



THE FORM OF THE PARADOX: GIACOMO LEOPARDI AS AN EARLY GERMAN ROMANTIC THINKER



A FORMA DO PARADOXO: GIACOMO LEOPARDI COMO PENSADOR PRIMEIRO-ROMÂNTICO

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Abstract

In this paper we aim to approach Giacomo Leopardi's theory of imagination, one of the keystones of the theory of literature developed in the *Zibaldone di pensieri* (2016), by reading it through the lens of early German romantic philosophy. The effort to think poetry, in the *Zibaldone*, is responsible for fascinating speculations which, according to recent studies, such as Dido (2020), Givone (2003), Garcia (2019), mark the limits of the materialistic nihilism as an hermeneutical paradigm. Therefore, by reading three different passages of the *Zibaldone di pensieri* (2016), we analyze how the problem of imagination is structurally connected with those of the final cause and of *Geist*. This exegetical step then leads us to read the three passages by comparing them with Friedrich Schlegel's (1973) notions of *Witz* and *Ironie*, as well as with Kant's (1974) remarks on determinative and reflective judgment. We conclude that Leopardi's speculation on imagination could be better understood if read from the post-Kantian and early German romantic perspective, a tradition with which the Leopardian theory of literature has been hitherto rarely compared.

Resumo

Neste artigo objetivamos apreciar a teoria da imaginação desenvolvida por Giacomo Leopardi no **Zibaldone di pensieri** (2016), lendo-a pelo prisma do pensamento primeiro-romântico alemão. O esforço por pensar a poesia, no *Zibaldone*, é responsável por fascinantes especulações que, conforme estudos recentes, como os de Dido (2020), Givone (2003), Garcia (2019), sublinham os limites da leitura materialista-niilista como um paradigma hermenêutico, representada sobretudo por Emanuele Severino (2005, 2006). Portanto, elegendo três significativas entradas do **Zibaldone di Pensieri**, avançamos a hipótese de que o problema da imaginação está estruturalmente conectado com os conceitos de causa final e de *Geist*. Tal passo exegético leva-nos a ler cada passagem cotejando-as com as noções de *Witz* e *Ironie*, desenvolvidas por Friedrich Schlegel (1973), bem como com as especulações de Kant (1974) sobre os juízos determinante e reflexivo. Concluímos que a teoria leopardiana sobre a imaginação, uma das pedras de toque de sua teoria da literatura, pode ser melhor compreendida se lida desde uma perspectiva pós-kantiana e primeiro-romântica, uma tradição com que a teoria literária de Leopardi tem sido raramente comparada.

Entradas para indexação

KEYWORDS: Giacomo Leopardi; Early German Romanticism; Imagination; Poetry

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Giacomo Leopardi; Primeiro-romantismo alemão; Imaginação; Poesia

Texto integral

1 INTRODUCTION: POETRY AND METAPHYSICS, LEOPARDI AND EARLY GERMAN ROMANTICISM

One of the main concerns of Giacomo Leopardi, in the **Zibaldone di Pensieri** (2016), is related with what we may call the metaphysical meaning of poetry. If we - as I will try to show in detail below - abstract from the major hermeneutic tradition with which the **Zibaldone** has been hitherto read, namely the so called materialistic nihilism, we may realize that the great philosophical motive of Leopardi's speculations resides in the mystery of which poetry is the greatest and most complex expression. Recent studies, such as those of Garcia (2019), Dudo (2020), Herold (2017), and Givone (2003) point out the deep interconnections between Leopardi's theory of poetry and his ontology, so as to conclude that, in the Italian poet, the speculations on poetic experience are at the same time reflections on Being as Being. From those remarks, at least two interesting consequences can be drawn: first, the hermeneutical *topos* of materialistic nihilism becomes more and more unsustainable, since it is unable to deal with poetic experience, the very core of Leopardi's thinking; secondly, it suggests that, in despite of all the hatred the Italian philosopher had towards German philosophy, he seems to share the same metaphysical preoccupations which, since Kant, dominate German philosophy, problems out of which the so called *Frühromantik* developed an entire theory of literature with a metaphysical nature.

Thus, the two consequences, apparently unrelated, may indeed indicate that the paradigm¹ so far used to read Leopardi has become insufficient to cope with some aspects of his thinking, leaving blind spots in the hermeneutical enterprise related with the exegesis of the **Zibaldone di pensieri**. The new analytical perspective, hinted at by the new researches we have quoted, suggest that it is only by changing the philosophical tradition, from which we approach Leopardi's thought, that we may fully understand those unsolved puzzles that, through the lens of the nihilistic paradigm, present themselves as anomalies². One of the major claims we will do here lies in the suggestion that, if read from the perspective of post-kantian philosophy, specially from early german romanticism, Leopardi's theory of poetry, such as developed in the **Zibaldone di pensieri**, may reveal itself as an authentic metaphysics, whose point of depart *and* of arrival is the reflection on poetry. It turns out that this movement of thought, which departs from poetry to arrive at it once more with all the weight of philosophical reflection, is the very structure found in Schlegel's and Novalis writings. Early german romanticism, as it has been recuperated by scholars such as Manfred Frank (1989, 1997), Andrew Bowie (1997, 2003), Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean Luc-Nancy (1978), constitutes a single perspective on the post-kantian problems, one which takes the reflection on poetry and sees it as the very heights of speculative thinking.

Therefore, we aim in this paper to approach this new hermeneutical perspective from one selected problem: that of imagination and genius³. Leopardi's reflections on imagination, in the **Zibaldone di pensieri**, are one of the most interesting exegetical puzzles, which are left in the dark by the majority of nihilistic inspired works. The methodological and analytical path we have chosen for the present article is thus the following: we will analyze three passages of the **Zibaldone di pensieri**, each of which introduce one of the three main concepts we will handle in this paper, that of *imagination/genius*, that of *the final cause*, and finally that of *Geist*. Our reasoning here is that the problem of imagination introduces, in kantian fashion, that of *the final cause*, that is, of *teleological judgment*, which in turn is

¹ We are here referring to Kuhn's (2012) notion of paradigms and paradigmatic shifts. One fascinating example of the use of such a notion in the human sciences is given by Giovanni Reale 's interpretation of Plato, in **Per una nuova interpretazione di Platone** (2010). There, Reale shows how the paradigm, in the human sciences, is constituted by hermeneutical keys which dictate the problems worth pursuing and the exegetical concepts to be used for solving puzzles. Our point here is that the materialistic nihilism, understood as a paradigm, has dictated hitherto the very tradition of thought with which Leopardi is associated - namely that of Enlightenment anthropology, and as prove we may quote the works of Prete (2021) and Donà (2013), not to mention the older readings of Rensi (2018), Tilgher (2018), Luporini (2006) and de Sanctis (1983). Even Severino's work, one of the most respected and complex interpretations of Leopardi's thought, still relies on this vision of a Leopardi who, although criticizing Enlightenment's optimism, is still bound to its anthropology. Our main claim is that, if we change from the english-french tradition of Enlightenment's thinkers and focus on the german post-kantian tradition, a new profile of Leopardi's philosophy may arise, one whose main source is the reflection on poetry and literature.

