

Review Essays

*De Omnibus Rebus et Quibusdam Aliis:*¹ Leopardi's *Zibaldone di Pensieri*

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Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di Pensieri*, trans. Kathleen Baldwin, Richard Dixon, David Gibbons, Ann Goldstein, Gerard Slowey, Martin Thom, and Pamela Williams, ed. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 2,502 + lxxxvi pp., \$75 cloth.

More than twenty years ago I took part in a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar for professors that was held in Rome, where we spent the summer studying Renaissance art in the churches and museums – especially the Vatican museums. Our group consisted of eleven art historians and one comp lit and history of ideas guy (me), so the group was pretty polyglot, with plenty of overseas experience, and there was an ongoing competition to see who was the most brilliant and knowledgeable – about language, about history, about art, about experience. While studying the frescos on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, which were undergoing restoration that year, our group was addressed by an Italian scholar who gave us an introduction to the Chapel. Incredibly polite, urbane, and low key, he began by apologizing: he hadn't realized

that he was to address professors, but had rather assumed that he would be lecturing a group of students. The talk that followed, however, was so learned and thorough that, against all expectations, instead of competing to show who was the most brilliant, our group was reduced to utter silence! Ten years earlier I had attended courses at the Università degli Studi di Firenze, where I had ample opportunity to witness Italian passion for art history firsthand, and this more recent experience was a strong reminder of the inspiring power and thoroughness of Italian scholarship that I had previously encountered. The same thoroughness, depth, and meticulous attention to detail can be found in the translation and editorial apparatus of this first complete English edition of Leopardi's *Zibaldone*. In the following review essay I will briefly assess the implied assertion that this edition of the *Zibaldone* is aimed at both a scholarly audience and the educated general public; then I will review the extensive and scholarly Introduction; and finally I will give some random examples and impressions from my firsthand experience of reading the work.

I became aware of this first complete English edition of the *Zibaldone* [hodge-podge, mishmash] through an on-line newsletter from the Seminary Co-op Bookstore in Chicago, which caters to the faculty and students of the University of Chicago as well as the general reading public. That the edition was advertised in such a venue, that it was published by Farrar Straus and Giroux, and that on the front flyleaf it was dubbed as "An extraordinary, epochal publication – one of the foundational books of modern Western culture," leaves no doubt that this work is being promoted as something that crosses the divide between academic specialists and academic generalists, and between academic generalists and educated lay people. On the back cover, Harold Bloom comments that *Zibaldone* "is finally available to English-language readers," which implies generalists and non-academics, while at the end of the brilliant "Note on the Translation" we are told as a general principle of translation that "readers of the English text should not have to refer back to Leopardi's Italian to try and figure out what a sentence means" (lxxxvi), which implies a more specialized audience. Although I have reservations about academic

perspectives in general, my own perspective in the present review essay is as an academic generalist with a serious interest in Leopardi: I have lived for extended periods in Italy, at one time was fluent in Italian, on occasion teach courses in comparative literature in which I include texts that I have read in Italian (Dante, Tomasi di Lampedusa), and I have a general love for the history of ideas (if it still exists as a discipline) and a particular love for Italian art and culture.

This edition of *Zibaldone* was published in 2013. I ordered it in mid-September and received it a month later in Istanbul, where I have lived and worked for more than a decade. At \$75, the 2,588 page book, beautifully designed and clothbound to last a lifetime, is a bargain, even if one has to pay shipping charges for this large book. Several months later, in the late spring of 2014, I began reading *Zibaldone* carefully, in small increments, until I finished it in the late spring of 2016 (OK, it was my bathroom reading for two years...). I consider myself peculiarly adapted to review a book like this: I am constitutionally unable to 'read for lustres,' so that when I set myself an enormous task such as the present work – well over 2,500 big pages that compress Leopardi's original 4,524 pages plus several dozen pages of his personal index – I am compelled to read every last word: introduction, text, notes, bibliography. This is a practice that flies in the face of modern high-pressure scholarship, but I hope it will produce some viable observations that might otherwise elude a reviewer. I began at the beginning, with the 86-page Introduction, read through the text, notes, indexes, and several bibliographies, and then returned to reread the Introduction.

The Introduction consists of 13 sections, written by Franco D'Intino (9 topics), Michael Caesar (3 topics), and Elisabetta Brozzi (1 topic: "Philology, Archaeology of Language"). Taken together, the wide-ranging introductory essays are precise and magisterial and alone are worth the price of the book. D'Intino's lead-off essay, "A Manuscript Found in a Bottle," begins by briefly sketching a mini-reception history outside of Italy of Leopardi's better-known works, the *Operette morali* and the *Canti*, by such writers and critics as Sainte-Beuve, G.H. Lewes,

