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# Leopardi and the Power of Sound

Margaret Brose

*A Voice to Light Gave Being*

--William Wordsworth, "On the Power of Sound"<sup>1</sup>

*When the bodily eye, in every stage of life  
the most despotic of our senses, gained  
Such strength in me as often held my mind  
In absolute dominion...*

--William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book XII (vv. 128-31)<sup>2</sup>

Giacomo Leopardi was, along with Dante, one of Italy's greatest theoreticians of language and poetics. Both poets intuited that the relationship between sound and sense was one of the cardinal elements of *poiesis*, in ways that foreshadowed the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, Émile Benveniste, Roman Jakobson, and the disciplines of semiotics and structuralism. Dante left to posterity abundant evidence of his mastery of poetic theory; indeed the *De vulgari eloquentia* is a gold mine of insights about philology, prosody, meter, rhyme, poetic topoi, and the categories of sound. Dante was only too happy to provide posterity with labels for specific categories and schools of poetry; for example, we owe to him the famous typological classification of the three classes of Romance languages based on the term for signifying assent (*yes*). Writing in Latin about the ascendancy of the Romance vernaculars, he distinguished the languages of the *oc* (southern France), the *oil* (northern France) and the *si* (Italy and Iberia).<sup>3</sup> But perhaps Dante's most enduring label remains "il dolce stil novo"—coined in *Purgatorio* 24.57 where the once-gluttonous poet Bonagiunta da Lucca hails the pilgrim Dante as the leader of this new poetic school. Bonagiunta states that the canzone "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore"—from Dante's own *Vita nuova* (chapter 19)—initiates this new poetic movement. Dante, not quite in the proper purgational mode, both accepts the title and offers a brilliant one-*terzina*-length explanation of his personal mode of inspiration:

E io a lui: "I' mi son un che, quando  
Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo  
ch'è ditta dentro vo significando." (*Purgatorio* 24.52-54)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All citations of Wordsworth's poetry are from William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1950). This citation is from "On the Power of Sound," 209.

<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth, "The Prelude," Book XII, in *ibid.*, 579.

<sup>3</sup> References to Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* are from Marianne Shapiro's translation and essay: *De vulgari eloquentia, Dante's Book of Exile* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> All citations of the *Divine Comedy* come from the three-volume edition and translation by Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); vol. 1, *Inferno*, 1996; vol. 2, *Purgatorio*, 2003; vol. 3, *Paradiso*, 2011.

The *Divina commedia* is replete with insights about the adequation of poetic phonological register and sound patterning to subject matter. *Inferno* 32 opens with a precise invocation to the Muse of Harsh Poetics:

S'io avessi le rime aspre e chiocce  
come si converrebbe al tristo buco  
sovra 'l qual pontan tutte l'altre rocce, (*Inferno* 32.11-3)

Dante here makes it clear that the poetic register needed (linguistically and ethically) to describe Cocytus, Satan, and the bottom of Hell, could not pertain to the *dolce* linguistic register, or to his own language which contains such endearing terms such as “mamma o babbo” (*Inferno* 32.9). And in Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia* we find an almost quaint typology of soundscapes (Book II Ch. 7): “those that are feminine because of their softness [...] those that are rustic on account of their hardness [...] those urbane words that are glossy or bristly” to which Dante then adds the category of “the combed and the hairy words.”<sup>5</sup>

I raise these Dantean issues here, in the context of Leopardi’s insights about soundscape, because Dante was explicit and insistent about his theories concerning the necessary connection between poetic sound and sense and registered his insights in his poetry itself, as well as in theoretical statements such as those in the *De vulgari eloquentia*. However, the poet from Recanati transcribed his theories of poetry in his secret notebooks, the *Zibaldone*, which were in effect lost, and only rediscovered accidentally by a servant sixty-one years after the poet’s death, and published in 1898, the centenary of the poet’s birth. The first entry in the *Zibaldone* is labeled 1817 (this date may have been added a few years later); the last entry is marked 4 December 1832. Thus, over a period of fifteen and a half years, Leopardi recorded his meditations on languages and cultures, including provocative discussions about the nature of happiness, pleasure, boredom—all jotted down as fragments and repetitions, accretions and exfoliations, in a notebook that grew by an almost rhizomic process.

But there was no readership for the *Zibaldone* until the early twentieth century, and this readership was primarily Italian, primarily professional literary scholars, thus a very limited group of readers at that. The complexity and size of the *Zibaldone* (4,614 pages in the 1997 Mondadori Meridiani edition, for example) kept it inaccessible to most readers of Leopardi’s poetry. That Leopardi was a philosophical poet was clear; and yet, in the absence of any knowledge of the *Zibaldone*, the first readers of his verse, critics and admirers both, were left to interpret the poems in the *Canti* in terms of the other poems in the same volume (and surprisingly, there are only forty-one poems in the *Canti*). Thus, most readers found Leopardi to be either too philosophical or too lyrical. This binary reading is, in my view, a tacit affirmation of the uniqueness of Leopardi’s brilliant mind and sensibility, always poetic and philosophical at the same time. Fortunately, the *Zibaldone* allows us to understand to what extent Leopardi’s lyrical philosophy and his philosophical lyricism are synthetically, symbiotically, and structurally one and the same. This would become the subject of some of the great Leopardi scholarship of the second half of the twentieth century (Piero Bigongiari, Walter Binni, Bruno

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<sup>5</sup> Shapiro, *De vulgari eloquentia*, 79.

Biral, Luigi Blasucci, Anna Dolfi, Antonio Prete, and Salvatore Timpanaro, among others), a direction signaled by the title of Antonio Prete's book, *Il pensiero poetante*.<sup>6</sup>

Leopardi has been, we might say, deeply in the closet: revered and repulsed. Although he was unambiguously acknowledged by Italian intellectuals as the most important lyric poet since Petrarca, and as one of the most important thinkers in Italy since Machiavelli, somehow Leopardi "did not exist" in the larger Western literary canon. As Italo Calvino wrote in 1979, Leopardi continues to be the most important and the most relevant presence for Italian writers; all Italian literary generations must construct their own Leopardi, against which they define themselves. And yet, Calvino concludes, "outside the confines of Italy, Leopardi simply does not exist."

Per noi Leopardi è una presenza che diventa sempre più grande e sempre più vicina; da tempo ogni generazione letteraria italiana si costruisce il suo Leopardi, diverso da quello delle generazioni precedenti, e si definisce attraverso la sua definizione di Leopardi; e Leopardi regge a tutte queste esperienze. Ebbene, *fuor dei confini dell'Italia Leopardi semplicemente non esiste*.<sup>7</sup>

We are, I believe, at a turning point, a swerve, in the consciousness of readers of poetry, of Romanticism, and indeed of Western literature. There has been a spate of new translations into English of Leopardi's poetry (by Eamon Grennan, Patrick Creagh, and Jonathan Galassi, among others; see Perella for a meticulous discussion about the challenges of translating Leopardi's poetry into English). Most crucially, the first complete English translation of the *Zibaldone* has just been published in the USA by Farrar, Straus and Giroux (and as a Penguin edition in the UK).<sup>8</sup> It will now be possible for Anglophone readers to access Leopardi's secret diaries, and to follow the paths, often circuitous, of his brilliant meditations on poetry, philology, history, philosophy, and anthropology. The *Zibaldone* is a book of innovative "cultural criticism" *avant la lettre*, summing up cardinal ideas from the Greeks and Romans, re-contextualizing literary, philosophical and philological discussions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and foreshadowing our own post-modern age. Indeed, Tim Parks's recent review of the English *Zibaldone* in *The New York Review of Books* (October 10, 2013) is entitled "The Greatest Intellectual Diary in Italian Literature." This is no hyperbole. The challenge for readers will be to resist the impulse to read Leopardi as merely a pessimist (a label found in the majority of the reviews of this translation)—and, above all, to open themselves up to the tender emotions, brilliant insights of cultural (and self) analysis, and the embodied pleasures of his prose.

The fundamental theme of both the lyrics and the prose of Leopardi is the opposition between mankind's irrepressible desire for an infinite happiness and the limited, fragmentary, delusory nature of reality. This is, of course, a pessimistic view of reality—and humans do

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<sup>6</sup> Antonio Prete, *Il pensiero poetante: Saggio su Leopardi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> "L'immagine culturale dell'Italia all'estero," *Atti della conferenza promossa dal Comitato Italiano dell'UNESCO*, February 22, 1979, ed. A. Bartoli, *Il Veltro* (1980): 72-73. Cited in Nicolas J. Perella, "Translating Leopardi?" *Italica*, Vol. 77, no. 3 (Autumn, 2000): 358. Emphasis mine.

<sup>8</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013). In my essay, all translations of *Zibaldone* passages are taken from this edition, which I have marked with Z and FSG (for Farrar Straus Giroux) and the page number of that edition. It is important to remember that when cited in Italian, *Zibaldone* passages are marked by the paragraph number, and not by page number, as is the tradition in Leopardi scholarship.

everything possible to resist its truth. The contrast finite-infinite appears in Leopardi as a temporal dilemma, born of the opposition, ontological in nature, between our experience of every present moment as necessarily finite and our desire for a happiness indissociable from a feeling for infinitude—a happiness accessible only by the imagination’s capacity for the production of *rimembranza* and *speranza*, emotions achieved textually by means of the two rhetorically propulsive devices, metalepsis and prolepsis.<sup>9</sup> The happiness we so fervently seek can only exist in a temporal dimension other than the present. The representation of that happiness is textually produced by manipulating spatial and temporal oppositional structures, and by the reversal of deictic fields.

For Leopardi, any memory of the past is the memory of childhood figuration, which is itself a projection of future happiness. In a famous passage in the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi speaks of every seeing of the world as doubled: “il mondo e gli oggetti sono in un certo modo doppi” (Z 4418).<sup>10</sup> Things are registered first by the eyes and then grasped by the imagination, and exist poetically only to the extent that they can be enfigured. This is why, for Leopardi, no primacy is to be granted to things as they first may have been. Things are perceived the first time around as bound and limited; and then, only secondly, sensations and experience are imbued with indefiniteness and immateriality, whether by metalepsis or prolepsis. For Leopardi sound recurrence was, therefore, the most indefinite and sublime of all affects.

Both Dante and Leopardi intuited, differently to be sure, what Roman Jakobson would later call *The Sound Sense of Language* (1979).<sup>11</sup> And yet, the rich poetic insights which are dispersed over the many pages of the *Zibaldone* were never articulated as poetic theories per se, but rather constitute merely one thread of that vast fabric of Leopardi’s generically philosophical enterprise—that of attempting to make sense of the misery of the human condition. Linguistically informed speculations are interwoven with, and conceptually similar to, speculations on the nature of pleasure, boredom, desire, memory, *assuefazione* (custom or habit) and the imagination—and on the rise and fall of civilizations, languages, and consciousness itself. And yet, numerous interesting correspondences do obtain between Leopardi’s theoretical awareness of how specific linguistic aspects of poetic discourse contribute to our experience of that elusive state known as the Sublime, and his actual poetic technique.

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<sup>9</sup> Both of these tropes involve temporal displacements: a word or a phrase from figurative speech is used in a new context, past or future. In Leopardi’s lyrics images, sounds and affects from his youth are re-membered at a later time, metaleptically retrieved; or experiences and figures are projected into a future time, proleptically. The affective states that correspond to these tropes are *rimembranza* and *speranza*.

<sup>10</sup> *Le opere di Giacomo Leopardi*, ed. Rolando Damiani and Mario Andrea Rigoni (Milan: Mondadori, 1997). All citations of Leopardi’s works (unless specified as other) are from this Meridiani edition, consisting of five volumes: vol. 1, *Poesie*, ed. Rigoni; vol. 2, *Prose*, ed. Damiani; vols. 3-5, *Zibaldone*, ed. Damiani. For the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi’s own manuscript page numbers have become the standard form of reference for modern editions, given in the body of the text in parentheses following the italicized letter Z.

<sup>11</sup> The bibliography on the topic of the relationship of sound to sense in poetry is extensive. For a few classic examples, see Jan Mukarovsky, “Sound Aspect of Poetic Language,” in *On Poetic Language*, ed. and trans. John Burbank and Peter Steiner (Lisse: de Ridder, 1976); Roman Jakobson, “Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 350-77; Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). For a more recent set of essays on the subject, see *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). And for a poet’s take, see Robert Pinsky, *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998). See also the provocative chapter on “Sound” in Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Finally, perhaps the most innovative poet in this realm, in theory and praxis, is Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose theories of sprung rhythm and inscape and instress remain as innovative today as ever.

