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**GIACOMO LEOPARDI'S POSTHUMANISM.
THE *OPERETTE MORALI* OR THE APPEAL
OF THE INORGANIC**

ABSTRACT: In light of recent scholarship on the posthuman, this contribution asks a specific question: how to approach, today, Leopardi's *Operette morali* in order to take up the question of his anti-anthropocentric discourse? In order to answer this question, the essay takes as its object Leopardi's articulation of the tension between organic and inorganic – a distinction which is central to scientific discourses and literary representation between the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries. In particular, the essay examines the ways in which, in the *Operette morali*, Leopardi decenters the human subject through the representation of the inorganic. It shows how Leopardi's understanding of the the organic/inorganic dyad develops from his evolving materialism and converges with key issues in his philosophical reflection. From a posthumanist perspective, Leopardi's critique of anthropocentrism takes on new meaning when seen in the context of the opposition between organic and inorganic. It emerges as a practice that questions the centrality of the human through a conceptual redefinition that explores the cognitive and biological limits of human beings.

KEYWORDS: Inorganic, Organic, Posthuman, Antianthropocentrism, Death, Automaton, Sensibility, Materialism.

PAROLE-CHIAVE: Inorganico, organico, postumano, antiantropocentrismo, morte, automa, sensibilità, materialismo.

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I explore the representation of the inorganic in Giacomo Leopardi's *Operette morali* with the aim of addressing Leopardi's anti-anthropocentric discourse from the perspective of posthumanism. In recent years, scholars in Romantic studies have tried to create a dialogue between the contemporary debate about the posthuman and those aspects of Romantic-era

scientific and philosophical thought dedicated to rethinking the ontological status of the human.¹ Posthumanism, in particular, offers an intellectually-provocative way of relating Romantic-era critiques of anthropocentrism to the period's thought about the inorganic, for example regarding the relationship between materialism and vitalism and the boundary between living and non-living. What distinguishes posthumanist approaches is that they do not aim at an erasure of the human, but rather they develop a reflection that decenters humanity. Their aim is to recognize on the one hand the paradoxical position of human beings, who are both external to the world and intertwined with it; and on the other hand, to redefine their position in the interaction with other non-human agents, such as non-human animals, plants, objects, or weather phenomena.² By approaching Leopardi's thought from a posthumanist perspective, I hope to bring such theoretical reflections to bear on his work in order to redefine his critique of anthropocentrism as a practice that displaces the centrality of the human. I also hope to show how Leopardi's positions on organic and inorganic materiality, on the conception of life and living things, and on the question of the human engage with scientific, philosophical, and aesthetic discourses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that impact all of Europe. Ultimately, by highlighting Leopardi's intellectual participation in the debates of his time and his prefiguring of the concerns of our own, we will not only better appreciate his position in his own period, but also his contemporary relevance.

I. WHAT IS THE INORGANIC?

I will begin by framing the topic in general terms from a historical and theoretical point of view in order to clarify the breadth of meanings associated with the term 'inorganic'. Up until the seventeenth century, to explain the functioning of the living in terms of that of a machine or of an automaton was not just a metaphor or an analogy. It was rather a question of identity. For Thomas Hobbes and for René Descartes, the operating principles of an animal coincided with those of any other mechanism. The laws of mechanics applied to the functioning both of the inanimate and of the animate. Up

1 See, for example, EFFINGER 2022; LANDGRAF – TROP – WEATHERBY 2019; WASHINGTON – MCCARTHY 2019; and BROGLIO 2017.

2 The concept of the posthuman is central to several different critical approaches that try to rethink the relationship between humans and material objects, between the animate and the inanimate, and between the organic and the inorganic.

Magdalena Zolkos identifies four approaches that pay particular attention to the interaction organic/inorganic: thing theory, new materialism, actor-network theory, and object-oriented ontology. For details on each approach, see ZOLKOS 2020, p. 148. See VINT 2020 for an overview of the objects of enquiry at the center of posthumanist investigation, from machines and non-human animals to the anthropocene and the inorganic.

to this moment, in fact, as François Jacob explained in *La logique du vivant*: «the living extended without a break into the inanimate... There was as yet no fundamental division between the living and the non-living» (JACOB 1973, p. 33). According to Jacob's reconstruction, the scientific distinction between the living and the non-living takes firm hold at the beginning of the nineteenth century, thanks to Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and the introduction of generative categories. With the rise of biology as a science, Jacob maintains, «the living was separated from the inanimate» as a scientific category (ivi, 1973, p. 152).³

A brief passage from Lamarck's *La Flore française* (1778), illustrates clearly what counted as organic and inorganic at the *tournant des lumières*:

Si l'on observe les différens êtres qui entrent dans la structure intérieure de notre globe, ou qui en occupent les dehors, on remarquera d'abord un grand nombre de corps composés d'une matière brute, morte, & qui s'accroît par la juxtaposition des substances qui concourent à sa formation, & non par l'effet d'aucun principe interne de développement. Ces êtres sont appelés en général, *êtres inorganiques* ou *minéraux*, & se divisent en diverses classes particulières ; savoir, les terres, les pierres, les métaux, les sels, &c. auxquels on doit ajouter les éléments qui ne sont que les derniers résultats de la décomposition des corps. D'autres êtres sont pourvus d'organes propres à différentes fonctions, & jouissent d'un principe vital très-marqué, & de la faculté de reproduire leur semblable. On les a compris sous la dénomination générale d'*êtres organiques*. (LAMARCK 1778, pp. 1-2).

Lamarck distinguishes between «inorganic beings», made of raw matter and lacking an internal principle of development, and «organic beings», which are equipped with organs and can reproduce. The latter are, in turn, divided into two categories: those that are without sensibility or ability to move, i.e. plants, and those endowed with sensing and spontaneous movement, i.e. animals.⁴ The inorganic, thus, is first and foremost that which is lacking functional organs. Second, it is that which is not endowed with a vital principle, which is not able to reproduce and has no sensibility or capacity for movement.

