heyer-Caput writes in comparing the two authors:

the radical critique of historicism and nineteenth-century historiography, from the optimistic rationalism and of the present decadence as the inability of historical action that characterizes *Untimely Meditations II*, directly recalls Leopardi’s critique of culture. (1991, 206; translation mine)

It is not accidental that Nietzsche’s considerations on the philology of the future are written contemporaneously to the composition of UM2 (both date from the winter of 1873-74). Indeed, there is a sense in which UM2 tries to complete the task that Nietzsche poses to himself in the meditations on philology, when he writes: “the task of the science of history is completed and it itself has become superfluous.... Its place must be taken by the science of the future” (1911, 184). While the preface of UM2 explicitly references the connection to Nietzsche’s reflection on the philology of the future: “It is only to the extent that I am a pupil of earlier times, especially the Hellenic, that though a child of the present time I was able to acquire such untimely experiences.... For I do not know what meaning classical studies could have for our time if they were not untimely – that is to say, acting counter to our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come” (1997, 60). The question of philology is perhaps above all a question on how to approach a philosophy of history, and Nietzsche once again takes Leopardi as his point of departure to survey alternative approaches to historiography.³⁴ The essay poses as its central question a discussion of the use [*nutzen*] of history for the modern post-Colombian man who recognizes the absence of univocal metaphysical truths or of a *telos* in the universe.

In UM2 Nietzsche considers the three larger categories that are of primary

³⁴ On the history of the composition of UM2, see Salaquardia (1974).

consideration for reflecting on how to approach history or, for that matter, philology: the a-historical, the ‘over-historical,’ and the historical. The historical mode – no matter whether antiquarian, monumental, or critical – is a mode that “im Prozesse das Heil sieht” (sees salvation in the process). In other words, the historical process is legitimated on the basis of the notion that the future will be different from the past and will redeem it in some ways. At the other end of the spectrum, there is the a-historical, the *in-fante*, who lives in the eternal present with no sense of either a future or a past. Nietzsche writes:

Consider the herd, grazing as they pass you by: they do not know what is meant by yesterday or today, they leap about, eat, rest, digest, leap about again, and so from morn till night and from day to day, fettered to the moment and its pleasure and displeasure, and thus neither melancholy nor bored. This is a hard sight for man to see; for, though he thinks himself better than the animals because he is human, he cannot help envying them their happiness. (1983, 1, 60)

As often noted, these words are reminiscent of Leopardi’s “Canto notturno del pastore errante dell’Asia” (Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd of Asia).

Looking at the history of the variants between the different drafts of Nietzsche’s work, the Leopardian intertext becomes explicit, casting a shadow over the entire first section of UM2. The direct engagement with Leopardi is first recorded in a note to himself for the composition of that volume, where Nietzsche writes: “No consideration for the past. Animal. Leopardi” (1980, VII, 676). In the summer of 1873, Nietzsche adds the following: “The herd grazes in front of us: it doesn’t feel the past, it leaps, eats, rests, digests, leaps again, and so from morning to evening and from day to day, briefly tied to its pleasure and pain, that is, fettered to the moment [*Pflock des Augenblicks*]. Thus, man, seeing that, can sigh and speak to it as Leopardi in the “Nachtgesang des Hirten in Asien” (1980, VIII, 677). Nietzsche then quotes from the shepherd’s comparison of his life to that of an animal in the “Canto notturno”:

Quanta invidia ti porto!
Non sol perché d’affanno
quasi libera vai;
ch’ogni stento, ogni danno,
ogni estremo timor subito scordi;
ma più perché giammai tedio non provi
(107-112)

(How I envy you!
not just because you move
as if nearly trouble-free
and soon forget each need, each pain,

each deadly fear,
but, more, because you're never bored).

In other words, as Antimo Negri (1994) has also noted, Leopardi's "Canto notturno" is a key intertext for UM2. The poem begins with the shepherd's comparison between his life and the eternal circling of the moon. Both the similarities and the absolute distance between the human shepherd and the eternal moon are established in the first verses. Whereas the shepherd tells the moon that their lives are similar (10-11), the dissonance is registered immediately, formally underscored by the verbal and syntactical repetition which introduces the structural similarity: The moon "sorge alla sera" (3; rises at dusk); the shepherd "sorge in sul primo albore" (12; rises at the first light of dawn). However, the similarities soon give way to an unbridgeable gap of difference: the moon never grows tired of repeating the same tasks; the shepherd is overcome by the boredom of repetition.³⁵ The contrast is between two opposite meanings of time. Is the shepherd correct in conflating the eon of his individual life span with the *eon/chronos* of the moon, as a total cosmic cycle?³⁶ As Heidegger remarks in his reading of Anixamander's "fragment 33" (albeit a bit overdramatically): "the fate of the West hangs on the translation of the word 'eon'" (1979, 33).

Regarded as a turning point in Leopardi's pessimism, the "Canto notturno" develops the theme of meaningless repetition throughout. Man, no longer Pico's *copula mundi* freely ranging between animals and angels, is absolutely different from both the sublunar world of his herd and the eternal rounds of the heavens. The stars, the moon, the animals do not grow tired of repeating the same routines, the same tasks; do not feel the weight of ennui. Not so the shepherd, who cannot but envy them their capacity for forgetfulness that saves them from the unbearable boredom of being. The shepherd is tired of the routine of his life, the repetition of seemingly meaningless gestures without any redemptive end value. By contrast, the herd, chained to the stake of the present, does not fall in the infinite void opened by the modern age. The animal is happy insofar as it is a-historical. Modern human beings instead are incapable of seeing that the future is neither a time nor a place but the possibility of the present, an aspect that also necessarily incorporates the past as one of its dimensions. In the "Dialogue of Torquato Tasso and his Guardian Spirit," Leopardi makes the famous statement that "il piacere è sempre o passato o futuro, e non mai presente" (1988, II, 271; pleasure is always either past or future, and never present). In the entry for January 20, 1821 in the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi writes "[il piacere umano] si può dire che è sempre futuro, non è se non futuro, consiste solamente nel futuro.... [I]l piacer possibile non è altro che futuro, o relativo al futuro, e non consiste che nel futuro" (1991, I, 374; [Human Pleasure] can be said to be always in the future, it does not exist apart from the future, consists solely in the future.... [T]he pleasure that is possible is nothing else than the future one, or the one relative to the future, and it does not exist apart from the future).³⁷

³⁵ Cf. Bruno Biral who argues that *noia* is correlated with having no sense of either past or future (1965, 1160).

³⁶ For an extremely interesting interpretation of aeon as time-fetish see Lukacher (1998).

³⁷ Brose has shown that Leopardi's early poems are structured "allegorically" for they look for their fulfillment in a moment either in the past or in the future (1998, 41).