The most obvious example of such a relationship of interdependence is to be found in “L’infinito” (1819), the first of the early group of idylls (“i piccoli idilli”). The title of this extraordinary fifteen-line poem (a quasi-sonnet) points us towards Leopardi’s numerous notebook entries concerning the indissoluble nexus, in poetry, between expressions of the indefinite and the experience of the infinite. This idyll demonstrates how the experience of the infinite is produced by means of carefully articulated contrasts between opposing semantic and temporal fields.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, what mediates between and indeed makes possible the deictic inversion of *questo* and *quello* is the recurrence of sound. The finite and the bounded present (“questa siepe”) is first opposed to, and then transformed into the limitless sublimity of that sea (“il naufragar m’è dolce in questo mare”) by means of the power of sound-images. The sublime otherness of infinite time and space will be made affectively proximate by a simple deictic reversal. The rustling of the wind becomes the animating force of the experiences both of limitation and of its very transcendence. This particular wind (“il vento / Odo stormir tra queste piante,” vv. 8-9) calls up comparison with the infinite silence (“Infinito silenzio a questa voce / Vo comparando,” vv. 10-11). This action, *vo comparando*, is followed by a dead-stop, a colon, from which a chain of time-space correlations expands, from eternity back to this present season, and its sound:

[...] 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. (vv. 8-13)

([...] And hearing the wind  
 rustling through these plants, I begin  
 to compare that infinite silence  
 to this voice: and the eternal comes to mind  
 and the dead seasons, and the present  
 and living one, with its own sound.)<sup>13</sup>

By means of enjambments, diaeresis (*profondissima qui-e-te*), polysyndeton (*e*), and the medial caesuras that occur four times in the middle of the fifteen lines, the oral-aural temporality of the idyll is hastened, lengthening or abruptly stopped. Time becomes contracted, expanded, in a vertiginous rush.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Almost all critics of Leopardi have commented on the implicit didactic aspects of this poem. “L’Infinito” is a mini-manual: it produces the experience of the sublime at the same time that it delineates the steps needed to create this affect. See among others Luigi Blasucci, *I tempi dei ‘Canti’: Nuovi studi leopardiani* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996) and *Leopardi e i segnali dell’infinito* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1985); Giorgio Agamben, *Il linguaggio e la morte* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982); Elio Gianola, *Leopardi, la malinconia* (Turin: Jacca Book, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> This and all subsequent translations of Leopardi’s poetry are by the author, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>14</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I will put aside the fundamental issues of voice and orality, which are intimately linked to sound; these issues are taken up by Franco D’Intino’s provocative analysis of this problematic in *L’immagine della voce: Leopardi, Platone, e il libro* (Venice: Marsilio, 2009). D’Intino examines the *Operette*

“La sera del dì di festa” (1820), the second of the early idyll series, also instantiates many of the theoretical observations in Leopardi’s notebooks. This poem is especially interesting for its utilization of sound, understood in two senses. On the one hand, the dense patterning of sound segments (alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme, internal rhyme, stress change, anaphora, inversion, etc.) activates the signifiers of the poem, reinforcing Leopardi’s tendency to valorize the signifier over the signified.<sup>15</sup> In fact, a recurrent feature in all of Leopardi’s musings on poetry is the recognition that the signified must be diffused into a polysemous nexus of associations.<sup>16</sup> Leopardi’s cardinal distinction between *parola* and *termine* (the two categories into which he divides all the lexemes of a given language) rests precisely on this difference: a *parola* is a word without a specific signified, pointing instead to a vague field of emotive, hence poetic, sentiments; a *termine*, by contrast, has a single, precise signified. It follows, then, that the ideal form of a *parola* would entail the evocativeness of pure sound itself:

Le parole [...] non presentano la sola idea dell’oggetto significato, ma quando più quando meno immagini accessorie. Ed è pregio sommo della lingua l’aver di queste parole. Le voci scientifiche presentano la nuda e circoscritta idea di quel tale oggetto, e perciò si chiamano termini perchè determinano e definiscono la cosa da tutte le parti. Quanto più una lingua abbonda di parole tanto più è adatta alla letteratura e alla bellezza ec. ec. (Z 109-10).

(Words [...] present not just the idea of the objects they signify but also accessory images, sometimes more and sometimes fewer. And it is the most precious gift of a language to have these words. Scientific words present the bare and circumscribed idea of an object, and that is why they are called terms, because they determine and define the thing from all sides. The richer in words a language is, the more suitable it is for literature and beauty, etc. etc. [Z, FGS, 98])

On the other hand, there is another use of sound in “La sera del dì di festa,” differing from but convergent with the actual recurrent sound segments of the poem, and that is the topos of a recurrent sound, in this case, the song of the artisan returning home at night: “Ahi per la via / Odo non lunge il solitario canto / dell’artigian, che riede a tarda notte” (vv. 24-26). Patrick Creagh’s translation of these verses, published for the first time in this volume of *CIS*, reads: “...Ah woe, along / a lane close by I hear the lonely song / Of an artisan returning late at night.” It is in both these senses of the term *sound* that I want to discuss Leopardi’s insights into the practice of auditory semiosis. His quite original understanding of how sounds produce meaning and/or evoke emotion (for these are distinct processes, as we shall see) underlies both uses of sound in “La sera del dì di festa.” And whereas all poems rely on some form of equivalence in sound patterning, consonant with Roman Jakobson’s famous definition of the poetic and meta-

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*morali*, which were written by Leopardi during the hiatus between his two most productive poetic (*idilli*) phases and, crucially, after his encounter with Plato. D’Intino examines the politically revolutionary power of the oral genres (*l’oratorio, il dramma, l’epos*).

<sup>15</sup> For this type of formal analysis of the sound segments, see Stefano Agosti, *Il testo poetico, teoria e pratiche d’analisi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1972) and Gian Luigi Beccaria, *L’autonomia del significante* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975).

<sup>16</sup> See Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), for whom poetic “indeterminacy” is linked to “undecidability.”

linguistic functions of language,<sup>17</sup> this idyll is thematically about sound as the most immediate sign of both temporal loss and poetic resurrection. While the topical movement from strophe to strophe oscillates between the oppositional semantic fields typical of a Leopardian idyll, the thematic message of “La sera del dì di festa” remains constant: all that is mortal fades, a man’s youth, a holiday, and indeed entire civilizations die and become, like sound itself, a mere trace, or resonance.

And yet, sounds that recur, which are perceived by the ear as echo, as having already been heard at another time, in another (or, better yet, the same) place, mitigate the intense pain brought by the present recognition of transience. According to the Leopardian mythology, any earlier occurrence of a sound refers us back to a temporal moment of relative plenitude—plenitude because (1) past and therefore distant, thus indefinite and diffused; and plenitude because (2) youth is necessarily a time of hope, a point of prolepsis from which to envision a future. Embedded in this message is the Leopardian conviction that events must be repeated to have any poetic significance at all; and that “first” occurrences have no worth, since experiences and sounds becomes recognizable only on the second time. Interestingly, then, the “poetic” affect of an event can only occur after its phenomenological occurrence. As we noted above, beauty, according to Leopardi, is in the hearing or seeing for the second time. Quoting Rousseau, Leopardi affirms, “L’on n’est heureux qu’avant d’être heureux” (Z 4492) (One is only happy before being happy). This brings to mind (to ear?) the recurrent refrain in Roland Barthes’s eloquent elegy on the death of his mother, *Mourning Diary*: “I fear a catastrophe that has already occurred.”<sup>18</sup> The temporality of catastrophe, like that of happiness, is metaleptic and initiates with a prior occurrence.

Sound recurs in “La sera del dì di festa” not only by means of the literal repetition of the artisan’s song (in the poet’s *prima età*, v. 40 and in his *verde etate*, v. 24), but also by the echoing patterns of sound segments of which the poem is composed. Phonemes, lexemes, and entire syntagms repeat in a pattern of centrifugal distancing (*lontanando morire a poco a poco*, v. 45), as does the artisan’s song.<sup>19</sup> This is but one of many examples of the poet laboring to arrive at the phonological and lexical analogues of the dispersion of sound itself. The phrase *lontanando morire* combines gerund and infinitive, temporally unmarked and non-conclusive expressions of the action of hearing the song. In sum, sound and its affect constitute, then, both the medium and the message of “La sera del dì di festa.”

These two aforementioned aspects of sound, and indeed all of Leopardi’s speculations on the power of music, reveal another domain in which we might say that Leopardi was again a precursor to the age of modernity. Leopardi did not attend musical events frequently, especially those valued above all for their social dimension, and he did not have an extensive knowledge of music, either in theory or in practice. He does however refer to music in his letters, and he

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<sup>17</sup> See Roman Jakobson’s famous distinction between metaphor and metonymy, and between the axis of selection and the axis of combination, in “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” *Fundamentals of Language* (1956), reprinted in *Selected Writings of Roman Jakobson, II: Word and Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 239-59. This formulation is central to the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Lacan.

<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary: October 26, 1977 - September 15, 1979*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 203. See also 122 and 158.

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, three earlier versions of this phrase, which was obviously coined for the express purpose of representing the distancing of sound, contained the variant *moria slontanando*; it is not surprising that Leopardi abandoned this infelicitous conjoining of the conjugated verb and an “S impure” sound. Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, ed. Emilio Peruzzi (Milan: Rizzoli, 1981), 277.



pondered it deeply in his *Zibaldone* entries. Not surprisingly, his thoughts bear the marks of both irony and contradiction, and the typical Romantic aversion to materialist investigation of a phenomenon. For example, the assertion that music is one of his greatest passions (“La musica, se non è la mia prima, è certo una mia gran passione e dev’esserlo in tutte le anime capaci di entusiasmo,”) <sup>20</sup> should be placed within the context of the letter itself: an appeal for aid to flee Recanati, written to a man who was himself a musical composer and promoter. In a similar vein of enthusiasm, Leopardi later in 1826 writes to his sister Paolina from Bologna that he finds himself in a city of music; and yet he did not actually attend more than one or two musical performances during his three-month sojourn there. While in Florence, Leopardi, who suffered from severe health problems all his adult life, did not attend any musical performances due to the painful condition of his eyes and teeth. Thus, it appears that Leopardi’s passion for music was primarily intellectual; it was an object of speculation (as, for example, his reflections on the profound effects of popular music as a basis of Rossini’s success, Z 3208). Leopardi had only a limited knowledge of contemporary Italian music, and he did not know German music at all.

Leopardi’s thoughts about sound and music utilize the same rhetorical structures and systems of thought as his ideas about pleasure and desire, about *il nulla* (nothingness, the void) and about poetic discourse. Marcello de Angelis, in *Leopardi e la musica*, <sup>21</sup> examining observations dispersed throughout the *Zibaldone* and *Le Operette morali*, indicates that Leopardi had thought about music, and its basic constituent element, raw sound, as elements connected to his central philosophical or rhetorical concerns such as *assuefazione* and *la rimembranza*. And in another study, *Musica ed estetica in Leopardi*, Bruno Gallotta offers an analysis of the interconnections between Leopardi’s thoughts about music, sound, harmony, and beauty. This study explicitly examines how Leopardi’s thoughts about music fall perfectly within the entire system of his aesthetics. Gallotta summarizes what he calls “i tre elementi-cardine del pensiero leopardiano sulla musica: il suono in quanto materiale del tutto atipico e particolare; l’armonia come ordinatrice e combinatrice di suoni, anche in senso orizzontale, i cui pregi risiedono nell’imitazione della natura; l’armonia in quanto convenienza [...] identificata con la bellezza.” <sup>22</sup> An early *Zibaldone* entry (July 7, 1829) lays out these distinctions:

Il piacere che ci dà il suono non va sotto la categoria del bello, ma è come quello del gusto dell’odorato ec. La natura ha dato i suoi piaceri a tutti i sensi. Ma la particolarità del suono è di produrre per se stesso un effetto più spirituale dei cibi dei colori degli oggetti tastabili ec. E tuttavia osservate che gli odori, in grado bensì molto più piccolo, ma pure hanno una simile proprietà, risvegliando l’immaginaz. ec. Laonde quello stesso spirituale del suono è un effetto fisico di quella sensazione de’ nostri organi, e infatti non ha bisogno dell’attenzione dell’anima, perchè il suono immediatamente la tira a se, e la commozione vien tutta da lui, quando anche l’anima appena ci avverta. Laddove la bellezza o naturale o artificiale non fa effetto se l’anima non si mette in una certa disposizione da riceverlo, e perciò il piacere che dà, si riconosce per intellettuale. Ed ecco la principal cagione dell’essere l’effetto della musica immediato, a

<sup>20</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, letter of April 28, 1820 to Piero Brighenti, in *Le lettere, Tutte le opere di Giacomo Leopardi*, ed. Francesco Flora (Milan: Mondadori, 1963), 323.