William Gladstone, Melville, Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, and Beckett. Leopardi was limited by geographical isolation, bodily infirmity and deformity, and parental constraint (he was forbidden to leave the house without his tutor). “He became a philosopher without knowing Kant, and poet without knowing Goethe [...]” (xii). Out of these constraints appeared the *Zibaldone*, a secret notebook or intellectual diary that wasn’t discovered until the turn of the twentieth century, long after the poet’s death, and even then it was a work for specialists. D’Intino describes Leopardi as “an anthropologist of modernity,” but because his notebook was at first the province of specialists in Italy, “even after publication [...] there was no impact on anthropologists, historians, linguists, psychologists, philosophers, political scientists, aestheticians, musicologists, and scientists [...]” (xiii). In sum, the goal of the present edition is to reconceptualize Leopardi “as one of the key thinkers of modernity. This is why [...] the moment has come for the *Zibaldone* to go out and find its true audience among those readers who, from different countries, languages, and cultures, will read it without prejudice, like a manuscript found in a bottle” (xiv). Moreover, Leopardi is especially suited not only to modern thinkers in a variety of disciplines, but he is a generalist who, like Socrates, is “an ancient teacher who thinks poetically [...] to communicate the very method of thought” rather than a specific doctrine (xiv).

D’Intino’s ideals to justify the goals of this edition seem reminiscent of American transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who wrote voluminous journals that far exceed the *Zibaldone* in volume and that also fed into their prose and poetry, so that their ‘lustres’ were later developed and built into lectures, and then again into essays that were published. Additionally, Emerson and Thoreau’s perspectives were both radical and internationalist and have had far-reaching influence. But unlike Leopardi, Emerson and Thoreau had no need for secrecy, and Emerson in particular insisted that one’s intellectual development should benefit society and humankind. Nevertheless, it appears that D’Intino’s interpretation of the *Zibaldone* project is similarly highly idealistic and

might have special appeal to a certain type of American sensibility, regardless of differences in intellectual outlook between Leopardi and his younger American transcendentalist contemporaries.

In the second introductory essay, "The Genesis of the *Zibaldone*," D'Intino gives us an overview of the work, which was begun on an indeterminate date in 1817 and concluded 4 December 1832, on page 4,526.

Yet the dates are deceptive. By the end of 1823, Leopardi, at the age of twenty-five, had already written 4,006 pages, that is, in essence, almost the whole diary. In addition, of those thousands of pages, some 3,197 (around two-thirds of the total) were written in just two years, 1821 and 1823. [...] If we consider the extraordinary intellectual and philosophical range of the *Zibaldone*, it's hard to remember, reading it, that it is the work of a very young man, even if one who was a genius. (xvi)

The work was a product of what later became the region of Le Marche, in east-central Italy. At the time, Leopardi's Recanati was a hill town that was a provincial backwater and part of the Papal States, where Leopardi spent most of his life in geographical, but not intellectual, isolation. Leopardi grew up in the 'company' of "virtual persons" who "came alive in the thousands of volumes that filled the rooms of the second floor of the [Leopardi] palazzo. The *Zibaldone* came into being so that Leopardi could have a dialogue with those voices" in what D'Intino describes as "the first modern philosophical hypertext" (xvi). D'Intino also gives a fascinating account of the "art of memory" – encyclopedic techniques of filing and cross referencing information, which are indicated by the indexes and file cards that Leopardi made, in addition to the many reference works that he regularly used in his reading and study (xvi-xvii). This intellectual background, in addition to his private tutors and the vast library where he worked, are the foundations of the life of the mind that we designate as "Leopardi." However, the *Zibaldone* hardly constitutes a 'work' in the normal sense of a unity or progression, but rather is "a forerunner of so

much fragmentary philosophical writing, with its intolerance of systematic philosophical forms, from Nietzsche to Wittgenstein [...]" (xx). Yet Leopardi's indexes and classifications of his diary also made him aware, as the heir of eighteenth-century encyclopedism, of "the connection between the broadening of knowledge and its impoverishment" (xxi).

The third section of the Introduction, "Giacomo Leopardi: A Short Biography," is by Michael Caesar and is the most extensive of the 13 sections of the Introduction. Caesar outlines the basic familial and social coordinates of Leopardi's life – the isolation, the scholarly expectations of his father, his mother's icy rationality and unfeelingness in the name of religion, the developing physical deformation of a hunchback and crooked spine, all of which resulted in extensive periods of melancholia and introspection that led to the prodigious classical scholarship and philosophical acumen that are reflected in the *Zibaldone*, as well as the great outbursts of lyrical poetry and "the radicalization of his reflection on existence" (xxvi). Nevertheless, at the same time, Leopardi strove for recognition in his scholarly publications: he "was no literary recluse" (xxvii). By 1827, Leopardi was working on the enormous task of indexing his *Zibaldone* "to see if he could extract from it ideas for future books," and he also began collecting material "for a book of aphorisms that would be published posthumously as *Pensieri*" (xxviii). In sum, the essay reflects on Leopardi's life through the lens of the *Zibaldone* in personal, scholarly, and literary perspectives.

