

*Declinazioni dello spazio
nell'opera di Giacomo Leopardi*

Tra letteratura e scienza

a cura di Antonella Del Gatto e Patrizia Landi

IL SEGNO E LE LETTERE

*Collana del Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture Moderne
dell'Università degli Studi 'G. d'Annunzio'*

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PARODIED KNOWLEDGE: LEOPARDI AND THE ATHENAEUM OF LISTENING

Andrea Lombardinilo

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ABSTRACT

The paper revolves around the anti-academic diatribe developed by Leopardi in his late *Thoughts* and inspired by an intense social and civil sensibility. Striving to arrange his unfinished *Handbook of Practical Philosophy*, the poet shuns not only the uncontrolled diffusion of books and mediocre authors, but also the annoying habit of reciting verses in public: “the recitation by authors of their own compositions is one of the most imperious needs of human nature” (*Thought* nr. 20). By means of the Athenaeum of Listening, Leopardi fuels the anti-academic diatribe coming from his essays, dialogues and poems, in line with a discursive strategy rooted in the harsh criticism of official and pedantic knowledge in urban environments. This is why the Athenaeum of Listening can be interpreted as the metaphor of social, cultural and educational short circuits of urban living, and often deals with the search for gratification through cultural ostentation.

Keywords: anti-academism; communication; knowledge; Leopardi; literary sphere.

1. KNOWLEDGE AS OSTENTATION: LEOPARDI'S COGNITIVE DISENTANGLEMENT

“Dwellers in large towns are compelled to sacrifice the beautiful to the useful”¹. In his late years, Leopardi grows increasingly aware of the risks hidden in urban life. In Naples the fluctuation between a provincial mindset and urban dynamism gains a new existential meaning as Leo-

¹ *Parini on Glory*, 90. All quotations from Leopardi's *Moral Essays* are retrieved from Leopardi 1892.

pardi's health issues are worsening. Nonetheless, all of his trips away from Recanati seem to feature the same existential instability: in Milan, Rome, Bologna, Pisa and Naples his creative tension is nurtured by unhappiness and loneliness, along with a rare lyrical pressure².

His knowledge of city life is impeded by the revelation of human complexity experienced during his youth in Recanati. Living in big cities or little towns implies different psychological and physical arrangements, due to various social dynamics featuring human aggregations. Leopardi has been facing this complexity since his first trips away from Recanati, where he gained experience of the oppressive sense of safety becoming an unbearable iron cage. This is what he points out in *Discourse on the Present State of the Customs of the Italians* (1824), providing “a sarcastic list of a series of defects of the Italian people, some of which may strike us as equally valid today”³.

The analysis of Italian society reveals the forthcoming departure of the local dimension from global expectations, in a world featuring political and civil fragmentation. “Italians have usages and habits rather than customs. Few usages and habits can be described as national, but these few, and the many more which can and must only be described as provincial or municipal, are followed simply through habit rather than any kind of either provincial or national spirit”⁴.

Far from considering the social effects of mass urbanization, Leopardi stresses his own vision of urban life as it is ruled by self-awareness, pretence, immorality and simulation. The art of conversation has to be improved and perfected so as to provide men with the communicative skills in line with the public sphere. Immorality, cynicism, and duplicity are the hallmarks of social living, especially when society grows complex and moves far from that society of ideas that Plato dreamt of⁵. The power of knowledge resides in its symbolic aura and behavioural exclusivity, insofar as science and wisdom match. Nevertheless, the practice of knowledge is often limited to a mere aesthetic ostentation emphasizing austerity and flair⁶.

This intellectual attitude is one of the main polemical targets of Leopardi's writings, both in prose and poetry. In some *Moral Essays*, as well as

² Citati 2000.

³ Magatti 2003, 201.

⁴ *Discourse on the Present State of the Customs of the Italians*, retrieved from Magatti 2003, 201.

⁵ On Leopardi's moral interest for Plato see D'Intino 2009.

⁶ Boncinelli - Giorello 2006.

in the *Palinodia to the Marquis Gino Capponi, Consalvo, to Count Charles Pepoli*, the criticism of modern times mingles with the denouncement of cultural decay representing the proliferation of extemporary writers, poets and scholars, yearning for glory and success. Unfortunately they lack talent and inspiration⁷.

The printing of mediocre books and the practice of public reciting are seen as the consequences of the communicative degeneration which was previously denounced not only by Giambattista Vico and Alexander Pope (in reference to their own urban environments) but also by Annibal Caro and Traiano Boccalini, whose *I ragguaigli del Parnaso* can be interpreted as a witty satire of the Renaissance cultural system⁸. Leopardi ponders on the solitary nature of knowledge, which has to be practiced in silent environments: “It may be said that artists, who work in solitude and silence, strive laboriously and industriously to please men, who, because accustomed to the bustle and noise of the cities, are almost totally incapable of appreciating the fruit of their exertions”⁹.

