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THE PREHISTORY OF THE *OPERETTE MORALI*:
LEOPARDI'S EARLY MACHIAVELLISM OR HOW
TO WRITE USEFULLY

ABSTRACT: In 1821, a year of significant political events in the slow-moving process of Italian independence, Leopardi identified Machiavelli as the political pendant of those who have «truly changed the face of philosophy», namely Galileo, Descartes, Locke, and Newton. Meanwhile, imbued with a project of literary and social reform, he wrote a series of *prosette satiriche* in an effort to create a new genre of moral and philosophical satire. As he composed the *prosette* and prepared the *Operette morali*, Machiavelli remained an enduring influence. This study explores the internal history of the Machiavelli-Leopardi interaction through an analysis of the *Novella Xenophon and Niccolò Machiavello* to understand Leopardi's own reformulation of 'Machiavellism' and its historically specific meanings. Rather than an 'effacement' of Machiavelli in both the *Zibaldone* and the *Operette morali*, I argue that his moral philosophy has fused with Leopardi's own vision of the relationship between ethics, politics, and the purpose of literature.

KEYWORDS: Machiavelli, Virtue, Moral Philosophy, *Great*, Perspective.

PAROLE-CHIAVE: Machiavelli, virtù, filosofia morale, *grandi*, prospettiva.

The *Discourse of an Italian on Romantic Poetry* (1818) reveals Leopardi's attentiveness for his writings' status within the (absent but) anticipated audience of «young Italians». ¹ In a gesture of unmistakable self-exposure, he emphatically enlists the knowledge, experience, and revolutionary ardor of his peers as fellow brother-in-arms, inviting them to fight for their «weakened and moribund» motherland and join forces instead of eschewing direct conflict and remaining «on the periphery of the (military

1 PP, p. 996.

and literary) field».² The *Discourse* provided Leopardi the conceptual vocabulary for diagnosing a moral-political dysfunction in the body politic and its cultural implications. At the same time, it also exposed the effort of most of the learned community to forge a high, ‘untranslatable’ culture, amplifying the chasm between the Italian literary republic and its readers. Leopardi concludes the *Discourse* by asking his young audience to peer into the gap, symbolized by the «ever-growing wall» that is separating the «writers», who see modernity merely as corruption and decadence, but are not able to replace what they have criticized, and the «people», who find the call for present generations to serve beauty for its own sake and to return to Roman and Greek antiquity utterly uninspiring.³ To Leopardi’s mind, having the republic of letters speak directly to the people, rather than for a faction of intellectuals or as a representative of an ideology, would be the best way for Italy to achieve formal innovations in literature and philosophy; the people, in turn, would see themselves as part of a (still divided) nation and show their willingness to challenge external political forces. This process would translate into a civic life characterized by participation, discipline, and reciprocity, and would contribute significantly to the formation of a shared sense of (proto)national identity. With this process advanced, books that are truly «in step with the times» can be produced.⁴

In 1819, shortly after the *Discourse on Romantic Poetry* was composed, Leopardi drafted two projects for his *Disegni letterari*: a series of satirical dialogues, or *prosette satiriche* as he calls them a year later, to harness the potential of satire as a (neglected) literary mode in Italy; and a treatise on the «present state of Italian literature» which would address the still-vexed issue of making Italian literature useful to the nation, to its audience (including «women and the illiterate»), and to European readers in general.⁵ Despite its ambitious scope, the treatise remains unfinished, as do many others of his *Disegni letterari*. Nevertheless, Leopardi saw fit to incorporate its important message – the blurring of the «ever-growing wall» that is separating the writers and the people evoked in the *Discourse* – into his early satirical dialogues.

In his *prosette satiriche* – often considered as a foreshadowing of the later *Operette morali* –, Leopardi remains concerned with preserving oral traditions and bringing «comedy to what hitherto has been characteristic of tragedy», that is, finding a new genre that treats serious issues ludicrously in the dialogic form. At issue was the understanding of the *Zeitgeist*, the interpretation of the moral, political, and psychological themes that were

2 Ivi, p. 968. On the heroic ethos and patriotism during the years 1818-1823, see D’INTINO 2021, pp. 17-93.

3 *PP*, p. 996.

4 *Epist.*, lettera 227, p. 305.

5 *PP*, pp. 1109-10.

central to contemporary European discussions, but still lacking in Italian debates. Though he envisages a distinctive structure relying on «the weapon of ridicule» to stir up «his poor country and poor century» through the unmasking of vice (leaving «the weapons of feeling and enthusiasm and eloquence and imagination» to lyric poetry, and those «of reason, logic, philosophy» to theory), the *prosette*, like the *Operette*, can be hardly reduced to one single stylistic source.⁶ The spirit of these early prose fictions extends beyond the conventional expectation of comedy; in fact, they seem to evoke the themes and voice the feelings we would experience and read in a tragedy:

In my dialogues I will strive to bring comedy to what hitherto has been characteristic of tragedy, that is, the vices of the great (*grandi*), the fundamental principles of calamity and human misery, the absurdities of politics, the improprieties pertaining to universal morals and to philosophy, the condition and general spirit of the age. (*Zib.* 1394, 27 July 1821)