Michael Caesar is the author of two additional essays in the Introduction. After giving an overview of Leopardi's biography – which is really a biography of intellectual and emotional development in relation to the literary output – in the seventh section of the Introduction he gives us "History, Politics, Government," which is not an outline of contemporary historical and political backgrounds and development during Leopardi's life, but rather the poet's own philosophical views of such matters in the context of Classical, Neoclassical, and Romantic philosophies. For example, the poet makes frequent allusions to classical views of human society (Plato, Aristotle, Cicero) in relation to later writers

(Rousseau, Montesquieu) and in relation to views of his contemporaries. He considers the organizing basis of societies, "the spread of consciousness and thought to the detriment of virtue, illusion, and enthusiasm," the idea that modern social organization is a "source of evil and unhappiness" due to "departure from the natural state" (xl). Leopardi does on occasion reflect on contemporary political trends, but in the context or from the perspective of the history of ideas:

Experimentation with constitutional monarchies, of the kind being tentatively explored in the Europe of the 1820s, is regarded by Leopardi as self-contradictory since such arrangements seek to mitigate the monarchical principle of oneness (the single "prince") by distributing his authority, though they may be the best solution to the post-revolutionary crisis of governance in the short term (Z 576-79). And Leopardi does seem to glimpse the outline of a modern, emerging, "soft despotism," anticipating Tocqueville by twenty years [...]. (xli)

Some of Caesar's recounting of Leopardi's ideas sound like raw material for a series of aphorisms:

[...] reason – as the antagonist of courage, virtue, enthusiasm – is integral to the debility of modern society, an ally of the interests of the despotic ruler.

[...] power itself is for the most part hidden and hallucinatory [...].

Human history is a succession of the unforeseen.

The more refined, subtle, planned, and organized a society is, the more it is vulnerable to conquest by the barbarian.

Nature and illusion trump science and civilization [...]. (xlii)

The focus here is on Leopardi's fascinating play of ideas against his formidable background in classical literature and philosophy – a demonstration of applied education.

The third and final essay by Michael Caesar is “Nature, Culture, Society,” which is section ten of the Introduction, and like his previous section, “History, Politics, Government,” suggests the kind of philosophizing that we associate with the Sociology of Knowledge or Philosophical Anthropology of the Frankfurt School. Leopardi considers the corruption of nature, or rather the corruption of humans *in* nature. Part of such corruption follows from reason. “Nature” gives us “illusions [... of] virtue, glory, love of country, and so on,” in opposition to the unnatural feeling of boredom, which is “the passion most contrary to and farthest from nature,” and along with “the feeling of nothingness” is “the acme of human corruption” (lii). Here it sounds like Leopardi is anticipating the ‘nausea’ of Sartre. It also sounds reminiscent of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, which Leopardi mentions many times. The themes that Caesar explores in “Nature, Culture, and Society” are part of a web of relations that we find in other essays in the Introduction. For example, Caesar’s discussions of ancient society in relation to Leopardi’s contemporary cultural moment of course overlap and engage with D’Intino’s fourth essay, “Ancients and Moderns.”

Leopardi’s ethnography conceives of cultural moments as “stratified,” so that as culture becomes more sophisticated and spreads from south to north and from east to west, one can nevertheless find pockets of earlier times existing simultaneously with contemporary states of culture. Moreover, Leopardi’s classicism – his respect for the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome – and his reservations about his contemporary Catholic civilization thanks to his mother’s rationalistic and cold-blooded approach to religion, allowed him to develop thought in a variety of directions in spite of aristocratic and conservative Catholic cultural conditioning that would have made it impossible for most people to think independently. Leopardi saw the ancients as free from the trammels of ‘reason’ and the suppression of healthy *natural* instincts

because they believed in the objective reality of things:
sensations, images, institutions, rituals, and words are real
for them, because these apprehensions and practices have

not been submitted to the rule of Reason, "the true mother and cause of nothingness" (Z 2942), which destroys the basis of experience. There is no doubt that when Leopardi speaks of the ancients, he is thinking primarily of Greece, or better still, of an archaic Greece, still uncorrupted by Platonic intellectualism. For according to Leopardi, Rome in the first century BCE is already the victim of that excess of civilization and of philosophy that produces the internal barbarism of every people (Z 22, 161, 274), as Brutus and Cicero demonstrate. (xxxix)

D'Intino cites such attitudes as forerunners of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, and indeed at times it's difficult not to think of Nietzsche while reading some passages of the *Zibaldone*. Leopardi's personal background was reinforced by his wide-ranging reading habits in both primary and secondary sources as part of his scholarly pursuit to publish on classical philology in contemporary journals, which were important to his intellectual development. Even when many of Leopardi's values developed and changed, he remained faithful to his vision of the ancients, which "remained steadfast" and "was strengthened in the fall of 1828 by his reading of Vico and of Wolf on Homer and oral cultures." In short, "the ancients knew how to protect both humanity and the individual against the ferocity of nature and the barbarisms that are inherent in the ascendancy of Reason" (xxxix).