Parini’s words trigger an autobiographic reminiscence of the uncanny power of imagination and meditation. Intellectual exertion collides with human bustle, despite the web of opportunities nurtured by city life. In provincial (and rural) areas nature can be observed in its living splendour, both astonishing and dreadful. Within urban societies, utility replaces beauty, and spontaneity gives way to ostentation¹⁰.

As regards attention to politeness and sociability, Leopardi inherits not only Castiglione and Della Casa’s behavioural legacy, but also Segneri’s educational teaching, whose oratory deals with the most relevant moral and ethical education¹¹. Leopardi knows how negative the effects of an illiberal education can be. In the section of Practical Philosophy of the *Crestomazia italiana della prosa* he reports a number of texts from Matteo Palmieri, Agnolo Pandolfini, Paolo Segneri, who provide the reader with some precious reflections on freedom of thought and speech, focusing on educational strategy capable of improving children’s behaviour¹².

⁷ Colaiacomo 2013.

⁸ As regards the influence of Boccalini’s satirical model see Melosi 2015.

⁹ *Parini on Glory*, 91.

¹⁰ For a sociological analysis of urban evolution see Sennett 1996.

¹¹ On Leopardi’s educational insights see Cappa 2016. On the importance of the scientific prose of the seventeenth century see Macchioni Jodi 1978.

¹² On the educational paths developed in the *Crestomazia italiana della prosa* (published in 1827) see Lombardinilo 2010a.

Underestimated or even forgotten thinkers shed light on the old controversy between official and popular knowledge and the everlasting rift between urban and rural living. After all, in his early *History of Astronomy* (1813) Leopardi outlined the development of science across the centuries, with the purpose of celebrating Galileo, Newton and Kepler, each one a solitary genius. Galileo, in particular, embodies the quintessence of the scientist who revolutionized the world thanks to observation: every single discovery entailed the struggle with some well-established interests, whether political or ecclesiastic or both. This discovery of new truths can lead to discredit, slander and isolation¹³.

Galileo appears as the supporter of freedom of knowledge fighting against prejudice and diffidence. It is not by chance that his writings fill up the section of speculative philosophy of the *Crestomazia* which the poet set up with the prospect of gathering bibliographical material for his *Handbook of Practical Philosophy*¹⁴. Galileo's troubles with the Court of Inquisition highlight the risks inherent in the practice of knowledge failing to comply with the rules of official institutions. Government and churches, along with schools, universities and academies boast intellectual privileges that are sometimes legitimated by obsolete and old-fashioned traditions.

Galileo's abjuration can be seen as the triumph of order over research. The latter's mission should be the improvement of life quality. All behavioural drifts from official parameters may engender panic and confusion. This is why Boudon's metaphor of "place of disorder" and Augé's insight of "non-places" may help us probe Leopardi's concept of urban uncertainty fed by rhetoric and relational pretence¹⁵. Urban cohabitation is based on usefulness, even though looks may deceive. This is the gist of some of Leopardi's moral essays inspired by harsh criticism of social commonplaces. Within the urban environment people are far from beauty, because "the true is not necessarily the beautiful"¹⁶.

In spite of the magnificence of buildings, monuments and squares, beauty does not dwell in the city, as Filippo Ottonieri notices: "Consequently, in large towns one sees, feels, hears, and breathes nothing but fal-

¹³ On Galileo's influence see Lombardinilo 2010b.

¹⁴ See, in particular, Lombardinilo 2012a. On Leopardi's *Crestomazie*: Bollati 1968; Gallifuoco 2000; Felici 2005; Crivelli 2012; Lauro 2012; Palumbo 2012; Corsalini 2018.

¹⁵ Boudon 1984; Augé 1992.

¹⁶ *Remarkable Sayings of Filippo Ottonieri*, 133.

sity, which in time, custom renders even pleasurable. To sensitive minds, what misery can exceed this?"¹⁷.

Falsity and conformism inspire academic institutions as well, in line with those perfunctory guidelines assuring respect and nobility. Appearances must be safeguarded despite the number of drawbacks produced by unchecked urbanization and industrialization. "The true is not [...] the beautiful", since beauty must be in line with collective expectations: art and imagination cannot be found in great urban centres, where "calumny, fraud, perfidy, cunning, dissimulation, and other such despicable means"¹⁸ lurk.

The *Remarkable Sayings of Filippo Ottonieri* depicts the profile of the perfect anti-academician, insofar as his sarcasm warns young writers and thinkers of the dangers of social life. Hence follows the rebuttal of academic habits ruled by intrigues and personal interests, as Leopardi ponders in *The Prize Competition of the Academy of Sillographs* and *The Wager of Prometheus*. These writings are inspired by a corrosive representation of human aspirations: the cult of immortality nurtures the utopian target of a consumption-driven society. This happens long before the advent of mass civilization, as imagination declines when reason overwhelms feelings and fantasy, just as knowledge replaces superstition when minds are free of stereotypes¹⁹.