² To give two examples as support for this claim: Givone (2003) explicitly mentions the necessity of abandoning the nihilistic perspective and adopting an meontological one, from which Leopardi's reflections on Nothingness would be understood within a richer framework, in which Nothing is a source of productivity deeply related with Being. The same claim is to be found in Dudo (2020).

³ Those problems are structurally related in such a way that mentioning one of them already entails the consideration of the other. Therefore, whenever we speak of imagination, we thereby imply the concept of genius - which, as we will see, is the most radical expression of subjectivity understood as *Geist*.

related with that of *Geist*. In order to understand those concepts in the **Zibaldone** we propose to translate them into romantic language: thus we read the passage on imagination linking it with Schlegel's fragments on *Witz* and *Ironie*, so as to grasp them in their inner connections with the notion of *Geist* and teleological judgment. By analyzing those passages from the post-kantian framework, we aim to open new perspectives on Leopardi's theory of poetry, of which the *imagination* and the *genius* are one of the most important concepts. At the same time, we propose that leopardian speculation on poetry are not to be separated from his metaphysics, which in its turn could be better apprehended when we set aside nihilistic materialism as an hermeneutical key and approach leopardian thinking, instead, from the great post-kantian tradition of german early romantic philosophy.

2 THE MATERIALISTIC NIHILISM AND ITS BLIND SPOTS: THE MYSTERY OF IMAGINATION.

One of the most repeated ideas about Giacomo Leopardi's thought can be brought under the label of the so-called materialistic nihilism, which has been a major hermeneutic theme since the first interpretations of Tilgher (2018) and Rensi (2018). Even when recognized by intellectuals as a thinker, Leopardi was in general seen as an anti-metaphysician, some sort of inheritor of the anthropology developed by Enlightenment's thinkers - therefore as a materialist, in the manner of a D'Holbach or Helvetius, and as an atheist. This opinion has received, as time went by, the support of important intellectuals, among which Emanuele Severino (2005, 2006), Antonio Prete (2021), Massimo Donà (2013), who have reaffirmed the materialistic and nihilistic nature of Leopardi's thought. Above all Emanuele Severino, whose major works on Leopardi are responsible for one of the finest readings the poet has yet received, insists on this hermeneutic key, according to which Leopardi attains the heights of Western thought, but precisely by doing this reveals the contradictory structure of the very western thinking - what Severino calls the yes being the no and the thing being a no-thing, that is, Nothing:

Non esiste nulla di eterno. Questa inevitabile conclusione è il centro della filosofia e della cultura contemporanea. Nella storia dell'Occidente, Leopardi è il primo a trarla in modo pienamente consapevole. Egli non è più pessimista di Platone, dei Padri della Chiesa, di Leibniz o di Hegel: è solo più coerente - estremamente coerente - all'essenza, alla matrice, alla fede fondamentale dell'Occidente. Se l'essente, nel divenire, è in rapporto al nulla, l'essente non può salvarsi dal nulla. Leopardi per primo mostra *l'inevitabilità di questa conseguenza* e il fallimento di ogni salvezza. (SEVERINO, 2005, p. 343)

Severino's reading thus reaffirms a topic which, as such, is quite old, dating at least since Tilgher (2018), Rensi (2018) and, although with a negative judgment, from Benedetto Croce (1996) himself. If we were to resume the thesis to its basic elements, the argument would run as follows: Leopardi, in his later thought, affirms the principle of reality as the very denial of the principle of contradiction, which means that, reality being ungrounded, there is no further reason which could give existence a meaning capable of justifying the sorrow of individual beings. The absence of such a reason is precisely what renders existence mere randomness, in which the pain of beings - in the heideggerian sense of *Seiende*⁴ - is blind, because ungrounded, and yet certain, since each *Seiende* brings within itself its own destruction and its own anguish. In Leopardi's words:

L'uomo (e così gli altri animali) non nasce per goder della vita, ma solo per perpetuare la vita, per comunicarla ad altri che gli succedano, per conservarla. Né esso, né la vita, né oggetto alcuno di questo mondo è propriamente per lui, ma al contrario esso è tutto per la vita. - Spaventevole, ma vera proposizione e conchiusione di tutta la metafisica. L'esistenza non è per l'esistente, non ha per suo fine l'esistente, né il bene dell'esistente; se anche egli vi prova alcun bene, ciò è un puro caso: l'esistente è per l'esistenza, tutto per l'esistenza, questa è il suo puro fine reale. (Z. 4168)⁵

The pure and blind will of an existence which wills nothing but itself implies an impossible happiness for *Seiende* whose only objective here is to feel pleasure. This, however, is undermined by the very contradictory structure of desire: each *Seiende* desires something which will never achieve, and this precisely because it exists not for its own sake, but for the perpetuation of existence as such. From this perspective, to exist is to suffer, since life is nothing but death in a disguised form: as Leopardi puts it, each affirmation of possible happiness is always overcome by sorrow, each yes being already a no. Thus, Leopardi's famous theory of pleasure is deeply articulated with his denial of the principle of non-contradiction - that is, with his affirmation that existence is, in itself, a contradiction - since every being is

⁴ From now on, we will use the german term *Seiende* when we refer to beings as *ens*, in order to avoid the ontological confusion to which the English language gives rise, since it has no different words for Being and beings. Therefore, for reasons of style and to avoid repetition, we will use *Seiende* for individual beings and Being for *Sein*, maintaining thus the ontological difference which is so important in Leopardi's thought on poetry.