D'Intino's sixth essay, "Experience, Autobiography, Memory," reinforced by the tail end of his fifth essay on "Animals, Body, Senses, Passions," highlights aspects of Leopardi's thought that appear to foreshadow more recent existential thinking, as when he considers the relation between thought and action: "By turning experience into a predictable geometrical theorem, thought destroys the possibility of actually living [...]" (xxxvii). Some of D'Intino's most telling appraisals of the *Zibaldone* occur in this short chapter, as when he describes it as "the inscription of how the self perceives and reflects both the external world and its own interiority" (xxxviii), or when he sees Leopardi's various

autobiographical projects, along with the *Zibaldone*, as “an enormous effort, silent and secret, to reach self-understanding” until he arrives at his “acceptance of a purely material world, without any meaning” (xxxix). Some of these assessments, however, are somewhat mitigated in D’Intino’s eighth essay, “Language and Style,” where it seems to me that his apparent foreshadowing of Nietzsche, Sartre, and even Derrida, are occluded by Leopardi’s attitude that “Nothing human exists outside of language; [...] and everything is *incarnated* in and by language” (xliv, emphasis in original). This is quite in opposition to transcendentalists who recognize a realm beyond language, and who consider language as inadequate to record everyday reality. And yet, in the following ninth essay, “Metaphysics, Theology, Philosophy,” the seeming simple clarity of the previous essay is left behind as D’Intino, in a virtuoso elucidation of the complex philosophical development of Leopardi, in which the poet turned against the major influence of his youth, Rousseau, to conclude with the resultant vision of “a blind mechanistic world [...] the materialism of the eighteenth century, above all that of Baron d’Holbach [...]” (l). Although in 1836, one year before his death, Leopardi retreats to imagine “a world sustained by ‘right and pity,’” the final view of the *Zibaldone*, which ended in 1832, is unrelenting in its philosophical vision:

The third from the last entry of the *Zibaldone* highlights the triple nulla: “two truths that man will generally never believe: one, that we know nothing, the other, that we are nothing. Add the third, which depends a lot on the second: that there is nothing to hope for after death.” (li)

D’Intino’s thirteenth and final essay, “Scientific Knowledge and Natural History,” begins by elucidating the role of the natural sciences in the education of Leopardi. After several previous essays that trace various developmental and philosophical perspectives, it comes as a surprise to be told that “the sciences played a significant role in Leopardi’s education, and were at least as crucial in the defining of his poetic horizon as was his study of the classics” (lxiv). The natural science of the *Zibaldone*

is personal but also relates to the development of science in the late eighteenth century – from the idea of nature as a “fixed” and harmonious order that can be subjected to classification and mathematical description to an idea of nature that is run through with continual transformations, something that is living and historicized even while it works according to recognizable laws and is animated by recognizable forces. (lxiv).

One is reminded here of Leopardi's contemporary – younger by just five years – Ralph Waldo Emerson, who experienced a moment of insight in the Paris natural history museum, the Jardin des Plantes, in July 1833, where the cabinets of comparative anatomy gave a simultaneous impression of both stasis and flux, order and development, and which was followed more than a decade later by poems like “Uriel,” which prefigured Einstein's physics and was recognized by Robert Frost as “the greatest American poem yet.” But nearly ten years earlier, beginning in 1824, Leopardi's previous view of a “harmonious [...] natural world” was transformed, as “chaos and chance become the rule of a natural world made up of a mass of facts that can no longer be either interpreted or controlled” (lxv). Hence the title, *Zibaldone* [hodgepodge] acquires another layer of significance. Nevertheless, Leopardi continues to see the great philosophical and scientific geniuses as heroes – Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, Locke – despite his recognition of the limitations of modern science and the happenstance nature of many modern scientific discoveries. Moreover, he conceives of modern science as a product of the imagination, so that his scientific heroes like Newton “can be likened to Homer” (lxvi). Another important aspect of Leopardi's views of natural history is man's capacity for “habitation” or conformability, which enables humans to create culture – a topic to which I will return in my comments on the actual text of the *Zibaldone*.

We now move back to the twelfth or penultimate essay, “Poetry, Voice, Music,” in which D'Intino outlines the aesthetic ideas of Leopardi. Perhaps this essay could have been the final essay, by a logic that considers

the *Zibaldone* as a precursor or an adjunct to Leopardi's poetry. Nevertheless, once again the aesthetic ideas overlap with the various philosophical perspectives of the previously discussed introductory essays. According to D'Intino, "The *Zibaldone* begins to take shape, from its very first entries, as a fragmentary treatise on aesthetic theory, oriented primarily toward literature [...]" (lviii). Surprisingly, we learn that Leopardi's emphasis in his aesthetic theory is not on the beautiful but on truth. However, by truth Leopardi does not mean what is usually understood by the term "truth" when it is discussed in the company of beauty, which normally refers back to Plato's triangle paradigm in which "the good" is represented as a triangle with the three angles representing "truth," "beauty," and "goodness," representing epistemology, aesthetics, and ethics, which all have equal status. Instead, Leopardi's "truth" is the truthful "imitation of nature," referring to what we can see, what we can perceive with the senses, which situates him closer to Lockean empiricism than to Platonic thought [my comment] (lviii; lvix).