It is the weight of memory that makes humans historical, always longing with envy and deep emotion for the lost paradise of the age that Lacan will term “the imaginary.” For both Leopardi and Nietzsche, subjective identity evolves under the burden of history. In the *Zibaldone* on August 26, 1823, Leopardi elaborates, saying that this quality is also present in children insofar as: “Niun pensiero del bambino appena nato ha relazione al futuro...; non pensa che al presente” (1991, II, 1712; the infant has no thought with a relation to the future ...he/she thinks only of the present).³⁸ Nietzsche will similarly say that as soon as children learn the word “it was” the immediacy of the present is lost as well as the capacity to forget. The shepherd envies the herd precisely because of its being unburdened by memory; to use Nietzsche’s words “Blessed are those who forget” (2002, 217). Leopardi’s shepherd is oppressed by the chain of memory, which Nietzsche portrays in *Zarathustra* as hung around a shepherd’s neck (more on this later in section iii.). Memory makes humans historical.

This view of history, and of time in general, has two important consequences. Time and distinctions between past, present, and future are not only the realm of subjective experience, as Bergson will famously later indicate, but are constitutive of being and intrinsically connected to human experience, to the capacity of memory, which is impossible without language. Infants (etymologically from *in-fari*: not speak) and animals have no sense of history, insofar as they do not possess language. In the “Canto notturno,” the shepherd wishes that the herd could talk to him: “se tu parlar sapessi” (128; If you knew how to speak). In UM2, after paraphrasing from Leopardi’s song, Nietzsche writes:

A human being might well ask an animal: ‘Why do you not speak to me of your happiness but only stand and gaze at me? The animal would like to answer, and say: ‘The reason is I always forget what I was going to say’ – but then he forgot this answer too, and stayed silent.... Thus the animal lives unhistorically. (1983, 60-61)

By making history coincide with language, in turn, philology becomes the privileged mode of historical investigation.

It is not a coincidence, then, that the idea of the ‘eternal return’ is first cast as a linguistic metaphor. In Nietzsche’s second rewriting of UM2 from the fall/winter of the same year, the direct citation from the “Canto notturno” is still present, but it is removed from the third edition, where only the paraphrase remains. Yet, as Rennie pertinently writes, “Leopardi stands as a key – although initially unnamed – presence behind the essay on history. By hinging its three most important terms – historical, unhistorical, and ‘over-historical’ – on Leopardian models, the text underscores the poet’s role in defining and radicalizing a conception of human time that had evolved in the course of the eighteenth century and which, according to Nietzsche’s essay, demands renewed attention in the nineteenth” (2005, 284).

It is important to stress how the first chapter of UM2 both begins and ends with citations from Leopardi, who thus delimits the possible approaches to the question of

³⁸ See also 1991, 1022-23 (September 22, 1821).

history and memory. Whereas the “Canto notturno” serves to underline the a-historical position, the over-historical is delineated through Leopardi’s poem “A se stesso” (To himself). Nietzsche writes:

In opposition to all historical modes of regarding the past, they [the ‘over-historical’ men] are unanimous in the proposition: the past and the present are one [*das Vergangene und das Gegenwärtige ist Eines und dasselbe*], that is to say, with all their diversity identical in all that is typical [*in aller Mannigfaltigkeit typisch gleich*] and, as the omnipresence of imperishable types, a motionless structure of a value that cannot alter and a significance that is always the same [*ein stillstehendes Gebilde von unveränderten Werthe und ewig gleicher Bedeutung*]. Just as the hundreds of different languages correspond to the same typically unchanging needs of man, so that he who understood these needs would be unable to learn anything new from any of these languages, so the over-historical thinker beholds the history of nations and individuals from within, clairvoyantly divining the original meaning of the various hieroglyphics and gradually even coming wearily to avoid the endless stream of new signs: for how should the unending superfluity of events not reduce him to satiety, over-satiety and finally to nausea! So that perhaps the boldest of them is at last ready to say to his heart, with Giacomo Leopardi:

Nothing lives that is worthy
Thy agitation, and the earth deserves not a sigh.
Our being is pain and boredom
And the world *nothing but mud*.
(1983, 66)³⁹

Through these lines from the poem “A se stesso,” Nietzsche presents Leopardi’s response to the thought of repetition developed in the preceding paragraphs, and they remain in the ears of the reader as an echo throughout the essay on history.

The notion that every moment of existence might recur presents a frame within which life itself comes to appear arbitrary and futile. As Giuseppe Mazzotta comments regarding Leopardi’s ending of this poem invoking “l’infinita vanità del tutto,” (the infinity vanity of all): “The aphorism [echoes] the ancient Epicurean wisdom about the emptiness of everything, but it also carries intimations of the wisdom in Ecclesiastes concerning vanity” (2011, 174). The allusion is not epiphenomenal insofar as, Mazzotta continues, “Even a fragmentary verse of Leopardi’s is more often than not a palimpsest of partially erased yet faintly visible accumulations of the history of words and ideas. These accumulations draw a pattern of presence and absence, forcing the reader and the translator into a steady interrogation and literally a radical digging up of the roots of language” (ibid., 175).

³⁹ The original Italian is: “Non cal cosa nessuna/ i moti tuoi, ne di sospiri e’ degna la terra. Amaro e noia/ la vita, altro mai nulla; e fango e’ il mondo” (“A se stesso,” 7-10).

UM2 as a whole is staged as an answer to Leopardi's question concerning the value of history. Nietzsche identifies different modes of understanding and performing history (configured in different combinations), and argues for a meta-approach that would reorient history toward the future. In fact, the merit of each different historiographical mode does not lie in itself but in its capacity to instill the "meta-principle" that "knowledge of the past has at all times been desired only in the service of the future and the present and not for the weakening of the present or of depriving a vigorous future of its roots" (1983, 77). In UM2 Nietzsche turns away from the 'over-historical' approach, and thus from Leopardi, not because of any rational arguments against the sameness of existence but as a matter of preference, a judgment of taste. This turn constitutes a reorientation toward life and the future, because, translating from Leopardi in his notes, he writes that only the thought of beauty [der Gedanke der Schönheit] "discolpa il fato" (1980, III, 430). Nietzsche is responding to the poem "Il pensiero dominante," where Leopardi writes that the passion of love: "Sola discolpa al fato,/ Che noi mortali in terra/ Pose a tanto patir senz'altro frutto" (82-5; alone redeems the fate, which put us mortals on this earth, without any yield but suffering). In UM2, the turn away from Leopardi's concept opens the path to this new orientation: "But let us leave the over-historical men to their nausea and to their wisdom: Today let us rejoice for once in our own un wisdom..." (1997, 66).

Whereas in "Nietzsche und Leopardi," Otto Bollnow argues that the text of UM2 is to be read in sharp opposition from its Leopardian beginning and that Leopardi does not pose a genuine concern for the German philosopher (1972, 68), I would maintain instead that not only is the text as a whole to be read as Nietzsche's answer to the Leopardian critical approach to history, but also it is through the reflection on Leopardi's conceptualization of the problem that Nietzsche arrives at his own Copernican revolution: the idea of the 'eternal return.'