<sup>21</sup> Marcello de Angelis, *Leopardi e la musica* (Milan: Unicopli, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> Bruno Gallotta, *Musica e estetica in Leopardi* (Milan: Rugginenti, 1997), 18.

differenza delle altre arti. (Z 157-58)

(The pleasure we derive from sound does not come under the category of the beautiful, but is like that of taste or smell, etc. Nature has given us pleasure in all our senses. But sound is unique in producing an effect that in itself is much more spiritual than food, colors, or tangible objects. And yet observe that smells, although to a much lesser extent, have a similar ability to awaken our imagination, etc. Hence the very spirituality of sound is a physical effect on our sensory organs and does not require the attention of the soul, because sound draws the soul directly to itself, and this is what moves us, even when our soul barely notices it. Whereas beauty, whether natural or artificial, affects us only if the soul is predisposed in certain ways to recognize it, hence the pleasure that it gives us is recognized as an intellectual one. And this is the main reason that the effect of music is immediate, unlike that of the other arts. [Z, FSG, 125])

At this point, it will be useful to track the development of Leopardi's comments on music and sound for, as will be seen, these give insight into his theories of poetic sound and its relation to poetic temporality. The earliest *Zibaldone* entries already distinguish music from the other arts by virtue of its particular mode of semiosis or signification. "Le altre arti imitano ed esprimono la natura da cui si trae il sentimento, ma la musica non imita e non esprime che lo stesso sentimento in persona, ch'ella trae da se stessa e non dalla natura, e così l'uditore" (Z 79) ("The other arts imitate and express nature, from which feeling is drawn, but music imitates and expresses only feeling itself, which it draws from itself and not from nature, as does the listener," Z, FSG, 79). In other words, Leopardi attributes to music a unique system for the production of meaning. The other arts employ a three-step process: the image or word refers to a signified in Nature, which then elicits a sentiment (affect or meaning) that is the ultimate referent of the sign. In music, however, a sound (sound-wave frequency, perhaps) immediately produces the sentiment (affect) that is the end term of the chain of signification. Leopardi goes on to say that even the poetic word can only express sentiment by means of mediation through objects. The words are used to create a poem, Leopardi continues, "la parola come i segni e le immagini della pittura e scultura hanno una significazione determinata e finita" (Z 80) ("words, like marks and images in painting and sculpture, have a specific and finite meaning," Z, FSG, 79). Thus, while words and images must move through an object to achieve signification, the sounds of music directly and without mediation produce affect.

Leopardi's discussion of music falls within the larger sphere of his investigations into the constitution of the poetic experience in general, and its temporal dimension. Throughout the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi repeatedly stresses that the "poetic" is linked to expressions of the *indefinito* and the *vago*. Music, although perceived or registered in the present, is never actually of the present in a phenomenological sense, since it is necessarily an after-effect (like an after-image on the retina); thus, music is always belated to the vibrations that produce it. This paradox is merely Zeno of Elea's paradox in reverse; it is the same temporal dilemma, the one in terms of closure and the other in terms of origin.<sup>23</sup> Achilles will never catch the tortoise, just as the perception of

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<sup>23</sup> Zeno of Elea's (ca. 490–430 BC) two most famous paradoxes are "Achilles and the Tortoise" and "The Arrow." In the former paradox, Achilles is in a footrace with the tortoise. Achilles allows the tortoise a head start of 100 meters, for example. If each racer runs at some constant speed (one very fast and one very slow), then after some

sound will never be contemporaneous with its originary cause. Music, in contradistinction to the other arts, is liberated from the servitude of mimesis, and consequently freed from the spatial, temporal, and logical laws of causality that delimit and prescribe meaning.

As Leopardi envisions it, music and then all the other arts present two distinct semiotic models, which we might call, roughly, centrifugal and centripetal. The mimetic constraints of the other arts funnel meaning through the single lens of the object imitated, in a centripetal direction. Juxtaposed against this movement, the semiotic pattern of sound bypasses the middle term, the object of the mimesis, eliciting immediately, as Leopardi's argument would have it, a nexus of sentiment and affect. The movement is expansive or centrifugal precisely because there is no middle term through which the signifying process must pass. As we shall see later, these notions resonate with the theories of the French Symbolist poet, Paul Valéry.

Music holds for Leopardi a privileged place: it is in its very nature what the other arts strive to be—immaterial, indefinite, and polysemous. Leopardi is careful to distinguish sound from harmony (or music). “Distinguette suono (sotto questo nome intendo ora il canto) e armonia. Il suono è la materia della musica come i colori della pittura, i marmi della scoltura ec. L'effetto naturale e generico della musica in noi, non deriva dall'armonia, ma del suono, il quale ci elettrizza e scuote al primo tocco anche sia monotono” (Z 155). (“You must distinguish between sound (in which I also include song) and harmony. Sound is the material of music, as color is of painting, marble of sculpture, etc. The natural, distinct effect that music has on us derives not from harmony but from sound, which electrifies and shakes us from the very first note, even if it is monotonous,” Z, FSG, 123.) Sound is the raw material, as it were, of music, just as colors are of painting and stone would be of sculpture. Thus, this immateriality possesses a materiality of sorts. Leopardi affirms that the electrifying effect of music derives not from harmony but from those very raw materials of the harmony, the basic sounds. Here Leopardi makes a characteristically problematic assertion, namely that song (*il canto*) falls under the category of sound, not of harmony or music. This distinction accounts for the axial role of the artisan's song in “La sera del dì di festa,” heard once and remembered once, but always with the raw immediacy of sound, not with the labored aspect of harmony. Leopardi asserts that sound can be “electrifying” even when monotonous. Harmony modifies the effects of sound and consequently its structured sounds become music, and thus one of the other arts. Sound unstructured, in its primal form, remains a proto-art. Sound does not, therefore, fall under the category of *il bello* (Z 158).

Later in the *Zibaldone* Leopardi will return to this argument: “Di questi due effetti della musica, l'uno cioè quello dell'armonia, è ordinario per se stesso, cioè qual è quello di tutte le altre *convenienze*. L'altro, cioè del suono o canto per se stesso, è straordinario, deriva da particolare e innata disposizione della macchina umana, ma non appartiene al bello” (Z 1784-85). (“Of these two effects of music, one, namely the effect of harmony, is in itself ordinary, that is the same as all other *proprieties*. The other, that is, the effect of sound or song in itself, is extraordinary, and derives from the particular and innate disposition of the human machine, but does not pertain to the beautiful,” Z, FSG, 807). Earlier, on July 7, 1820, Leopardi had written, “la particolarità del suono è di produrre per se stesso un effetto più spirituale” (Z 157) (“But

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finite time, Achilles will have run 100 meters, bringing him to the tortoise's starting point. However, during this time, the tortoise will have run ahead. It will then take Achilles more time to run that distance, by which time the tortoise will have advanced even farther, however slowly. Thus, whenever Achilles reaches any specific place the tortoise has been, he still has farther to go. Therefore, because there is an infinite number of points Achilles must reach where the tortoise has already been, he can never overtake the tortoise.

sound is unique in producing an effect that is more spiritual,” Z, FSG, 125). Sound, Leopardi’s argument continues, does not require an operation of the *anima*: unlike the other arts, sound produces a pleasure and a meaning that are not operations of the mind. Again, Leopardi uncannily foreshadows some aspects of contemporary linguistic theory and its insights. What has been called *fonosimbolismo* was certainly anticipated by Leopardi in these musings on sound’s immediacy and its polysemous character. For although some sounds imitate their referent, indeed, may be onomatopoeic, many other sounds that do not resemble their referent are no less meaningful. Therefore, even those sounds to which we cannot attribute a specific semantic meaning affect us forcefully. Sounds signify in a precognitive mode; and perhaps Leopardi would say today, in a bio-neurological mode.

Sounds are, of course, material things, Leopardi avers, but they are virtually insubstantial in that their constitution is ethereal, and thus almost spiritual. “I suoni son cose materiali, ma poco materiali in quanto suoni, e tengono quasi dello spirito, perchè non cadono sotto altro senso che l’udito, impercettibili alla vista e al tatto, che sono i sensi più materiali dell’uomo” (Z 1689). (“Sounds are material things, but being sounds, they are barely material, and have something spiritlike about them, because they are not distinguished by any other sense than hearing, and are imperceptible to sight and touch, which are man’s most material senses,” Z, FSG, 773.) Sight and touch are the most material of the senses. Here Leopardi approaches more modern conceptions of the relationship of sound to its materiality, or its medium. The basic one-line definition of sound in Wikipedia indicates that the medium is indeed the message: “Sound is a mechanical wave that is an oscillation of pressure transmitted through some medium (like air or water), composed of frequencies within the range of [human] hearing.”<sup>24</sup> And this is followed by the assertion: “The speed of sound depends on the medium the waves pass through, and is a fundamental property of the material.”

One of the critical resurrections of Leopardi in the mid-twentieth century was to read him as a materialist and a crypto-Marxist. It is undeniable that Leopardi was in fact a materialist, and was also convinced that the more material our senses are, the more despotic and limiting. The visual, according to Leopardi, is the sense least given to producing experiences of the abstract, and thus, of the Sublime: “La vista è il più materiale di tutti i sensi, e il meno atto a tutto ciò che sa di astratto” (Z 1994). Just as Nature and Reason are opposed, in Leopardi’s view, the auditory and the visual are opposed. In fact, for Leopardi, Reason and the visual are analogous by virtue of their shared materiality. In the following *Zibaldone* entry, Leopardi posits the materiality of the faculty of vision, and offers provocative assertions as well about the materiality of *il nulla*. Here we approach another of the cardinal concepts of Leopardi, the *nulla* of existence. This term has been the object of several studies, especially those of the philosopher, Emanuele Severino. Even without an analysis of the passage in technical philosophical terms, we can see that Leopardi’s conviction of the materiality of all things animates his sense of both the meaninglessness and the greatness of the human fate:

Come potrà essere che la materia senta e si dolga e si disperdi della sua propria nullità? E questo certo e profondo sentimento (massime nelle anime grandi) della vanità e insufficienza di tutte le cose che si misurano coi sensi, sentimento non solo di raziocinio, ma vero e per modo di dire sensibilissimo sentimento e

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<sup>24</sup> “Sound,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, accessed Aug. 28, 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sound#Longitudinal\\_and\\_transverse\\_waves](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sound#Longitudinal_and_transverse_waves).

dolorosissimo, come non dovrà essere una prova materiale, che quella sostanza che lo concepisce e lo sperimenta è di un'altra natura? [...] E si noti ch'io qui non parlo di cosa che si concepisca colla ragione, perchè infatti *la ragione è la facoltà più materiale che sussista in noi*, e le sue operazioni materialissime e matematiche si potrebbero attribuire in qualche modo anche alla materia, ma parlo di un sentimento ingenito e proprio dell'animo nostro che ci fa sentire la nullità delle cose indipendentemente dalla ragione, e perciò presumo che questa nuova prova faccia più forza, manifestando in parte la natura di esso animo. *La natura non è materiale come la ragione.* (Z 106-107)

(How could it be that matter feels, suffers, and dispairs of its own nothingness? This certain and profound feeling (especially in great souls) of the vanity and insufficiency of everything that is measured with the sense, a feeling that is not only rational but a true and so to speak very perceptible and acutely painful feeling, how can this not be material proof that the substance that conceives it and experiences it must be of another kind? [...] It should be noted that I am not talking about something that can be grasped by our reason, because in fact *reason is the most material of all the faculties we possess*, and its highly material and mathematical processes could also be attributed in some way to matter; rather, I am talking about an inborn feeling, belonging to our minds, which makes us unaware of the nothingness of things independently of our reason, and so I presume that this proof will have more force, revealing in part the nature of the mind. *Nature is not material, as reason is.* [Z, FSG, 96])

Reason is both material and mathematical. For Leopardi, music as harmony is also mathematical and, thus following the homology, stands opposed to sound in so far as music is a product of an intellectual operation and works to regulate sound with rules and laws. These rules and laws are cognitive operations that delimit and control signification, much as mimesis itself does.