On one level, the early dialogues are a medium to reconcile comedy and tragedy. They privilege the humble style of comedy, with a language that everyone would comprehend, while simultaneously addressing the serious, higher subjects of tragedy and emphasizing ethical and political concerns. But on the other, they were also meant to controvert the conceit of a particular social class, to ‘ramson’ the *great*. Using the most loathed of Machiavellian words, Leopardi identifies a specific target, that is, the discrediting of the *grandi*, meaning with a collective noun both the noble class (to which he belonged), who have a greater degree of power and socioeconomic privilege, and the antiquarians, the *litterati* he evoked in the *Discourse on Romantic poetry* for making literature unintelligible for its readers. Thus, the *prosette* originated from an antagonistic attitude towards the *grandi*, resulting in a text that dramatizes such judgments. The fact did not escape the notice of Leopardi himself who, in a famous letter to Pietro Giordani in 1820, admitted that he was willing to wage a sort of “satirical warfare” to expose the issues of Italian society and its social classes, to «vengeance the world» and its ideals of «virtue».⁷

In what follows, I would like to retrace the sources and map the contours of the satirical prose fictions through the analysis of one of them, the *Novella of Xenophon and Niccolò Machiavello*, which Leopardi drafts in 1820 and revises in 1822. The scholarly debate on the novella has pivoted on the relationship between Machiavelli-the character and the tradition of Machiavellism, identifying the former as a mere perpetuation of the latter, leaving Leopardi’s reliance on Machiavelli’s rhetorical function largely un-

6 *Zib.* 1394, 27 July 1821.

7 *Epist.*, letter 330, p. 438.

explored.⁸ I argue that, rather than reinstalling the tropes of Machiavellism through satire, the novella functions as a textual laboratory for reconfiguring Machiavellian – hence moral and political – motives developed especially in the *Operette morali*, concerning the nature and limits of virtuous behavior (*Dialogo Galantuomo e Mondo*), the efficacy of writing as a means of literary innovation (*Il Parini*), the difference between usefulness and expediency in human affairs and beliefs (*Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico*), and the need for modern books that cultivate illusions (*Dialogo di Timandro e di Elean-dro*). The resulting intertextuality does not come at Machiavelli's expense, turning Machiavelli's teaching against him. Instead, as the reflections in the *Zibaldone*, in the *Operette morali*, and in the later *Pensieri* testify, Machiavelli's perspective was profoundly entwined with Leopardi's in the very formative years that framed the writing of the novella.⁹

Xenophon and Niccolò Machiavello is closely related to the idea of applying Machiavellian teachings to literary ends. In its original draft, the novella is just a sketch of what would eventually become a burlesque short story that has no obvious polemic voice. The narrative takes place in a pagan underworld, where Pluto and Proserpine, kings and rulers of the dead, announce a competition to find a preceptor for their son, who is destined to rule on earth as the diabolical prince.¹⁰ The main characters are the Athenian historian Xenophon and Niccolò Machiavelli, both considered «masters of the art of governance».¹¹ The author of the *Cyropaedia* or *Education of Cyrus* and the author of the *Prince* compete in a rhetorical *certamen* that culminates in the victory of Machiavelli who, having exposed the malice of man and the ruthlessness of the *grandi* within the structure of Roman and Renaissance societies, is deemed to be the best preceptor for the new prince. In the course of his pedagogical endeavor, Machiavelli will be assisted by Baldassarre Castiglione, who is appointed preceptor of the future prince's court pages thanks to his new edition of the *Book of the Courtier*. A reprint of Castiglione's guide is in fact reissued by the «Hell printing house», and revised based on the testimonies from damned souls, who witnessed court life and the behavior of courtiers on earth in ways that diverge significantly from those offered by Castiglione in the original

8 The bibliography on the *Novella* is vast and here I refer mainly to BLASUCCI 1989, pp. 157-71; LATTANZI 1978, pp. 639-53; CAMPAILLA 2000, pp. 813-23; FEDI 2010, pp. 157-71; and MECATTI 2004, pp. 59-111.

9 Still in 1829, after surveying the early modern reception(s) of Machiavelli, Leopardi expands his eclectic list of *Disegni letterari* to include a companion on the history of morality, moral orations, and studies on Machiavellism. Among

these book projects is a book analyzing Machiavelli's philosophy and its reverberations on Italy's morality and "behavioral politics", and a historical commentary illustrating general political principles based on the distinct commentary that Machiavelli sets forth in his *Discourses on Livy* (1531). On the Machiavellism of the later *Pensieri*, see MECATTI 2004, pp. 59-111.

10 *PP*, pp. 607-9.

11 *Ibid.*

edition. Thus, in the coda Castiglione should explain how he intends to use this diabolical (hence, Machiavellian) pedagogical manual.