In UM2, Nietzsche's historical categories, as we have seen, run the gamut from the 'a-historical' to the 'over-historical.' What is truly distinctive in Leopardi's over-historical approach is that it refuses to seek salvation in the historical process. The historical datum is not necessary for the furthering of knowledge, race, or civilization, nor is it a part of a Hegelian dialectic, nor has it meaning in and of itself. In other words, the 'over-historical' approach refuses any meta-narrative that would incorporate the history of the world into its words. This refusal leads to abandoning the idea that time is linear or that indeed it might be capable of being explained spatially. Time is heterogeneous and not reducible to "an accident of matter," but rather enters into the very substance of matter.

For Nietzsche, the historical approach is characterized by seeing salvation in the unfolding of history and is tantamount to the belief that the future will be different, mostly better, than the past. Leopardi does not belong to such a vision of history insofar as De Sanctis writes, "Leopardi does not believe in progress, laughs at the possibility of a philosophy of history and thinks that our suffering is incurable" (1983, 262-63; translation mine). In the same essay, in his reading of Schopenhauer, De Sanctis argues against a totalizing Hegelian vision of history, taking issue especially with the idea of causality: "history then is not a science, but a conglomeration of arbitrary facts amongst which there can be only coordination not subordination" (ibid., 161; translation mine). In a fragment from the winter of 1879-1880, Nietzsche similarly affirms: "In all the past

history of humanity we cannot discern either a purpose or a secret rational guide, or an instinct, but only blind fortune [*Zufall*]" (1980, IX, 19) and at the beginning of 1881, "History is a misunderstanding – nothing more. Causality is just a means to dream profoundly, the artifice to deceive ourselves with illusions" (XI, 435).

In this regard, a note from the *Zibaldone* in which Leopardi reflects on the genealogy of science is particularly suggestive:

Perché dunque si dà a questa scienza il nome di storia? Perocch'essa fu fondata da Aristotele: il quale la chiamò istoria, perché questo nome in greco viene da *istor* (conoscente, intendente, dotto), verbale fatto dal greco *isemi* (*scio*) e vale conoscenza, notizia, erudizione, sapere, dottrina, scienza, *fusike istoria*, notizia della natura. Così la *Varia istoria* d'Eliano, non è altro che *Varia erudizione*, così i libri *pantodapes istorias* d'altri scrittori greci, opere filologiche (October 13, 1826 [1991, II, 2332])

(Why do we call this science with the name of history? Because it was founded by Aristotle who called it *istoria*, on the basis of its etymology: The Greek noun comes from *istor* (one who knows, interprets, one who is erudite), which in turn comes from the verb *isemi* (*scio*) and is equivalent with knowledge, news, erudition, information, doctrine, *fusike istoria*, news of nature. Thus Claudius Aelianus' *Varia istoria* is nothing more than *Varia erudizione* [Various Erudition]; likewise, the books *pantodapes istorias* [universal histories] written by other Greek authors: Philological works).

Leopardi's explanation offers a brilliant restaging of the question of the relationship between history and philology. According to Leopardi's genealogical analysis, the confusion between science – the realm of laws, causes and effects – with that of history, arises out of an Aristotelean (mis)nomer (much as the term metaphysics which began to be employed to refer to "ta meta ta physika," that is, to the books that followed those on physics in the Aristotelean *oeuvre*). *Ipse dixit*.

The etymology from *istor*, in turn, shows the predominance of subjective interpretation over objective explanation, thus making philology the most fit instrument for their interpretation. As Vico would say, history is first of all the realm of philology. Nietzsche makes a similar remark in *Daybreak* (1988, III, 224-25), affirming that all historians tell facts that never existed except in their representation. A teleological view of history subordinates the present to the future as a series of goals while a mechanistic one subordinates the present to the past as a series of causes.⁴⁰ For Leopardi, instead of looking for a first cause, philology should question the status of both "first" understood as archetypal, and of "causality" itself as a concept. But, can life be meaningful apart from a future notion of redemption? The attitude toward the future distinguishes the a-

⁴⁰ In 1868 Nietzsche intended to write a dissertation "On Teleology Since Kant." A recent translation and reconstruction of this project has been prepared by Swift (2000).

historical person (for whom there is no future) from the historical one (who has faith in the future) and the over-historical (for whom the world reaches conclusion in any given moment and its end is thus attained). Over-historical being is not being oriented toward the past, but being oriented toward the future. But how can this reorientation take place? How can there be a history of the future? Whereas for the a-historical there is no future, the over-historical approach posits an end, but an end in itself, insofar as the future becomes a dimension of the present moment.

In UM2, the thought of the eternal return is presented as a prelude to Leopardi's poem "A se stesso." Nietzsche writes: "If you ask any of your acquaintances if they would like to relive the past ten or twenty years, you will easily discover which of them is prepared for this over-historical standpoint: They will all answer No, to be sure" (1983, 65). In UM2 Nietzsche brackets this approach with the famous phrase, "let us rejoice of our unwisdom." Yet, it is specifically the over-historical approach that becomes central to Nietzsche at the beginning of 1880. The reconciliation with the over-historical approach, though, also marks the point of absolute distance, according to Nietzsche, between himself and his "Latin brother" (to adapt the words of Bülow in a passage quoted above).

iv. *Genoa, 1882: Incipit Zarathustra* (The Gay Science)

There is another world to discover – and more than one!
On to the ships, you philosophers!
 --Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

Reading Nietzsche's letters, it becomes apparent that his feeling of kinship for Leopardi takes a distinct turn toward the end of the 1870s, when he becomes increasingly preoccupied with distinguishing his pessimism from that of the Italian poet. For example, in a letter to his sister in 1878, he states that he is different from Leopardi because "I am not a pessimist in the same way he is – I only ascertain and do not lament the deep sadness I feel" (1980, V, 375). In an 1879 letter to Peter Gast, he affirms: "In regard to painful existence, I know that Leopardi did not have it worse than I. Nevertheless!" (1980, V, 383). This distancing culminates in his rejection of Leopardi's pessimism in 1881, when Nietzsche formulates the idea of the 'eternal return' as his Copernican revolution, what in *Ecce Homo* he calls the *Grundconception* or *Grundgedanke* of his best and most important work. In this section, I examine two of its most famous formulations, in the *Gay Science* and in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in relation to a Leopardian genealogy of this idea as it has been outlined above.⁴¹

⁴¹ Nietzsche refers to himself as "the teacher of the eternal recurrence," but of Zarathustra he writes, "You are the teacher of eternal recurrence - that is your destiny [Schicksal]!" (1980, III, 2). In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche calls the eternal return "the ideal of the most high - spirited, alive, and world affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated into all eternity, shouting insatiably *da capo* - not only to himself, but to the whole play and spectacle" (2002, 56).