Scientists between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used oppositional terminology to differentiate between the two categories and one

3 In the *Order of Things*, Foucault develops an analogous argument. He reflects on how the emergence of the principle of *organic structure*, in late 18th-century natural science, renders the notion of life central to the ordering of natural beings. See FOUCAULT 1994, pp. 245-52. For an analysis of the conceptual transformations of

the term "organism" between the mid-17th and mid-19th centuries, see CHEUNG 2010.

4 The status of plants as 'sensitive' beings was rather controversial at the time. See GIBSON 2015, pp. 149-78. As we shall see below, several thinkers of the time believed "sensibility" to be an attribute of *all* living things,

of the most common sets of oppositions was ‘organized’ and ‘inorganized’ beings, a distinction which, as we shall see, Leopardi himself employed.⁵ Organized beings, which include the vegetable and the animal, i.e. organic beings, are those that are composed of different parts, each with different functions, that are interrelated and mutually dependent. Inorganized beings, i.e. inorganic beings, by contrast, lack any internal division into interactive parts (i.e., each part possesses the same qualities as any other part). While focused on bodily organization, these two categories overlapped with the organic and the inorganic and retained the same set of contrastive meanings, which would rearrange the Aristotelian three kingdoms of nature along the rift between living and non-living.

In fact, in the time frame that begins with Lamarck and culminates with Charles Darwin, a new distinction is introduced alongside the traditional categories of mineral, vegetable, and animal: on one side is the living thing, that which senses, which nourishes itself, and reproduces, and on the other side is inorganic, non-living, inert, inanimate matter. The former has feeling and is subject to suffering and decay. The latter is non-sentient and indistinct and lacks a complex system of organization. As David Wills has observed in *Inanimation*, this moment marks the emergence of a “new divide” in nature between living and non-living.⁶ Whereas the notion of life comes to be defined by the positive characteristics that we still attribute to it, as a matter of reproduction and inheritance, the inorganic becomes defined by what it lacks in respect to life.

At the same time, in European scientific and philosophical thought between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the boundary between organic and inorganic is permeable. The organic is that which, at the end of its life cycle, returns to being inorganic, and the inorganic can always be assimilated by the organic. For example, the German thinkers of *Naturphilosophie*, such as F. W. J. Schelling, conceived of the relationship between organic and inorganic in terms of an oxymoronic sameness/otherness.⁷ Similar ideas are found in the writings of Georges-Louis Leclerc Buffon, Denis Diderot, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Common to all is a homology between organic and inorganic within the natural unity – an idea of continuity between the inorganic world and the organic world.

These scientific and philosophical ideas both influence and emerge in literary representation. Romantic authors explore in literature the most

even if each possessed it in different degrees. Leopardi’s vision of the garden of universal suffering in *Zib.* 4175 would seem to endorse this idea.

5 On the prevalence of the distinction see SULLIVAN 2003, p. 36.

6 See WILLS 2016, p. 3.

7 See TROP 2019.

disturbing and radical aspects of the tension between organic and inorganic, sometimes exploiting the subversive potential of the two categories and sometimes undermining them:⁸ what does it mean to reimagine the unity of nature as a convergence of organic and inorganic matter and as the opposition between life and non-life? What is the relationship of the human body vis-à-vis the inorganic world? What is the difference between living bodies and dead or inorganic bodies? What does it mean to equate human existence with the organic and thus with the living?

2. LEOPARDI'S CHAIN OF BEING: ORGANIZED BEINGS VS INORGANIZED BEINGS

Similar questions related to the tension between organic and inorganic and between life and non-life are present in the work of Giacomo Leopardi in close dialogue with his materialism and from an anti-anthropocentric perspective. Leopardi's materialism is rooted in the classical Epicurean and Lucretian tradition, but it is also indebted to the Enlightenment materialist tradition and to French sensationism. As such, his materialist perspective is filtered through a form of philosophical sensationism according to which all mental and physical states are the result of sensations and impressions perceived through the senses. Beginning in 1824, his sensationist materialism takes a radical turn towards a gnoseological materialism «che distrugge le illusioni sul significato cosmico dell'uomo svelando la sua limitatezza e l'incommensurabilità fra i suoi desideri e il potere della natura» (POLIZZI 2003, pp. 227-8). Throughout Leopardi's oeuvre, his materialism develops in constant dialogue with the scientific and philosophical literature of the time and is characterized by a merging of vitalist and materialist views. He is exposed to and reworks ideas and suggestions deriving from thinkers and naturalists as diverse as Diderot, Buffon, Paul Henri Thiry d'Holbach, Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland, and Erasmus Darwin.⁹ Grounded in a convergence of materialism and vitalism, Leopardi's anti-anthropocentric reflection finds its most compelling expression in the *Operette morali*, many of which were written in 1824, when he began to embrace Stratonian materialism.

8 For example, one might think of authors such as E. T. A. Hoffmann, Ludwig Tieck, William Wordsworth, and Mary Shelley, who, in different ways but showing a similar sensibility, thematize the tensions surrounding the uncertain boundary between death and life, permanence and impermanence, organic and inorganic.

9 POLIZZI 2003 provides a detailed reconstruction of Leopardi's scientific knowledge and its sources. On Leopardi and science see also, POLIZZI 2008, STABILE 2001 and NEGRI 1998. On the convergence of materialist and vitalist positions in his philosophy, see CAPITANO 2020, esp. for the relationship to d'Holbach. On the complex genealogy of Leopardi's materialism, see CAPRA 2016, pp. 89-92.