In depicting Machiavello as the type for deceit and fraud, Leopardi conjures up the tropes of a longstanding debate concerning the politics of Machiavelli's reputation, tuning what would seem a mere reference into a code name for a form of political leadership unconstrained by moral and religious absolutes.¹² It is well known that since Machiavelli's works were published, translated, and censored, his name becomes a shared cultural product that both collided with and perpetuated the disgraceful reputation of Italian politics: vicious, corrupted, unstable. By the seventeenth century, any investigation of his intellectual legacy must confront the derogatory usage that the term 'Machiavellian' takes on during the Counter-Reformation period, commonly describing ruthless, irreligious, and devious politics. If 'Machiavellian' became synonymous with amorality and a symbol for political manipulation through the use of both force and fraud, the antitheses of classical and Renaissance *virtù*, why then does Leopardi decide to rescue Machiavelli from popular infamy to the point of investing him with the role of «founder of profound, modern politics»? Why does he occupy such an unambiguously important role throughout the *Zibaldone* as one of those heroic presence that, once sedimented in the authorial consciousness at different points in time, foster and cherish his epistemological development?

To answer these questions and to distinguish the early plot structure of the *Novella* from Leopardi's later revision, we must go back to 1821, a year of significant political events in the slow-moving process of Italian independence, and of solitary reflections in the *Zibaldone* on contemporary literary tastes and inclinations. In a long note dated June 1821, Leopardi meditates on the nature, disposition, and evolution of human faculties, as well as on the centrality of the «facoltà osservativa e comparativa» as a feature of greater intelligence or *genio*.¹³ In a similar note the following October, he reflects on the philosopher's need for imagination and on German philosophers specifically (which he knew mainly from Madame de Staël and from the articles in the *Biblioteca italiana* and the *Spettatore*) as a means of comparing the characters of northerners and southerners, identifying Machiavelli as the political pendant of those who «truly changed the face of philosophy», namely Galileo, Descartes, Locke, and Newton:

12 The bibliography on Machiavellism is vast. See especially GILBERT 1973, pp. 116-26 and CAMPI 2018, pp. 285-310.

13 *Zib.* 1183-201, 20 June 1821.

So we actually find, contrary to what at first sight might seem to be the case, that the nations with the most imagination, in short, the southern peoples, from the earliest traces we have of human history up until our own day, have always been preeminent in philosophy and especially in the great discoveries that belong to them. Greece, Egypt, India, then Arabs, then Italians during the Renaissance [...] Among the moderns, the Germans, who are certainly more skilled in abstract matters, seem to be an exception to my system [...] the eye cast by Germans into abstract matters is itself never entirely sure, although it is very free (and it can never be free without a great capacity to imagine, to feel, and without a natural mastery of nature, which only great souls have.) Minute, refined analysis is not the same as seeing at a glance and never discovers a major point of nature [...] But Galileo, Descartes, Newton, Locke, etc. have truly changed the face of philosophy [...] Machiavelli was the founder of a profound, modern politics. In short, the spirit of invention is so characteristic of the south as regards both the abstract, etc., and the beautiful and the imaginary. (*Zib.* 1849-60, 5-6 October 1821)

Leopardi was quick to note the novelty of Machiavelli, whose approach, like the other fathers of modern science and philosophy, rests on the interactions between theoretical and empirical modes of observation, and whose role as a guide in the *vita activa* would enable a recontextualization of political leadership. Naming Machiavelli a political philosopher, a title that until then had only been occupied in the *Zibaldone* by classical or French philosophers, Leopardi also singles out, throughout his secret diary, Machiavelli's attention to the rational and irrational forces that influence the foundation and conservation of power in every society (notably, the efficacy of eloquent rhetoric in shaping popular imagination and beliefs, the role of appearances in keeping consensus, the influence of human passions on political decisions), and that release the creative potentialities of «invention» and «imagination» in human actions and events.¹⁴

Moreover, Leopardi uses almost systematically a distinct set of words when describing Machiavelli's inventiveness in his *Zibaldone*. The terms «extension» (*estensione*) and «depth» (*profondità*) indicate that Machiavelli's analyses have the potential to branch out and develop in complexity touching different subjects, a tendency common in humanistic inquiries to

14 *Zib.* 1858, 5-6 October 1821.

have different fields of knowledge and ideas converge or clash.¹⁵ He alternatively employs the language of *perception* (from the Latin *perceptionem*, «come to know by direct experience») and *perspective* (*perspicere*, «look through»), and its figural meaning, in use from the late eighteenth century, «mental outlook over time») to hint at the sophisticated architecture of Machiavelli's science, which makes you see things through various angles and condenses images of the world into a plastic form reminiscent of aesthetic construction.¹⁶ In the same passage from October 1821, Leopardi detects what I would call Machiavelli's "hermeneutical sensibility":