Ho detto che la nostra scienza o arte musicale fu dettata dalla matematica. Doveva dire costruita. Essa scienza non nacque dalla natura, né in essa ha il suo fondamento, come le più dell'altre; a ebbe origine ed ha il suo fondamento in quello che alla natura somiglia e supplisce e quasi equivale, in quello ch'è giustamente chiamato seconda natura, ma che altrettanto a torto a quanto facilmente e spesso è confuso a scambiato, come nel caso nostro, colla natura medesima, voglio dire nell'assuefazione. (Z 3215-16)

(I have said that our musical science and art was dictated by mathematics. I should have said constructed. This science was not born of nature, nor does it have its foundations in nature, as do most of the others. Rather it has its origins and foundation in that which resembles nature and replaces it and is virtually equivalent to it, in what is rightly referred to as second nature but which is also referred to erroneously when it is easily and frequently confused with and mistaken for nature itself, as in our case when we are conditioned to do so. [Z,

Music's effect, continues Leopardi, is cultural, not natural; it is a product of custom or *assuefazione*. Sound is to Nature as music is to Culture. Indeed, since the constitutive principle of harmonic music is, as Leopardi envisions it, *assuefazione*, he ironically concludes that music is contrary to Nature. Speaking about the rapid passages in music from one mode and tonality to another, from one "tempo" to another, Leopardi notes that this is not to be found in Nature: "... non solo non ha fondamento alcuno nella natura, ma anzi è generalmente contrarissimo alla natura" (Z 3364) ("...not only has it no foundation whatsoever in nature, it is in fact, quite contrary to nature," Z, FSG, 1379).

For Leopardi, the clarity of expression of an idea depends upon the possibility of "materializing" that idea, which is to say, upon the extent to which the idea approximates the material conditions of phenomenal reality. "E generalmente parlando si può dire che la chiarezza dell'espressione di qualsivoglia idea, o insegnamento, consiste nel materializzarlo alla meglio, o ravvicinarlo alla materia, con similitudini, con metafore, o comunque" (Z 1690). ("And generally speaking, one can say that the clarity of expression of any idea, or teaching, depends on making it as material as possible, or relating it to matter, by means of similes, metaphors, or in any other way," Z, FSG, 773). What is more, Leopardi never suggests that lack of clarity is to be equated with the poetic, or the Sublime. Rather, Leopardi strongly asserts that the *vago* and the *indefinito* are not to be identified with the imprecise. Nor does the poetic *parola* represent a failed *termine*: it is of another order of signification entirely. Thus, since sound is the least material of the senses (yet is transmitted by materiality), it has the capacity to lead a poem's process of signification towards the indefinite, and away from mathematical and logical clarity.

Poetic language necessarily consists in the indefinite: "Non solo l'eleganza, ma la nobiltà la grandezza, tutte le qualità del linguaggio poetico, anzi il linguaggio poetico esso stesso, consiste, se ben l'osservi, in un modo di parlare indefinito, o non ben definito, o sempre meno definito del parlare prosaico o volgare" (Z 1900-01). ("Not only elegance, but nobility, grandeur, all the qualities of poetic language itself, consists, if you observe it closely, in a mode of speech that is indefinite, or not very well defined, or always less definite than prosaic or vulgar speech," Z, FSG, 848.) Indefinite language is the linguistic analogue of the psychological experience of the Sublime, which can be related to modern notions of repression and sublimation, as well as to the concepts of infantile amnesia and screen memories. As we shall see, the entire Leopardian project of a poetics of remembrance depends upon our human capacity for forgetting.

In a *Zibaldone* entry of 1821, at the time of the composition of the first idylls, Leopardi attributes to sound, to song, and to the *udito* in general, this capacity to evoke the idea of the infinite. In what reads like a catalogue of sound effects from the "piccoli idilli," Leopardi enumerates the types of sounds which give rise to "un'idea vaga ed indefinita."<sup>25</sup> First and foremost among such sounds is a song. In diction closely echoing "La sera del dì di festa" ("un canto che s'udia per li sentieri / Lontanando morire a poco a poco," vv. 44-45), Leopardi emphasizes the poetic effects of a song as it fades, becoming trace rather than presence, dematerializing itself:

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<sup>25</sup> See also the list of sounds in "Ricordi d'infanzia e di adolescenza," in Giacomo Leopardi, *Le poesie e le prose I*, ed. Francesco Flora (Milan: Mondadori, 1973), 673-86.

Quello che altrove ho detto sugli effetti della luce o degli oggetti visibili, in riguardo dell'idea dell'infinito, si deve applicare parimente al suono, al canto, a tutto ciò che spetta all'udito. E piacevole per se stesso, cioè non per altro, se non per un'idea vaga ed indefinita che desta, un canto (il più spregevole) udito da lungi o che paia lontano senza esserlo, o che si vada *appoco appocoallontanando*...che l'orecchio e l'idea quasi lo perda nella vastità degli spazi. (Z 1927-28; emphasis mine.)

(What I have said elsewhere about the effects of light or visible objects on the idea of infinity should likewise be applied to sound, to song, to everything that concerns hearing. A song (the most banal) heard from afar, or that seems far away without being so, or that *is gradually fading* and becoming imperceptible is pleasurable in itself, that is, for no other reason than the vague and indefinite idea that it awakens...that the ear and mind all but lose it in the vastness of space. [Z, FSG, 857])

The more distant and unclear the source of the *canto*, the more it reverberates or echoes. This is so, Leopardi continues, because neither the auditory nor the other senses can determine or circumscribe it. Leopardi notes, in a Vichian vein, that other sounds which elicit the sublimity of the *indefinito* are thunder, above all when heard in the open country, and the rustling of the wind (as in the famous Romantic metaphor of the correspondent breeze).

Again, we note how the language of Leopardi's *Zibaldone* entries echoes his lyric expression in the idyll sequences: "lo stormire del vento" (Z 1930) evokes the magnificent verses of "L'infinito":

[...] E come il vento  
odo stormire tra queste piante, io quello  
infinito silenzio a questa voce  
vo comparando... (vv. 8-11)

([...] And hearing the wind  
rustling through these plants, I begin  
to compare that infinite silence  
to this voice...)

Here Leopardi sets up a series of contrasts between the finite and the infinite by means of a contrastive use of deictic pronouns and adjectives. However, *this* voice and *that* infinite silence, both the present and finite, and the infinite, are apprehended as sensory data, as sound which expands into a contrapuntal centrifugal rhythm (at the phonemic, metrical, and semantic levels contemporaneously).<sup>26</sup> So too in "La sera del dì di festa" sound is utilized to build up rhythms of comparison and contrast, to the extent that finally the echoes of the past supplant the sounds of the present.

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<sup>26</sup> See Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" for a striking use of deictics or shifters.

The echo, perhaps the most indefinite of all possible auditory phenomena, is a trace of a trace, twice removed from the material occasion of its production: “È piacevole un luogo echeggiante, un appartamento, ec. che ripeta il calpestio de’ piedi o la voce ec. Perocchè l’eco non si vede ec. E tanto più quanto più il luogo e l’eco è più vasto, quanto più l’eco vien da lontano, più si diffonde” (Z 1929). (“There is something pleasurable about an echoing place, an apartment, etc., when trampling feet reverberate, or a voice, etc. Because an echo is not seen, etc. And all the more so, the vaster the place and the echo are, the farther off the echo comes from, the wider it spreads,” Z, FSG, 858.) Above all, the echo is a form of a return, and for Leopardi all value or meaning in life comes by way of recurrence.

Leopardi maintains that only the return by means of a memory can infuse the present with poeticity—and this is so regardless of whether the actual content of that memory is pleasant or painful: indeed he specifically insists that we derive pleasure from a painful memories: “E son piacevoli per la loro vivezza, anche le ricordanze d’immagini e di cose che nella fanciullezza ci eran dolorose o spaventose ec. E per la stessa ragione ci è piacevole nella vita anche la ricordanza dolorosa. E quando bene la cagion del dolore non sia passata” (Z 1987). (“And memories of images and things that were painful, or terrifying, etc. in childhood are also pleasurable, because of their vividness. And for the same reason we also derive pleasure in life from a painful memory even when the cause of the pain has not yet passed,” Z, FSG, 879.). So too, the return of the auditory by means of echo either re-evokes the sublimity of our earliest childhood experiences, or is an analogue of those experiences by virtue of the shared characteristics of the *vago* and the *indefinito*. Given Leopardi’s conviction that the present is devoid of affect or meaning, memory serves to build up the present, to provide layers and density—accumulations (as in the etymological sense of “heaping up”) of temporal otherness. Only what is other can be spatially and temporally distant, and thus indefinite.

In a curious but characteristic rumination on reading, Leopardi suggests that the pleasure we experience in reading derives not from the text or its images, but from the fact that it renews past impressions and pleasures produced by other texts, figurations, images, or readings. “Similmente molte immagini, letture ec. ci fanno un’impressione ed un piacer sommo, non per sé, ma perchè ci rinnovano impressioni e piaceri fattici da quelle stesse o da analoghe immagini e letture in altri tempi, e massimamente nella fanciullezza e nella prima gioventù” (Z 4515). (“Similarly, many images, readings, etc., make an impression on us and give us supreme pleasure, not because of themselves, but because they renew within us the impressions and pleasures of those same or similar images or readings in other times, and especially in our childhood or early youth,” Z, FGS, 2063.) Leopardi asks us to re-examine all our past moments of pleasure; all of these, he provocatively asserts, consist totally or principally in remembrance (“consistono totalmente o principalmente in rimembranza,” Z 1829.)

Sound is intimately tied to the process of cognition itself. Memory depends upon language to provide the signs with which to fix ideas and experiences. Leopardi privileges childhood as that pre-lapsarian moment when words and things are indissolubly linked:

Essendo certo che la memoria dell’uomo è impotentissima (come il pensiero e l’intelletto) senza l’aiuto de’ segni che fissino le sue idee, e reminiscenze. [...] E le più antiche reminiscenze sono in noi le più vive e durevoli. Ma elle cominciano giusto da quel punto dove il fanciullo ha già acquistato un linguaggio sufficiente, ovvero da quelle prime idee, che noi concepimmo unitamente ai loro segni, e che



noi potremmo fissare colle parole. (Z 1103)

(For it is certain that man's memory is utterly powerless (as are thought and the intellect) without the aid of signs to fix his ideas and recollections [...] And the earliest recollections are the most intense and enduring we have. Yet they begin just at the point at which the child has already acquired an adequate language, or with those first ideas which we conceived along with their signs and which we were able to fix with words. [Z, FSG, 522])

It follows, according to the Leopardian logic, that our oldest memories are the most vivid because they are most edenicly at one with their representational signs. Leopardi continues, in this passage, to describe his first memory, that of several pears, which he both saw and heard, named at the exact same time: "Come la mia prima ricordanza è di alcune pere moscadelle che vedeva e sentiva nominare al tempo stesso" (Z 1103) ("Just as my first memory is of some musk pears I saw, and heard being named at the same time," Z, FSG, 522). Thus it is not so much the actual semantic content of the sound, in this case the lexeme *pere*, which fixes memory, but the simultaneous fusion of a sound and an image.<sup>27</sup>

Recurrent sounds are the privileged signs by means of which memory retrieves the past, thereby providing both pleasure and knowledge. In an interesting passage in his "Ricordi di infanzia e di adolescenza," Leopardi describes his youthful musings on the meaninglessness of the universe; the passage is especially noteworthy for its concrete demonstration of how sound can be structured to create a contrastive rhythm:

[...] mie considerazioni sulla pluralità dei mondi e il niente di noi e di questa terra e sulla grandezza e la forza della natura che noi misuriamo coi torrenti ec. che sono un nulla in questo globo ch'è un nulla nel mondo e risvegliato da una voce chiamantemi a cena onde allora mi parve un niente la vita nostra e il tempo e i nomi celebri e tutta la storia.<sup>28</sup>

([...] My speculations on the plurality of worlds and the nothingness of us and of this earth and on the greatness and forces of nature which we measure by the torrents, etc., that I am a nothing on this globe, which is a nothing in this cosmos and awakened by a voice calling me to dinner from which it became clear to me that our life and time and the celebrated names and all of history were a nothing.

Here the contrapuntal movement oscillates between the general and the specific, moving from the nullity of the world to a single human voice in the present and back again to all human time and history. Importantly, this passage bears an uncanny resemblance to the catalogue of sounds

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<sup>27</sup> See Emanuele Severino, *Cosa arcana e stupenda. L'occidente e Leopardi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1997) 99-100, for a discussion of the relationship between word and thing.