Taking as a starting point the polarity between organic and inorganic discussed in the opening section, I will focus on the ways in which, in the *Operette morali*, Leopardi decenters the human subject through the representation of the inorganic, which is imagined in terms of that which is in a relationship of identity and alterity with the organic. In an 1821 entry of the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi reflects on the unavoidable anthropocentrism which, in the aesthetic realm, brings human beings to prefer artistic productions that focus on the representation of everything that pertains to the human, especially the sentiments. He describes a scale of interest that situates “inorganized things” in last place and that expresses a clear aesthetic prejudice that is not merely anthropocentric, but also, more extensively, organic:

la poesia non diletta molto né durevolmente se verte 1. Sopra cose inorganizzate; 2. Sopra cose organizzate ma non vive; 3. Sopra enti vivi ma non uomini; 4. Sopra uomini ma non sopra ciò che meglio spetta all'uomo ed a ciascun lettore, cioè le passioni, i sentimenti, insomma l'animo umano; (notate queste gradazioni che sono applicabili ad ogni genere di cose e idee piacevoli, ed alla mia teoria del piac.) (*Zib.* 1847, 5 ottobre 1821)

It is striking, then, that several characters that appear in the *Operette morali* as protagonists, in supporting roles, or just as mere extras, belong to the first three categories of this aesthetic hierarchy. We have, to name a few, the automata of the *Proposta di premi fatta dall'Accademia dei Sillografi*, the imp and the gnome, and the mummies in the *Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie*. In going against aesthetic expectations, Leopardi has clear subversive intentions that align with the anti-anthropocentric discourse of the *Operette morali*. In particular, through the representation of the inorganic, he enacts a reversal of ontological privilege. The positive aspects of the organic and of life take on a negative value, while the characteristics of the inorganic – primarily, as we shall see, not sensing and not being conformable – become positive and desirable.

In his *Zibaldone*, Leopardi distinguishes broadly between the organic and the inorganic, identifying the specific properties that set organized beings apart from inorganized things. The organic and the inorganic are the two fundamental categories at the basis of his reworking of the concept of the great chain of being, or *Scala Naturae*. In the long section of the *Zibaldone* in which he discusses the relative perfection of each species on earth, Leopardi imagines a scale, which has at one end «gli esseri affatto o più di tutti gli altri inorganizzati» and at the other end «gli esseri più organizzati» (*Zib.* 2899, 6 luglio 1823). The gradation of beings, according to the first part of Leopardi's argument, can be imagined as moving

from inorganized beings to fully organized beings, i.e. humans, the most advanced life form. In this respect, his take on the chain of being does not stray from the conventional model, which implies a hierarchy of species that culminates in human beings.¹⁰

This biological teleology, with its implicit anthropocentrism, however, is reversed when happiness is given a place on the scale. When considering the potential of each species to be content and satisfied (i.e., to achieve happiness), human beings do not stand out, but rather they find themselves at the bottom of the scale. The top is occupied by those beings that, in Leopardi's words, «tengono il mezzo della organizzazione» (*Zib.* 2899, 6 luglio 1823), that is, one is led to assume, non-human animals. The capacity for happiness depends on two specific properties that, Leopardi explains, distinguish organized matter from inorganized matter: sensibility and conformability.

Leopardi's characterization of organized beings, and primarily of human beings, as endowed with sensibility and conformability takes on new meaning when we see it in the context of the opposition between organic and inorganic as it is laid out in the *Operette morali*. Here, Leopardi's rewriting of the chain of being opens up a space for moral reflection where physiology and psychology converge.

3. «THE FEEL OF NOT TO FEEL IT»

Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term 'sensibility' was used in several different fields, ranging from philosophy and literature to natural history and physics. In its most immediate meaning, it designated that which was related to the senses and the ability to have sensations. As a property of organized matter, it presupposed the presence of sense organs. When used in the life sciences, then, it referred to the ability of organic beings to sense and respond to stimuli or impressions and it was tightly linked to a notion of life and of the living. In literature and philosophy, the term acquired a slightly different nuance of meaning. Still a vital quality, it defined a readiness in perceiving and responding to emotional stimuli. It was an emotional receptivity that could manifest itself in the moral, aesthetic, or social field. As a distinguishing attribute of human beings, it implied both an embodied experience of life and a synchronic accord of mind and body. In the *Encyclopédie*, for example, 'sensibility' has two entries, one moral and one medical. Louis Jaucourt defines it in moral terms as

¹⁰ On Leopardi's adaptation of the *Scala Naturae* as a key notion in eighteenth-century natural sciences, see DAMIANI 2011, p. 3502, n.1 to p. 1830; LEOPARDI 2013, pp. 2262-3, n.1 to *Zib.* 2900; and CAPITANO 2020, pp. 53-60.

a: «disposition tendre & délicate de l'âme, qui la rend facile à être émue, à être touchée» (JAUQUET 2022, v. 15, p. 52). Whereas Henri Fouquet describes it in medical terms as: «la faculté de sentir, le principe sensitif, ou le sentiment même des parties, la base et l'agent conservateur de la vie, l'animalité par excellence, le plus beau, le plus singulier phénomène de la nature, etc.» (FOUQUET 2022, v. 15, p. 38). The term continued to have multiple meanings well into the nineteenth century, and because of its polysemy, as Stephen Gaukroger has suggested, it allowed for connections to be established between natural-philosophical theories and «moral, philosophical and psychological theories», thus «shaping a new field of the moral sciences» (GAUKROGER 2010, p. 389).

In line with the scientific literature of the time, in the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi describes sensibility as a general property of organized beings and as the expression of a vital force. It becomes, in fact, tantamount to life.¹¹ As Leopardi highlights in his inverted ladder of being, however, one's propensity to suffering is directly proportional to one's sensibility. A heightened and more refined sensibility, such as that of human beings, implies not only the ability to experience pleasure more intensely, but also the certainty of more intense suffering.¹²

The tragic aspect of the equivalence of life and sensibility is dramatized in the *Operette morali*, especially in those dialogues that scholars have described as part of the so-called phase of sensationist existential pessimism, during which Leopardi reworks his theory of pleasure. The exchanges in the *Dialogo di Malambruno e di Farfarello* (April 1824) offer a particularly good example. The dialogue explores the implications of the reverse proportionality of happiness and life that Leopardi describes in the elaboration of his chain of being. The Faustian protagonist, Malambruno, invokes the demon Farfarello and asks him to grant him the wish of experiencing a single moment of happiness. At one point in the dialogue, Farfarello suggests that