⁵ We follow the convention among leopardianists and quote the *Zibaldone* by mentioning its entrances. The formula used is the following: *Z. Number of Zibaldone's entrance*. The following translations of the *Zibaldone di pensieri* were taken from the Farrar, Strauss and Giroux english edition of the **Zibaldone** (2013). "Man (and likewise the other animals) is not born to enjoy life, but only to perpetuate life, to communicate it to others who come after him, in order to preserve it. Neither he himself, nor life, nor anything in this world is properly for him, on the contrary his entire being is for life. —A terrifying, but a true proposition and conclusion of all metaphysics. Existence is not for the existent being, does not have for its end the existent being, nor the good of the existent being; if there is any experience of good, that is purely by chance: the existent being is for existence, entirely for existence, this is its only real end."

destined to suffer. As Leopardi writes: "la felicità (la quale di natura sua non potrebb'essere altro che un bene ossia un piacere infinito) sia di sua natura impossibile. Gli enti sensibili sono per natura enti souffrants, una parte essenzialmente souffrante dello universo. (Z. 4137).

The impossibility of articulating a final cause which would justify the meaning of pain draws each *Seiende* into an ocean of blind sufferance, so that the very dogma of Enlightenment materialism and optimism, whose belief in progress could only be understood from the point of view of the *species*, is undermined and, as it were, set upside down. Leopardi is here - as he will always be, specially when he thinks on poetry - concerned with the individual face of each *Seiende*, and tries therefore to conceive their existence by avoiding the Enlightenment's denial of sufferance through postulation of a higher good of the species:

La natura tutta, e l'ordine eterno delle cose non è in alcun modo diretto alla felicità degli esseri sensibili o degli animali. Esso vi è anzi contrario. Non vi è neppur diretta la natura loro propria e l'ordine eterno del loro essere. Gli enti sensibili sono per natura enti *souffrants*, una parte essenzialmente *souffrante* dello universo. Poiché essi esistono e le loro specie si perpetuano, convien dire che essi siano un anello necessario alla gran catena degli esseri, e all'ordine e alla esistenza di questo tale universo, al quale sia utile il loro danno, poiché la loro esistenza è un danno per loro, essendo essenzialmente una *souffrance*. (Z. 4133)⁶

If existence only exists for its own sake, then the final cause, which would justify each single pain, is destroyed from within: existence is blind and wants nothing but its own willing. We should, however, avoid the easy link with Schopenhauer, something to which De Sanctis himself called attention a century ago: Leopardi's thought is more subtle and rather closer to Schelling's speculation on God and freedom, in the **Freiheitsschrift** (2021) and in **Die Weltalter** (1983), than to Schopenhauer metaphysics of Will - *and this precisely because of the importance Leopardi accords to poetic experience*. In it Leopardi does not see, as Severino (2005) argues, the lyric affirmation of his nihilistic premises, which would indeed make of him an Italian Schopenhauer, since in Schopenhauer's aesthetics art has a cognitive power because it formulates in sensitive forms the truth achieved by philosophy through concepts - almost as an *ancilla philosophiae*. On the contrary, Leopardi sees in poetry the very enigma of beauty, that is, of some pure gratuity which saves *Seiende* by recognising their pure individual form, independent of their function in the complex network of existence-existing-for-its-own-sake (*la gran catena degli*

⁶ "The whole of nature, and the eternal order of things is not aimed in any way at all at the happiness of sensitive beings and animals. In fact it is quite the opposite. Nor is their own nature and the eternal order of their being aimed at it. Sensitive beings are naturally souffrants [suffering], a part of the universe that is essentially souffrante.¹ Since they do exist and their species perpetuate themselves, it must be said that they are a necessary link in the great chain of beings, and in the order and the existence of this universe as it is, to which their harm is useful, since their existence is harmful to them, being essentially a souffrance."

esseri). Beauty, as pure gratuity, is an ethical commitment which undermines existence's blind will, and thus puts itself as a metaphysical problem to be understood from a wider and deeper perspective than a mere nihilistic materialism. One way to arrive at this interesting problem is to read the passages in which Leopardi deals with *l'immaginazione*, for it is precisely imagination which offers the key to apprehending the concepts of genius and of poetry. We begin to see, here, how the hermeneutical *topos* of the materialistic nihilism shows its limits: it is when we consider the enigma of poetry, whose condition of possibility is the imagination of the genius, that we gain access to a wider and more subtle ontological perspective, in which Being (*Sein*) ceases to be blind Will and becomes the mystery of an infinitude which is better formulated by poetry.

Thus, it seems that, even if we read cautiously the works responsible for perpetuating the hermeneutical *topos* of the materialistic nihilism, there are some blind spots which remain without explanation. To give two simple examples: Severino (2005, p. 340) recognizes the great importance the concept of the genius has for Leopardi, and indeed he stresses the relation between the genius and the force of poetry as the vision of Nothing whose force comes out of the very intensity with which reality's groundlessness is seen. But, one should ask, how is it that this strength, this *forza* arises at all, if there is nothing in reality beyond matter and its contradictions? The genius, as such, supposes a theory of subjectivity in which desire and pleasure are not to be thought in hedonistic and materialistic terms as the egoistic needs of individual beings - on the contrary, the genius is a miracle, because in his conscience the souffrance of beings is articulated - so that we may speak here of pure gratuity, of *gratias* and of *caritas*, therefore of an ethical commitment which, as such, goes beyond mere matter. So even if we give the *topos* of materialistic nihilism some credit, it presents itself as insufficient within the very texts in which it is formulated.

Now, in the **Zibaldone di Pensieri** this insufficiency comes to sight with an undeniable force. We will now advance our hypothesis from two main points, deeply intertwined: by reading two different passages of the **Zibaldone**, we will try to show that there is a structural relation between *imagination*, *subjectivity* and *ethical commitment*. Our main point here concerns the notion of subjectivity as a non-conceptual activity, which cannot be brought under a concept and, thus, which is not reducible to analytical reason. This notion of subjectivity, we claim, is better described by the discussions concerning imagination: because imagination is a *force* responsible for finding rapports which analytical reason is unable to see, it is itself something which transcends analysis, and thus presents itself as a necessary riddle or enigma - a metaphor of subjectivity. The structure of subjectivity, such as it is presented and conceived by Leopardi, is not at least close to the materialistic anthropology of Enlightenment thinkers, being rather closer to the post-kantian concept of *Geist*, as it was developed above all in the early romantic speculation and in Schellings middle philosophy. Our final step will consist, thus, in trying to apprehend Leopardi's reflections on imagination as structurally identical with those developed by early german romantics, specially Friedrich Schlegel. We may thereby see how the concepts of imagination/genius, teleological judgment and *Geist* bild together one of the thresholds that give us access to leopardian metaphysics, whose core lies in the mystery of poetic experience.