Exactness is good for parts, not the whole [...] it is either not appropriate, or not enough for great discoveries. When you set out to compose a great whole out of the most minutely but separately considered parts, you run into a thousand difficulties, contradictions, obstacles, absurdities, dissonances, and disharmonies, a sure sign and necessary consequence of the lack of the ability to take things in at a glance that discovers the things contained in a vast field, and their reciprocal relationships («segno certo ed effetto necessario della mancanza del colpo d'occhio che scuopre in un tratto le cose contenute in un vasto campo e i loro scambievoli rapporti»). It is the most routine circumstance even in material objects and in the countless accidents of life to discover that what is proven or appears to be true and demonstrated in its smallest parts, is not proven as regard the whole. (*Zib.* 1854, 5-6 October 1821)

When thinking is judged by a standard such as «exactness», it inevitably falls short of the fundamental task of hermeneutics, which relies on the interconnectedness and extensiveness of ideas, their process of osmosis and their ability to migrate from different fields of knowledge. Leopardi leads up to nominate the greatest modern philosophers (Descartes, Galileo, Newton, Locke, and Machiavelli) *via negativa*, describing them by saying what they are *not*. In broad terms, they don't remain stagnant in abstract speculations, neither they provide sophisticated results just by solving «contradictions» and fixing «dissonances». Rather, they possess the ability to detect and explore the dialogic continuity between things «contained in a vast field», between whole and parts, or in other words, between theory and practice. Among their greatest merits and at the core of their innovative gesture, there is the development of a method based on questioning, comparison, and discussion, and secured on its relationship with the past as well as its outlook towards the future. Borrowing the language of perspectivism, and using the metaphor of seeing from a distance and close-up at the same time,

15 *Zib.* 1532, 20 August 1821.

16 *Zib.* 1850-8, 5-6 October 1821.

he acknowledges that Machiavelli sees representation and mimesis not as a normative system that reproduces models and things mechanically, but treats them inventively, making the effort to understand what escapes incorporation into logic, unity, or rationality, and including the idiosyncrasies, the «accidents of life», and the whims of human desire as key components for the foundation of knowledge. This is also why a text like the *Prince*, as has been noted, is conceived as a comprehensive arsenal of alternating perspectives and alternative readings of reality.¹⁷

The positioning of Machiavello as a diabolic counselor for the evil prince in the *Novella* appears to conflict with the depiction of Machiavelli the author in the *Zibaldone* as the authentic repository of Italian socio-political thought. Instead, the constructive judgments in the *Zibaldone* are consistent with the Machiavellism developed in Italy during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and intended to interpret Machiavelli's ideas more objectively, in terms of their historical context and 'scientific' spirit.¹⁸ Indeed before or during his zealous scrutiny of Machiavelli's works in 1823 and 1824, Leopardi might have already assimilated the works of Italian historians and political philosophers, such as Traiano Boccalini, Francesco Algarotti, Ludovico Antonio Muratori, and Antonio Genovesi, who were actively engaged in reviving Machiavellian studies and reprinting more accurate editions of his corpus.¹⁹ As Francesca Fedi suggests, Leopardi might also have come into contact with Vincenzo Cuoco, to whom Machiavelli served as a constant source of inspiration as he reconstructed the dramatic Italian events of the late eighteenth century, analyzed the sudden failure of the Neapolitan revolution, and attempted a new political path.²⁰ In his «Politics of Niccolò Machiavelli» (one of the two *Fragments on the History of Italian Politics*), Cuoco sets the scene for a dialogue between Machiavelli and a fictional interlocutor, who is or will be transcribing their conversation. In his ef-

17 KAHN 1993, pp. 196-217.

18 During the writing of the *Novella*, Leopardi likely consulted Machiavelli's texts or used his interpreters as a means of contextualizing his character's statements within the historical context of Machiavellism. As Leopardi scholars know, just because Leopardi mentions Machiavelli's name in his reading list beginning in November 1823, this does not mean that Machiavelli's works have remained completely unexplored until then: Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*, for instance, are cited in *Zib.* 2678, 4 March 1823, months before Leopardi consistently includes Machiavelli's name in his reading list.

19 ALGAROTTI 1762. See also FEDI 2010, pp. 162-3 and GENOVESI 1962, p. 124.

20 See CUOCO 2012; DI MASO 2005, pp. 85-224; FEDI I 2010, pp. 157-71. In his *Historical Essay on the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799*, Cuoco draws an analogy between 1494 and 1798, between the coming of the French to Italy, described by Machiavelli in his major works, something that is seen as the beginning of the end of the Italian Renaissance, and Napoleon's invasion three centuries later, which led to the establishment of Francophone republics throughout the peninsula. Observing a repeated pattern, Cuoco maintains that Italian revolutionaries lacked the requirements for promo-

forts to construct a legitimate space for the reassessment of Machiavellian ideas, Cuoco encapsulates the semantic shift of the term ‘Machiavellism’ (from denoting unscrupulousness to denoting proto-democratic praxis) and the difference between an old and modern perspective on the place of Machiavelli in political literature.²¹

In «Politics of Niccolò Machiavelli», has been accused of inciting tyrannical power appropriation proposing models for it (such as Cesare Borgia) that still scandalize his interpreters. To these accusations, Machiavelli replies that he has just reported «the ordinary facts» of his own time, hoping that, by providing an insight into the dynamics of power of elites, the people would «reawake» their spirits and gain a better understanding of the «customs» of his own time.²² Therefore he explains why he decided to address the *grandi* instead of the *popolo*, thereby reconciling an apparent contradiction in terms:

– How come you gave your precepts to princes instead of the people?
 MACHIAVELLI: I tried to speak to the people, but I realized that I would speak in vain. People move and operate according to their virtue, princes for their power. You know the people among whom we live. I could not tell them, «Make a good use of your virtue» – they did not have it. I said to the princes: «Put your power to good use» – and this precept, sooner or later, produces the same effect as the first, because the efficacy of virtue is so great that, even simulated, helps recompose the souls and orders of the nations; and the wise use of power (for the virtue of the princes is nothing more than this) produces noble habits in princes and a desire in their subjects to emulate them.²³

Cuoco summons up Machiavelli’s debt as well as his criticism to the humanist tradition (particularly the Ciceronian strain of humanist rhetoric) in judging political affairs through the lenses of the *honestum* and *utilitas*. For Renaissance humanists, what united ethics, politics, and economics

ting liberty as nondomination and the ability to create an independent political identity separate from their foreign liberators, thus failing to live up to popular expectations.

21 CUOCO 2007-2012, pp. 44-52. While Leopardi does not explicitly mention this source, Cuoco’s ideas influenced authors close to him (such as Melchiorre Cesarotti) and circulated widely when Cuoco still worked as a journalist for the *Giornale italiano* in Milan and later as an important government figure in Naples, where Leopardi lived from 1833 to 1837.

22 Ivi, p. 45.

23 Ivi, p. 47 (my translations). By reframing Machiavelli’s ideas on virtue, utility, and popular consensus (the real link to Leopardi’s *Novella* that Fedi overlooks), Cuoco foregrounds popular accountability and advances a new political strategy that aligns the interests of both elites and the people, a notion at the core of Machiavelli’s understanding of leadership: an unprecedented reevaluation of Machiavelli’s thought will later inspire Francesco De Sanctis’ populism and Gramsci’s concept of

was their central concern with moral virtue. As a guide to civic conduct and political action, humanist ethics (propagated up until the seventeenth century) accentuated the distinction between the honorable (*dignum* or *honestum*) and the useful (*utile*, as a personal advantage or as a means of seeking the common good), with honor favored over utility, and reiterated the fact that both individual happiness and the health of the state were directly affected by the practice of moral virtue in its correlative forms.²⁴ In problematizing the relation between what's useful and what's just honorable, Machiavelli harnesses his political knowledge and diplomatic experience to affirm that the criterion of correct action in political rhetoric and leadership is neither «moral goodness» nor the «intrinsically moral judgement of prudence», but the efficacy of *virtù*, virtue that «demonstrates its own excellence in being effective» as occasion demands.²⁵

For Machiavelli, virtue must be conceived as a form of rhetorical efficiency that functions even when simulated and that may be used to «recompose the souls» and recalibrate «orders of the nation». At a crucial point in his text, Cuoco attends to the importance of Machiavelli's *appearances* – the qualities that a leader can show or simulate, but not necessarily possess – in securing power, earning consensus among the people, and contributing to the well-being of the state. The art of politics is an aestheticized practice grounded on the «exhibition» of certain qualities or opinions and the «emulation» of certain conducts or practices (*Prince*, 7, 8, 17). As Machiavelli reminds when discussing the rise to power of Cesare Borgia (*Prince*, 18), his model of the modern prince, appearances are useful to obtain a certain outcome that benefits the people and, if used wisely, these simulated qualities produce a virtuous and felicitous effect over time. Readers like Leopardi, already acquainted with Machiavelli's advocacy for dissimulation, might find this scenario exceedingly familiar.²⁶ Probably under the influence of Machiavelli's exploration of the value of appearance in maintaining the support of the people, and following the Romantic psychology of aesthetic illusions (the willing acceptance of something as true that we know is not true), Leopardi expounds on the func-

the *modern prince*.

24 REMER 2009, pp. 1-28.

25 KAHN 1994, p. 9. Machiavelli assigns different meanings to *virtù* (ability, skill, determination) depending on the context. Similarly, Leopardi in *Zib.* 2215-7, 3 December 1821.

26 *Zib.* 2678-81, 4 March 1823. See CAMAROTTO 2019, pp. 87-104, D'INTINO 2009, pp. 115-66, FOLIN 2008, pp. 53-68, QUONDAM 2010. Camarotto affirms that the notions of 'virtue' and 'appearance' that emerge in the *Novella* and in the later *Pensieri* are closely

related, if not identical. It is worth remembering, however, that in the *Novella* Leopardi is still playing with the idea of moral virtue as «ammaestramento» or as a performative appearance (*Zib.* 663-5, 16 February 1821) and is concerned with the idea of reforming moral teachings that fail to treat virtue as a form of action. Conversely in the later *Pensieri*, he grew increasingly disillusioned about the efficacy of virtuous action in society and already assimilated the distinction between appearances as deceitful facades vis-à-vis appearances as

tion of illusions in bridging the gap between the writers and the people and keeping the public ‘enchanted’ within a disenchanted modernity.²⁷