11 For the equation between life and sensibility in materialist thinkers, see WOLFE 2014. Leopardi, of course, will argue that matter can sense and think (*Zib.* 4252-3, 9 marzo 1827). In this respect, he would seem to share the same views as Diderot who, in his writings, reconciled two apparently contradictory positions: the idea that sensibility is a property of matter and the idea that it is a product of organization. As Wolfe explained in examining Diderot's material(ist) vitalism, to claim that thought and sense are properties of matter «enables materialism to provide a full and rich account of the phenomena of conscious, sentient life». More

specifically, Wolfe continues citing Abbé Lefrange de Lignac's critique of Buffon, it makes it possible to grant the body qualities that are essential to the mind (WOLFE 2014, pp. 148-9). As we shall see, however, Leopardi's later materialism seems to hint at the possibility of sensibility as a universal property of matter, approaching a panpsychist view of nature. For a careful reconstruction of the intellectual journey that leads Leopardi to the idea of thinking matter, see CRIVELLI 2000.

12 On the centrality of sensibility as a «misura della condizione umana», see PRETE 2006, pp. 136-9.

happiness is indeed attainable when one sleeps a dreamless sleep, or when one is seized by a «sfinimento o altro che v'interrompa l'uso dei sensi» (LEOPARDI 2009, p. 40). In a similar vein, in the *Dialogo di Torquato Tasso e del suo Genio familiare* (June 1824), sleep and opium are listed among the remedies for unhappiness and ennui, since both either inhibit or alter the exercise of the senses.¹³ This theory that connects sensing, suffering, and life is also illustrated at several different points in the *Zibaldone*. In *Zib.* 2861 (30 giugno 1823), for example, we read:

In ciascun punto della vita, anche nell'atto del maggior piacere, anche nei sogni, l'uomo o il vivente è in istato di desiderio, e quindi non v'ha un solo momento nella vita (eccetto quelli di totale assopimento e sospensione dell'esercizio de' sensi e di quello del pensiero, da qualunque cagione essa venga) nel quale l'individuo non sia in istato di pena, tanto maggiore quanto egli o per età, o per carattere e natura, o per circostanze mediate o immediate, o abitualmente o attualmente, è in istato di maggior sensibilità ed esercizio della vita e viceversa.¹⁴

Leopardi is clear: the greater the sensibility and the greater one's exercise of life, the greater one's suffering will become, since it depends on a corresponding increase of desire. The only relief from this suffering is the sedation of the senses and of thought. Many other *operette* suggest as a palliative to the pain of living such a dulling of the senses, which leads to a dissolution of consciousness and to a state of senselessness characteristic of inorganic matter.¹⁵

The temptation of the inorganic, then, is a possibility, a thought experiment, offered to the reader of the *Operette*, who is invited to imagine what it would be like to live numbly in complete unconsciousness, that is as pure inorganic materiality. This sensory and emotional numbness posits the possibility of comfort, or relief, in a state of insensate materiality, which is the opposite of life, so that readers might embrace intellectually and imaginatively the very possibilities that they fear the most (as negations of life): an insensate state beyond pleasures and pains; organic dissolution into the inorganic; and death.¹⁶

13 See LEOPARDI 2009, p. 73. Pain is the third remedy, as Leopardi seems to suggest that extreme pain can bring about a state of psychological insensitivity and numbness.

14 On the same topic, see also *Zib.* 3134, 9 aprile 1825, where Leopardi writes: «Gli enti sensibili sono per natura enti *souffrants*»; and *Zib.* 3137, 3 maggio 1825, where he asserts

that «vivente» and «infelice» are «quasi sinonimi».

15 See, for instance, *Il Dialogo della Terra e della Luna* (Apr. 1824) and the *Cantico del Gallo silvestre* (Nov. 1824).

16 On the epistemological and cognitive functions of the imagination in Leopardi, see LANDI 2017, esp. pp. 26-28 and pp. 129-41.

4. FROM THE ORGANIC TO THE INORGANIC

As I mentioned in the opening section of this article, during this period the categories of the inorganic and the organic are permeable. An interesting example can be found by examining how the body is conceived of across the *Operette morali*. Together with a materialist conception of nature, Leopardi proposes a conception of the human body as a material substance that is in constant interaction with the material universe of which it is a part. The biological body is presented as subject to the same physical and material laws that govern every other thing in the world. Organicity, however, also means physiological fragility – a vulnerability to external agents and to the passage of time, and thus to illness and old age – and susceptibility to change, including a receptivity to social influences.

Furthermore, in naturalistic thought between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, the body occupies an ambiguous space. It is clearly an organic entity, but it also possesses inorganic components, inasmuch as there are chemical and mineral elements to it. The transition from one state to another is always possible. Even Buffon, who argued for a sharp divide between the organic and the inorganic, put forward the hypothesis that organic molecules could originate from inorganic matter and formulated a physiological theory of death according to which the body, as we shall see, progressively ossifies, becoming inorganic. Lamarck imagined an *échelle des êtres* according to which living forms emerge from inorganic matter and eventually return to the inorganic side of the system. He too envisaged a return of the human to the inorganic.¹⁷ A suggestive example of the continuity between the inorganic and the organic, which involves human beings, is the thought experiment of the statue in Diderot's *Entretien entre d'Alembert et Diderot*. Challenged by the character D'Alembert to demonstrate that matter can sense, the character Diderot asks his interlocutor to imagine a statue that is pulverized and mixed with the soil. The plants growing in this soil will be eaten by animals, which, in turn, will feed human beings.¹⁸ In this process of the 'animalization' of matter, the inorganic transitions gradually into the organic.

The anthropogonic myth that Leopardi chooses to retell in the first of his *Operette morali*, *Storia del genere umano* (Jan.-Feb. 1824), has at its core this very image of transformation. The *operetta* tells the story of the world through a succession of four ages during which human beings become progressively more unhappy. At the end of the second age, the gods send a universal flood in the hope of regenerating humankind. Deucalion and Pyrrha,

¹⁷ See GILLISPIE 1958 and SOMERSET 2002, pp. 99-100.