3 IMAGINATION, SUBJECTIVITY, GENIUS: FROM KANT TO SCHLEGEL AND LEOPARDI.

One of the main points of post-kantian speculation is that the Absolute cannot be articulated by concepts of analytical reason⁷, that is, by what this tradition of german thought called, in Kant's aftermath, *Verstand*. Be it with Fichte, for whom the Absolute was to be found in the subject's absolute act of self-positing, be it with the young Schelling (1983), who tried to articulate the Absolute in the *Indifferenzpunkt*, or with Hegel, whose **Phenomenology of Spirit** presented *Geist* in its movement of self-articulation through the work of the negative, the point is that analytical reason is unable to apprehend what is most important for philosophy: its very absolute grounding point. Now, one of the trademarks of early german romantic metaphysics is the claim that the Absolute, being non-conceptual, is to be better articulated in the very experiences in which the concept plays not the largest role, so that aesthetic experience, in which we observe a free play of faculties that never stops in a final conceptual determination, offers itself as the privileged way to access the Absolute, in its paradoxical manner of appearing and disappearing. As Manfred Frank (1989) argued, Schlegel and Novalis realize that poetry is not some sort of irrational state of ecstasy, but an experience which forces reason to go beyond itself and to apprehend, through the formal configuration of its appearing⁸, its non-conceptual ground. Thus, the romantics drew the consequences which were already foreseen by Kant (1974) in his **Kritik der Urteilskraft**, for whom aesthetic judgment forms a specific form of the reflective judgment, being characterized by its non-conceptual nature: whereas teleological judgment is at the service of natural science and helps us to understand the structure of biological organisms by postulating a final cause that, as such, cannot be demonstrated, aesthetic judgment only gives us a promise of teleology, not however for the sake of scientific progress, but for our own moral and free nature. The symbolic infinitude of the symbol is seen by Kant as an expression of our noumenal freedom, which can only appear in time through the

⁷ I am, of course, synthesizing in one phrase a rather complex and long debate. I refer to the works of Manfred Frank (1989, 1997), Andrew Bowie (1997, 2003), Eagleton (2003), where it is possible to find a detailed description of the problem, from a historical as well as a systematic point of view.

⁸ By the "formal configuration of its appearing" we make reference to a possible definition of aesthetic form we have proposed in recent works. By it we describe the fact that aesthetic form is something which exists necessarily in time (thus the use of appearing as the translation of the greek *phainomenon* - that which appears in time) and, as such, has its cognitive force not on the conceptual value of the words employed, but on the specific configuration taken by the combination of the words. From this perspective, aesthetic form subverts the platonic notion of *eidos*, defined as an eternal form seized by reason, and roots it in time. Aesthetic form, thus, is different from conceptual form, for the latter receives its epistemic value from the stable relation it maintains with the other concepts of a conceptual system, whereas the former draws its force from the individual and temporal configuration established by a *unique* - in the sense of the german word *ehemalig* - appearance. As a consequence, we may say that conceptual form is a pure determination, while aesthetic form is the undetermining determination of the undeterminable. Hence its speculative and ontological power.

infinite of the symbol. This also means that the aesthetic object is a product of a free activity, that is, one that cannot be brought under previous rules - if it were to be determined by already existing rules, it would cease to be free and, thus, would acquire the nature of the determining judgment, no longer being a reflective one. Therefore, aesthetic judgment structurally implies the strong notion of *productive imagination*, as Larthomas (1994) and Bowie (2003) have argued. Furthermore, it becomes more visible in the notion of *genius*, whose free productivity Kant sees as unconscious, in the sense that it cannot be conceptualized, for this would entail its being no longer free. Thus, as Frank (1989) and several others argued, Kant needs to posit imagination as productive and, by token, to conceive the genius as its necessary correlate. This will be the very source from which Schlegel draws his reflections on poetry, genius and imagination: the speculative figure of romantic irony is the most refined outcome of such reasonings, and it is not in vain that we read Schlegel saying that irony is the sense for the Absolute in its paradoxical coming-forth-while-disappearing: *Ironie ist gleichsam die επιδείξις der Unendlichkeit, der Universalität, vom Sinn fürs Weltall*⁹ (KA XVIII 128).

Well, the very same speculative structure is to be found in Leopardi's reflections on imagination. Precisely as Kant and Schlegel did, the Italian philosopher links the problem of *imagination* with that of the *final cause*, so as to conclude that both form the core of subjectivity, for none of them are to be articulated by analytical reason, which works only through the principle of sufficient reason (Kant's *Verstand*). There is, thus, three passages from the *Zibaldone*, in which we can see this reasoning develop until it reaches its peak in the speculation on the idea of subjectivity as *Geist*. The first passage treats the problem of imagination as the condition of possibility for the authentic poetic style; the second deals with the final cause; finally, the third combines the two previous steps into a speculation on *Geist*. Let us consult Leopardi:

Immaginazione continuamente fresca ed operante si richiede a poter *saisir* i rapporti, le affinità, le somiglianze o vere, o apparenti, poetiche. degli oggetti e delle cose tra loro, o a scoprire questi rapporti, o ad inventarli, cose che bisogna continuamente fare volendo parlar metafisico e figurato, e che queste metafore e figure e questo parlare abbiano del nuovo e originale e del proprio dell'autore. Lascio le similitudini: una metafora nuova che si contenga pure in una parola sola, ha bisogno dell'immaginazione e invenzione che ho detto. Or di queste metafore e figure ec. ne dev'esser composto tutto lo stile e tutta l'espressione de' concetti del poeta. Continua immaginazione, sempre viva, sempre rappresentante le cose agli occhi del poeta, e mostrantegliele come presenti, si richiede a poter significare le cose o le azioni o le idee ec. per mezzo di una o due circostanze o qualità o parti di esse le più minute, le più sfuggevoli, le meno notate, le meno solite ad essere espresse dagli altri poeti, o ad esser prese per rappresentare tutta l'immagine, le più efficaci ed atte o per se, o per questa stessa