The fourth book of the *Gay Science* opens with a poem dedicated to Saint Januarius, written in Genoa in January 1882 (2001, 276). The dedication makes playful reference to the month of January and to Nietzsche's New Year resolution of *amor fati*, (love of one's destiny), and enlists the pagan god *Janus bifrons* into the canon of Christian saints. I will return to the question of Janus later on in the context of the vision on the riddle. For now, let it suffice to say that *amor fati*, like Janus, is two-faced: both an epiphany and the greatest weight according to Nietzsche's gloss in the penultimate section of book 4:

The greatest weight. – What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you in your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence....” Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine!” (Aphorism 341 [2001, 194])

This aphorism restages the over-historical approach of UM2 to indicate the dreariest vision of existence; the thought that every aspect of one's own life recurs eternally, with no aim or purpose, no meaning, no ground, no justification – an existence without hope in anything beyond itself.⁴² In the *Zibaldone*, on July 3, 1823, Leopardi had denied peremptorily that any one could possibly rejoice at the idea of an eternal recurrence of the same moment, even the most pleasurable: “‘Io provo presentemente un piacere, io vorrei che la condizione di tutta la mia vita, di tutta l’eternità fosse uguale a quella in cui mi trovo in questo momento.’ Questo è ciò che nessun uomo dice mai né può dire in buona fede, neppur per un solo momento” (1991, II, 1527; I now experience pleasure, and I wish that the condition of my entire life, of all eternity might be the same as the one in which I find myself in this moment.’ This is what no man neither says nor could ever say in good faith, not even for a single moment).

Although Nietzsche did not know the *Zibaldone*, the theme of the eternal return permeates Leopardi's other works as well. For example, in the *Dialogo della natura e di un Islandese*, Leopardi writes, “La vita di quest’universo è un perpetuo circuito di produzione e distruzione collegate ambedue tra se di maniera, che ciascheduna serve continuamente all’altra, ed alla conservazione del mondo; il quale sempre che cessasse o l’una o l’altra di loro, verrebbe parimente in dissoluzione” (1988, I, 117; the life of this universe is a perpetual circle of production and destruction, connected in a way that each serves continually the other and the conservation of the world, which if one or the other were to cease would come similarly to dissolution). Moreover, in the *Dialogo tra un*

⁴² Nietzsche glosses this again in the *Will to Power*: “Let us think this thought in its most terrible form: existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale or nothingness: *the eternal recurrence*” (1980, XII, 71).

venditore di almanacchi e un passeggero, Leopardi engages with the concept of eternal return in connection with the beginning of the new year, much as Nietzsche does in the *Gay Science*.

Leopardi's *operetta* narrates the story of a traveler who challenges the calendar seller's wish of a happier new year to his clients. The traveler inquires which year exactly was ever better than the past one and, to prove his point, he poses the following question to seller:

PASSEGGERO. Non tornereste voi a vivere cotesti vent'anni, e anche tutto il tempo passato, cominciando da che nasceste?

VENDITORE. Eh, caro signore, piacesse a Dio che si potesse.

PASSEGGERO. Ma se aveste a rifare la vita che avete fatta né più né meno, con tutti i piaceri e dispiaceri che avete passati?

VENDITORE. *Cotesto non vorrei.*

PASSEGGERO. Oh, che altra vita vorreste rifare? La vita che ch'ho fatta io, o quella del principe, o di chi altro? O non credete che io, e che il principe, e che chiunque altro, risponderebbe come voi per l'appunto; e che avendo a rifare la stessa vita che avesse fatta, nessuno vorrebbe tornare indietro?

VENDITORE. *Lo credo cotesto*

(TRAVELER: Would you not want to live again those last twenty years, and all of your past years, beginning from the day you were born?)

SELLER: Ah, my dear Sir, I wish to God I could!

TRAVELER: But if you had to live the same life all over again, nothing less and nothing more, with all of its pleasures and all of its pain?

SELLER: *That I wouldn't want.*

TRAVELER: But what kind of life would you like to live over again? The life I've had, or a prince's, or who else's? Don't you think that I, the prince, or anyone else, would answer just like you, that having to live the same life over again, no one would want to go back to it?

SELLER: That, *I believe*)

(1982, 481; translation amended, my emphasis)

Leopardi offers the traveler's proposition that no one would agree to live her life over again as proof that the eternal return makes life unworthy of being lived. Once again the very form of the Leopardian prose (whose author Nietzsche esteemed as *der grösste Prosaiker des Jahrhunderts* [1980, VIII, 35; the greatest prose writer of the century]) reproduces the image of temporality as a circle, through the chiasmus between "codesto io non vorrei" and "lo credo codesto."

The Italian scholar Antimo Negri has beautifully underlined the similarities and nuances that need to be considered in comparing the theme of the eternal return in Leopardi and in Nietzsche. On the one hand, Negri notes that "È comune a Leopardi e

Nietzsche l'idea di un eterno divenire circolare, di un perenne avvicinarsi di produzione e distruzione" (1994, 75; see also 50-51; 81; Leopardi and Nietzsche have in common an idea of the circularity of eternal becoming as an eternal cycle of production and destruction). However, Negri cautions against conflating the notion of repetition in Leopardi and Nietzsche, denying that Leopardi really embraced an idea of the eternal return: "Agisce, qui, ancora l'idea dell'eterno ritorno dell'eguale, alla quale, di fatto, Leopardi non perviene" (ibid., 81; what is at stake here, is, once again, the idea of the eternal return – an idea that Leopardi did not in fact reach). Yet Negri recognizes the fundamental impact that Leopardi's images of the eternal return had on Nietzsche. Galimberti suggests instead that in Leopardi's poems the repetitions of images let the reader breathe the same "aria di eternità" (air of eternity) as Nietzsche, insofar as both writers capture the reader with the "fascino di un eterno ritorno" (1965, 177; seduction of the eternal return). More recently, Rennie has suggested that Goethe and Leopardi influence Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return in different ways, finding that both poets reformulate Pascal's famous wager: either we bet on our lives on earth having no significance beyond what they appear to have, or we commit ourselves to a faith in the possibility of an afterlife that possesses infinitely greater value. Goethe represents, for Nietzsche, the individual who radically affirms the strength and unity of his or her subjectivity; by contrast, Leopardi represents an opposing, and self-destructive attitude toward the same wager. While I am not sure how useful it is to cast the question in terms of a Pascalian wager – nor do I believe that Nietzsche thinks about the 'overman' as a teleological development – I do agree with Rennie's assessment that: "If Nietzsche conceives of a teleological development toward the Overman's 'philosophy of the future,' this philosophy itself is centered around the conception of eternal recurrence.... What is important is not the determination of a metaphysical reality, but a way of thinking by which the philosopher of the future comes to be" (2000, 184). More specifically, I would posit that the idea of the eternal return is central to the development of the philology of the future into a philosophy of the future.

There has been much discussion concerning the origins of the Nietzschean idea of the eternal return, with proposed sources ranging from Heraclitus, Polybius, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Vico to David Hume, Goethe, and Heinrich Heine. Walter Kaufmann suggests that Nietzsche may have encountered this idea in the works of Heine, who once wrote:

Time is infinite, but the things in time, the concrete bodies, are finite. They may indeed disperse into the smallest particles; but these particles, the atoms, have their determinate numbers, and the numbers of the configurations which, all of themselves, are formed out of them is also determinate. Now, however long a time may pass, according to the eternal laws governing the combinations of this eternal play of repetition, all configurations which have previously existed on this earth must yet meet, attract, repulse, kiss, and corrupt each other again (1968, 376).