¹⁸ See DIDEROT 2010, p. 347.

the only two melancholic survivors, throw stones over their shoulders that transform into people, giving life to the human species once more. It is a suggestive retelling of the Greek myth, in which the rocks were the bones of the earth. The ancient myth contains an allusion to the earthly origin of the human species and the life-giving powers of the earth. If read through a materialist lens, though, it also alludes to a commonality between rocks and animal bones, which are both made of minerals. The tale, then, evokes the hybrid biology of the human body, which is made of both organic and inorganic components, but also the cycle itself of eternal transformation of matter.¹⁹ In this sense – and this is, indeed, what Leopardi seems to suggest – the difference between a stone, a piece of inert matter, and a sensing human being is just a temporal interval along the great chain of being. This awareness makes it possible for us to conceive of human beings as pure matter in motion, a materialist point of view that excludes any anthropocentric primacy. At the same time, it also renders the human condition uniquely tragic, inasmuch as the very consciousness that condemns us to pain and suffering, makes us inferior even to animals.²⁰

It is significant that one of the dialogues in which the anti-anthropocentric theme emerges most forcefully, the *Dialogo di un folletto e di uno gnomo* (Mar. 1824), features two spirits that preside over the inorganic world: the imp, a spirit of the air, and the gnome, a spirit of the earth and of precious metals. In the dialogue, the imp is related to «il sole, la luna, l'aria, il mare, le campagne», whereas the gnome is linked with «le cave d'oro e d'argento, e tutto il corpo della terra fuor che la prima pelle» (LEOPARDI 2009, p. 35). Both are essentially alien to the world of organic matter. In fact, the imp, in the first versions of the text, tells the gnome: «Se come tu sei maestro in mineralogia, così fossi pratico dell'istoria degli animali, sapresti che» several different animal species have gone extinct in the course of time (LEOPARDI 2019, p. 157 n. 22). In the definitive version, however, the imp's line reads: «Tu che sei maestro in geologia, dovresti sapere che il caso non è nuovo, e che varie qualità di bestie si trovarono anticamente che oggi non si trovano, salvo pochi ossami impietriti» (LEOPARDI 2009, p. 34).²¹ The gnome indeed already has all of the skills necessary to understand the issue, since the *ossami impietriti* about which the imp is speaking are just mineral formations. In the

19 The Ovidian version of the myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha was famously evoked by Canon Seward in his verses criticizing Erasmus Darwin's Epicurean and Lucretian materialism: «He too renounces his Creator, | And forms all sense from senseless matter; | Makes men start up from dead fish-bones, | As old Deucalion did from stones», quoted in SMITH 2010, p. 191.

20 Similar considerations on human inferiority vis-à-vis non-human animals when it comes to happiness are also in *Zib.* 814-5, 19 marzo 1821; the later *Dialogo di Plotino* (1827); and the *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia*, vv. 105-132 (1829-1830).

21 As Laura Melosi indicates, the first version can be found in the Neapolitan autograph,

Compendio di Storia naturale, in fact, and in the *Saggio di chimica e storia naturale*, the «impietrimenti» and the «pietre figurate» – or fossils – are duly listed in the section on mineralogy and are described as bodies that are «induriti, e ridotti per quanto sembra alla natura della pietra» (LEOPARDI 2021, p. 139 and 149).

There is no doubt that those petrified bones are the destiny that awaits humanity. In fact, in the first formulation of the dialogue, the draft *Dialogo tra due bestie*, the two hypothetical protagonists – a horse and a bull – speak in front of some scattered «ossa d'uomini» (LEOPARDI 2009, p. 237). Leopardi seems to suggest that from the point of view of the fossil record, where the organic and the inorganic merge, there is really no distinction between the human and the animal, between the human and the non-human. Set against the backdrop of deep time, human history is but a brief parenthesis that loses its significance within the cycle of universal existence.²² Indeed, both the imp and the gnome, in taking stock of how much has disappeared along with humans, notice the absence of a number of things all linked to human chronology: gazettes no longer exist, nor do lunar cycles or the days of the week. So, in the posthuman reality imagined by Leopardi, after the extinction of our species, nothing is left of human beings except inorganic remains, fossils. To talk about human beings, then, is no longer a matter of history, but rather of geology.

Fossils, thus, the *ossami impietriti*, become the symbol of a critique of anthropocentric finalism that returns the human to pure materiality and reinserts it into the vastness of deep time. Leopardi's thought aligns with the theory of the posthuman inasmuch as it does not elide the human entirely, but represents it in a diminished and disempowered state. The posthuman, in fact, questions the centrality of the human through a conceptual redefinition that explores the cognitive and biological limits of human beings and inserts them into a context of interaction with other non-human, even non-organic, agents, such as geological time.

5. THE DEATH DRIVE

That attraction of death, a theme that permeates the *Operette morali*, can also be understood as the temptation of the inorganic. Even before Sigmund Freud, who defined the death drive as a desire to «lead organic life back into the inanimate state» (FREUD 1960, p. 38), thinkers close to Leopardi ima-

in the Stella edition of 1827, and in the Piatti edition of 1834. The definitive version appears in the Starita edition of 1835 (LEOPARDI 2019, pp. 157-8, n.22).