⁹ "Irony is the presentation of Infinity, of Universality, it is the perception for the Whole of the World". All translations from Schlegel are henceforth mine.

novità o insolitezza di esser notate o espresse, o della loro. Or non si possono adoperar tali mezzi, né produr tali effetti (che con altri mezzi nello stile non si ottengono) senza una continua e non mai interrotta azione, vivacità e freschezza d'immaginazione. E sempre ch'essa langue, langue lo stile, sia pure immaginosissima e poetichissima l'invenzione e la qualità delle cose in esso trattate ed espresse. (Z. 3717)¹⁰

We see here how imagination is the very condition of possibility of poetry and of what Leopardi calls style: there is only style when the imaginative activity, a synthetic force capable of apprehending unity within multiplicity, is embodied in the language, so as to make it burn, *ardire*, as Leopardi expresses himself - *l'ardire di un parlar pelegrino*¹¹. There are no given rules, whose obeisance would render possible the experience of poetry: the genius is precisely he who comes up with something which, before him, existed not - only in his burning eyes are we to see the yet unseen, for the metaphor unconceals the invisible hidden in the visibility of things. We see here how Leopardi is close to Schlegel's notion of *Witz* as the combinatory activity by which invisible rapports are made visible in the sudden appearance of a metaphor whose constitution cannot be foreseen, since the act by which it is constituted eludes all concepts. We hint at such a notion in famous fragments, such as 71 of *Ideen: Nur diejenige Verworrenheit ist ein Chaos, aus der eine Welt*

¹⁰ "Imagination which is continually fresh and at work is needed to be able to saisir [grasp] the links, the affinities, the similarities, etc. etc., either real, or apparent, poetic, etc., of objects and things between themselves, or to discover these links, or to [3718] invent them, etc.,¹ and this must be done continually if one wishes to talk metaphorically and figuratively, and to ensure that these metaphors and figures and this way of talking have aspects that are new and original and that are proper to their author. I leave aside similes: a new metaphor which is contained even just in a single word has need of the imagination and invention of which I have spoken. Now from these metaphors and figures, etc., the whole style and the whole expression of the poet's concepts must be composed. Continual imagination is required—always alive, always showing things to the eyes of the poet, and showing them to him as present—in order to be able to indicate the meaning of things or actions or ideas, etc., by means of one or two circumstances or qualities or parts thereof, and these the tiniest, the most fleeting, the least note, "the least likely to be expressed by other poets or used to represent the whole image, the most effective and fitting because of this very newness or rareness of their being noted or expressed, or of their application [3719] and use, etc., the most fitting, I say, to signify the idea to be expressed, to represent it to the life, to awaken it with efficacy, etc. Now such methods cannot be adopted, nor such effects produced (for there is no other way to obtain them as far as style is concerned), without a continuous and uninterrupted activity, vivacity, and freshness of imagination. For wherever that flags, so does the style, no matter how outstandingly imaginative and poetic is the invention and the quality of things treated and expressed in that style."

¹¹ This fascinating metaphor should be the theme of another paper, for it formalizes in an illuminating manner the very difference between conceptual determination and aesthetic determination, which we articulated briefly in the previous note. The former type of determination supposes an estable network of concepts which are fixed by repeated use, so that we may speak metaphorically of a *patriotic language*: a language in which common notions are shared and taken for granted. In aesthetic determination, however, the *patriotic language* is the first step towards a *wandering language*, the language of a *parlar pelegrino*, whose force resides in the unique configuration through which the aesthetic object appears. Whereas the words used in the configuration exist before the aesthetic existence, its unique *configuration* does not, and is therefore a product of genial imagination, for it cannot be brought under previous rules, rather producing the rules by which the aesthetic object is understood.

*entspringen kann*¹², to be read side by side with the fragment 69, also from *Ideen: Ironie ist klares Bewusstsein der ewigen Agilität, des unendlich vollen Chaos*.¹³ The chaos of which Schlegel speaks is not some mystical unspeakable entity, but rather the free activity by which distant realms of reality are united in the metaphorical configuration, in the moment of *Witz*, so as to give rise to new intellections of reality. *Witz* is at the same time the name of this activity and its metaphorical description: as the lightning which unconceals, for brief moments, the hidden aspects of Being, *Witz* is the sudden appearance of the productive imagination, which is able to *scoprire questi rapporti, o ad inventarli*.

We must begin, from now on, to avoid all easy and simple notions of romanticism as a mere literary movement which establishes itself as a reaction to Enlightenment's *Entzauberung der Welt*, to quote Weber's famous term. On the contrary, early German Romantic thinking needs to be taken seriously as an attempt to build a post-Kantian metaphysics with all the rigour the Kantian transcendental criticism had established in German philosophical culture, as the works of Manfred Frank (1989, 1997), Andrew Bowie (1997, 2003) have shown. Thus, when Schlegel speaks of *Witz* he is describing, with all possible rigour, a speculative figure by which the pure and unconceptualisable energy of the subject is able to come up with unseen relations, which however *make sense*. The poetic metaphor which is the outcome of *Witz* is not a *willkürlich*, arbitrary image, for it only works if it yields common ground, intersubjective consensus. It supposes, therefore, a double speculative level: on the side of the subject, it works as a sudden light, coming from the depths of subjectivity, which links together different points of reality in a hitherto unconceived manner, but by doing so presupposes an action¹⁴ which as such cannot be conceptualised; on the side of the object, it is not merely subjective and arbitrary, since it produces *knowledge of reality*, which is testified by the intersubjective consensus it gives rise to. We only make these remarks to stress that, for us, early German Romantic thinking is to be understood as an authentic metaphysics, one with whose structure Leopardian thought has more than mere resemblances in common: indeed, we are dealing here with the same speculative pattern, and the analyses of *imagination* in both thinkers is but one of several perspectives from which we can approach this metaphysics.

The combinatory activity of *l'immaginazione*, in Leopardi as well as in Schlegel, thus provides new perspectives on reality, opening new paths and producing new conceptual rules. However, since the process by which new rules are created cannot itself be the object of previous rules for conceptual determination, we can only grasp the problem of imagination if we suppose that there is something

¹² "Only that confusion can be a chaos, from which a world emerges."