Heidegger recalls that Nietzsche refers to Hume's notion of return in the preparatory notes for UM2. In the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume writes: "Ask yourself, ask any of your acquaintances, whether they would live over again the last ten or twenty years of their life. No! But the next twenty, they say, will be better" (1990, 197). Most interestingly, Andrew Cutrofello has pointed out to me that even the Kant of the *Third Critique* could be a predecessor:

It is easy to decide what sort of value life has for us if it is assessed merely by what one enjoys (the natural end of the sum of all inclinations, happiness). Less than zero: for who would start life anew under the same conditions, or even according to a new and self-designed plan (but one still in accord with the course of nature), which would, however, still be aimed merely at enjoyment? (2000, 311).

To find the *ur*-source of the idea of the eternal return eludes the scope of this chapter. However, I do think that Leopardi is an important point of reference and that the mention of the New Year in the *Gay Science* seems to allude to *Dialogo tra un venditore di almanacchi e un passeggero*, while the young shepherd in *Zarathustra* echoes the "Canto notturno" previously cited by Nietzsche in *Untimely Meditations* II.

This becomes more apparent if we look at the eternal return in connection with the interrelated themes of Columbus, Genoa, and seafaring. In the *Gay Science*, the eternal return is presented, in the penultimate section of book 4, and brings about the coming of Zarathustra, whose journey is foreshadowed in the last chapter, 342 (this is generally understood to be the moment in which Nietzsche begins writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). It does not seem accidental that the beginning of the following book, section 343, ends with a rewriting of UM2's image of sea travel,⁴³ in which Nietzsche, new Mai and new Columbus, describes his reconsideration of history via the metaphor of a "perilous and exciting" sea voyage: "Antiquity has been treated by all kinds of historians and their methods. We have now had enough experience, however, to turn the

⁴³ For an extremely interesting and innovative reading of the sea imagery in Nietzsche in relation to the issue of gender see Luce Irigaray's *Amante Marine (Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche)*. Irigaray describes a feminine imaginary that is like the vast ocean: "And the sea can shed shimmering scales indefinitely.... And each one is the equal of the other as it catches a reflection and lets it go. As it preserves and blurs. As it captures the glinting play of light. As it sustains mirages. Multiple and still far too numerous for the pleasure of the eye, which is lost in that host of sparkling surfaces. And with no end in sight" (1991, 46). Picking up on Nietzsche's sea-faring imagery, Irigaray speaks of man's invention of ships in order to pass over the waves of the sea. But the feminine sea will not be mastered, as Irigaray both plays with Nietzsche's works and chides him for his inability to overcome. In a completely different vein, see Cassano who makes the following comparison between Nietzsche and Heidegger: "Il pensiero di Heidegger si oppone al mare, esalta il valore del popolo tedesco circondato dalla terra, ricerca una dimensione profonda e essenziale che lo porta a una polemica con la società mercantile. Il pensiero di Nietzsche, al contrario, esalta il mare, quel mare che coincide con l'infinita apertura, la partenza senza ritorno e senza rimpianto" (1996, 145; Heidegger's thought opposes the sea, it exalts the value of the landlocked German people.... Nietzsche's thought, instead, exalts the sea, that sea that coincides with infinite aperture, leaving with neither return nor regret." On the imagery of the sea in Nietzsche's oeuvre, see also Gillespie and Strong (1988).

history of antiquity to account without being shipwrecked on antiquity itself” (1980, VIII, 153). The essay ends as the author uses the same trope, invoking a return to land:

I cry Land! Land! Enough and more than enough of the wild and erring voyage over strange dark seas! At last a coast appears in sight; we must land on it whatever it may be like, and the worst of harbors is better than to go reeling back into a hopeless *infinity* of skepticism. (1983, 116; my emphasis)

The return to land replicates the return to the historical realm in chapter 1 of UM2 when Nietzsche dismissed the ‘over-historical’ approach of Leopardi – as well as the repudiation of skepticism that it represented – by proposing the eternal return.

By contrast, the seafarer of the *Gay Science* is no longer a symbol of *nostos*, the desire for homecoming, but rather relishes the infinity of the open sea. Nietzsche writes:

At hearing the news that ‘the old god is dead,’ we philosophers and ‘free spirits’ feel illuminated by a new dawn, our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, foreboding, expectation – finally the horizon seems clear again, even if not bright; finally our ships may set out again, set out to face any danger; every daring of the lover of knowledge is allowed again; the sea, our sea, lies open again; maybe there has never been such an ‘open sea’” (Aphorism 343 [2001, 199]).

The theme of seafaring, with particular reference to Columbus also completely rewritten *in bono*, returns in the poem *Toward New Seas* published at the end of the *Gay Science*:

Out there – thus I will; so doing
Trust myself now and my grip.
Open lies the sea, its bluing
Swallows my Genoese ship.
All things are now new and beaming,
Space and time their noon decree – :
Only your eye – monstrous, gleaming
Stares at me, *infinity*! (2001, 258)

However, Nietzsche’s rewriting *in bono* of Ulysses as Columbus, much as was the case with Leopardi, is very different from both the use of the figure as a hero of the Enlightenment or of Romanticism. There is a sense in which infinity becomes the spatial correlative of eternity that brings the philosopher of the future into being as Nietzsche

hints in the following poem “all sea, all midday, all time without aim” announcing the coming of Zarathustra: “and Zarathustra strode into my view” (ibid.).

Moreover, the mention of infinity, in conjunction with the sea metaphor, is particularly striking. According to Antimo Negri, Leopardi’s “L’infinito” is very important for Nietzsche who uses it as a source for the section “We Aeronauts of Spirit” in *Daybreak* where he writes, “Will it perhaps be said of us one day that we too, steering westward, hoped to reach an India – but it was our fate to be wrecked against infinity” (1997, 229). Indeed, Nietzsche seems particularly taken with Leopardi’s poem, and in the winter vacations between 1880 and 1881 he writes “Unendlichkeit! Schön ist’s ‘in diesem Meer zu scheitern’” (1980, I, 620; Infinity! Beautiful it is to “shipwreck in such a sea”). Nietzsche is quoting the concluding line of Leopardi’s most famous poem:

“L’infinito”

Sempre caro mi fu quest’ermo colle,
e questa siepe, che da tanta parte
dell’ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude.
Ma sedendo e mirando, interminati
spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani
silenzi, e profondissima quiete
io nel pensier mi fingo; ove per poco
il cor non si spaura. E come il vento
odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello
infinito silenzio a questa voce
vo comparando: e mi sovvien l’eterno,
e le morte stagioni, e la presente
e viva, e il suon di lei. Così tra questa
immensità s’annega il pensier mio:
e il naufragar m’è dolce in questo mare