22 On the impact of the nascent geological sciences and the notion of deep time on literary representation at the *tournant des lumières*, see FERRI 2015, especially pp. 187-224 on Leopardi.

gined death as a return to the state of inorganized bodies. We can read in *Il Caffè*, for example, the reflections on death of Luigi Lambertenghi:

La morte, fenomeno che pochi guardano con tranquilla filosofia, come una necessaria conseguenza delle infallibili leggi dell'universale meccanismo stabilito dall'Eterno Autore della natura, si è quel punto che fa rientrare nella folla de' corpi non organizzati la spoglia nostra, e la confonde col resto della materia. Incapace di azione, di sentimento, di piacere e di dolore, pare che non dovrebbe dagli altri uomini meritare cura alcuna. Ciononostante quello è il tempo in cui maggiori tributi riceviamo dall'altrui umanità... (LAMBERTENGI 1998, p. 481)

In her article on Leopardi's *Federico Ruysch*, Maria Conforti highlights the impact that scientific discussions of the time had on the composition of the *Operette morali*. In particular, she draws attention to the importance of a new discourse on the organic world and a connected redefinition of the concepts of life and death: «[g]li anni della composizione delle *Operette* sono [...] anche quelli del grande dibattito europeo sui confini del mondo organico e sul trasformismo, nel quale la ricostruzione della morfologia, della vita e della morte delle specie avrebbe finito per ridefinire i confini della storia umana e le caratteristiche della specie uomo» (CONFORTI 2010, p. 170). Developments in the life sciences between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries fueled an intense debate concerning the process of dying and the actual definition of death. From a mechanistic point of view, death coincided with the destruction of the organized body, a machine which would simply stop functioning. But the emergence of vitalism during the late Enlightenment gave rise to new questions: was death a sudden transformation or a gradual transition? What exactly was the borderline between life and death?²³

For Hufeland, for example, mentioned in the *Dialogo di un Fisico e di un Metafisico* for his misguided attempt to extend human life, the boundary between life and death was anything but certain and the only indisputable sign of death was «putrefaction,» which made evident that the life force had disappeared and the «body's organization» itself had been destroyed.²⁴ Interestingly, in several reflections on the physiology of death, dying coincides with a change of state comparable to the passage from the organic to the inorganic. In Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*, well known to Leopardi, old age and death are described as a progressive process of petrification in which organic substances, or rather organized bodies, become mineral: «Souvent même à mesure que la substance animale ou végétale se détruit, la matière pierreuse en prend la place, en sorte que sans changer de forme, ces bois et ces

23 See REILL 2005, pp. 171-81.

24 Ivi, p. 173.

os se trouvent convertis en pierre calcaire, en marbres, en cailloux, en agates, etc.» (BUFFON 2007, p. 1354).²⁵ For Buffon, in fact, the most useful distinction, which was to be superimposed onto that between the organic and the inorganic, was between living matter and dead matter.²⁶

Discussions on the nature of life and death, then, were entangled with questions about the status of organic matter versus inorganic matter, and about the continuity between living matter and dead matter. These issues are at the core of the *Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie* (Aug. 1824).²⁷ How does one define life and death? What is the difference between the organic and the inorganic? What is the actual process of dying like? When is a body dead?²⁸ In order to explore these questions, Leopardi imagines an assembly of mummies who speak with their creator, the anatomist and embalmer Ruysch. As Conforti reminds us, research on the techniques of preserving corpses saw great advances in the course of the eighteenth century. This research, combined with the establishment of theories of vitalism and the Napoleonic archaeological discoveries in Egypt, led to a true mania for mummification between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.²⁹ So, the interest in the techniques of embalming and the fascination with mummies had different causes: the advancement of scientific inquiry into the forms and limits of organic life, a growing interest in life-extension techniques (such as macrobiotics), the never-ending appeal of the grotesque body, and the emergence of new attitudes towards life and death.

In Leopardi's text, the mummy becomes an uncanny figure of the post-human, a sort of relic in which life and death appear intertwined and that makes it possible for him to articulate a reflection on the becoming-inorganic of death and on the difference between being and non-being. In Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle's *Eloge de mons. Ruysch*, a source for the dialogue that Leopardi clearly indicates, the mummies preserved in the anatomist's cabinet appear congealed in a semblance of life, which renders them similar to «des ressuscités» (FONTENELLE 1764, p. 103). In Leopardi's dialogue, Ruysch states that he has preserved the dead from corruption – «preservati

25 The ancient Greeks had already imagined the dead as essentially all dried up, inasmuch as old age consisted in a progressive desiccation of the bodily humors. Leopardi cites from the chapter on old age and death of Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* in *Zib.* 4092. On Leopardi and Buffon, see POLIZZI 2003 *passim*; and CONTARINI 1994, which focuses on the *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*.

26 On Buffon's understanding of death, which has much in common with Leopardi's view, see ROGER 1997, pp. 169-73.

27 Given the medical subtext of these questions, it is worth remembering the presence of physician Francesco Puccinotti during the composition of the *Dialogo di Federico Ruysch*. See in the same issue the essay by Paolo Colombo, pp. 139-51.

28 In the characteristic convergence of philosophical reflection between *Zibaldone* and *Operette*, these same questions about death and dying are also explored in *Zib.* 281-3 (16 ottobre 1820); *Zib.* 365-6, 1 dicembre 1820; *Zib.* 2182-4, 28 novembre 1821; and *Zib.* 2566, 16 luglio 1822.

29 See CONFORTI 2010, pp. 171-2.

dalla corruzione» – but did not expect them to come back to life (LEOPARDI 2009, p. 117). The expression clearly alludes to a paradox that Fontenelle did not recognize. The chemical preparations that Ruysch injected into the corpses have «effetti maravigliosi» (LEOPARDI 2009, p. 226, n. 41) that make the corpses seem alive, but actually, by preventing their decay and thus removing them from the flow of time, they provide them with a stability that is characteristic only of the inorganic. They are in fact simulacra of life whose presence itself negates life. This negation of life is also the essence of the message at the core of the mummies' song and of their exchange with Ruysch. The mummies' primary role, as witnesses to the «infinito non-essere a cui tutti gli esseri tornano», is to affirm the primacy of death over life (PANIZZA 1991, p. 167). In the song that opens the *operetta*, a “canto dal nulla” according to Lucio Felici, the mummies refer to themselves as distinguished by their «ignuda natura» (LEOPARDI 2009, p. 117). As Walter Binni glossed, the expression «va intesa, coerentemente a tutto l'atteggiamento leopardiano, come una esistenza totalmente priva di vita» (BINNI 1987, p. 85). Their defining quality, therefore, is non-life, or rather an existence that is the antithesis of biological life.