¹³ "Irony is the clear consciousness of the eternal agility of the infinite and full chaos"

¹⁴ In the sense of Fichte's *Tathandlung*, that is, of an activity by which sense is established without it itself being an object of sense, since it is its presupposition. Indeed, the problem of *Witz* could be linked to what Žižek (2007) calls *die Grundoperation des deutschen Idealismus*, and which he, in Lacanian-Hegelian fashion, sees as the constitution of the Substance as Subject. The point is that the act by which meaning is created is always-already lost, so that its constitution is necessarily a retroactive one - hence of phantasmatic nature. There never was any whole Substance, since what we call Substance is nothing but the *nachträglich* creation of a subject. The main point here is that subjectivity is not a *thing*, an *object* which could be brought under a determinative judgment, since it is the very activity by which all judgments are made possible.

within both terms of reality, subject and object, which itself transcends the principle of sufficient reason. That is why analytical reason here plays no role, for it is unable to understand that very mystery which, nevertheless, imposes itself with its fullest force in poetic experience and in poetic metaphor. This is also why only through imagination are we to grasp the final cause, that is, the purpose of the system of sufficient causes. Here we arrive at our second passage, in which Leopardi negates analytical reason (*l'intendimento* or *Verstand*) the power to seize the cause which would ground the system of sufficient causes:

Chiunque esamina la natura delle cose colla pura ragione, senz'aiutarsi dell'immaginazione né del sentimento, né dar loro alcun luogo, ch'è il procedere di molti tedeschi nella filosofia, come dire nella metafisica e nella politica, potrà ben quello che suona il vocabolo analizzare cioè risolvere e disfar la natura, ma e' non potrà mai ricomporla, voglio dire e' non potrà mai dalle sue osservazioni e dalla sua analisi tirare una grande e generale conseguenza; né stringere e condurre le dette osservazioni in un gran risultato; e facendolo, come non lasciano di farlo, s'inganneranno; e così veramente loro interviene. Io voglio anche supporre ch'egli arrivino colla loro analisi fino a scomporre e risolvere la natura ne' suoi menomi ed ultimi elementi, e ch'egli ottengano di conoscere ciascuna da se tutte le parti della natura. Ma il tutto di essa, il fine e il rapporto scambievolmente di esse parti tra loro, e di ciascuna verso il tutto, lo scopo di questo tutto, e l'intenzion vera e profonda della natura, quel ch'ella ha destinato, la cagione (lasciamo ora star l'efficiente) la cagion finale del suo essere e del suo esser tale, il perché ella abbia così disposto e così formato le sue parti, nella cognizione delle quali cose dee consistere lo scopo del filosofo, e intorno alle quali si aggirano insomma tutte le verità generali veramente grandi e importanti, queste cose, dico, è impossibile il ritrovarle (Z. 3237)¹⁵

¹⁵ "Whoever examines the nature of things using pure reason, and without the help of the imagination or feeling, or without affording either of them any scope, which is the procedure adopted by many Germans in philosophy, that is to say, in metaphysics and politics, will certainly be capable of doing what the meaning of the word to analyze involves, [3238] that is, to resolve and undo nature, but they will never be able to recombine it, I mean they will never be able to draw great or general consequences from their observations and analysis, nor will they be able to reduce them and bring them to some great and general conclusion. And in so doing, for they do not cease to do so, they will fall into error, and this is indeed what occurs. I am prepared to accept that they manage, with their analysis, to divide up and resolve nature into its smallest and least elements, and that they succeed in knowing each of the parts of nature individually.¹ But the whole of it, its end and the reciprocal relationship of these parts to one another, and of each of them to the whole, the purpose of this whole, and the true, profound intention of nature, what it has purposed, the cause, let us leave on one side for the moment the efficient cause, the final cause of its being, and of its being such as it is, the reason why it has arranged and formed its parts thus, the knowledge of which things is what the philosopher's objective must consist of and on which, in short, all truly great and important general truths are based—these things, I repeat, cannot be discovered [3239] and understood by anyone who analyzes and examines nature using reason alone."

For those who are acquainted with the post-kantian tradition the critique towards german philosophy, made in the third line, is almost incredible, for Leopardi follows, word for word, precisely the very reasoning which Kant himself, in the **Kritik der Urteilskraft** (1791), developed with his discussion of reflective judgment: the determinative judgment is unable to grasp the purpose of the natural phenomena, so that it is only in the reflective judgment that we may apprehend the unity which would render the multiplicity of phenomena its ground - its *telos*. Analytical reason cannot articulate the unifying ground of multiplicity, and therefore imagination comes up as the most suitable answer, for the imaginative activity is the expression of that unconceptualizable energy of the subject, which should correspond to the unconceptualizable ground of the object, as we stressed by analysing Schlegel's *Witz*. Let us remember that, in the first fragment we quoted, Schlegel points out that *Ironie* is the sense for the *Weltall*, the Whole of Existence, its absolute underlying final ground. There is always a double speculative level, one which marks the subject and another which marks the object. Therefore Leopardi is fully justified when he says that only by imagination can we grasp reality's final cause, for only the subjective infinitude could correspond to nature's infinitude. If this is so, then neither the subject nor the object can be thought of exclusively in terms of *matter* and, hence, are not reducible to Nothingness - on the contrary, *this reasoning introduces a mystery which, as such, demands to be seen as a productive darkness, and whose speculative level is to be found in the problem of imagination.*

But we had seen that, in Kant, productive imagination plays a crucial role in the **Kritik der Urteilskraft** (1791), since it is the possible bridge between the realms of natural phenomena and moral noumenal freedom. If we were to apprehend, through productive imagination, the final cause of existence - that is, if we could indeed produce a teleological judgment which would be at the same time a determinative judgment -, the kantian transcendental limites would be overstepped, which Kant dears not to do. What Schlegel, on the other hand, does is to overpass kantian limits and claim that imagination, indeed, gives us access to the Absolute, but this does not mean that it will be finally brought under a concept, for the nature of the Absolute eludes all possible concepts. It is, as such, infinite, and marks with its infinitude the subject and the object. Therefore, imagination gives us knowledge of reality, precisely because it implies the infinite core of the subject whose pendant is the infinite core of the object, and this precisely through the poetic metaphor, whose form assimilates the very infinitude by which subject and object are alike marked. Imagination is, thus, a metaphysical faculty, for the knowledge it produces is always knowledge of Being - a knowledge whose form is a *mimesis* of the infinitude of its object and of the subject by which it was produced.