(“The Infinite”)

I always loved this solitary hill,
and this hedgerow, which cuts off
the view of so much of the final horizon.
But seated here, wondering at
unending spaces beyond,
superhuman silences, and unfathomable peace
I feign in thought; till fear is almost what
my heart feels. And as I hear the murmur
of the wind among the leaves,
that infinite silence to this voice
I go comparing; and the eternal seizes me,
and the dead past seasons, and the present
and the living one, and its sounds. Thus, in such

immensity my thought drowns:
and to shipwreck is sweet to me in such a sea).⁴⁴

“L’ultimo orizzonte” would be more precisely translated as “ultimate” from its etymology as that which is *plus ultra*. Negri concludes his analysis by noting that “Non si può disconoscere che, interrogandosi sul proprio destino di uomo e di pensatore, Nietzsche non si avvale solo della immagine leopardiana di Colombo, bensì recupera anche l’idea (‘visione ed enigma’) del naufragio ‘dolce’ nel mare de l’*Infinito*” (1994, 217; we cannot deny that Nietzsche, as he questions his destiny as a man and a thinker, not only uses the Leopardian imagery of Columbus but also the idea [‘both vision and enigma’] of the sweet shipwreck in the sea of “L’infinito”).⁴⁵

Rennie, in his otherwise excellent study of Leopardi and Nietzsche, thinks that the departure from Leopardi is a necessary turning away from the “experience of sublime dissolution” (2005, 312). It is not so much “L’infinito” as the bringer of a sublime experience, however, that interests Nietzsche, as its representation of the crossing, the going over a threshold of time, as infinity becomes the spatial correlative of eternity. Leopardi’s über-sonnet transgresses the sonnet’s traditional fourteen-line form, by placing the final joy of shipwreck in an additional fifteenth line, thus underlining the theme of a crossing over, which is both spatial and temporal in nature, traversing the past and present in the eternal moment, or point, of infinity. The eternal seizes the poet as the harmony and dissonance between dead past seasons and the present one: what Nietzsche would call the two paths which offend each other face to face [sie stossen sich gerade vor den Kopf]. This point will become even clearer when, in the next section, we look at its development in the beginning of the third book of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

v. De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii *and the Philosopher of the Future* (Thus Spoke Zarathustra)

The time is out of joint
--Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

*I walk among human beings as among fragments of the future, that future that I see....
[H]ow could I bear to be a human being if mankind was not also creator and solver of
riddles and redeemer of accidents*
--Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Scholars usually give crucial weight to the formulation of the ‘eternal return’ in book 3 of *Zarathustra* – originally published as the final book. For instance, Loeb comments: “The

⁴⁴ In the *Zibaldone* Leopard says that “l’infinito è un parto della nostra immaginazione, della nostra piccolezza ad un tempo e della nostra superbia” (May 2, 1826 [1991, II, 2299]).

⁴⁵ See also Antimo Negri (1993, 2, 66-77).

first extended account of the return is given in ‘Of the vision and the riddle’;...the most important single place in *Thus spoke Zarathustra* (and probably in all of Nietzsche’s writings) for understanding Zarathustra’s thought of eternal recurrence” (2007, 83).⁴⁶ As we have seen so far, the idea of the eternal return develops as an account of the relationship between self and history, whose genealogy is to be found in the dialogue between Nietzsche and Leopardi concerning philology and history in UM2 and the *Gay Science*. The same seems to hold true for *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, especially if we consider that in a letter to Heinrich Köselitz in September of 1883 Nietzsche makes the comparison between Zarathustra and Leopardi explicit: “I have to tell you that in the third part poor [Zarathustra] falls into deepest sadness, so much so that Schopenhauer and Leopardi will seem absolute beginners and novices compared to him” (1980 VI, 445). Considering that “the abysmal thought” is presented in book 3 of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in light of the relation to Leopardi, history and philology prove to be particularly useful in approaching what is often considered the most controversial of all Nietzschean concepts.

At the beginning of his journey in part 3, Zarathustra presents a parable, a riddle for his traveling companions, in which he tells us about his vision of a shepherd, in a desert, who is being choked. Zarathustra says: “A young shepherd I saw, writhing, choking, convulsing, his face distorted, and a heavy black snake hanging out of his mouth. Have I ever seen so much disgust and pallid horror on one face?” (2006, 127).⁴⁷ I would argue that given the context, this is a reference to Leopardi’s shepherd of the “Canto notturno.” For instance, the nocturnal setting of the parable – in a desolate landscape illuminated by the full moon “silent as death” (ibid., 126) – echoes the silent moon addressed as “giovinetta immortale” in the poem. This interpretation becomes clearer and stronger in light of my earlier discussion of the figure of Columbus and the theme of seafaring. Zarathustra presents the account to his fellow travelers on a ship voyaging from the Blessed Isles to the mainland. In fact, the riddle is posited by Zarathustra to his fellow voyagers because he loves “those who travel far,” and thus decides to speak after remaining in silence for two days.⁴⁸ Zarathustra says:

You bold ones around me! You searcher, researchers and whoever among you ever shipped out with cunning sails onto unexplored seas! You riddle-happy ones! Now guess me this riddle what I saw back then, now interpret me this vision of the loneliest one!... For it was a vision and a foreseeing: – *what* did I see then as a parable? And *who* is it that must some day come? Who is the shepherd into whose throat the serpent crawled this way? (2006, 127)

⁴⁶ In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and elsewhere, Nietzsche employs two cognate terms to refer to recurrence: *Wiederkehr/wiederkehren* and *Wiederkunft/wiederkommen*. Although he seems to use these words interchangeably some scholars have argued that there is an important conceptual difference between. See for instance Lampert, (1986); Higgins (1987). See also Rosen (1995); Gooding-Williams (2001); and Seung (2005).

⁴⁷ Giuseppe Gabetti argues for the similarity between Leopardi’s Columbus and the figure of the Overman, remarking that the Italian poet brings us to the “threshold of what will be the world of Zarathustra” (1924, 15).

⁴⁸ As often noted, this is also a Christological image.

It is important to note that what we could call Zarathustra's *orazion picciola* to his companions (following the Dantean Ulysses) frames the chapter "On the vision and the riddle" as a whole. The invitation to guess the riddle is repeated twice, at the beginning and at the end of the section to indicate the double vision of the riddle, and it is structured into two encounters: respectively, the encounter with a dwarf and the one with the shepherd.