The conceptual apparatus of Cuoco’s story fashioned the coming-to-be of a different type of Machiavelli, a character that actively seeks to dispel his “devil’s advocate” reputation by slowly cutting the cloth of fictionality and becoming more historically defined and determined. While Cuoco frames aspects of Machiavelli’s philosophy within a fictional (albeit probable) experience as embodying his view of how Machiavelli’s political theory should be received, Leopardi, on the contrary, plays with empty caricatures. In his *Novella*, Xenophon and Machiavello takes on the roles assigned to them by the early modern tradition of Machiavellism: the former is the author of a manual on exemplary political conduct, and the latter is the writer of a guide for callous rulers. Moreover, Xenophon and Machiavello personify two (supposedly) divergent formative approaches: they were both rethinking old questions in a new way, but Xenophon centered the *Education of Cyrus* on a political use of fiction to shape the ideal type of emperor, whereas Machiavelli furnished later readers with an historical interpretation of actual power dynamics, not a politically engaged romance or utopia.

In June of 1822, Leopardi goes back to the draft of the *Novella*. He promised to structure it as follows: «burlesque and fantastic description of the court, the courtesans, Pluto, his son, etc.», followed by the opening of the contest, the orations of the two candidates, and the victory of Machiavello as the new preceptor of the «diabolical prince».²⁸ However, none of these narrative sequences are further developed and the only addition in the expanded version of 1822 is Machiavello’s rhetorical intervention before the kings of the underworld; in fact, Machiavello’s speech ends up occupying the entire novella, whereas Xenophon’s oration and Castiglione’s election remain both unwritten.

In the final version, Machiavello uses the language of invective to construct a strong polemic concerned with the disputed question of what form of moral virtue was best suited for the highest intellectual purposes and the fulfillment of human happiness in society. A psychological understanding of moral virtue and its role in shaping individual conduct as well as laws and institution was

positive, healthy illusions.

²⁷ While a thorough examination of this topic would fall outside the scope of this article, it is useful to remember that Machiavelli’s concept of appearances is in dialogue with Leopardi’s own “theory of dissimulation,” which rests on the importance of intellectual illusions, that is, the literary fictions that have the power to beguile, thus finding favor among the common people,

by remaining within the realm of the verisimilar. Although he feels that a restoration of antiquity is impossible and outmoded, he pursues the attainment of an ancient effect in prose and poetry through intellectual illusions, whose pedagogical function lays in their ability to accommodate the beliefs of the people through inspiring fictions in prose and poetry.

²⁸ *PP*, p. 607 (my translations).

incorporated by Machiavelli in the *Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*, where he made explicit the dilemmas concerning utopian ideals of moderation, self-control, and benevolence for the purpose of maintaining a republic free and just. A primary aim of politics is to educate not tame the passions of the citizen and favor institutional arrangements that produce the greatest benefit, at a given time in history, for the collective life of the city: «in the way [men] behave, and especially where deeds of moment are concerned, men should take account of the times, and act accordingly».²⁹ In full agreement with the Machiavellian view, Leopardi makes his character say that politics have an important ally in literature, for both should teach «the art of living well» (*l'arte del saper vivere*) according to the needs and interests of their audience and «in harmony with the times».³⁰ Literature cannot fulfill its ultimate purpose if it follows established moral conventions at a time in Italy when the vocabulary of moral and civic philosophy must be reworked entirely. As Machiavello argues:

If the books don't teach us how to live, then what is the point? Now why should you tell the young men, or the men, or the prince, *do this*, and be certain that, if they follow your advice, they are bound to fail, they won't know how to live, and they will never achieve anything? Why must men read books to learn and educate themselves, and at the same time, know that they will have to do the opposite of what these very same books prescribe to them?³¹

In reminding us so, Machiavello-Leopardi sees a conflict between the moral value of literature and the detrimental effects of scholarly inquiries into the past for erudition's sake. This attitude, especially typical of the academics Leopardi will meet in his sojourn in Rome and identified as archeologists, leads to a paralysis of creativity and generates an indiscriminating reverence for ancient periods, thereby magnifying the fracture existing between a bygone past and a present still lacking critical elaboration.

The rhetorical distance from the actual needs of the literary audience («the wall between the writers and the people») may be attributed, Machiavello says in the novella, to two generalized errors. First, hinting at the usefulness of literary imitation as a pedagogic exercise, Machiavello maintains that throughout history it has been proposed to place literature at the service of people, but there have been no (early modern) books (except the *Prince*) that fulfill this purpose:

Not surprisingly, my book [the *Prince*] prevailed to yours [Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus*], to that of Fénelon [*The Adventures of Telemachus*], and to all the other political books because I say

29 MACHIAVELLI 1989, I, pp. 450-1.

31 *PP*, p. 608.