We arrive herewith at our third and final passage of the **Zibaldone di pensieri**, which is the sequence of the second entrance we just read. Leopardi continues his thinking line and points out reason's inability to grasp the idea of life, which is the very core of beings. The passage is, as the others, quite long, but it is worth quoting it at its full length:

La natura così [that is, exclusively through analytical/sufficient reason] analizzata non differisce punto da un corpo morto. Ora supponghiamo che noi fossimo animali di specie diversa dalla

nostra, anzi di natura diversa dalla general natura degli animali che conosciamo, e nondimeno fossimo, siccome siamo, dotati d'intendimento. Se non avendo noi mai veduto né uomo alcuno né animale di quelli che realmente esistono, e niuna notizia avendone, ci fosse portato innanzi un corpo umano morto, e notomizzandolo noi giungessimo a conoscerne a una a una tutte le piú menome parti, e chimicamente decomponendolo arrivassimo a scoprirne ciascuno ultimo elemento; perciò forse potremmo noi conoscere, intendere, ritrovare, concepire qual fosse il destino, l'azione, le funzioni, le virtù, le forze ec., di ciascheduna parte d'esso corpo rispetto a se stesse, all'altre parti ed al tutto, quale lo scopo e l'oggetto di quella disposizione e di quel tal ordine che in esse parti scorgeremmo e osserveremmo pure co' proprii occhi, e colle proprie mani tratteremmo; quali gli effetti particolari e l'effetto generale e complessivo di esso ordine e del tutto di esso corpo; quale il fine di questo tutto; quale insomma e che cosa la vita dell'uomo, anzi se quel corpo fosse mai e dovesse esser vissuto; anzi pure, se dalla nostra stessa vita non l'arguissimo, o se alcuno potesse intendere senza vivere, concepiremmo noi e ritrarremmo in alcun modo dalla piena e perfetta e analitica ed elementare cognizione di quel corpo morto, l'idea della vita? o vogliamo solamente dire l'idea di quel corpo vivo? e intenderemmo noi quale e che cosa fosse l'uomo vivente e il suo modo di vivere esteriore o interiore? (Z. 3239)¹⁶

Analytical reason is unable to grasp the idea of life precisely because the *Seind*, understood as a pure and unique appearance, goes beyond any already given rule with which reality has been hitherto categorized. The example Leopardi gives is so fascinating because it follows, without any explicit mention of it, the structure of an aesthetic judgment: the dead human body appears, for the supposed aliens of the thought experiment, as something absolutely unique and, thus, which escapes the already existing rules of conceptual determination. There is no current concept

¹⁶ "Nature thus analyzed differs not in the slightest from a corpse. Let us imagine for a minute that we were animals of a different species to our own, indeed of a different nature to the general nature of those animals we are familiar with, but that nonetheless we were furnished with understanding, as indeed we are. If, having never seen a man or any animal among those that actually exist, nor ever having had information about any of them, a dead human body were brought to us, and in dissecting it we came to know all of its smallest parts one by one, "and in chemically decomposing it, we uncovered every last one of its elements: would we, in this way, be able to know, understand, discover or conceive of what the destiny, action, functions, virtues, forces, etc., of each part of this body were in regard to themselves, to the other parts, and to the whole; what was the purpose and object of that disposition and particular order that we would note in those parts and observe indeed with our own eyes and handle with our own hands; what was the particular and the general and overall effect of this order and the whole of the body; what the "purpose of it all was; what ultimately the life of man was; indeed, if that body had ever lived or had to have lived; [3240] or again, if we could not infer it from our own life, or if anyone could understand it without actually living, would we conceive of, would we be in any way able to derive, the idea of life from full, perfect, analytical, and elementary cognition of that dead body? Or shall we just say the idea of that living body? And would we understand what living man was, and what his outer and inner way of living was like?"

with which the human body may be understood, for its sudden appearance breaks, as it were, the network of concepts which had seized reality thus far but which is now destabilized. Even though we could analyse all its parts, trying to grasp them with the concepts of our understanding, the core of the organism, the idea of that *for which it lived*, could not be apprehended by analytical reason alone, for it is not a physical and material part of a supposed mechanism. The idea of life, thus, is the core of the *freedom* of the body, that for the sake of which it existed: *il destino, l'azione, le funzioni, le virtù, le forze* cannot be analyzed, since they are not efficient, but final causes, thus belonging not to the realm of natural phenomena and of matter, but to that of *Geist*.

Therefore, analysis ceases where the individual being arises with all its dignity: in its purposes, in its desires, in the beautiful unique coming-forth of its being-there. Now, the second interesting movement in this passage is that, in order to know and to grasp the core of such a being, we cannot use analytical reason, *but the force of our own ungraspable core: our imagination*. Exactly as Schlegel (1973) and Novalis (2018) will put it, only another *Dichter* can understand a *Dichter*¹⁷ - which means, of course, that only by mobilizing those faculties which go beyond conceptual reason are we to grasp the full force of the poetic experience. Because poetry is above all the outcome of a genial activity, which combines common and shared knowledge in a unique configuration that opens new paths of intellection, the reception of poetry is necessarily also active and productive, for it can only be grasped by another subject, whose force lies in his unconceptual activity which we have called, following Kant, Schlegel and Leopardi, imagination. The post-kantians called this unconceptualizable core, of which imagination is one expression, *Geist*. *Geist* is precisely that element which, hidden within the depths of a subject¹⁸, comes to light in the force of the metaphorical uniqueness of its existence, which, like the Organism for Kant, exists for its own sake. However, and this must be stressed, with the significant difference of teleological judgment which supposes the final cause, aesthetic judgment cannot but feel its suggestions - and thus never arrives at a final definition of the telos, even if it is a supposed one. This is precisely where Leopardi comes along with Schlegel: because for both what matters in poetic experience is its

¹⁷ It is for that reason that Novalis says „Sogar der Raum einer Nussschale kann uns wichtig werden, wenn wir selbst Fülle des Daseins mitbringen“, or Willst du dich selbst erkennen, so sieh, wie es die anderen treiben/ Willst du die anderen verstehn, blick' in dein eigenes Herz.