Consistently with their condition, they sing death as «sicura | dall'antico dolor», because it is the only thing that offers relief from the pain that is one and the same with life (LEOPARDI 2009, p. 116). As Bortolo Martinelli notes, in their song, the dead describe the quelling of those passions that, according to stoic ethics, haunt the human soul: «dolor», «desio», «temenza», «lieta, beato», corresponding to *dolor*, *desiderium*, *metus*, *gaudium*.³⁰ So death, in this dialogue and throughout the *Operette morali*, is the ultimate fulfillment of the aspiration for ataraxia. Becoming inorganic brings the liberation from passion and need, the absence of agitation, and the cessation of all movement – both of the body and of the soul. In fact, in another *operetta*, the *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* (May 1824), the human protagonist is in continuous movement, prey to a restlessness of spirit that turns him into a wanderer, as he seeks shelter from the universal *souffrance* to which society and nature indiscriminately condemn all living beings, even if society is an affliction that belongs to man alone. His destiny is to end up devoured by two hungry lions or to be dried up and turned into a mummy by the wind and sand of the desert. In the first case, he is reinserted into the endless cycle of production and destruction of matter, whereas it is only in the becoming-inorganic of mummification that, ironically, he finds absolute quiet and relief from the suffering of being.³¹

30 See MARTINELLI 1989, p. 91, n. 101.

31 Another instance of the inorganic as expression of a death drive in the *Operette* is

represented by fashion. As intuited by Walter Benjamin, who in the *Arcades Project* cites from Leopardi's *Dialogo della Moda e della Morte*

6. LIFELESS MACHINES

The protagonists of the *Proposta di premi fatta dall'Accademia dei Sillografi* (Feb. 1824), one of the first *Operette* to be composed, are perhaps the most emblematic figures of the nineteenth-century posthuman: automata. The representation of artificial life, a motif which had interested Leopardi from as early as the *Dissertazione sopra l'anima delle bestie* (1818), intersects with key points of his philosophical reflection. Valerio Camarotto effectively summarizes the key issues in the *operetta*: the anesthetization or loss of vital energy that characterizes modern human beings; the notion that technological advancement will not give human beings happiness; a debunking of the myth of progress and of the perfectibility of the human species.³² At the basis of the representation of automata in the *Proposta di premi*, however, is not only a multifaceted critique of machines or of the modern civilization of progress, but also a repulsion-fascination for the inorganic. The mechanical beings of the *Proposta di premi* – true posthuman creatures – provocatively embody an overcoming of the human; in their being inorganic they evade not so much death as conformability.

Conformability, in Leopardi, indicates an inherent ability to transform oneself in response to external stimuli. Luigi Capitano has compared Leopardi's notion of conformability to the idea of species plasticity at the core of Erasmus Darwin's and Lamarck's theories of transmutation.³³ It is an apt analogy because it highlights the historical dimension that Leopardi attributes to the transformations of species. For both E. Darwin and Lamarck, however, inorganic matter was also dynamic; according to Lamarck, for example, new primitive organisms were constantly being formed out of inorganic matter – according to the so-called process of abiogenesis.³⁴ Whereas the idea of a dynamism of matter is also present in Leopardi, conformability, as we have seen, is a specific property of organic life, in that it defines a process of development that pertains exclusively to individual living beings.

Conformability distinguishes in particularly human beings, who, according to Leopardi, are the most conformable of all species.³⁵ Alongside a primitive conformability, which is shared with other living beings and

and clearly reworks his ideas: «[e]very fashion couples the living body to the inorganic world. To the living, fashion defends the rights of the corpse» (BENJAMIN 1999, p. 79). In the *Dialogo*, Fashion, as Death's sister, proposes a series of excruciating practices that mortify the body, by piercing it, burning it, and deforming it, causing horrific «dolori e strazi» (LEOPARDI 2009,

pp. 25-26). All of these practices, like tiny *particelle di morte*, transform the different parts of the body into something inorganic, dead. Thus, thanks to fashion, life approaches death.

32 See CAMAROTTO 2021, pp. 3-5.

33 See CAPITANO 2020, p. 53.

34 See GIGLIONI 2013, pp. 32-35.

35 See *Zib.* 1568-69, 27 agosto 1821.

which could be understood in terms of inherited inclinations, human beings also possess a secondary conformability which corresponds to the ability to learn from experience.³⁶ Human conformability, therefore, corresponds, on an individual level to a capacity for self-cultivation and improvement and, on a collective level to a capacity for culture and civilization. In both cases, however, conformability contains a principle of degeneration that leads the individual to unhappiness and that condemns society to inequality. In fact, while conformability allows human beings to acquire «maravigliose facoltà», being as it is, highest in people of talent and genius, it also allows them to develop in ways unintended by nature, thus distancing them from a hypothetical original state of perfection and happiness. Conformability, therefore, as Leopardi explains in *Zib.* 1569, is completely different from perfectibility.

The automata of the *Proposta di premi*, however, are perfectible, or rather, already perfect. If the organic is malleable, flexible and changeable, the inorganic is complete in itself. The capacity that human beings have to change and adapt is an ability that depends fully on the organicity of their bodies of flesh, so much so that, as Claudio Colaiacono suggests, it can be understood as «una pieghevolezza di organi esteriori e interiori» (COLAIACONO 2005, p. 511). To use terminology from our own era's computer science and artificial intelligence, we could say that to the 'wetware' of human beings – i.e. the human body and central nervous system – Leopardi juxtaposes the hard mechanisms of the automata of the *Proposta di premi*. If the human being is a «pasta molle, suscettiva d'ogni possibile figura, impronta, ec.» (*Zib.* 1452, 4 agosto 1821), a soft machine, Leopardi's automata are its exact antithesis. They do not possess fleshy bodies, but rather they have mechanical parts that are not susceptible to change or decay. They are equally immune to emotional variations, as Leopardi emphasizes that their affective states are not subject to any alteration. They have no experience of physiological or psychological alteration. Beyond change, the automaton also escapes the pain of becoming. For Leopardi, oppositions such as natural-artificial, conformable-non conformable, organic-inorganic are not meant to establish an ontological primacy of the living – of life – but rather of existence: «se v'ha cosa che non sia punto conformabile naturalmente, quella niente partecipa della vita, ma solo esiste» (*Zib.* 3381, 8 settembre 1823).