Leopardi points out that the true danger for art lies in intellectualism and "affectation," both of which are marked by an excess of awareness and artificiality. As man develops his faculty of reason, he distances himself from nature, and in so doing loses the capacity to live, even to breathe. (lix)

I find myself writing in the margin of page lix next to this statement, "Today!" though I am thinking of both literary criticism as well as literature itself. There is automatically, necessarily, a nod to phenomenology here: Leopardi's ideal poet, as so often, is Homer, "who sees the things of this world as they are, without altering them, without allowing the 'effort' of the act of representation to become apparent [... but rather giving the impression of] non-reflection and 'nonchalance'" (lxi). According to this standard, Leopardi's 'literary stock market' devalues Ovid, Virgil, and much subsequent poetry including Byron and the German and British romantics generally, while increasing the value of Homer, Xenophon in prose, and Dante. He "accused the Romantics of

having corrupted the material nature of poetry, turning art into an intellectual operation" (lix). In sum, Leopardi values feeling, existence, impulse, the pleasures of the senses, as opposed to hyper-intellectual and analytical approaches to literature: "poets today have no other readers but persons who are educated and informed [but unfortunately] Today every educated and informed man is unfailingly egoistic and philosophical, deprived of every noteworthy illusion, devoid of intense passions, and every woman likewise" (lx-lxi). And following Rousseau, and reinforced by the later studies of Friedrich August Wolf (1759-1824) on the Homeric question, Leopardi decries the print revolution and the loss of poetry as part of oral culture – an echo of some of the impulses that several decades earlier had contributed to revivals of ballads and folk poetry. In the Leopardi canon, this aesthetic attitude that values the music of oral poetry over the silence of the printed page, is reflected in his choice of *Canti* [songs] as the title of his 1831 volume of poetry. D'Intino sees this impulse as Leopardi's concern to create a new kind of poetry that would be a departure from what he considered the path of contemporary poetry from "decadence."

The final introductory section to be considered here is section eleven, the single essay by Elisabetta Brozzi, "Philology, Archaeology of Language." Anyone who does even a preliminary reading of the *Zibaldone* is immediately struck by the amount of detailed philological material in this enormous compendium. When I began reading, I found myself constantly wondering how present-day classical philologists would assess the work of this brilliant young student, who was a mere 19 years old at the start of *Zibaldone*, and whose private formal education was essentially over by the time he was fourteen. Moreover, the formal education by private tutor included Latin language and literature, but not Greek and Hebrew, which he taught himself. And yet Leopardi was making judgments about the work of the great classical philologists of his own and earlier times, and at age 25 the originality of his conception of philology, which he instinctively combines with comparative linguistics, is "immediately recognized" by important contemporary scholars (lvi). The classical authors whom

Leopardi focuses most on are Homer, Xenophon, Plato, Celsus, Cicero, Horace – and a host of authors that nonspecialized readers today are unlikely to have even heard of: Velleius Paterculus, Florus, Diogenes Laertius, Sidonius, and many others. The first four authors, beginning with Homer, according to Brozzi are especially appreciated for their closeness to nature – that is, their closeness to the spoken word, so even here, there are cross linkages with philosophical perspectives from most, if not all, of the other twelve essays in the Introduction.

In sum, the thirteen essays of the Introduction are judicious and magisterial. At times I felt that a different order of the essays might be more informative, or that they could be better integrated or more systematic in relation to one another, but given the size and complexity of the material considered, and given that the essays are written by three different scholars, perhaps that is not possible. Also, occasionally while rereading the introductory essays, important references or quotes would seem to leap out of the text, pregnant with meaning, so that I found myself wishing that there might have been a kind of brief, overall linear ‘map’ of the *Zibaldone*, with a key to the most important passages and developments. At times, in my own reading – especially in the early sections – I found myself feeling bludgeoned by the excessive amount of classical philology that went on for page after page, despite the fact that my own education generally renders such passages more interesting than they would be for most readers, since I had at least a dozen years of formal training in classics, mostly in philology – from junior high through graduate school. In any case, the modern Italian cultural context is well equipped to deal with the technicalities of Leopardi’s brilliant and precocious philology, since to this day Italian *liceos* still compete to identify the best Latin student in the country. But at times Brozzi’s philological introduction, while extremely helpful at situating the general contours of Leopardi’s philology, seemed inadequate to the avalanche of philological material in the *Zibaldone*. The textual notes are sometimes helpful in this respect, although it is not easy to flip back and forth from text to notes in this large volume; this is not the kind of compact work that

one can easily tote to and from work for reading on the metro or the bus. Occasionally there are bibliographic references that might be helpful in this respect. For example, there are references to two books by Sabastiano Timpanaro, in Italian, on Leopardi's classicism and his philology, that appear to be the place to go for more detailed philological information, but one would most likely need access to a good research library in North America, or more likely access to resources in Italy.