30 *Ivi*, p. 450.

plainly the things that are true, that men do, will always do, and must do, while others state the opposite, although they also know and see that things are as I think they are. So, their books are like the books of the Sophists: many scholastic exercises useless to life and to the goal they propose, that is, to instruct it.³²

Above all, Machiavelli's book(s) prevailed to Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus*, a canonical mirror for princes since its Latin translation by the Italian humanists Lorenzo Valla and Poggio Bracciolini, and a model for the just, pitiful, affable behavior of the political ruler that was perfectly aligned with the moral principles of the Renaissance.³³ After criticizing the pedagogical enterprises of the past (the *Education of Cyrus*), Machiavelli polemicizes against the literature of advice of the present (Fénelon's *Adventures of Telemachus*, Knigge's *On Human Relations*, and to a certain extent, Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*) for providing exemplary narratives which address bygone principles of moral education that are far removed from reality.³⁴ In the eighteenth century, the *Adventures of Telemachus* (1699) became one of the most popular and frequently reedited literary works, and a source for any study on moral conduct. Fénelon could have been admired by Leopardi for his desire to restore ancient eloquence and for anti-absolutist ideals, which, through the *Adventures*, influenced the republican myths of the French Revolution (i.e. that sovereignty resides with the nation, not with an absolute monarch). Nevertheless, Leopardi may have considered Fénelon's teachings entirely unpractical: his political and literary reforms, despite resembling those of prosperous Roman and Athenian republics, were based on an archaic and rigidly hierarchical model that made them incompatible with the temperament of modern society. Along the same trajectory's of Fénelon, Adolph Knigge must have negotiated the same conceptual terrain when he published *On Human Relations* by (1788): a form of narrative that, to Leopardi's eyes, is concerned with the enactment of an ideal set of morals as the ultimate end of one's education.

32 *Ibidem*, p. 608.

33 BIASIORI 2017. In emphasizing how Machiavelli predated Leopardi's theory of pleasure, Biasiori's analysis is, however, a bit reductive, since it associates Machiavelli's «mala contentezza», that is, the eternal contrast between the infinity of human desires and the finiteness of satisfaction, to Leopardi's concept of pleasure, but ignores the medieval and Renaissance humoral theory that underlies it. Moreover, in his analysis Biasiori sketches Leopardi's (Machiavellian-inspired) reflection on beginnings as a proof

of his acquaintance with the *Discourses on Livy*; yet he overlooks the theoretical implications underlying Machiavelli's use of medical humoral theory and its «return to the beginning» as a metaphor for a purgative action within the body politic, not as hint at the circularity of human desire in its quest for pleasure, as Leopardi believes.

34 Although Leopardi extols Castiglione (for his concept of *sprezzatura*) and Fénelon (primarily for his language) in the *Zibaldone*, yet he plays here with the politics of one's reputation and one's text.

The second error, which Machiavello sees as a repercussion of the abuse of moral philosophy and the subsequent turn away from the real to the ideal, concerns the relationship between language and ideas. Things, argues Machiavello, «must be called by their names» (*chiamare le cose coi loro nomi*), or in other words, words should be able to express ideas. If the literary language confuses the relationship between ways of doing and ways of being, alters the relation of signifier to signified, of *verba* to *res*, and ultimately «messes with your head», then what is the reason, Machiavello asks, to emulate it?

Now I don't know why, willing to be as useful as possible, and having available the clear language that I used, you want to use an obscure language that confounds, often deceives, and messes with the writer's head [...] Why do all the arts and sciences have their own accurate terms and lexicons, except for the most influential art of all [literature], which can be identified with the art of living well? What is the reason for borrowing the vocabulary of moral philosophy, which is the art of not living?³⁵

By virtue of his philological and etymological competence, Machiavello underlies here the need for a clear literary language that reinforces the correspondence between words and the concepts they denote, rather than being marked by disingenuous rhetoric and emphasizing style at the expense of thought. Likewise, in the dedicatory letter of the *Prince*, Machiavelli anticipates that he won't win over his audience by using an «ornate speech» (*ornamento estrinseco*), but by speaking plainly and usefully about the world as it is, not as it ought to be, including in his account of conflicting inclinations and passions, what Leopardi would call the «contradictions and disharmonies of life» in human societies. Not just the rehearsal of Machiavelli's teaching on interpreting the ideological context of one's time, but also the commitment to find a new vocabulary hang in the balance, awaiting critical exploration.

Prior to the novella's revision in 1822, the character of Machiavelli represents the obstinate residue of the tendentious ideas propagated by Machiavellian ideologies of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. In returning to it after the numerous inquiries in the *Zibaldone* into the genealogy of human politics and societies, and the role of efficacious rhetoric and politics in establishing a national literature, Leopardi makes Machiavelli the spoke character of Italy's cultural lacunae and the «errors» that the literature of his time, to be truly useful, must avoid. Through a 'necromantic' operation, a resurrection from the underworld of worn-out clichés, Leopardi exposes

³⁵ *PP*, pp. 608-9.

the unfulfilled potentials of Machiavelli, who becomes a figure subtracted from parody or censorship and reassigned to persuasive oratory.