<sup>28</sup> "Ricordi di infanzia e di adolescenza" are in the collected works of Leopardi (*Poesie e Prose*, I, 143). Translation mine.

in “La sera del dì di festa,” which covers the spectrum from the poet’s own impassioned cry of anguish at life’s misery and transience. “Mi getto, e grido, e fremo. Oh giorni orrendi / In così verde etate!” (vv. 23-24) moves to the sound and fury of the Roman Empire, and then to its inevitable silence (obliteration). The juxtaposition of the lost sounds of history to the individual human voice, and, finally, to silence itself, brings the awareness of an all-encompassing nullity. Let us listen to this brilliant buildup of a contrapuntal soundscape in “La sera del dì di festa”:

[...] oh giorni orrendi  
In così verde etade! Ahi, per la via  
*Odo non lunge il solitario canto*  
Dell’artigian, che riede a tarda notte,  
Dopo i sollazi, al suo povero ostello;  
E fieramente mi si stringe il core,  
A pensar come tutto al mondo passa,  
E quasi orma non lascia. Ecco è fuggito  
Il dì festivo, ed al festivo il giorno  
Volgar succede, e se ne porta il tempo  
Ogni umano accidente. Or dov’è *il suono*  
Di que’ popoli antichi? Or dov’è *il grido*  
De’ nostri avi famosi, e il grande impero  
Di quella Roma, e l’armi, e *il fragorio*  
Che n’andò per la terra e l’oceano?  
Tutto è pace e *silenzio*, e tutto posa  
Il mondo, e più di lor non *si ragiona*. (vv. 23-39; emphasis mine)

Once again, I will cite from Patrick Creagh’s translation of “La sera del dì di festa” which appears in this volume of *CIS*:

[...O horrendous days  
In the very bloom of youth. Ah woe, along  
A lane close by I hear the lonely song  
Of an artisan returning late at night  
After the revels, to his humble dwelling;  
And very cruelly my heart is wrung,  
To think how all things in this world must pass,  
And barely leave a trace. For lo! The festive  
Day has fled, and after the festive day  
The workday follows, and time carries off  
All the haphazard of man. Where now is the name  
Of those ancient peoples? Where the renown  
Of our famed ancestors and the great empire  
Of that mighty Rome, the arms, the clamour  
Which from her walls went forth by sea and land?

All is now peace, and silence, and the whole  
World is at rest: of them we speak no longer.

Juxtapositions such as these between differing registers of sound, in a ricocheting rhythm, (italicized in the passage above) constitute the structuring principle of many of the *idilli* poems.

In his suggestive study of Leopardi's poetry, Alvaro Valentini asserts that Leopardi's originality lies precisely in his invention of silence, albeit a particular form of silence to be sure. Valentini notes that Leopardi describes a silence that is absolute (terrifying, in the Pascalian sense), and when this cosmic, empty silence is then compared to a contingent, particularized small sound, the experience—perhaps, the horror—of the infinite is produced. This dialectical movement between two opposing fields is usually marked, as we have noted, by the deictics *questo* and *quello*. Once again, “L'infinito” provides the instantiation of this poetic device: “quello / infinito silenzio a questa voce / vo comparando; e mi sovvien l'eterno” (vv. 9-11). *Silenzio* is juxtaposed to *voce*, the absolute to the relative: this act of comparison gives rise to a third term, the poet's figuration of the eternal. We witness how the eternal is a product of the interiority of memory itself, and of the indefiniteness of sound perceived as trace rather than as presence. The repetition of *-vo-* (from *voce* to *vo* in the slippery enjambment) and its reversal in *sovvien* is the Ariadne's thread that leads us through the labyrinth.

To recall for a moment yet another example of this contrastive operation of sounds, the second strophe of “La vita solitaria” (1821) is entirely structured by means of this contrastive relationship between silence and sound, and in fact constitutes a perfect *idillio* in and of itself. The progressive elimination of the specific sounds indigenous to the idyllic Recanati landscape clears the way for the absolute silence, the “altissima quiete” (33):

Talor m'assido in solitaria parte,  
Sovra un rialto, al margine di un lago  
Di taciturne piante incoronato.  
Ivi, quando il meriggio in ciel si volve,  
La sua tranquilla imago il Sol dipinge,  
Ed erbe o foglia *non* si crolla al vento,  
E *non* onda incresparsi, e *non* cicala  
Strider, *nè* batter penna augello in ramo,  
*Nè* farfalla ronzar, *nè* voce o moto  
Da presso *nè* da lunge odi *nè* vedi.  
Tien quelle rive altissima quiete;  
Ond'io quasi me stesso e il mondo obbligo  
Sedendo immoto; e già mi par che sciolte  
Giaccian le membra mie, *nè* spirto o senso  
Più le commova, e lor quiete antica  
Co' silenzi del loco si confonda. (vv. 23-38: emphasis mine)

(Sometimes I sit solitary, apart  
upon a hillside, by the edge of a lake,  
ringed round by silent plants.

There when high noon fills the sky  
 The Sun paints his tranquil image.  
 No blade of grass, no leaf bends to the wind  
 nor does any wave break upon the shore, no  
 cicada shrieks, no bird wing flutters on the branch  
 no butterfly flutters, there is no sound or motion,  
 neither far nor near, and there is nothing you see or hear.  
 Those shores hold the deepest quiet;  
 So that I nearly forget myself and the world  
 sitting so still; and it seems as though my limbs lay loose  
 no longer moved by mind or spirit, and their timeless calm  
 dissolves itself in the silence of the place.)

The verbs of sound, as well as those of motion, are one by one negated by the hammered repetition of the negative particles *non* and *nè* (italicized in the passage above); the progression moves from the concrete and the specific to the generic (e.g., the botanical and zoological precision of *erba* and *cicala* move into the indeterminacy of *voce* and *moto*). Leopardi creates a state of total immobility by eliminating even those last vestiges of mortal time, the echoes of sound itself. The infinite is apprehended primarily as absence of sound. Specific sounds become the signs by which the present can be progressively annihilated, summing up into the now empty textual space an absolute silence, the auditory analogue of eternity, the poetic Sublime. This constitutes an original poetics of metalepsis.

Just as Alvaro Valentini attributes to Leopardi the creation of silence, Bruno Biral attributes to the early *idilli* the invention of the sentiment of time: "I 'piccoli idilli' introducono per la prima volta il sentimento del tempo nella lirica italiana."<sup>29</sup> The allusion here to the title of Giuseppe Ungaretti's second collection of poetry, *Il sentimento del tempo* (1933), is not casual. Ungaretti himself constituted his poetic genealogy as a direct line from Petrarca through Leopardi to his own work. The connective tissue of this genealogy is to be found precisely in the sentiment, or better still, the anxiety, of time. Petrarca's *Canzoniere* represents an attempt to transform *rime sparse* into a unifying temporal and spatial pattern, one able to transcend both human time and the transience of all forms. His *Trionfi*, on the other hand, is an architectonic excursus on the banality of time as humanly conceived, and constitutes a vertical temporal ascendancy, through human time to eternity. The sixth and final Triumph, that of *Eternità*, overcomes the fifth Triumph, that of *Tempo*. The rhetorical-temporal strategies employed by Petrarca in both of these works remain fundamentally within the cosmology and epistemology of the fourteenth century. Therefore, we must agree with Biral that it is only with Leopardi that the sentiment of time takes on a "modern" cast.<sup>30</sup> We should remember that Leopardi published his annotated commentary of Petrarca's *Canzoniere* in 1826 (for A.F. Stella, Milan); and that meticulous labor served as a necessary apprenticeship for most of Leopardi's later poems.

<sup>29</sup> Bruno Biral, "Il sentimento del tempo: Leopardi, Baudelaire, Montale," *Il Ponte* 21 (1965): 1156-76.

<sup>30</sup> Leopardi attempted a similar type of allegorical poetry in his early years; "Appressamento della morte" (1816), a long poem in Dantesque *canti* and *terza rima*, describes the youthful protagonist being instructed by an Angel about an ascending series of mortal temptations. A section of this poem first appeared as fragment no. XXXVII in the 1835 Naples edition of the *Canti*, among the group entitled *Frammenti*. For a brilliant discussion of this poem, see Franco D'Intino, "Spento il diurno raggio," in *Lectura leopardiana: I quarantuno "Canti" e "I nuovi credenti"* (Venice: Marsilio, 2003), 697-717.

Both Biral and Valentini share the perception that the registers of silence and sound used by Leopardi are indices of his larger concern with time as a rhetorically engendered experience. What is more, Leopardi continually highlights the psychological nexus binding the perception of silence and/or sound to the experience of the nullity of the universe and to the experience of eternity; *il nulla* and *l'eterno* are even identified with each other in certain lyrical moments. Sound is necessarily already a trace, and functions as the ultimate sign of the caducity of all life. Yet the retrievability of sound data by means of memory allows for the construction of a new temporality within the poetic space that abrogates the delimiting nature of the present.

In the “Cantico del gallo silvestre,” the last of the *Operette morali*, composed in 1824, Leopardi comes to the expression of the nullity of the universe by a route similar to that found in “La vita solitaria,” including even employing the same anaphoric repetition of negative particles. Within a state of “profondissima quiete” the individual sounds of the idyllic Recanati landscape are eliminated one-by-one in this *operetta*, leaving nothing but the terrible awareness of the nullity of the universe: “languendo per la terra in profondissima quiete tutti i viventi, non apparisse opera alcuna; non muggito di buoi per li prati, nè strepito di fiere per le foreste, canto di uccelli per l’aria, nè sussurro d’api o di farfalle scorresse per la campagna; non voce, non moto alcuno.”<sup>31</sup> This *operetta* concludes with a majestic portrayal of that ultimate nullity, again perceived as the absence of individual sounds and concomitantly a present of infinite silence:

E nel modo che di grandissimi regni ed imperi umani, e loro maravigliosi moti, che furono famosissimi in altre età, non resta oggi nè segno nè fama alcuna; parimente del mondo intero, e delle infinite vicende e calamità delle cose create, non rimarrà pure vestigio; ma un silenzio nudo, e una quiete altissima, empieranno lo spazio immenso.<sup>32</sup>

(And just as for the greatest of human kingdoms and empires, and their marvelous exploits, which were so very famous in other ages, today there remains neither sign nor fame whatsoever; so too of the entire world, and of the infinite vicissitudes and calamities of all created things, no trace will remain; but a naked silence and a most profound quiet will fill the immensity of space.)

The language of this passage echoes the language of “La sera del dì di festa” as well as that of “La ginestra.” We might say that the former poem is structured along the rhetorical axis of allegory, and the latter, along the axis of irony, to recall the terms of Paul de Man.<sup>33</sup> Thus the same lexical items, the same semantic fields, will function differently depending on their contextual “temporality.” And these dual registers, allegory and irony, are often present within the same lyric.<sup>34</sup> Or, the same syntagm may be found in poems of allegorical and ironic temporalities. Interestingly, “una quiete altissima” of the “Cantico del gallo silvestre”

<sup>31</sup> Leopardi, *Le opere*, 2: 162.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>33</sup> Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles Singleton (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 173-209.

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Brose, “Leopardi’s ‘L’infinito’ and the Language of the Romantic Sublime,” *Poetics Today* 4, no. 1 (1983): 47-72. See also Brose, “Remembrance and the Rhetorical Sublime in Leopardi’s Lyrics,” *Stanford Literature Review* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 115-33, and *Leopardi Sublime* (Bologna: Re Enzo Editore, 1998).

immediately evokes the “profondissima quiete” (v. 6) of “L’Infinito.” This remembered echoing of Leopardi’s hallmark syntagms, from poem to poem, from *Zibaldone* to *operetta morale*, constitutes yet another cardinal aspect of Leopardi’s use of sound patterning.