The gist inspiring the *Essay on the Popular Errors of the Ancients* (1815) gains new argumentative insights in the *Moral Essays*, as Leopardi's scepticism mingles with the distrust in human beliefs spread by books, newspapers and public speakers. This scepticism is both theoretical and experiential – in Rome and Florence Leopardi attends some prestigious cultural institutions that may have increased his disappointment and isolation. Irony is the only defence against conformism, and irony can corrode the weak certainties of urban living²⁰.

The desecration of sociality intertwines with the celebration of the "place of the local"²¹ within those "provincial fences" posing as the metaphor of existential confinement. The fluctuation between escape and return inspires all of Leopardi's work; his inexplicable sorrow stems from the full awareness of egoism and self-love undermining the power of illusion²².

¹⁷ *Remarkable sayings of Filippo Ottonieri*, 133.

¹⁸ *Remarkable sayings of Filippo Ottonieri*, 130.

¹⁹ On Leopardi's *Moral Essays* see Melosi 2016.

²⁰ On Leopardi's comical dimension see Melosi 2012.

²¹ Magatti 2003, 201-205.

²² Prete 2006.

Leopardi's academic irony echoes Vico's criticism of the Cartesian method, in a time of discipline specialization and university functional shifts²³. Unlike the Neapolitan philosopher who was able to teach in his university, Leopardi cannot flaunt institutional relationships. This is why he disapproves of all the frail certainties permeating academic environments, which can be portrayed as dusty centres of symbolic power. "Purposive activity in both humans and organisms is overwhelmingly tied in Leopardi to the search of happiness. The transition from a more benign assessment of nature to one that considers her as more malignant or at least malingering, is tied specifically to reflections on the extent to which nature facilitates the achievement of pleasure and also of why organisms were designed to seek in the first place"²⁴.

The search for the best place to live leads to disillusion. Furthermore, academic life can result in harmful strain. Imagination should be kept distant from big towns and their universities, whose cognitive mission is influenced by the lobby interests determining both didactic and research activities.

Leopardi debunks academics and pedant writers, poets, scholars and thinkers haunting the university venues, where scholars and professors need to be acknowledged and rewarded. In this sense, the invention of the Academy of Sillographs represents an outstanding symbolic insight, insofar as it emphasizes the vacuity of academic poses, those already denounced by Alexander Pope in *The Dunciad*, in which he saw the collective unconscious of printed books "as the accumulating backwash of private self-expression"²⁵.

The parody of typographic dullness concerns public confession and desire for self-expression. Similarly, egotism impedes the sense of community and collective belonging. The construction of modern public opinion depends on the communicative efforts of the typographic revolution, which influence the same educational practice in agreement with Rousseau's. Thus, Leopardi's invention of the Academy of Sillographs, "ardently desiring to advance the common welfare"²⁶, is the metaphor of an obsolete world hardly keeping up with the risks of rhetoric and stereotypes driven by "the age of machines"²⁷.

²³ Lombardinilo 2016.

²⁴ Epstein 2019, 355.

²⁵ McLuhan 2011 (1962), 293.

²⁶ *Prize Competition of the Academy of Sillographs*, 24.

²⁷ On Leopardi's metaphoric mindset see Del Gatto 2012.

2. “THE WEARINESS OF READING”: FOR AN ACADEMY OF LISTENING

Social living requires cunning and irreverence. As the years pass by, Leopardi’s philosophical meditation increasingly deals with the unsolvable contradictions of modern society, in which every man has to feign his own identity. Goffman’s insight into everyday life as a presentation can also shed light on this proto-sociological survey, ahead of the rise of electric complexity²⁸. Once again, the contrast between urban and provincial life stresses the incommunicability between two different worlds, whose symbolic and emotional features rarely match.

In his late *Thoughts* Leopardi improves his theoretical reflection on the unexpected effects of modernity, hinting at the much-needed societal panache. He depicts human vices ruling every single age and distinguishes the public “bads” of modern society. The popular press is undermining culture and causing imminent damage within the literary republic²⁹. This phenomenon is highlighted in the *Moral Essays*, especially in the *Dialogue between Tristan and a Friend*, in which the poet focuses on the contrast between the individual and the masses:

Everything that formerly tended to preserve and perfect the body, seems to-day to be in conspiracy for its destruction. The consequence is, that, compared with the ancients, we are little better than children, and they in comparison with us may indeed be termed perfect men. I refer equally to individuals in comparison with individuals, as to the masses (to use this most expressive modern term) compared to the masses.³⁰

As well as in the *Dialogue between an Almanac Seller and a Passer-by*, irony is a cognitive medium allowing intelligence to probe the short circuits of progress. Modernity is the age of the masses, as Manzoni and Zola show in their novels³¹. Modernity is also the age of newspaper and popular press opinions, as Sighele points out in his *The Criminal Crowd* (1891)³².

Leopardi claims his own sociological sensitivity inspired by the refusal of intellectual standardization, superficial ideas and commonplaces. This is why Tristan ironically decides to share such intellectual degeneration: “I bow before the profound philosophy of the journals, which will in time

²⁸ Goffman 1959.