Henceforth I will make a few random comments from my own reading experience of the *Zibaldone*. Early on, Leopardi comments that

When we have formed a bad habit through reading, writing, discourse, literary or other kinds of entertainment (but above all through books, as far as the taste for writing is concerned, and conversation with people, as regards behavior), we believe that that is nature, because nothing is so easily confused with nature, even by the most perceptive people and philosophers, as habit. (52)

And so begins hundreds of ensuing references to "habit" and "habituation" (unaccountably, these terms are not listed in the Index). "Habit" is an important point of reference that reflects upon several important philosophical perspectives, including nature and culture. It's also a mark of the excellence of the translation: too often scholarly writing and translation, in works of sociology especially, are jargon-laden with such ugly terms as "routinization" – as if there aren't enough words in the English language so that we have to make up new ones. However, the introductory essays and the translations of the text of the *Zibaldone* are wonderfully accessible and free from jargon. "Habit" and "habituation" are perfectly good standard words to indicate the phenomenon that Leopardi is discussing.

Moving along, we occasionally run across such wonderful aphoristic statements as,

It seems absurd and yet it is absolutely true that, since all reality is nothing, there is no other reality or other substance in the world but illusions. (91)

And a little further on, “*Nature is not material, as reason is*” (96, italics in original); surely food for thought. Or better still,

Patience is the most heroic of the virtues precisely because it has not the least appearance of heroism. (100)

Or again,

the peak of human knowledge or philosophy is to recognize its own uselessness [...] the height of philosophy is useful for that reason alone, because it frees us and disabuses us of philosophy. (195)

And here are two more:

in every society you find religion at its cradle, in the same way that philosophy has always been close to its grave.

[...] where religions draw the conclusion that states are established and preserved by truth and destroyed by error, I say that they are established and preserved by error and destroyed by truth. (206)

And reminiscent of Hawthorne’s musing on the imperfectability of humans:

The perfection of reason consists in knowing its inadequacy to make us happy [...] The full perfectibility of man is in knowing that he is in fact incapable of perfection [...]. (239)

A special pleasure of reading such a polyvalent work as the *Zibaldone* lies in making connections with one’s previous literary acquaintances. Who can read the following without thinking of Nietzsche’s *The Anti-Christ* (if only the *Zibaldone* could have been extant two or three decades before 1898, when it finally surfaced!):

it might be argued that the dark, murky, cowardly, and strangely cruel barbarism of late antiquity arose not from ignorance alone but from this combined with Christianity. If it had been a pagan barbarism, that religion, open, clear, and material, with no element of mystery, would have

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given their ignorance a more cheerful tone and their customs a less gloomy aspect. But minds were filled with the *somber* [gloomy], the mysterious, the lugubrious, the frightening aspects of the Christian religion, contaminated above all by superstition. (110)

And who can read the following passage without thinking of Shakespeare's greatest sonnets on Time:

Rome is no longer Queen of the World, the Father of Rome no longer holds the reins of the empire, the Pontifex Maximus no longer climbs to the Capitol with the Vestal virgin, a very long time has gone by, and yet the verses of Virgil are still read, Nisus and Euryalus have not been forgotten, and the fame of Horace endures. Fortune is fickle, and these poets certainly never imagined that time would have had more difficulty destroying their verses than the vast and solid Roman empire, built over so many centuries. But these sheets of paper survived that mighty edifice, through a whim of fortune, which has destroyed countless other works of ancient genius, and preserved these beyond the space allotted by hope itself, self-love itself, their authors' own imaginative power. (23 Dec. 1820.) (258-59)

Another example of relating *Zibaldone's* far ranging comments and observations to one's previous reading and observations is the following passage, which reminds us of Emily Dickinson's little poem that begins "Success is counted sweetest":

Glory, on the whole, especially the literary sort, is sweet when a man can savor it in the silence of his study and use it as a spur to further glorious endeavors and as a foundation for renewed hope. Because then it conserves the power of illusion, the only power it has. But enjoyed in the world and society, it turns out to be nothing or very small or incapable, in short, of filling the spirit and

satisfying it. As all pleasures from a distance are great, but close up are minuscule, dry, empty, and nothing at all. (182)

And immediately on the heels of the previous statement:

Those people who, to console someone deprived of some great advantage in life, say, “Do not torment yourself, remember it’s only an illusion,” are talking nonsense. Because that person can and should respond, “But all pleasures are illusions or based on illusion, and life is formed and consists of such illusions. So if I cannot have any, what pleasure is left to me? What is the point of living?”

Both of these entries are from 11 October 1820, when Leopardi was 22 years old. It’s not surprising that such statements have at times been taken as reflections on Leopardi’s reaction to his physical deformity and are used to explain philosophical perspectives that his biographers disagree with, but in the light of Leopardi’s iron will (which might tend to exclude self pity), such assumptions seem doubtful at best.