For Leopardi, the generative powers of sound reside not only in such external auditory phenomena as echo, wind, and song, but also internally within the poetic text itself. In a *Zibaldone* entry of 1821, Leopardi asserts that very often in poetry it is the rhyme rather than the poet, which suggests the concept: “possiamo dire per esperienza di chi compone, che il concetto è mezzo del poeta, mezzo della rima, e talvolta un terzo di quello e due di questa, talvolta della sola rima” (Z 1907). The hypothesis that the “concept” or signification might be generated by rhyme alone constitutes a radical revision of the nineteenth-century conception of the relationship of form to content. By *rima* we may understand Leopardi to be suggesting the larger domain of all sound patterning in poetry, of which rhyme is but one instance. However, even if one were to limit Leopardi’s insight to occurrences of actual rhyme *strictu sensu*, the incisive originality of his assertion remains: the poetic signifier generates rather than reflects, claiming primacy and autonomy over the signified.<sup>35</sup>

Leopardi’s privileging of the phonic dimension of language accounts for what Piero Bigongiari has termed the overabundance of signifiers (but a dearth of signifieds) in the *Canti*.<sup>36</sup> According to Bigongiari, Leopardi’s poetry provides an experience of “meditazione assisa,” somewhat akin to the Buddhist state of za-zen—a form of oblivion in which signifieds remain suspended in what he terms “l’oblio leopardiano” (154). As thus envisioned, the famous *naufregar* which closes “L’infinito” could be construed as an interruption of the signifying process itself, “un ribaltamento del linguaggio nella sua fase significante senza che esso si diluisca nei propri significati” (157). So too, the dominant poetic metaphor of the shipwreck, from the French Symbolists to Ungaretti (*L’allegria di naufragi*, 1916) and beyond, suggests this same hiatus in the semiotic chain.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, in the *idilli* more often than not it is a particular sound (or the invocation of cosmic silence) that interrupts the chain of signification, tropically turning the signifiers to the production and evocation of other signifiers. This is consonant with numerous theories about the structure of the poetic sublime.<sup>38</sup>

Leopardi consistently valorizes the auditory over the visual both in his theoretical writings in the *Zibaldone* and in the actual sound patterning of his poems; typically dialectical, he conceives of the sound-sight dualism as structurally analogous to the Nature-Reason opposition. We may add to this binary set the *parola-termini* distinction, in that the first term of each pair (the auditory, Nature, *parola*) is characterized by spontaneity, indefiniteness, and the polysemous. One could easily extend the list by adding such pairs as poetry-prose, or idyllic and

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<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Gian Luigi Beccaria, *L’autonomia del significante: Figure del ritmo e della sintassi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975). The subtitle suggests the affinity of Valéry’s insights with Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “figures of sound.”

<sup>36</sup> Piero Bigongiari, “Leopardi e l’ermetismo,” in *Leopardi e il Novecento, Atti del III convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani* (Florence: Olschki, 1970), 151.

<sup>37</sup> We might add that such is the case as well for the famous shipwreck of Ulysses in *Inferno* 26, given that the chain of semiosis is interrupted; this chain, if followed anagogically, would have led to God.

<sup>38</sup> See for example the discussion of Thomas Weiskel, in *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). Weiskel posits a tripartite process in the aesthetic of the sublime, the second phase of which is constituted by a crisis/rupture in discourse (23-24). See also M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1973) and *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1984); and Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

anti-idyllic; or ancients-moderns. We might even include the pair childhood-adulthood, one fundamental to Leopardi's thinking, and deeply resonant with Vico's theories of *corso* and *ricorso* and his discussions of the "poetic logic" in *La scienza nuova* (1725). Leopardi writes that the spirit of his poetic career has followed the same course as the human spirit in general (Z 143); the poet's childhood is analogous to the childhood of mankind. Leopardi continues: the only poets were the ancients, and the only ones now are children: "poeti non erano se non gli antichi, e non sono ora se non i fanciulli" (Z 144). Or, one might use terms such as "pastoral" and "history," as does the critic Nicola Gardini, in a recent essay discussing the primary cultural matrices in Leopardi's *Canti*.<sup>39</sup> But we need to be wary of absolute binarism; it tends to simplify Leopardi's own complex understanding of the differences between the auditory and the visual, as well as his almost-Hegelian understanding of the creative dynamics produced by opposition in general.<sup>40</sup>

Auditory signs are intimately linked to the problematic of temporality, and are essentially different in character from visual signs. The first presuppose time, not space, as a major structuring principle. The second use space rather than time. Auditory, "temporal" signs tend to be *symbolic* in character, while visual, "spatial" signs tend to be *ionic* in character. Auditory signs are symbolic of loss, of what can only be apprehended its absence. The iconicity of the visual sign, on the other hand, accentuates the *in praesentia* nature of the spatial dimension. The auditory sign above all leads to the remembrance of things past. As we have seen, Leopardi associates both the visual and Reason with the mathematical and the material. Significantly, it was Leopardi's actual loss of vision in 1819 that initiated the period of his first *idilli* (following or caused by his seven years of "mad and desperate study" in the paternal library of Recanati).

This tension between the auditory and the visual has been recognized by most readers and scholars of Leopardi's works. For example, in her study *Leopardi e la forma della vita*, Maria Teresa Gentile analyzes in great depth the various modalities of the tension between sound and sight, and associates the notion of the Sublime with a language issuing from a maternal space.<sup>41</sup> What explains this privileged domain of the auditory? To initiate our inquiry, we might profitably think of Leopardi's *rimembranza* as akin to the Freudian Unconscious. Freud asks, in *The Ego and the Id*, "How does a thing become conscious?"<sup>42</sup> He then goes on to suggest that the difference between an unconscious and a preconscious idea is that the former "is carried out on some material which remains unknown, whereas the latter (the Preconscious) is in addition brought into connection with word-presentations." Freud continues: "These word-presentations are residues of memories; they were at one time perceptions, and like all mnemonic residues they can become conscious again." These "memory-traces," to use Freud's phrase, appear to have had

<sup>39</sup> Nicola Gardini, "History and Pastoral in the Structure of Leopardi's *Canti*," *The Modern Language Review* (Jan. 2008): 76-92.

<sup>40</sup> See Giovanni Carsaniga's chapter "The Soul of Everything is Contrast, in *Giacomo Leopardi: The Unheeded Voice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977),

<sup>41</sup> Maria T. Gentile, *Leopardi e la forma della vita: Genesi, formazione, tradizione* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1991). See Part II, Chapter V: "Le progressioni della corporeità verso la parola poetica: la dialettica tra il visivo e l'uditivo" (131-45). The work of Gentile touches several of the themes of my book, *Leopardi sublime*, including an emphasis on the *fonosimbolismo* of Leopardi's lyrics, as well as the attention to gender and family issues. I have written elsewhere about the relationship of the auditory to the feminist concept of "écriture feminine," and to the notion of Chora, or the Semiotic as described by Julia Kristeva in *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974); and the notion of the pre-Symbolic voice of the mother proposed by Luisa Muraro, *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1992). For a recent examination of the figure of the female in Leopardi, see Novella Bellucci, *Il "gener frate": Saggi leopardiani* (Venice: Marsilio, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: W. W. Norton and Co: 1960), 10.

a temporal existence prior to becoming word-presentations; or, if we take Freud's model to be spatial as well as temporal (and this supposition is sanctioned by Freud's own metaphor of the mystic writing pad), there is a deeper level than the word-presentation at which a mnemonic residue is purely auditory. According to Freud, "verbal residues are derived primarily from auditory perceptions, so that the system Psc. has, as it were, a special sensory source. The visual components of word-presentations are secondary [...] In essence a word is after all the mnemonic residue of a word that has been heard" (10-11). As thus envisioned, a thing becomes conscious by the association of visual components with a prior auditory sign, which in itself is already a trace of a lost instance of time. But all this Leopardi seems to have intuited when he recognized that memory (his first memory being the dish of pears) is retrievable only by a prior "word that has been heard."

In a psychoanalytic reading of Leopardi's "L'infinito," G. G. Amoretti raises the question of the primacy of the auditory in Leopardi's verse. According to Amoretti's interpretation, the poet's loss of vision in 1819 stems from psychic rather than somatic causes, and is the functional equivalent of castration.<sup>43</sup> Amoretti points to two letters written by Leopardi to Saverio Broglio d'Ajano.<sup>44</sup> In the first letter to d'Ajano (July 29, 1819), Leopardi had secretly applied for a passport in order to flee Recanati, intimating that his father knew and approved of his plans to leave home. The passport, being therefore sent directly to Leopardi's father, Conte Monaldo, exposed the young poet's furtive plan and brought forth his father's wrath. In the letter to d'Ajano of August 13, 1819, Leopardi both apologizes for his deception and reaffirms his claim of Monaldo as an unnatural father: one who, despising everything great and extraordinary, repented of having allowed Giacomo to achieve greatness in his studies, and would have preferred his son to have been born a mole, *una talpa*.<sup>45</sup> Leopardi's blindness, according to Amoretti, is thus an acceptance of his father's judgment, a prohibition of virility and vision; a literalization, we might say, of the metaphor of the mole, a veritable Lacanian "nom/non du père."

Amoretti believes that the famous *siepe* in "L'infinito," which obstructs the poet's gaze and thus calls forth the sublimity of the infinite, is symbolic of this refusal to see, a voluntary blindness. Loss is transformed into gain, however, in the psychic economy of the poet. Leopardi's blindness becomes the stimulus for experimentation with new modes of consciousness, especially that of the auditory—the dark, the night, the maternal pre-Symbolic or Chora, to use Julia Kristeva's felicitous term. The Chora is a retrospectively posited prelinguistic (maternal) condition out of which language and subjectivity emerge. The rejection of the visual is a refusal to grow up, a regression of sorts.<sup>46</sup> Of course, this is consistent with numerous theories of the structure of the Romantic sublime, from Longinus on, which posit a tripartite movement, the middle of which is a blockage, or swerve.

Alvaro Valentini suggests, however, that Leopardi's recourse to the auditory actually predates the loss of his vision in 1819, and that the theme of *il buio* (the darkness) appears even in his pre-adolescent verse.<sup>47</sup> Most critics agree that the valorization of the auditory comes to the fore in 1819, and corresponds to the appearance of a new type of glance (*mirare*), one that utilizes the auditory to reach the interiority of memory itself. The visual, the domain of the light,

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<sup>43</sup> Giovanni Giuseppe Amoretti, *Poesia e psicoanalisi: Foscolo e Leopardi*, (Milan: Garzanti, 1979). Cited also in Alvaro Valentini, *Leopardi: L'io poetante* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1983), 53 and following.

<sup>44</sup> Leopardi, *Le lettere*, 217-23.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>46</sup> Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique*, 90-136.

<sup>47</sup> Valentini, *Leopardi*, 54.



necessarily admits of confines, the finite, and the non-poetic. The auditory, on the other hand, has no need of light, nor of any kind of limits or blockages. A distant song, source unknown, evokes the vague and the indefinite, according to Leopardi. Sounds heard in the dark in bed lead back to childhood's imaginings, producing what I have called Leopardi's "memorial-durational temporality." Leopardi writes in 1818: "Sento dal mio letto suonare (battere) l'orologio della torre. Rimembranze di quelle notti estive nelle quali essendo fanciullo e lasciato in camera oscura chiuse le sole persiane, tra la paura e il coraggio sentiva battere un tale orologio" (Z 36). ("From my bed I hear the ringing (striking) of the tower clock. Memories of those summer nights when I was a child left in bed in a dark room, with only the shutters closed. And suspended between fear and boldness hearing the striking of such a clock," Z, FSG, 42.) A sound heard in the closed room/womb of darkness metaleptically refigures the childhood scene of that same sound, giving rise to the same youthful fantasies of mixed pleasure and fear (that *frisson* of the imagined premature death of the young).<sup>48</sup> Wordsworth describes this wellspring of childhood emotions as "those first affections, / Those shadowy recollections."<sup>49</sup>

This early *Zibaldone* entry, filled with metaphors of what Amoretti calls "la madre-notte," exemplifies the typical process by which Leopardi isolates a present auditory phenomenon so as to call forth a replicated prior auditory sign. The sublimity of a childhood affect reappears, but this time it returns as de-temporalized and de-spatialized, open to infinite duration and extension. Let us look at another famous *Zibaldone* entry:

Dolor mio nel sentire a tarda notte seguente al qualche giorno di festa il canto notturno de' villani passeggeri. Infinità col passato che mi veniva in mente, ripensando ai Romani così caduti dopo tanto romore e ai tanti avvenimenti ch'io paragonava dolorosamente con quella profonda quiete e silenzio della notte. (Z 50)

(My sadness at hearing the night song of country people passing in the late evening after some festivity. Infinity of the past that came into my mind, as I thought back to the Romans so fallen after such clamor, and to the many events now past that I compared sorrowfully with that profound quiet and silence of the night. [Z, FSG, 570])

Without doubt we have here the nucleus of the later poem "La sera del dì di festa": the sound of a nocturnal song heard in the darkness summons up both the sounds of the lost Roman Empire as well as the absolute silence of this specific night; by the juxtaposition (*paragonava*) of sound and silence the Infinite comes to the poet. Infinity appears not with the temporality of either of these auditory events, but as a meta-temporality produced by their rhetorical transumption in memory. The passage exemplifies again how Freudian "memory traces" are retrievable only by a prior auditory perception. This process finds exquisite lyric representation in "Le ricordanze":

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<sup>48</sup> For another psychoanalytic reading of the *Zibaldone*, see Lea Canducci, *Giacomo Leopardi: Autoanalisi di un poeta* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1978).

<sup>49</sup> Wordsworth, "Intimations of Immortality" (published 1807), in *The Poetical Works*, 152-53.