Indeed, the connection between the "Canto notturno" and the shepherd of Zarathustra becomes more apparent if we concentrate on what Small calls the "preparation" of the riddle of the shepherd, for as he notes, "Zarathustra does not present his vision and riddle to this audience straight away, but prepares for it with a narration which is important in its own right. He describes an encounter which occurred "not long ago" between himself and his enemy, the spirit of gravity" (1998, 80). The spirit of gravity is represented by the dwarf who confronts Zarathustra at a gateway, which is described as having

Two faces. Two ways come together here: no one has yet followed either to its end. This long lane stretches back for an eternity. And that long lane out there, that is another eternity. They contradict each other, these paths; they offend each other face to face; and it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above: 'Moment.' These two paths are the past and the future. (ibid., 125; translation amended)

Zarathustra describes the threshold by invoking the figure of the Latin Janus, Horace's *Matutine Pater* or father of dawn (Horace, 1992, 2: 6, 20-23), the two-faced God of times, transitions, thresholds, endings and beginnings, celebrated at the start of every new year. The mention of the two faces recalls Nietzsche's poem to St. Januarius, which I began to discuss above, at the beginning of book 4 of the *Gay Science*, where the so-called "first full" mention of the eternal return is presented.

The gateway is also obviously a representation of time itself, setting the stage for the eternal return. Zarathustra then adds: "And it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above: Moment (Augenblick)" (125).⁴⁹ Small comments that the German word *Augenblick* literally means a blink of the eye, a familiar event that occurs in next to no time, and adds: "More broadly, it suggests a point of view. In this sense, the moment is a perspective upon a temporality which consists of a past and future, because it looks forward along one of the ways and backward along the other" (1998, 80). It should also be pointed out that *Augenblick* is not a word that occurs often in Nietzsche's prose. Its best known earlier occurrence is part of another reflection on history and time, where it is used in such a way that it might call to mind the herd fettered to the moment (1983, 60; *Pflock des Augenblicks*) of Leopardi's "Canto notturno."

⁴⁹ Cf. Rennie (2005), who examines the structure of the moment as *Augenblick* in detail; see especially 271-89, 311-336.

The connection to Leopardi becomes even stronger if we consider that, as many Nietzsche scholars have pointed out, the parable is an answer to the reflection on time provoked by the soothsayer's assertion at the end of book 2 that "All is empty, all is the same, all has been!" (2006, 105-06, translation amended).⁵⁰ This formulation echoes what Leopardi's considered the distinctive feature of the post-Colombian world where "tutto è simile e discoprendo,/ solo il nulla s'accresce" (all is the same, / discovery only increases emptiness). The allusion is further reinforced if we consider Leopardi's image of drowning in infinity in relation to the soothsayer's lament, 'Oh where is there still a sea in which one could drown?' (ibid., 106). In book 2, the soothsayer prompts Zarathustra's reflection on time, history and the spirit of revenge in the following chapter, "On Redemption." Here Zarathustra explains to the "hunchback" (and an Italianist cannot help but to think about Leopardi in his traditional guise as the "gobbo di Recanati") the nature of the spirit of revenge in terms of an attitude toward time, "This, yes, this alone is revenge itself, the will's unwillingness toward time and time's 'it was'" (ibid., 111). The overcoming of revenge comes first in the form of an overcoming of resentment toward the past and of a reorientation of the will toward the future: "the now and the past on earth – alas, my friend – that is what is most unbearable to *me*. And I would not know how to live if I were not also a seer of that which must come. A seer, a willer, a creator, a future himself and a bridge to the future" (ibid., 110).

Zarathustra's redemption and his final answer to the soothsayer take the form of a productive willing *a posteriori* at the end of book 2. The past is nothing but a collection of fragments dictated by *fortuna*, chance, until the creative will says to it, "But I will it thus! Thus shall I will it" (ibid.). One wills the past as if it were one's own responsibility, as if it were the result of one's own willing it to be so. This, however, is not a just compromise with the past; rather, the act of willing *a posteriori* partially reconstitutes one's past. In other words, the self takes possession of the past not as an indication of time but as a willful and artistic patchwork, essentially related to one's own perspective, which has the further potential to revise and/or reorient the future.

In book 3, Zarathustra's redemption takes the form of his "abysmal thought" (ibid., 125). The word choice itself is particularly interesting because the German word that is in English is translated as abysmal is *abgründlich*, or 'groundless,' without a stable foundation. Indeed, the vision of time as the eternal return unchains history from causality. If time truly is a circle and not a line, then determining the future is tantamount to determining the past. Zarathustra asks: "Must not whatever *can* happen have happened, have been done, have passed by before? And if everything has been there before – what do you think, dwarf, of this moment? Must not this gateway too have been there before? And are not all, things knotted together so firmly that this moment draws after it *all* that is to come? Therefore – itself too?" (ibid., 126). What returns eternally is thus also all the structure of the moment as gateway between past and future. Importantly, in fact, as Small points out, the gateway is not the present moment, but it is the structure, the frame of the "moment" in general: "Such a frame allows a direct confrontation of past and future in the moment: they meet face to face, and not by proxy. The 'moment' does not separate past and future, because they come together within it" (1998, 80). Past and future are not entities separated from

⁵⁰ For instance Gooding-Williams comments that "Zarathustra forms the thought [of recurrence] in response to the soothsayer's prophecy" (2001, 185).

the present in a linear succession – what comes later and what comes earlier – but rather they are the very dimensions of the present.

In other words, we could say that the gateway stages the anachronicity of time: If from the perspective of the past, the present is decided by whatever happened before, from the standpoint of the future, it is the present that determines all that comes afterwards. (In the former case the past would determine the self and the moment would be eternally determined; in the latter case, the future would be the one determining the self, while the moment determines eternity). There is a sense, therefore, in which the present gateway, both limen and threshold, is absolutely determined and absolutely self-determining insofar as it contains all possible sets of future and past moments. Indeed, it might even be useful to think about the gateway in terms of Gianni Vattimo's *Verwindung* (1987), a distortion of time and self that puts into question, once and for all, the issue of origin and thus also the connected notion of overcoming (*überwindung*). Vattimo argues that after UM2 Nietzsche develops the eternal return as a conception of time and history that can best be thought of in terms of Heideggerian *Verwindung*. Vattimo writes, "It is very likely that the idea of thought's progress and emancipation through 'critical overcoming' is 'distorted' [Vattimo's own translation of Heidegger's *verwunden*] into the notion of *Verwindung*, history itself can no longer appear as linear" (1987, 17). As the dwarf puts it "[a]ll that is straight lies," insofar as "truth is crooked, time itself is a circle" (2006, 125). Time seems indeed out of joint, but the circle is more akin to the *ouroboros* than to its hermeneutic namesake.