The dangers of interpreting the *Zibaldone* as autobiography are manifold. If the pitfalls are real, the attempt is necessary since, along with the letters, the *Zibaldone* is a mine of personal data. However, great tact, as always, is required of such an endeavor. A passage of several pages, generally taken to be Leopardi’s extended moral description of his mother Adelaide – a sort of ‘iron lady’ whose discipline ultimately saved the family fortunes – is a good example. One biographer has described the following passage as “terrifying”:

The extent to which Christianity is contrary to nature, when it acts solely on simple, rigid reasoning and when this is taken as the sole norm for behavior, can be seen from the following example. I once knew very well the mother of a family who was not in the least superstitious, but devout and unswerving in her Christian faith and in the practice of her religion. She not only felt no sympathy

for parents who lost their children in infancy but positively and sincerely envied them, because such infants had flown safe and sound straight to paradise, and had freed their parents from the inconvenience of supporting them. Finding herself more than once in danger of losing her own children at the same age [five of Leopardi's siblings died in childbirth or infancy], she did not ask God to let them die, because her religion forbade this, but she rejoiced with all her heart. Seeing her husband weeping and distraught, she became distant and felt real irritation. She was diligent in her care of the poor little things, but in the depths of her soul, she hoped it would prove useless and was forced to admit that the only anxiety she felt when consulting or questioning a doctor was hearing that there might be a possibility or a faint hope of recovery. [a page and a half of the original MS omitted here] She would talk of such misfortunes with an icy coldness. This woman had been endowed by nature with a very tender disposition and had been reduced to this state by religion alone. What is this if not barbarous? (215-16)

It seems to me that the passage is not "terrifying" at all, but rather the interest lies, first, in the razor-sharp assessment of his mother's behavior, which is then followed by an extremely kind assessment of her *true* character, as "endowed by nature with a very tender disposition." To my mind this passage reflects a deep and humane understanding of life. Is this a reflection of the soul of a great poet? Perhaps. At the very least, it's an interesting contrast with our own world in which children against parents commonly hold unrelenting grudges that they take with them to the grave.

Elsewhere, the Editorial Index allows us to track Leopardi's reading and concern with certain topics. For example, when I first began my reading of the *Zibaldone*, I was struck by the frequency of references to Montesquieu's *Essai sur le goût* [*Essay on Taste*], especially early on: 51,

154, 170, 178, 186, 188-89, 191, 193, 198, 202, 212-13, 269, 1366, 1552, 3214. (The page references are to Leopardi's original pages of the *Zibaldone*, which are indicated throughout the text in bracketed boldface numbers.) In these particular references, page 51 occurs before Leopardi started dating his entries (which began on page 100, dated 8 January 1820), and then entries from pages 154 to 269 take place from 5 July to 10 October 1820. Then with pages 1366 and 1552 it jumps ahead nearly a year, to 21 July and 23 August 1821, and then the final reference to Montesquieu's essay occurs two years later on page 3214, dated 20-21 August 1823. In this way, by paying attention to the index and the dated entries, one can track the reading and interests of Leopardi in a precise way in relation to his material circumstances (biography) and the development of his thought. However, as previously mentioned and as pointed out by at least one biographer, one needs to be careful about connecting Leopardi's philosophical statements with his life, and especially with his deformities and health problems. I think it safest to enjoy many of Leopardi's statements at face value, without such extrapolations, especially when one can enjoy his delicious irony:

I have seen the lectures of a German, Herr Hufeland, on the Art of Prolonging Life, given by him in his capacity as a professor dedicated expressly to this subject. He should teach people first how to make life happy, and then how to prolong it. Since life is so unhappy, I would have much more respect for someone who taught me how to shorten it, because I have never known anyone who deserves praise for his service to the public by teaching us how to prolong unhappiness.

I find Leopardi's critical statements about literature and philosophy particularly interesting, and occasionally surprising, especially when he makes a critical statement about classical literature that, in spite of his prodigious classical scholarship, is simply dead wrong: "we will always praise Homer's flawed Achilles more than Virgil's perfect Aeneas on the grounds of credibility and of the advantages that illusion and persuasion

gain thereby" (189). Yes, Achilles is of far more interest and worth as a literary character than Aeneas, but Virgil deliberately created Aeneas as *imperfect*, and for very specific effect: two high points of the epic, Aeneas's dalliance with Dido near the beginning and his slaying of Turnus at the very end of the *Aeneid* are quite deliberately portrayed by Virgil as major failures on Aeneas's part, although these have little to do with why one prefers Achilles to Aeneas.

Elsewhere, Leopardi's comments on style add support to the editors' high praise of his prose style and remind us of homegrown American Puritan plain style ('God's altar needs not our polishing'):

For what reason is Celsus's Treatise, which is a treatise on medicine, beautiful? Is it because it has poetic and rhetorical ornaments? On the contrary, it is beautiful first and foremost because it doesn't have any at all, and because it has the bare candor and simplicity that befit such works. Next, because it is clear and precise, and because it has pure language and pure style. These are merits or beauties that suit any book. (448)

And here's a final example – of style applied to life:

where the ancients did things, the moderns count them, and what were once upon a time the results of actions are today results of calculations; and thus without doing anything, we live by calculating and reckoning what should be done or what should happen waiting before actually doing anything, and so living, until we are dead. For such a life cannot now be distinguished from death and must of necessity be identical to it. (1 May 1821.) (477)