²⁹ Guglielmi 2011.

³⁰ *Dialogue between Tristan and a Friend*, 210.

³¹ For further investigation on the relationship between literature and collective movements: Palano 2002.

³² The English translation of Sighele’s well known book can be found in Sighele 2018.

supersede every other branch of literature, and every serious and exacting study. The journals are the guides and lights of the present age. Is not so?"³³.

The (sceptical) narration of everyday facts gains a new semiotic impact on the audience, thanks to the intermingling of photos and texts. Newspaper pages are mosaic spaces representing the ongoing variety of human deeds, in line with the connecting pressure stemming from progress³⁴. The useful is overwhelming beauty and indifference has weakened the fascination of cultural engagement. Sacrifice is the keyword of this intellectual endeavour which has been reduced to domestic isolation. The space of knowledge is neither urban nor crowded, as Leopardi points out several times in his *Zibaldone*.

Self-living is the ace up the sleeve of the solitary scholar spiralling down into his dreams. The solitary thinker can only pursue his utopian thoughts and fight against the detriment of illusion³⁵. Everything is reduced to public ostentation and personal gratification³⁶. From this perspective, *Thoughts* reveals a firm refusal of academism, accused of stifling imagination and exalting social bonds. In particular, *Thought* nr. 20 provides an example of Leopardi's witty sarcasm:

Just as Cervantes wrote a book which purged Spain of spurious chivalry, so I, if I but possessed his genius, would fain write one calculated to purge Italy, and indeed the whole civilized world, of a vice which, having regard to the humanity which in other respects characterizes the age, is perhaps not less cruel and barbarous than any of the relics of medieval ferocity which were lashed by the satire of Cervantes. I refer to the vicious practice which some writers have of reading or reciting their compositions to their friends.³⁷

Cervantes is the emblem of a decaying society pivoted on chivalric rules and aristocratic privileges. Only irony can contrast this fading society, as Boccalini outlines in his *News-sheet from Parnaso*. He represents Apollo receiving complaints from all the writers and scholars appearing before him. Apollo's mission is to deliver justice in compliance with their merits. Leopardi takes inspiration from Boccalini's satire, in which the gods listen

³³ *Dialogue between Tristan and a Friend*, 211.

³⁴ Lombardinilo 2012b.

³⁵ Cassano 2003, 31-54.

³⁶ In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt dwells on the "public admiration" pursued by poets, writers, intellectuals in the public sphere, insofar it can be seen as one of the main features of contemporary media participation. Arendt 1998 (1958), 77.

³⁷ *Thoughts*, 257.

to well-known people complaining about their colleagues. Hence follows the description of a ridiculous cultural landscape permeated by hypocrisy³⁸.

Cervantes' novel provides the corrosive representation of this mock behaviour, which Manzoni faithfully represents in *The Betrothed* through the character of Don Ferrante, who is fond of modern political writers³⁹. While Manzoni is engaged in the analysis of the society of the seventeenth century, Leopardi denounces the contradictions of his age through the parody of the Baroque age described by Cervantes in his masterpiece. The "vicious practice" of reciting compositions is but the legacy of bygone times, which featured the sharing of oral narrations.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the diffusion of the popular press makes possible a communicative strategy exploiting the content reproducibility engendered by new typographic techniques. Leopardi's satire takes inspiration from real facts and degenerative behaviour featuring both public and private spheres. Public reciting makes no exception:

At the present day, however, when all men write, and when it is most difficult to meet with a man who is not an author, it has assumed the proportions of a social scourge, a public calamity, and a new terror to life. Indeed it is no exaggeration, but the simple truth, to say that by reason of this odious practice our acquaintances have become objects of suspicion, and friendship itself a danger; and that there is no time or place at which some innocent person may not be assailed, and subjected on the spot, or be dragged away in order to be subjected, to the torture of listening to interminable prose compositions, or to verses by the thousand.⁴⁰

"The torture of listening" is a vicious habit and a social plague especially common in big towns. Why do people have to bother friends and relatives by reciting their interminable writings? Friendship is a double-edged sword, exposing men and women to "public calamity". This is one of the most alarming drawbacks of the typographic era, which has spawned easier and cheaper access to knowledge.

The more diffused books are, the lower the quality of their content: this tendency is bolstered by the decreasing assessment of authors and their works. The echo of Vico's criticism is still alive: "I am, however, afraid that the abundance and cheapness of books may cause us to become

³⁸ Bonazzi 2017.

³⁹ As in Machiavelli, Botero, Boccacini, Paruta, Sansovino. For a socio-cultural interpretation of Manzoni's novel see Morcellini 2016.

⁴⁰ *Thoughts*, 257.

less industrious; we may be like banqueters, who, being surfeited with gorgeous and sumptuous dinners, wave away ordinary and nourishing food and prefer to stuff themselves with elaborately prepared but less healthy repasts”⁴¹.