Viene il vento recando il suon dell'ora  
della torre del borgo. Era conforto  
questo suon, mi rimembra, alle mie notti  
quando fanciullo, nella buia stanza,  
per assidui terrori io vigilava,  
sospirando il mattin. Qui non è cosa  
ch'io vegga o senta, onde un'immagin dentro  
non torni, e un dolce rimembrar non sorga. (vv. 50-57)

(The wind rises, bringing the tolling of the hour  
from the bell tower. How comforting  
was this sound, I remember, in the nights  
when as a small child, in the darkened room,  
tortured by bleak terrors I lay in wait,  
sighing for the dawn. Here there is nothing  
that I might see or hear that does not call up  
an image of sweet remembrance.)

“Le ricordanze,” from the second sequence of *idilli* of 1829 (known as the “grandi idilli” or the Pisa-Recanati poems), already foreshadows the last poems of Leopardi's life, in which the visual mode of perception gains ascendancy. In “Le ricordanze,” sweet memory is shrouded by the pain of the present moment (“ma con dolor sottentra / il pensier del presente, un van desio / del passato, ancor tristo, e il dire: io fui,” vv. 58-60). But the progressive decimation of all of the poet's “dear illusions,” which occurred between the two groups of idyll poems (the period of the *Operette morali*), annihilates also any possibility of comfort in the shadowy memories of the past. Perhaps the metamorphosis from the spatial archetype of the *camera obscura*<sup>50</sup> of his earlier memories to the wasteland of Vesuvius described in “La ginestra” can be apprehended first in the “stanza / smisurata e superba” of “Canto notturno” (vv. 90-91), a poem of 1829-1830—in all probability the last of the idyll poems written by Leopardi. Even in “Canto notturno,” temporality is still registered primarily as auditory phenomena; yet in this case, it is the terrifying, alienating silence of the infinite movement of time, rather than immersion in some amniotic recurrence of familiar, domestic sounds: “del tacito, infinito andar del tempo” (72).

The last two major poems of the *Canti*, “La ginestra” and “Il tramonto della luna” (both of 1836), are most certainly poems of the visual mode. This is not to imply, however, that they are more “virile” poems, nor that they bear witness to a more mature Leopardi—a poet finally willing to grow up, as it were, and leave behind the “Mother-darkness.” Much of the critical revalidation of Leopardi's last poetic phase has tended to under-value the idyllic moments; this may be in reaction to what had been the previous over-validation of the *idilli*, based on the work of Francesco de Sanctis, and later Benedetto Croce (the Crocean *poesia* vs. *non-poesia* binary). In this sense, we owe a great debt to Walter Binni for his seminal reconsiderations of Leopardi's differing rhetorical strategies.<sup>51</sup> This readjusting of balance is healthy, although we might now want to do away with the notion of mutually exclusive binaries. We should not be forced to

<sup>50</sup> See Claudio Colaiacomo, *Camera obscura. Studio di due canti leopardiani* (Naples: Liguori, 1992).

<sup>51</sup> Walter Binni, *La nuova poetica leopardiana* (Florence: Sansoni, 1971 [1947]), and *La protesta di Leopardi* (Florence: Sansoni, 1973).

consider Leopardi's *idilli* sequences as youthful, evasive, inwardly directed poems, transcended by the more mature, progressively political ("heroic," as some would have it) poems. While it is true that Leopardi's poetry spans a wide bridge between differing rhetorical registers, these diverse rhetorical modes are interdependent rather than mutually exclusive. What is more, the powerful dynamics of Leopardi's poetry stem precisely from the tension between contending rhetorical strategies. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Leopardi's last poems do evince a loss of that particular form of memorial-durational temporality that is the realm of memory, sound, and musical echo.

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In conclusion, Leopardi's privileging of the auditory seems to prefigure certain tenets of both the Symbolist movement of poetry and the poetics of the twentieth century. Paul Verlaine's "Art Poétique" opens with the famous exhortation for "la musique avant toute chose"<sup>52</sup> and expressly designates the optimal poem as "la chanson grise / Où l'Indécis au Précis se joint" (7-8). Equally Leopardian is Mallarmé's celebrated dictum: "Nommer un objet, c'est supprimer le trois-quarts de la jouissance du poème qui est faite de deviner peu à peu: le suggérer, voilà la rêve."<sup>53</sup> Paul Valéry held that what is called symbolism is nothing more and nothing less than the poetic impulse to take back their own from Music: "Ce qui fut baptisé: le *Symbolisme*, se résume très simplement dans l'intention commune à plusieurs familles de poètes (d'ailleurs ennemies entre elles) de 'reprendre à la Musique leur bien.'"<sup>54</sup> Like Leopardi, and like E. A. Poe, Valéry conceives of music and sound as modalities of signification more immediate than language (1271). Valéry's theory of the dual mode of language production (consumption and repetition) is strikingly similar to Leopardi's division of the lexicon into the two categories of *termine* and *parola*. Among the many poetic devices used to achieve the effects of music, Valéry stresses the importance of those poetic words "which allow us to leap so rapidly across the chasm of thought" ("qui nous permettent de franchir si rapidement l'espace d'une pensée").<sup>55</sup> For Valéry, as for Leopardi's notion of the *parola*, these words must avoid the referentiality and precision of the *termine*. Thus, poetic lexemes affine to music are like self-consuming artifacts, suspension bridges of finely wrought silver. These airy links carry us from one semantic associative cluster to another, all the while giving us the vertigo of the free fall. For Valéry, poetic words function much like the rhetorical trope of metalepsis, which Quintilian had termed a transition from one trope to another—a veritable verbal suspension bridge.

Valéry's notion that poetry requires figures of rapid transit underlies his discussion of the two differing effects produced by language: the one, "utilitarian" and characterized by "consumption," and the other, pleasurable and characterized by "repetition."<sup>56</sup> The first brings about understanding and thus the complete negation of language itself. In this first model, the signifiers disappear as soon as the referent has been reached. Language becomes, at that point,

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Verlaine, *Oeuvres poétiques complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 206.

<sup>53</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 869.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Valéry, "Avant-propos à la connaissance de la déesse," in *Oeuvres I*, ed. J. Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 1272.

<sup>55</sup> Valéry, "Poésie et pensée abstraite," *ibid.*, 1317.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 1325-1326.

non-language. The success, as it were, of this model of consumption depends upon the ease with which words are transformed into something else (ideas, referents, emotions). The second mode of language use generates its own material dissemination, an endless recycling of the signifier. In this second model, language stems from, and brings about, desire and repetition. These two models are strikingly analogous to Leopardi's categories of *termine* and *parola*. Or, to invoke Jakobson's six-part model of verbal communication, both the Leopardian *termine* and Valéry's first model of linguistic "consumption" are oriented toward the context, the so-called "referential function." *Parole* and the "repetition" model of language, on the other hand, are oriented toward the message itself, thereby illustrating what Jakobson called "the poetic function of language." Valéry asserts that the dual modes of language coincide with the prose/poetry distinction. In prose, Valéry says, once language has fulfilled its function, it vanishes ("s'évanouit à peine arrivé").<sup>57</sup> Discourse no longer exists; form does not outlive understanding. On the other hand, he continues, poetry can be recognized by the remarkable fact that it tends to reproduce itself in its own form; it stimulates our minds to expand it, to re-member it. Valéry states that "[. . .] le poème ne meurt pas pour avoir vécu: il est fait expressément pour renaître de ces cendres et redevenir indéfiniment ce qu'il vient d'être."<sup>58</sup> Or to rephrase this insight in Jakobsonian language again, Valéry discerns here how the principle of equivalency is projected from the paradigmatic axis onto the syntagmatic axis.<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps the most daring insights in both Leopardi's and Valéry's speculations on the semiotics of sound lie in their intuition that language functions like desire. Desire does *not* seek to arrive at the putative, and seemingly terminal, object of its propulsory force. Desire, like poetic language, wants only to disseminate itself, to produce more desire, to keep the desiring machine going full force. Thus, both desire and poetic language seek "repetition" rather than "consumption." Leopardi quite explicitly describes this process in his numerous discussions of pleasure and happiness in the *Zibaldone*.<sup>60</sup> "Il piacere umano [...] si può dire ch'è sempre futuro, non è se non futuro, consiste solamente nel futuro. L'atto di piacere proprio non si dà" (Z 531). ("Human pleasure [...] can be said to lie always in the future, to be only in the future, to consist purely in the future. The act of pleasure, strictly speaking, never takes place," Z, FSG, 290). Any putative moment of "pleasure," the sensation of pleasure, is actually derived from the hope of an even greater pleasure in the future; pleasure is therefore necessarily proleptic (or, metaleptically retrieved from a past hope that was, then, at that time, proleptic.) Leopardi is adamant: pleasure cannot exist in the present. This is tantamount to acknowledging that pleasure resides in the imagination (and its anticipatory drive), in the image-producing faculty of human beings; and that it is a rhetorical figuration rather than a phenomenological "experience." What we call pleasure, then, would be our intuition of a sensation's inherent capacity for repetition (and thus the "illusion" of its unlimited nature), rather than for consumption. For both Leopardi and Valéry,

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 1331.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Valéry's notion that the poem continuously reproduces itself resembles the basic tenet underlying Michael Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978): that is, that poetic discourse represents nothing but itself. The semiotic trajectory of poetry, suggests Riffaterre, is actually determined from within the individual poem's structure; and what is more, all the constituent elements of the poetic text are encodings of a self-same message. Valéry's well-known view that a poem is a kind of "machine" which produces the same message over and over seems to anticipate Riffaterre's position. So, too, Leopardi's notion that true poetic words bypass the intermediary phase of an object of mimesis is consonant with Riffaterre's impulse to dismiss the problematic of mimesis entirely from the semiotics of poetry.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Z 531-35.

only poetic language is self-renewing, and its primary motor is the propagation of sound, and the auricular-oracular powers of the ear.

But why raise Valéry?

I would like, in my closing comments, to sidestep the normal directionality of literary analysis—that of influence or prefiguration. Rather, after examining Leopardi's insights on the role of sound, I want to put him into dialogue with several poets from different temporal moments, and to allow them to comment upon each other. Leopardi's voice has been strikingly absent from such discussions. Now, with the recent publication in English of Leopardi's *Zibaldone*, we should be able to move outside of chronological teleology. This mode of reading is brilliantly exemplified by Mieke Bal's study of Caravaggio, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*.<sup>61</sup> Bal argues that we need to rethink the notion of linear influence, and that later artists who "quote" Caravaggio in their own works change profoundly the way we see the source of the citation, Caravaggio. Her notion of "preposterous history," then, allows for works which appear chronologically first to be "influenced" by later works. The model, based on the rhetorical figure of hysteron-proteron, stresses the need for reading against a rigid conception of uni-directional time in terms of cultural affiliations or genealogies.

Thus, in the spirit of reversible chronologies, or preposterous histories, I initiated a brief conversation between Leopardi and Paul Valéry. I will momentarily give the floor over to William Wordsworth, who has provided the two epigraphs for this essay. Valéry, a Symbolist poet, lived from 1871 to 1945, in what seems to be culturally several centuries after Leopardi (1798-1837). William Wordsworth (1770-1850), a so-called "contemporary" of Leopardi, was actually born almost 30 years before Giacomo, and died 13 years after Leopardi's death. In fact, the most productive year of Wordsworth's poetic career, his *annus mirabilis*, 1798, was the very year of Leopardi's birth (1798 saw the publication of Coleridge's and Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*). Of course, the differences and dissonances between these poets are considerable (not least of which are the attitudes towards Nature in Leopardi and Wordsworth). However, I propose that we consider Leopardi's meditations on the function of sound in poetry in the spirit of Erich Auerbach's notion of figuralism, that is, as the fulfillment of what is "figured" in both Valéry and Wordsworth; or conversely, as the *figura* that reaches fulfillment in Valéry and Wordsworth, among many others.