The possibility of seeing Machiavelli acting outside the framework of the novella, taking the place of the worthy teacher of «the art of living well» depended, however, on the celebration of a certain kind of narrative open-endedness. We may venture to say that the novella resists to become fictional in the most traditional sense: not only because the narrative frame is left undeveloped and all the characters (with the exception of Machiavelli) do not have a voice, but most importantly, because Leopardi seems to escape any aspiration for synthesis or closure. He alters the plot so as to cast Machiavello's oration as the main obstacle to the novella's narrative closure. In doing so, the novella contests the type of inaccurate fictionality that has invested Machiavelli over the history of Machiavellism as a typecast figure for malicious rhetoric, and at the same time, leaves room for the development of the theoretical elements gained from Machiavello's speech.

The *Novella of Xenophon and Niccolò Machiavello* has thematized a series of issues that concern Leopardi's relationship to his contemporaries in the Restoration between 1819 and 1822, as they concerned Machiavelli's relationship with Renaissance humanists: the critique of pedagogical models that are bound to a specific set of class values or ideologies and committed to the moral and the honorable but not the useful; the efficacy of rhetoric and the consequence of its idealization or impoverishment; and the lack of a linguistic vocabulary that is both uncontrived and solicitous of ideas, thereby serving as the basis of the cultural renovation of literature and philosophy.

By positioning Machiavelli as the diabolic counselor of the new prince from the underworld, Leopardi attempted to play with the reception of Machiavelli's philosophy both inside and outside of Italy, but at the same time, by considering Machiavelli the truest repository of Italian political thought in the *Zibaldone*, he seems to fit Machiavelli's ideas in a different way. The *Novella* thus seemed to prepare this transition by thematizing the relation of what *appears* to be true (Machiavelli is nothing more than a conduit to evil politics) to what *is* true (Machiavelli's rhetoric is more sophisticated than it appears to be) in order to create a new literary space from which a different idea of Machiavellism could surface.

This dialectic between appearances (distinguished between appearances as mere falsehoods and appearances as positive, healthy illusions) and reality (constrained by the laws of truth and rationality) can also be viewed as an allegory for the complex philosophical undertaking of the *Operette morali*. As it is well known, after the disappointing sojourn in Rome ended in April of 1823, Leopardi returned to Recanati, where he continued his work on the *Operette*, (re)read Machiavelli's corpus, includ-

ing his stage plays and other fictional works (the *Mandrake*, the *Clizia*, *Belfagor*, and the *Golden Ass*), and picked up where he left off with his political reflections, this time motivated by an acutely antihierarchical disposition. Despite losing the patriotic spirit of the *Discourse on Romantic poetry* and growing disillusioned about social and cultural reforms, the *Operette* retain a certain ideological ethos. In the *Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro*, which concludes the edition of 1827 and comes across as an apology for the book as a whole, Leopardi seems to grasp the fundamental connection between Machiavelli's appearances (the simulated qualities used to achieve a certain outcome that benefits the people) and the metaliterary potential of fiction (as something conducive to benefic illusions). The dialogue stages two contrasting voices. Aiming to persuade his interlocutor that humans are perfectible, Timandro discusses the benefits of concealing the truths in writing in order to be more agreeable to others. On the contrary, Eleandro challenges the false belief that the knowledge of the truth is the key to men's perfectibility or happiness, and maintains that a moral book should embrace reality's contradictions and disharmonies, rather than offer an idealization of it and of certain human qualities «that no longer exist in any man born today». Considered to be both Machiavelli's and Leopardi's alter ego, Eleandro also reminds that poets and philosophers should strive to conceal the truth through illusions, in the art of politics as in literature, that is, through the myths and literary images that are neither false nor immoral but that can transcend the limits of classical, Christian, and humanist moral philosophy, and that are a source of inspiration for the people, since they distract them from the condition in which man knows the truth.

We can now better contextualize the importance of nominating Machiavelli the «founder of profound, modern politics» in the *Zibaldone* and ask whether Leopardi alerted us to something unique about his writing. Leopardi ascribes a superior epistemological status to what I called earlier a certain hermeneutical capacity possessed by Machiavelli and his early modern avatars (Descartes, Galileo, Locke, and Newton), and understood as «the ability to take things in at a glance» and discover the «reciprocal relationships» of the various «things contained in a vast field». ³⁶ In other words, Machiavelli stands metonymically for a multiperspectival self-consciousness that binds together the knowledge of phenomenal particulars and a mentalism in interpreting these phenomena within a creative mindset. In addressing questions concerning the writer's hermeneutical situatedness, Leopardi ascribes to Machia-

36 *Zib.* 1852, 5-6 October 1821.

velli the ability to compose and decompose things in order to attain the knowledge of them, to create an interstice of maneuver within which the writer can intervene and exercise his rhetorical influence.³⁷ As the novella shows, the oblique intersection of rhetoric, language, and fiction play all a fundamental epistemological role in the possibility of knowledge, understanding, and in the *orientation* of judgement.

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37 I borrow the concept of situatedness of understanding from GADAMER 2004.

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