The banquet of knowledge is the metaphor of modern consumption. Writing is no longer a profession: it is a pastime that men feed through improvisation and approximation. These typographic shifts influence both communicative and educational practices, insofar as specialization leads to disciplinary fragmentation and intellectual personalization. Vico and Leopardi share the same concern about knowledge, despite their different heuristic approach to cultural institutionalization: one has a proactive attitude, the other shows a pessimistic approach⁴².

Prose and poetry make no difference: the “torture of listening” represents a real social scourge, especially when friends and relatives are engaged in such annoying performances. As a result, friendship can hide unforeseen risks. Bumping into unexpected people may be an unlucky occurrence. The satirical model built by La Bruyère and the epigrammatic style moulded by La Rochefoucauld provide Leopardi with an expressive force taking root in his Gnosticism and lyrical disillusion⁴³.

His distrust in human beings matches his scorn for any form of inane ostentation, the same unfortunately afflicting writers and poets. Pleasure and pain are unavoidably tethered in these performances: “Nor is this cruelty any longer practiced under the colourable pretext of desiring an opinion on the merits of these compositions, as used to be the ostensible excuse for such inflictions; but simply and solely for the pleasure it gives to the author to hear the sound of his own productions; and in order that, on the conclusion of his recitation, he may enjoy the extorted applause of his hearers”⁴⁴.

Extortion and torture are inflicted on passive listeners, who cannot avoid the emotional fury of improvised declaimers. Thus, sociability can ironically be a tricky experience being fed by suspicion. As Leopardi points out, recitations comply with the need for self-gratification and public approval: this is what applause means, since it legitimates the communicative short-circuit that fuels this insane interactional habit. Leopardi is convinced of the negative effects of this tendency jeopardizing freedom of

⁴¹ Vico 1990 (1708), 72.

⁴² On Leopardi’s admiration for Vico’s works see Gaglione 2018; Cacciapuoti 2019.

⁴³ See Rosengarte 2012.

⁴⁴ *Thoughts*, 257-258.

act in public. Self-infatuation and self-love make men similar to children, thus revealing puerile manners⁴⁵.

Individual blindness clashes with collective safeguard: in the meantime, self-love may produce social dismay and self-satisfaction may ensue from insolent and brazen habits. Leopardi's denouncement concerns not only the communicative sphere, but also the physical entirety besieged by annoying recitations:

Then during the recitation though he perceives, first by his yawns, then by his uneasy shiftings and contortions, and a hundred other signs, how acute are the sufferings of the unhappy listener, yet he will not desist or have mercy on him, but all the more ruthlessly continues droning on for hours, if not for entire days or evenings, until, having talked himself hoarse, and his hearer having swooned, he is at length exhausted though not sated.⁴⁶

The pleasure of authors is the pain of the listener. Leopardi depicts his condition with such a bittersweet parody. Physical suffering is the consequence of an intellectual distortion that only the presence of radio and TV will defeat. Leopardi warns human beings of the consequences related to aesthetic narcissism, as Debord points out in his *Society of the Spectacle*⁴⁷.

Public approval is the target of collective acknowledgment. In *Thought* nr. 24, Leopardi accuses human vanity: "At the present time, unless I am very much mistaken, if you see a man generally praised, you may be pretty sure that his praises began in his own mouth"⁴⁸. Vanity is the hallmark of both academic and literary spheres, whose representatives are accustomed to social flaunting. Despite his familiarity with these phenomena, Leopardi's sarcasm magnifies the physical exhaustion caused by endless recit-

⁴⁵ *Thoughts*, 258: "In good sooth I think that few things are more calculated than this to exhibit the puerility of human nature, and the extreme of blindness and infatuation to which self-love is capable of conducting a man; while at the same time it is a lurid illustration of the capacity of the human mind to cheat itself with illusion. For every man knows by his own experience what an ineffable nuisance it is to have to listen to the twaddle of other people, and yet, though he sees his friends turn pale with dismay when invited to listen to his; though he hears them plead every imaginable pretext for escape, and perceives that they even try to flee from him and hide themselves, nevertheless, with a brazen front, and with a fell persistence like that of a famished bear, he will hunt and pursue his prey over half the town, and when he catches him, he drags him to the destined scene of suffering".

⁴⁶ *Thoughts*, 258.

⁴⁷ Debord 1967. Nonetheless, the modern age is already ruled by the representative paradigms highlighted by Goffman (1959), who focuses on the drawbacks stemming from dramaturgic acts.

⁴⁸ *Thoughts*, 258.

ing. Mercy is the only requirement that the reciting writer should possess: the lower his satiation, the more intense his listener's pain.