I have written about the Leopardi-Valéry-Wordsworth nexus elsewhere,<sup>62</sup> and of course, there are numerous studies that bring Leopardi into a conversation, awkward at times, with Wordsworth. Importantly, both of these poets were the first in their respective national traditions to describe landscape not in balanced neoclassical terms, but, rather, as an extension of their own autobiographies. For the purposes of this essay, I would like to close with a section of Wordsworth's verse, from his Alfoxden period—a conversational moment in his poetic formation. Although Wordsworth often recorded his poetic impressions *in situ* and was theoretically committed to an objective observation of Nature, he soon recognized that every present moment is always colored by memories of a past. In Alfoxden, Wordsworth began to investigate some of the creative links mediating between his present emotion and the past; indeed Wordsworth

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<sup>61</sup> Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art and Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>62</sup> Brose, *Leopardi sublime*, 136-57.

himself regarded Alfoxden as the turning point in his career.<sup>63</sup> At this time, according to Geoffrey Hartman, Wordsworth's growing understanding "of the role of involuntary memory" leads him to introspection.<sup>64</sup> It is at this point, we might add, that Wordsworth lends an ear to those Freudian memory-traces by which the imagination is able to re-figure experience. An "emotion recollected in tranquility" acquires the *chiaroscuro* and depth that are denied to our apprehensions in the fleeting present. This is elegantly put in this Alfoxden fragment, when Wordsworth reiterates the term *second* a second time:

But by such retrospect it was recalled  
To yet a second and a second life,  
While in this excitation of the mind  
A vivid pulse of sentiment and thought  
Beat palpably within us, and all shades  
Of consciousness were ours.<sup>65</sup>

What Wordsworth refers to as "a second life, and a second life," Leopardi had called "the second time around." What Wordsworth aptly terms "all shades / Of consciousness," we might today speak of as the return or the de-sublimation of all memory-traces; a layering of experience into a palimpsest (Freud's mystical writing pad) retrievable by the imagination, and called to consciousness by the repetition of a sound. These recollections are ghostly yet embodied. This "gradual movement into the past or the mind," continues Hartman, "is related to a shift from sight, which is direct, to the ear, which catches life at a distance."<sup>66</sup> Here is another of the Alfoxden fragments:

Yet once again do I behold the forms  
Of these huge mountains, and yet once again,  
Standing beneath these elms, I hear thy voice,  
Beloved Derwent, that peculiar voice  
Heard in the stillness of evening air  
Half-heard and half-created.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy lived at Alfoxden House between July 1797 and June 1798, during the time of their friendship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Later in 1798 the siblings moved to the Lake District, to Grasmere. The two siblings continued to live together even after William married Mary Hutchinson (Dorothy's best friend) in 1802. Dorothy was an avid naturalist and took daily walks with her brother; she kept notebooks of thoughts and images based on her observance of the natural world, many of which appear in her brother's poetry. Her Alfoxden journals (kept from May 1799 to December 1802) were only published posthumously. This period, known as the "Alfoxden" period, may be considered the most fertile and defining moment of William Wordsworth's poetic career.

<sup>64</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 165.

<sup>65</sup> Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works*, 344.

<sup>66</sup> Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry*, 167-68.

<sup>67</sup> Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works*, 337.

In this poetic fragment, the various syntagms reduplicate and expand to mirror/echo the expansion of that indefinite voice of the river waters of Wordsworth's childhood (*once again [...] yet once again / I hear thy voice [...] that peculiar voice / [...] heard [...] half-heard*). The movement is centrifugal. In fact, the progression from *hear* to *heard* to *half-heard* could well have been written by Leopardi, either as a verse in an idyll, or as an entry in his *Zibaldone* as a reflection on the utilization of sounds in the creation of the Sublime.

In this early Alfoxden fragment, the repetitions and verbal lengthening slow perception itself; such repetitions and use of incremental redundancies constitute what Hartman calls the “Wordsworthian turn.”<sup>68</sup> The ear lends to things “an energy not reducible to the conscious self, the ear having an activity the mind does not know of.”<sup>69</sup> This would be fully consonant with Freud’s understanding of “memory-traces” as outlined in *The Ego and the Id*, as well as with Leopardi’s analysis of the semiotics of sound in relation to memory. In 1798 Wordsworth began his project to recall and record his earliest childhood; in an early version of what would become *The Prelude* he speaks of childhood as “The time of unrememberable being.”<sup>70</sup> Although these uncanny lines are eventually dropped from the final version of the poem, he soon came to understand that only the ear had the power to re-remember. Indeed, *The Prelude* might be seen as a versified meditation on the problematic of memory and poesis, quite similar to the many prose entries in the *Zibaldone* about these same subjects: each the author’s *Bildungsroman*.

Hartman goes on to trace the movement “from image to imagelessness (from object-consciousness to a further, non-objective stage), and then to a fluctuation between them” in several of the Alfoxden fragments.<sup>71</sup> Like Leopardi’s idylls, these lyrics demonstrate how Wordsworth’s gaze (like Leopardi’s *mirare*) denotes less an actual exterior looking than an interior harkening. The less the eye sees, the more “visionary” its power; this is the blockage of the *siepe* in “L’Infinito.” Wordsworth soon learns that the eye and ear are mutually interrelated, just as are past and present. Their interaction gives rise to the eerie synesthetic images of inner perception: the “fellowship of silent light / With speaking darkness.”<sup>72</sup> So too, Dante portrays the inner state with synesthetic metaphors of sight and sound, “là dove il sole tace” (“where the sun is silent,” *Inferno* 1.60). As the ultimate visionary “insight” in the *Paradiso* suggests, sight and sound would be inextricably joined in the image of the circle, wherein music and movement and light are one. This is also suggested in Wordsworth’s 1828 ode “On the Power of Sound.” Here the ear is eulogized as a spiritual power, even though the nuances of sound must once again—unfortunately—be described in visual terms: “Ye Voices, and ye Shadows / And Images of voice” (Stanza III, vv. 33-34). While shadows and images derive from the visual register, this synesthesia is dominated by echo and ear.

In a richly suggestive essay on the trope of sound in Wordsworth’s poetry, the critic and poet John Hollander reminds us “that the auditory realm is ever secondary to the kingdom of sight.”<sup>73</sup> As proof of this claim, Hollander refers to “the want of a complementary term, in the aural dimension, to the word ‘visionary’ in contrast with ‘visual.’” In fact, until the invention of

<sup>68</sup> Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry*, 87.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>70</sup> This phrase (*Prelude* 1798-99 10, 114) is used as the title of a study of memory and the sublime in Wordsworth: *The Time of Unrememberable Being: Wordsworth and the Sublime: 1787-1805*, ed. Klaus Peter Mortensen (Aarhus: Museum Tuscolanum Press, 1998).

<sup>71</sup> Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry*, 177.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>73</sup> John Hollander, “The Music of Sound,” in *William Wordsworth*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1985).

the phonograph, there was no way to record acoustic phenomena; “there is no analogue of painting or sculpture for the preservation of aural shades,” states Hollander. As we noted above, terms for inspirational understanding tend to derive from the visual: insight, illumination, enlightenment; envision, visionary; highlight, flash; and yet Romantic poetry relies as much upon the inward ear as upon the inward eye. Leopardi affirms that distancing makes everything poetry. Distanced aural phenomena already partake of that bittersweet quality of nostalgia and trace, whereas only certain visual phenomena can evoke the Romantic *Sehnsucht*. Hence the appeal of the ruin, the fragment, and the graveyard: concrete objects distanced by time and eroded in form.

Hollander notes that for lack of metaphors inherent to sound-description, poets as early as Lucretius relied on images of liquidity.<sup>74</sup> And he goes on to suggest that that seeing is often supplanted by hearing as the dominant organ of reception; it is sound which recalls sight. Hollander notes that characteristically “an image of sound will awaken visual perceptions.”<sup>75</sup> But the most revealing description of the primacy of ear over eye, and of the inherently distancing attribute of sound, appears in another of the Alfoxden notebook fragments. Here, the poet returns to a “favorite” spot, a stand of trees (much like *Sempre caro mi fu questo ermo colle*, “L’Infinito,” v. 1), and opens his ear to the sounds of the wind, bringing memories and the evidence of its own transience:

...I loved to stand and hear  
 The wind come on and touch the several groves  
 Each after each, and thence in the dark night  
 Elicit all proportions of sweet sounds  
 As from an instrument. “The strains are passed”  
 Thus often to myself I said, “the sounds  
 Even while they are approaching are gone by,  
 And now they are more distant, more and more.  
 O listen, listen how they wind away  
 Still heard they wind away, heard yet and yet,  
 While the lost touch they leave upon the sense  
 Is sweeter than whate’er was heard before,  
 And seems to say that they can never die.”<sup>76</sup>

The second half of this passage brilliantly exemplifies how both form and content can interact to echo the sound of echo itself. Filled with reduplicative syntagms (Hartman’s “Wordsworthian turn”), the syntax evaporates into finer and finer acoustic echoes or layers (*sweet...more...listen...they wind away...heard...yet...*) which are all re-echoed. The visual paranomasia (eye-rhyme) on wind (breeze; to turn), as both substantive and predicate, adds to this palimpsestal effect, as well as another paranomastic rhyme also suggested, between *to wind* and *to wend*. As Hollander correctly notes, “the penultimate strain may indeed be the last

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>76</sup> Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works*, 70.



acoustical one, echoed, at the very end, by memory's playback."<sup>77</sup> The very doubling and amplification of these key syntagms instantiates the poet's claim that the eternal quality of sound refigured by memory "can never die."

And yet, when reading Leopardi and Wordsworth together, we are also struck by a sense of the profound difference between them. This is not so much because we apprehend a pessimistic materialism in Leopardi, in contrast to Wordsworth's mystical Theism. It is due, rather, to their different uses of the concrete data of natural imagery, and of the temporality of memory in the poems themselves. In both writers, poetry is always a representation of an absence (no matter how densely packed the perceptual field of the poem), and memory always serves to screen the apprehension of mortality. But given this, we should note that Leopardi's dominant rhetorical strategy is that of metalepsis: the retrieval of a past childhood figuration (aural, visual, psychological) to substitute for the emptiness of the present. In contrast, Wordsworth often employs an ultimately proleptic rhetorical strategy: the retrieval of the present, or of a recollection from the past, to be saved for the regenerative purpose of retroping that memory into the future—for his own memory, or that of his sister, Dorothy, or for another, future, poem.

As an example of this, let us look at how Wordsworth portrays one of his famous "spots of time" in Book XII of *The Prelude*. He describes the return of memory: "The days gone by / Return upon me almost from the dawn / Of life" (vv. 227-229). Anticipating his own aging, he queries the possibility of the mind standing outside of human thought. But he suggests that what is past, and what is present—the poem itself—may function in a restorative mode in the future: "and I would give, / While yet we may, as far as words can give, / Substance and life to what I feel, enshrining, / Such is my hope, the spirit of the Past, / For future restoration" (vv. 282-286). Playing off the title of his great ode, "Intimations of Immortality," we might say that Wordsworth seems to have attempted to keep his own intimations of mortality at bay, in a way that Leopardi could not have possibly done, perhaps because Wordsworth's Nature was always too full, while Leopardi's was too limited. This is so because Leopardi was not, in any profound sense of the word, a Romantic poet, but a modernist one. However, both poets understood that "the despotic eye" was surely balanced, if not vanquished, by "the fleshly ear."<sup>78</sup>

The above excursus on Wordsworth can be used to return us to the example of Leopardi, with which we opened these remarks. For Leopardi, poetry's goal is the figuration of infinity, and he remained convinced that infinity was an idea rather than a reality: "L'infinito è un'idea, un sogno, non una realtà" (Z 4178). Leopardi repeatedly asserted that infinity could only exist in language itself, or in the Imagination: "l'infinità che non esiste né può esistere se non nella immaginazione o nel linguaggio" (Z 4181).

We might think of this as the "infinity effect," in the mode of Roland Barthes's "reality effect." With his customary irony, Leopardi notes that only that which does not exist, only the negation of being, is infinite; "pare che solo che non esiste, solo la negazione dell'essere è infinita" (Z 4178) ("It seems that only what does not exist, the negation of being, nothingness, can be limitless," Z, FSG, 1824). But the linguistic potential of language is, in fact, infinite, and the phonic qualities of poetic language are capable of eliciting experiences of the highest sublimity. Thus it follows that Leopardi set language as music, echo, or as pure sound over against language as referential—*parola* over against *termine*. And even more it follows, then, that ear is to be valorized over eye; for the eye, or the visual, is inherently mathematical and

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<sup>77</sup> Hollander, "The Music of Sound," 71.

<sup>78</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Bk. X.

material, and thus limiting, in Leopardi's view, while the auditory is productive of meaning that is necessarily diffused, and "infinite." Leopardi seems to have understood, in the manner of the French Symbolist poets, that sound achieves meaning by a different process of signification than that given to lexicalizable words; and in the manner of the psychoanalytic theorists, that poetic lexemes, like desire, seek to perpetuate themselves endlessly. And finally, like Wordsworth, Leopardi utilizes the topos of a sound (wind, song, voice) as well as the reduplicative syntax of echo itself, to memorialize experience in its most evanescent form, the sublime trace of a sound that has been heard, then reheard, evermore.

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