Beginning around page 273, long detailed passages in Greek and Latin begin to appear in the *Zibaldone*. In retrospect, it seemed to me that a considerable portion of the entire work consisted of such passages, but in skimming back, I am amazed to find that for nearly 300 pages such passages are mostly absent. There is a great deal of material on the details

of languages – especially about the development of languages: from Latin into the romance languages, including hypotheses about how spoken Latin fed into the spoken vernaculars of Europe, and even hypothesizing about lost words from spoken Latin, based on words in French or Italian that must have been based upon them. On occasion, Leopardi even speculates on how some words went directly from Greek into the European languages instead of being filtered through Latin. For example, on at least one occasion, Leopardi comes up with fascinating hypotheses about how Greek words fed directly into French from Greek colonies in what is today Marseilles. But the biggest point of classical philology that sticks in my mind is the emphasis that Leopardi gives to his distinctions between “frequentative” and “continuative” verbs in Latin. He considers this distinction an original discovery concerning the Latin language: “not only do the grammarians not distinguish, so far as I know, the frequentative from the continuative, but they do not even recognize, so far as I know, this kind of verb, which is, however, so common and important and which I call continuative, employing a new word because the observation is new” (529). This may seem a minor observation, but throughout the *Zibaldone* Leopardi gives hundreds of examples in which he distinguishes between the two forms. The importance, however, is not the grammatical distinction in itself, but the way the formation of such verbs enable a language to become more diverse and precise at the same time:

This capacity to create continuatives is one of the loveliest and as yet unremarked capacities by means of which the Latin language, by regularly diversifying its verbs and its words, adapted them to express precisely the minute differences between things and drew all possible advantage from its resources, applying this possibility with different and agreed inflections and modifications to all the needs of the language; and it employed its roots to obtain many different, wholly distinct, clear, certain, and unmuddled meanings, and with the utmost ingenuity and with very little effort it would multiply its riches and

increase its potency. This capacity is wanting in the Italian language [...]. (530)

This is important, and one doesn't have to be a classical philologist or a specialist in comparative linguistics to find such discussions fascinating. The discussion continues for several pages, and keeps popping up more or less throughout the entire *Zibaldone*. (Surprisingly, there is nothing about it in the index.) Here's a little snippet to just give a bit of an idea of the sort of detailed discussions of Latin philology that ensue:

The verb *stare* [to be] is, in my view, without a doubt the continuative of the verb *esse* [to be], formed from an old participle or supine of this latter verb, such as *stus* or *stum*, [1121] or rather from *situs* or *situm*, contracted into *stus* or *stum*. See also Forcellini, under *Lito as*, beginning, and under *Luo is*, end. Or perhaps at first one said *sitare*, like *secutari*, and *solutare* from which *soltar* for *solvere*, as I said on p. 1527, and *voltare* for *volutare*, etc. The analogy between the verb *essere* and *stare* may be seen in our participle *stato* from *essere* [to be], and in the French *été*, although the French do not have the verb *stare*. We have an obvious sign of the participle *situs* in the Spanish *sido*, which is indeed the participle of *ser*, to be. And perhaps this participle does still subsist in the Latins' *situs*, which means situated, but which is often usurped by writers giving it a meaning markedly similar to that of a participle of the verb *essere*, which Voss very unconvincingly derives from *sinere* [to allow]. It is a well-known fact that in Plautus (*Curculius* 1, 1, 89) some read *site* to mean *este*, from which *situs*, as naturally as *auditus* from *audite*, and that the old conjugation of the present indicative *esse* was, according to Varro (*De lingua Latina*, bk. 8, ch. 57) *esum*, *esis*, *esit*; *esumus*, *esitis*, *esunt*. In other respects, Forcellini himself, noticing that the verb *stare* is often used instead of *esse*, adds, *""with some

sense of duration”* (under the entry for *sto*) (and gives some examples of it), that is to say, I would argue, in line with the original characteristics of this verb which is the continuative of *esse*. (532-33)

This is just one very small snippet out of hundreds of pages of observations on classical philology. I often found myself wishing for a commentary by a modern specialist in classical philology about how such ideas, which were on occasion expressed in Leopardi’s scholarly articles, measure up to modern classical philology. I wish Elisabetta Brozzi had commented upon some of these ideas in her introductory essay, “Philology, Archaeology of Language.” If anyone would be qualified to comment on such things, it would be an Italian scholar of classical Latin philology. A measure of contemporary Latin scholarship in Italy is suggested by the fact that of all the web sources for the Latin phrase in the title of this review essay, it was only an Italian source that gave not just the literal meaning of the phrase, but the irony that accrues from the source and context.

I could continue to give an idea of the many facets of this vast and challenging work, but ‘Art is long and life is short.’ However, in skimming back over the *Zibaldone* for this review essay, I’ve noticed that the overload of philology has dropped from my attention and the philosophical and personal content, marked by countless underlines, symbols, and comments in the margins for thousands of pages, remains in high relief, so that it invites ‘dipping into’ many more times around, which is a more enjoyable and in some ways more fruitful approach to such a stimulating and challenging work.

Note

¹ My (very loose) translation of the Latin phrase in the title of this review essay: “concerning ‘everything under the sun’ – and a few other things besides” – an obvious reference to Leopardi’s staggering innovative knowledge in so many fields, not least of which is classical philology.