The "scene of suffering" is located in the city, where human vanity and social fictions take root. Thus, pleasure and pain become the metaphor of the daily struggle for survival: listeners are seen as the prey of famished writers haunting their blameless victims. The dialectic between the hunter and the haunted, being inspired by Renaissance political essays, allows Leopardi to express his cosmic pessimism and existential disillusion. Cities tend to conceal these harmful subjects seeking for glory:

Yet during this process, and throughout this torture which he inflicts on his neighbour, it is evident that he experiences a sort of superhuman delight; for we see people, in the pursuit of this pleasure, sacrifice all other enjoyments, neglect food and repose, and forget everything else in life. And his delight arises from his firm belief that he excites the admiration of his hearer, and gives him pleasure; for if this were not so, it would serve his purpose equally well to declaim to the desert as to recite to his fellow-creatures. Now, as to the pleasure conferred on the auditors – I say advisedly *auditors*, not *listeners* – I have just said that every one knows by experience what *that* is; and it is not concealed even from the reciter himself; and sure am I that many would prefer grievous bodily pain to such a pleasure as that.⁴⁹

The distinction between auditor and listener triggers the distance between art and entertainment: being auditors is the condition of insensitive persons, who often tend not to grasp the meaning of what is uttered. On the contrary, being listeners implies a natural predisposition to comprehension and critical elaboration of contents. In the age of digital media, Leopardi's differentiation may provide some useful heuristic insights to probe our communicative complexity, since our media society risks exposing audiences to an overwhelming informative flood⁵⁰.

Verbal flows fuel mass mesmerizing, as Adorno and Horkheimer highlighted⁵¹. It is possible to argue that Leopardi understood the negative effects of communicative constraints, long before the rise of electric civilization. Likewise, he wished to denounce the drawbacks of illiberal education: writers' self-love is not so distant from teachers' self-consciousness stemming from their status and role.

The power of knowledge resides in its public acknowledgment and symbolic reverence. Buildings and squares become the unexpected

⁴⁹ *Thoughts*, 258-259.

⁵⁰ For an interesting reflection on our informative complexity see Gleick 2011.

⁵¹ Adorno - Horkheimer 1987 (1944).

scenes of sufferings and venues of pleasure, where the haunter and the haunted dwell. In such a merciless public sphere, even good works and well-rounded authors are despised: “Finally, even the most beautiful and valuable compositions, when recited by their authors, are enough to bore one to death”⁵².

The exposure to declamation can be fatal, despite writers’ prowess. The more learned the authors, the deadlier their verse. Leopardi’s distressed sarcasm has the power to distort daily life, since such auditory tortures are diffused and harmful. His parody of coeval interactional practices suggests a semiotic approach to public reciting as it deals with behavioural and gestural expressions.

The ancient practice of poetry reciting cannot legitimate its diffusion in modern times: Martial and Horace, who used to avoid their colleagues yearning for public attention, attest the diffusion of such practice in Rome⁵³. And Virgil’s reading of his masterpiece is likely to have annoyed his listeners, thus confirming that even the most refined works can mortally bore: “which reminds me of the opinion of a learned friend of mine, who said that if it be true that the empress Octavia fainted away while Virgil was reading to her the sixth canto of his *Aeneid*, the probability is that her swoon was caused, not by the poet’s pathetic allusion to the fate of her son Marcellus, as is commonly alleged, but by sheer weariness of the reading”⁵⁴.

Public recitations can be considered more than a common habit. As they appeared in Rome, they were the only way to promote literary engagement and share narrative representations. Nevertheless, it could “bore one to death”. Nowadays – Leopardi assumes – poetry has become an old-fashioned product. This is why listeners should be considered as a professional category deserving a fair salary. Far from being a sarcastic provocation, Leopardi’s proposal points not only to his concern for cultural decline, but also to his dislike of academic stances. Once again he reminds his reader that the number of writers exceeds that of listeners:

Nowadays, however, matters have come to such a pass that the supply of listeners, even on compulsion, no longer keeps pace with the demands of reciters; and in these circumstances certain ingenious friends of mine have given their serious attention to the subject, and, being persuaded that the recitation by authors of their own compositions is one of the most imperious needs of

⁵² *Thoughts*, 259.

⁵³ Eshleman 2012.

⁵⁴ *Thoughts*, 259.

human nature, they have pondered on a scheme calculated not only to satisfy it, but also to direct its gratification, like that of other general public needs, to the promotion of the benefit of individuals.⁵⁵

Public need and human benefit are social requirements to be pursued so as to satisfy writers' and thinkers' self-love. The latter has reduced the literary sphere into "a social scourge, a public calamity and a new terror to life". Leopardi's sarcasm is the reaction to this communicative decay being spawned by urban gathering. Is reciting a public need? Is gratification an existential pressure? Living in the city entails the respect of rigid behavioural rules. The academy of listening should belong to the sphere of poetical inventions capable of reversing social stereotypes: in the foreground is the alleged intellectual supremacy of academics. Leopardi derides them in the *Competition of the Academy of Sillographs*. Listeners should be rewarded for their sufferance and revenged for their passive role in the public sphere:

For this purpose they are about to open a sort of Academy or Athenaeum of Listening, where, at specified hours, they, or persons employed by them, will listen to any writer desirous of reciting his compositions. For this service there will be a fixed tariff of charges; thus, for listening to prose, one crown for the first hour, two crowns for the second, four for the third, eight crowns for the fourth hour, and so on, increasing by arithmetical progression. For listening to poetry, these charges will be doubled. If at any time the reciter should wish to read any particular passage a second time, as often happens, he will be charged one *lira* extra for each line so repeated. If, in the course of any reading, any of the listeners should fall asleep, he will forfeit to the reader one-third of the fee falling due to be paid him. To provide for the possible case of convulsions, synopes, or other such accesses overtaking any listener or reciter, the institution will be furnished with appropriate essences and medicines, which will be dispensed without extra charge.⁵⁶

The more serious the risks of physical collapse, the higher the listeners' salary should be. The proportion between exposure and collateral effects is an amazing insight, through which Leopardi makes fun of one of the most common literary habits of his time. Listening to reciting authors is a "service" requiring a particular University training of well-prepared people capable of bearing the torture of public reciting. Fixed tariffs should be paid to manage a job allegedly leading men to death, "convulsions" or "synopes". The availability of free medicine and drugs emphasizes the

⁵⁵ *Thoughts*, 260-261.

⁵⁶ *Thoughts*, 260-261.

coercive dimension of this academy, almost appearing as a satiric prototype of a total institution.

Knowledge can no longer be considered an amusement. It may be a frivolous experience causing suffering and misery. The athenaeum of listening should be fuelled by the human desire of approval, especially when self-love inspires poems and poetry. Leopardi inherits Pope's ironic mindset involving academic institutions. Since self-gratification has become one of the "most imperious needs of human nature", the athenaeum of listening should aim at institutionalizing such an annoying habit, so as to make listeners a professional category: "In this way, the ear, which has hitherto been an unproductive organ, will become a source of direct profit to its owner, and a new path will be opened up to industry, to the increase of the public wealth"⁵⁷.

3. "I AM NOT AN ACADEMICIAN": THE RISK OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATING

I can tell you nothing new about me, except that on Easter Monday evening I recited at the Casino of the Academy of Felsinei, in the presence of the Legate and the cream of the Bononia nobles, both males and females; I had been previously invited by the Secretary himself on behalf of the academy, since I am not an academician; this is not a common thing. They told me that my verses were very impressive, and that everybody, men and women, want to read them.⁵⁸

This is what Leopardi wrote some days after his performance at the Academy of Felsinei in Bologna (Easter Monday 1826), where he had been invited to recite his poem, *To Count Charles Pepoli*. Despite his enthusiasm, the reading did not apparently excite the audience, which seemingly did not expect the gloomy pessimism inspiring his verses. On that occasion, the poet realized all the difficulties featuring the public sharing of personal emotions. He who used to scold reciters for their need for gratification had already undergone public reciting and already discovered the risks inherent in publicly sharing interior complexity.

"I am not an academician": this axiom appears to be slightly regretful. That performance revealed the difficulties concealed in public communication within official cultural institutions governed by intellectual etiquette.

⁵⁷ *Thoughts*, 261.

⁵⁸ Letter to Carlo Leopardi, 4 April 1826; my translation.

This is what happens in urban environments, where intrigues and falsity abound. Academic contexts make no exception: Leopardi's disdain for human frauds grows stronger in Florence, where the attendance at the "Gabinetto Vieusseux" displays the envy and competition harming intellectual relationships⁵⁹.

Academies are power institutions reflecting a society that is judged "by the daily light of the gazettes". The bittersweet irony inspiring the *Palinodia to the Marquis Gino Capponi* sheds light on Leopardi's emotional disentanglement, also nourished by his unsuccessful attempts to join academic environments. The *Palinodia* was written in Naples in 1835, when his relationships with his Tuscans friends were a distant thought⁶⁰:

O minds, O wisdom, insight marvellous
Of this our passing age! And what profound
Philosophy, what lessons deep, O Gino,
In matters more sublime and recondite,
This century of thine and mine will teach
To those that follow! With what constancy,
What yesterday it scorned, upon its knees
To-day it worships, and will overthrow
To-morrow, merely to pick up again
The fragments, to the idol thus restored,
To offer incense on the following day!
How estimable, how inspiring, too,
This unanimity of thought, not of
The age alone, but of each passing year!
How carefully should we, when we our thought
With this compare, however different
From that of next year it may be, at least
Appearance of diversity avoid!
What giant strides, compared with those of old,
Our century in wisdom's school has made!⁶¹

Echoing the scepticism inspiring many of his *Moral Essays* (not appreciated by the "Gabinetto Vieusseux" and then banned by the Holy Office), Leopardi laughs about the uncertainties supported by philosophers, professors and journalists⁶². Their optimism collides with the mortal nature of human beings, whose destiny is to accept, sooner or later, the merciful

⁵⁹ On Vieusseux's cultural influence see Melosi 2013.