³⁶ Maria Silvia Marini defines the first kind of conformability as the totality of genetic traits that an individual possesses; whereas the secondary, acquired conformability refers to

all the capacities that an individual can acquire through development and practice. See MARIANI 2021, pp. 52-53.

7. BEYOND THE INORGANIC

Leopardi reaches farthest in the posthuman imaginary with those *operette* that more closely coincide with his so-called turn toward Stratonian materialism, the *Cantico del Gallo silvestre* (the last of the 1824 *Operette* to be written) and the *Frammento apocrifo di Stratone da Lampsaco* (written in 1825). In these texts, Leopardi completes what Luigi Blasucci defined as the «diagramma ideologico di svolgimento da una considerazione sensistico-esistenziale a una considerazione cosmico-materialistica dell'infelicità» (BLASUCCI 1985, p. 222).

The *Cantico* reiterates in no uncertain terms the equivalence of life and unhappiness:

vedi tu di presente o vedesti mai la felicità dentro ai confini del mondo? in qual campo soggiorna, in qual bosco, in qual montagna, in qual valle, in qual paese abitato o deserto, in qual pianeta dei tanti che le tue fiamme illustrano e scaldano? Forse si nasconde dal tuo cospetto, e siede nell'imo delle spelonche, o nel profondo della terra o del mare? Qual cosa animata ne partecipa; qual pianta o che altro che tu vivifichi; qual creatura provveduta o sfornita di virtù vegetative o animali? E tu medesimo, tu che quasi un gigante instancabile, velocemente, dì e notte, senza sonno né requie, corri lo smisurato cammino che ti è prescritto; sei tu beato o infelice? (LEOPARDI 2009, pp. 162-3)

At this point, however, the state of *souffrance* seems to have expanded to touch everything that exists. In fact, even if Leopardi includes in the catalogue of unhappiness every living thing, taking care to point out that in Hebrew myth the sun, planets, and stars have a soul and a life, he nonetheless also inserts in the list those creatures that are “deprived of any vegetative or animal virtue.” In the allegory of the garden, in *Zibaldone* 4175, 19 aprile 1826, Leopardi will be even more explicit. He goes as far as to imagine a necessary unhappiness that no longer plagues only individual living beings, but also «le specie, i generi, i regni, i globi, i sistemi, i mondi». This, in fact, would seem to be the extreme corollary of the idea of a matter that can think and sense and that, as described in the *Frammento apocrifo*, makes up all material things. Furthermore, the potential extension of the capacity to sense to *all* material things is also hinted at in a parenthetical remark about what people infer about matter, which comes at the end of Leopardi's extensive reflection on “thinking matter” in the *Zibaldone*: «...abbiamo conchiuso non poter la materia pensare e sentire, perché le altre cose materiali, fuori dell'uomo e delle bestie, non pensano né sentono (*o almeno così crediamo noi*)... » (*Zib.* 4253, 9 marzo 1827; my emphasis).

If sensing, and therefore suffering, is intrinsic to matter, then the entire universe is condemned to suffer, since matter, a substance that revolves in an incessant process of production of things, is both uncreated and eternal. This means that not even the annihilation of all organic forms will eradicate suffering. At this point, readers of the *Operette* are no longer just asked to imagine something against their nature: the anesthetization of senses; the non-being of death; the disappearance of the entire human species or of all living beings; but – even more radically, indeed superhumanly – they are required to imagine either an infinite mechanism of production and destruction of life or a nothingness that goes beyond the limits of matter. If the Stratonian materialism of the *Frammento apocrifo* confronts us with the eerie sublimity of non-human agency, the *Cantico* leads us to imagine the annihilation of the entire universe, which gives way to «un silenzio nudo, e una quiete altissima» (LEOPARDI 2009, p. 165).³⁷

CONCLUSION

I have argued, in this essay, that Leopardi's *Operette morali* are suggestive of a posthumanist perspective in their representation of what I have termed the appeal of the inorganic. In a succession of moments, taken from a selection of *Operette*, human beings appear inferior to or displaced by not just all other living forms, but by inorganic matter itself. In a provocative reversal of the ontological order, the state of biological life itself is superseded by the insensate existence of the inorganic. So much so that the inorganic comes to exercise an unnatural force of attraction. Whether it is achieved in the quietus of organic death, or simulated either in the oblivion of drugs and sleep or in the immutable mechanical feelings of an automaton, the inorganic condition is to be ardently desired and even sought after.

The posthuman in Leopardi is first and foremost an imaginative exercise, coherent with the appeal to the imagination which is at the core of the *Operette*, a “book of poetic dreams”. The ‘post’ in posthuman, in this sense, functions not merely as an invitation to imagine a state of senseless inorganicity or a universe without human beings, but also and especially as a challenge to explore conceptually the limits of the human and to imagine the overcoming of these limits. Leopardi's position resonates with posthu-

³⁷ On the role that the imagination has in Leopardi's representation of evil and nothingness, see LANDI 2017, pp. 134-41, and especially p. 141 on the common origin and purpose of matter and nothingness, and on the difference between the latter and the concept of in-

finity. The nothingness that closes the *Cantico* is an absolute kind of nothingness that coincides with the extinction of matter itself. As such, it lies within the purview of poetry and appeals to the reader's imagination.

manist critiques of humanism in that the revised chain of being and the inversion of values, privileges, and desires proposed in his works, unravel the humanist hierarchy of being. There is no privileging of human life, but rather a repositioning of the human, one of the myriad things in the universe, be they animate or inanimate. In line with posthumanist thought, Leopardi emphasizes a kinship among all living things which is based on a shared condition of *souffrance*. Even more radically, in rethinking the agency of matter, he collapses all differences between the organic and the inorganic – imagining both classes as part of and as equally subject to a ceaseless cycle of material transformation.

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