At the end of book 3, Zarathustra delivers the poem to "his own heart," which is meant to rewrite Leopardi's "A se stesso" as Nietzsche interprets it in UM2. In so doing he wills the eternal return in direct contrast with Leopardi defining himself as *Columbus Novus*:

If I favor the sea and all that is of the sea, and even favor it most when it angrily contradicts me: If ever that joy of searching is in me that drives sails toward the undiscovered, if the seafarer's joy is my joy: If ever my rejoicing cried: "The coast has disappeared – now the last chain has fallen from me" – *infinity* roars around me, far and away space and time glitter, well then! Come on, old heart!" – Oh how should I not lust after Eternity and after the nuptial ring of all rings, the ring of recurrence!.... For I love you, oh eternity! *For I love you, oh eternity!* (2006, 186; translation amended)

The procreative *nuptiae* between Zarathustra and life that occurs at the end of the third book is a transformation of both Ulysses, who becomes the Overman, and of Time. Whereas in "Rimus Remedium, or: How Sick Poets Console Themselves," Nietzsche writes "Time is dour, / a witch who drools incessantly / drips upon hour upon hour. / In vain, disgust cries out me: / 'Curse, curse the power / of eternity!'" (2001, 256) all of the seven seals that conclude the third book (as mentioned, originally intended to conclude *Zarathustra*) end with the refrain "For I love you, oh eternity," repeated twice as a

couplet.⁵¹ The stylistic repetition serves to underline a new understanding of history and offers Nietzsche's final answer to Leopardi. Affirming the eternal return, the subject becomes free from its entanglements with resentment toward the past, with a bad conscience in the present, and with impotence in respect to the future. If the shepherd in the riddle, much like Leopardi's shepherd in the "Canto notturno", was limited by the spirit of revenge toward history, for Zarathustra, history is most of all an orientation toward the future. The eternal return brings the philosopher of the future into being.

In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche describes man as fundamentally preoccupied with the future, he is "the still-unconquered eternal-futurist [ewig-Zukünftige ewig-Zukünftige]," which could also be translated as "eternal future-dweller" whose "future mercilessly digs into the flesh of every present like a spur" (1994, 13). Whereas some argue that there is no mention of the eternal return in *The Genealogy of Morals*, I would object that the thought of the eternal return is the *sine qua non* to a genealogical approach. The extinction of revenge is connected to the eternal return as ultimately a willing that the past return as the future. Nietzsche describes the overman "who is sure of the future [zukunfts-gewissen]" and "creates man's goal and gives the earth its meaning and its future" (2006, 157). The task of the overmen is "to work on the future [Zukunfts-schaffen] and to redeem with their creation all that *has been* [und Alles, das war schaffend zu-erlösen]. To redeem [erlösen] what is past in man and to re-create all 'it was' until the will says, 'Thus I willed it! Thus I shall will it!'" (ibid., 110).

Of course, the future is also the past, for it is "whoever has become wise about ancient origins" that "in the end, seeks new wells of the future and new origins" (ibid., 170). Notably, in fact, there is a sense in which the philosopher of the future is made possible through his becoming first a philologist of the future. As Robert Gooding-Williams remarks in *Zarathustra's Dionysian Modernism* the word that Nietzsche uses to indicate Zarathustra's exhortation to the shepherd (*rieth*, counseled) is a form of the verb *raten*, which is the same verb that Zarathustra uses to exhort the sailors to guess the riddle (2001, 229). This suggests that on the one hand Zarathustra's advice is itself a way of guessing the meaning of the riddle, and, on the other, that the right kind of hermeneutical interpretation is itself a way to operate the transformation whereby the prostrated shepherd "leaped to his feet. No longer shepherd, no longer human – a transformed, radiant, *laughing* being" (Nietzsche, 2006, 127; translation amended).

As represented in *Zarathustra* (much as in UM2 and *Gay Science*), then, there is a sense in which the form of in which the concept of the eternal return is expressed seems itself to be a thought that invites interpretation; in this case, the hermeneutical act that Zarathustra incites his companions to perform. If interpreting the dream vision of the shepherd eventually reconciles Zarathustra with eternity, the reader/companion is incited to go through a similar interpretative journey spurred by Zarathustra's *orazion picciola* to his companions: "You bold ones around me! You searchers [*Sucher*], researchers [*Versucher*], and whoever among you ever shipped out with cunning sails onto unexplored seas! You riddle-happy ones! Now guess for me this riddle that I saw back then, now interpret me this vision of the loneliest one!" (ibid., 127).⁵²

⁵¹ The fourth book of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was not intended to be published immediately.

⁵² The word "researchers" could also be translated as "curious ones" taking the reference to Dante's Ulysses in conjunction with the consideration that this word points back to the verb *versuchen*, with a meaning of both "to experiment" and "to tempt." Apropos of this ambiguity, in "The Philosopher at Sea,"

The importance of this passage is further stressed in *Ecce Homo*, where citing the passage from *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche delineates the figure of the perfect reader:

When I imagine a perfect reader, he always turns into a monster of courage and curiosity; moreover, supple, cunning, cautious; a born adventurer and discoverer. In the end, I could say no better to whom alone I am speaking at the bottom than Zarathustra said it: to whom alone will he relate his riddle? "To you, the bold searchers, researchers, and whoever embarks with cunning sails on terrible seas – to you, drunk with riddles, glad of the twilight, whose souls flutes lure astray to every whirlpool." (1980, VI, 301–2)

The ideal reader is the philologist of the future for whom the past ceases to inform the present in the sense of a set of causes which determine it, but, rather, it acts as a presence that constitutes and determines both the present and the future. As late as 1885 Nietzsche will speak of the figure of the philologist as a new Columbus: "the discovery, happily begun, of the ancient world is the work of a Columbus *novus*" (ibid., XI, 582–83).

The Leopardian genealogy of the eternal return points to an understanding of history, which is not an epiphanic apotheosis, a sublime experience, or the eternalization of the present moment.⁵³ Far from being the last metaphysical hope, the eternal return is first a 'hermeneutical practice' in the sense of being a philology of the future. The "yes" to the eternal return is the expression of the will, not so much in reconciling and integrating estranged forms of time but in affirming the *aporia* of time itself, in all of its fundamental anachronicity and untimeliness. It is in this sense that we should ultimately understand Nietzsche's aphorism: "People in general think that philology is at an end – while I believe that it has not yet begun. The future commands a philologist skeptical in regard to our entire culture, and therefore also the destroyer of philology as a profession" (1874, 24). To return to Politian and to quote the authority of Aristotle himself, in fact, there is a sense in which "time either does not exist at all or barely, and in an obscure way" (*Physics* 2006, IV, 217, b35). *Ipse dixit*.

Karsten Harries remarks: "*Versucher* means first of all not a scientific researcher but a tempter. The devil, who tempted Adam and Eve with the promise that their eyes would be opened and they would be like gods, knowing good and evil, is the *Versucher*" (1988, 30). Harries further suggests that the sea voyage is akin to the labyrinth: "Just as Zarathustra's sailors are lured by the whirlpool's abyss, so Nietzsche, in an earlier draft of *Ecce homo*, speaks of the fascinated curiosity that draws him to the labyrinth, a curiosity, he suggests, that not only delights in the friendship of Ariadne but is also not afraid to make the acquaintance with the Minotaur, presumably not to slay it" (ibid., 37).

⁵³ It might be helpful to recall that Zarathustra himself mocks the "people of the present": "Foreign to me and a mockery are these people of the present to whom my heart recently drove me; I am driven out of father and motherlands. Thus I love only my children's land, the undiscovered land in the furthest sea: for I command my sails to seek and seek. I want to make it up to my children for being the child of my fathers; and to all the future – for the existence of this present" (2006, 95).

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