⁶⁰ On Leopardi's stay in Naples see Landi 2012, 25-61.

⁶¹ *Palinodia to the Marquis Gino Capponi*, vv. 208-226. Leopardi 2006 (1887).

⁶² On Leopardi's social skepticism see, among the others, Cordero 2011.

course of fate. The juxtaposition between ancient and modern times breeds a deep feeling of disillusion, both collective and individual⁶³.

Communications comply with the dramaturgic needs of an increasingly complex society, in which knowledge and art are self-gratification tools⁶⁴. This is what Leopardi highlights in one his later poems, *The New Believers*, providing us with an amazing portrayal of Neapolitan daily life, where gastronomic hedonism and intellectual stereotypes triumph⁶⁵. Among these he includes the mortal scourge caused by the “voices of those who know, / and teach others within the boundaries / that the Liri and a double sea wash upon”⁶⁶. He can hear the singing voice of the “valiant Elpidius” who boasts about his art. Thus he can mesmerize Galerio, the errand boy deprived of Venus’ delights:

Forever excluded: and content and pious,
he praises daylight, human destiny and the Lord.
And he sings, and he fills the rooms and courts
with harmony. Thus
his delight is the detriment of others, leading to death.
Today, he follows the footprints of his duke
and as he approaches me lightning burst out
from his pure breast whose mentor mesmerizes.
The beauty of Italy, the beauty of the world,
years of happiness,
sweet mortal condition! Another screams and coughs
like the one who speaks in his dreams;
as horrendous poison had already
made its way through
his bones and veins; and it will always be
crawling as it becomes one with Mercury.⁶⁷

The image of Galerio extracting poetical lightning from his “pure breast” is Leopardi’s ironic reaction to the journalistic fever afflicting his own age, in which inaccuracy, superficiality and mediocrity have become the best requirements to be successful. Furthermore, Elpidius’ influence is the metaphor of the negative effects spawned by overestimated teachers, whose only aim is to pursue their own vanity. The athenaeum of listening should

⁶³ On Leopardi’s philosophical modernity see Severino 2004; Donà 2014.

⁶⁴ Morcellini 2018.

⁶⁵ On this topic see Croce 2006 (1933).

⁶⁶ *The New Believers*, vv. 28-30; my translation.

⁶⁷ *The New Believers*, vv. 55-69; my translation.

be supplied with professional listeners capable of managing such flaunting poets, whose ambition to recite affords them self-gratification and leads the others to death.

Because of his academic frustrations, Leopardi allows himself to satirize the intellectual poses of his age, thus revealing what happens behind the stage scenes of academic life, dragged back by envy and power struggles. This is one of the several features of urban life where social dynamics are usually inspired by the acknowledgment of statuses and roles. Those who speak to audiences have a further communicative influence provided by the power of shared words. This kind of power gains a political and educational dimension, especially when the printing industry and industrialization are about to overwhelm the lyric power of poetry⁶⁸.

This is why public reciting has to be considered an obsolete legacy and a parodying practice. Leopardi suggests avoiding this “mortal scourge”. One of the possible solutions to this decline might be the transformation of academies into powerless institutions, as in the case of the Academy of Sillographs, lacking the money needed to reward the winners:

The Academy decrees that the cost of these prizes must be defrayed with what was discovered in the satchel of Diogenes, late Secretary of this Academy, or by means of one of the three golden asses that belonged to the three Sillographic Academicians, Apuleius, Firenzuola, and Macchiavelli; all which property passed to the Sillographists by will of the deceased, as may be read in the Chronicles of the Academy.⁶⁹

Firenzuola translated Apuleius’ novel and Machiavelli wrote an unfinished *Golden Ass*: the three asses are the ironic metaphor of any dusty form of cultural practice. Only disillusion and sarcasm are suitable to such an intellectual challenge. This parodied knowledge is one of the most significant features of urban living, featured by self-gratification: Leopardi knowingly emphasizes the educational insight stressing the anti-myth of the athenaeum of listening, long before the rise of digitalized teaching. In the background is the propagation of new forms of coercive interactions between auditors and reciters characterizing the age of connected risks⁷⁰.

⁶⁸ See Negri 2015 (1987).

⁶⁹ *Prize Competition of the Academy of Sillographs*, 27.

⁷⁰ Echoing Max Weber’s *Science as a Vocation*, Hannah Arendt (1998, 278) dwelled on the reification of knowledge within modern academies: “The learned societies and Royal Academies became the morally influential centers where scientists were organized to find ways and means by which nature could be trapped by experiments and instruments so that she would be forced to yield her secrets. And this gigantic task, to which no single man

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but only the collective effort of the best minds of mankind could possibly be adequate, prescribed the rules of behavior of the new standards of judgment. [...] Theory became hypothesis, and the success of the hypothesis became truth. This all-important standard for success, however, does not depend upon practical considerations or the technical development which may or may not accompany specific scientific discoveries. The criterion of success is inherent in the very essence and progress of modern science quite apart from its applicability”.

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