¹⁸ I am well aware that the metaphor of the depths may sound naive, although I think we have some good reasons to use it, in an ironic self-conscious way, in order to give the concept of *Geist* an operational existence. An author such as Slavoj Žižek, for example in *The indivisible remainder* (2007), would definitely see it as naive pre-hegelian romanticism, and argue that the subject is not some depth existing outside the symbolic language, but the very movement of its endless determinations, by which Substance becomes Subject. I indeed agree with him and also conceive of the subject in lacanian fashion as a productive void, which emerges when the pre-symbolic Real is done away with through castration and immersion in symbolic existence. Let us remember that, for Lacan, the subject is not the imaginary I, nor the pure symbolic order, but the void created by the intersections of the three orders, this being the reason why its correlate is *l'objet petit a*, the empty core which brings together the three registers of the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real. I have not the space to develop the reasons why I still deliberately use romantic language, but I think it may be useful to refer to Manfred Frank's (1980) beautiful romantic reading of Jacques Lacan's *Écrits*. Frank shows in a convincing way that Lacan's theory of the subject can be productively related with early romantic philosophy.

indefinite character, the infinitude which shines forth in the endless suggestions of the metaphors. Poetry works as a promise of the Absolute, as an unending approximation of it. Leopardi stresses the same point, since for him poetry is characterized by what he calls *l'indefinito*, that property of eternal suggestion that each great literary work has upon us. That is also why Schlegel described poetry through the concept of irony: poetic metaphor is paradoxical, for it presents the unrepresentable, it formalizes that which eludes all forms - the Absolute itself. In poetry the contradiction becomes, therefore, paradox: *logische Schönheit*.

In the traditional hermeneutic paradigm Leopardi's thought is divided into two phases, the first being marked by the theory of infinite understood as a protection created by a benevolent mother so as to elude us with the promise of happiness. The second phase, however, marks the moment in which Leopardi realizes the sufferance of all things, and sees nature/existence accordingly as a merciless tyrant: here, the poetical pendant to this philosophical stance would be leopardian titanism, as it was identified by Walter Bini and still recognized by Severino. Nevertheless, even if we assume Severino's point that in the late Leopardi poetry appears as the vision which affirms Nothingness, the *force* with which the *genius* affirms nature's mercilessness remains without explication. *It is just when we assume a theory of subjectivity as Geist that we may better understand how this force - namely imaginative vision - arises at all.* And this because, as we have seen, imagination is structurally connected with the reflection on the final cause, hence with the very concept of *Geist*. Poetry, thus, offers the very existential experience in which Being, in its full complexity, is offered to us subjects through the paradoxical form of poetic style, speaking not to our nature as matter, but as *Geist*.

4 CONCLUSION

We have begun our article by pointing out that nihilistic materialism finds its limits in the consideration of poetry as a metaphysical fact in the **Zibaldone di pensieri**. The point of this paper was to suggest that, by approaching the **Zibaldone di pensieri** from a post-kantian perspective, many interesting problems may receive new light: one of the most fascinating of them is that of imagination, which we made the object of our analytical effort. The concept of imagination, thus have we proposed, can be better understood when we link it with the related concepts of *final cause* and *Geist*, following therefore the post-kantian fashion to reflect on the aesthetic.

Our analysis of the three passages revealed that the concepts of *imagination/genius* was strictly connected with those of the *final cause* and with *Geist*. The poetic style, according to Leopardi, can only become truly poetic if activated by a living imagination, by him defined as the power to apprehend relations among things. The imaginative activity, thus we argued, is therefore conceived as an act by which new perceptions of reality are created, thereby engendering new rules for new determinative judgments. The act, however, by which these new rules are created cannot itself be determined, since it is the founding gesture through which meaning is engendered, thereby escaping all

determination. We found that Schlegel's *Witz* was the very speculative figure with which this complex act of unconcealing meaning - what Žižek (2007) calls the *Grundoperation des deutschen Idealismus* - could be described. Furthermore, we saw that *Ironie*, which according to Schlegel is the sense for the Absolute, linked imagination to the problem of the final cause. We thus proposed to see Leopardi's speculations on the final cause and on the *Geist* as structurally related with that of imagination: sufficient reason alone will never be able to apprehend the cause for the sake of which a *Seiende* lives its existence through the unique style it has chosen for itself. The principle of sufficient reason is unable to grasp the inner core of beings, for therein lies something which is not reducible to matter alone and, thus, must be conceived in terms of *Geist*. Only imagination can grasp the ethical life of a *Seiende*, only through imaginative activity can *Geist* be formalized, for both aim at something higher than matter alone: the Absolute itself.

Now, of all human discourses and experiences, poetry is the one which cultivates the indetermination of *Geist* in its very form, this being the reason why poetic style must be animated by the powers of imagination. In poetic experience, the subjectivity of the reader encounters the subjectivity of the text. If we are not overreading Leopardi's text, the following conclusion must be drawn: only through the imagination of another subject can a subject be understood and saved - that is, held above mere matter, transcending thus existence's own groundlessness. We don't propose, here, that a ground is absolutely given, and thereby the purpose - telos - of existence guaranteed. No: the contradiction becomes paradox - *logische Schönheit*, Schlegel would say - only when the structure of Being is thought as aporetic, that is, only when beings are at the same time thought as finite and infinite, as the romantics like to conceive them. Against Emanuele Severino (2005) and Massimo Donà (2013), it does not seem to us that Leopardi destroys the possibility of metaphysics by affirming the implicit nihilism of all western philosophy: on the contrary, his is a metaphysics which develops from a deep speculation on poetry, in which the principle of sufficient reason becomes aporetic and truly insufficient, demanding a higher perspective from which to think the relation of poetry with Being. But, in order to articulate this metaphysics, it is necessary to understand the place of the subject in it. If *imagination* plays such an important role in Leopardi's philosophy, then it demands a theory of genius which finds its *pendant* in the post-kantian tradition, for which *Geist* is the very unconceptualizable activity by which unity is found within multiplicity. As Schlegel's *Witz*, *l'immaginazione* arises as the lightning bolt which throws a momentaneous light over beings, thereby saving them - only to disappear and leave behind it the trace of the mystery which, since the Greeks, we call Metaphysics.

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