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## LEOPARDI'S RESPONSE TO WITTGENSTEIN

**ABSTRACT:** Scholars have long acknowledged the deep influence of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century science on Leopardi's thought. In his later writings, however, he draws a clear distinction between the foundations of science and those of literature, arguing that science rests on reason, whereas literature on the heart. Science tends to accuse non-scientific knowledge of being vague and indefinite, and thus ultimately meaningless – a charge Carnap would later repeat, and one that Leopardi had already noted in the *Zibaldone*. Yet Leopardi goes beyond this charge of «non-significance», seeing in literature a form of knowledge less rigorous and precise, but much more meaningful from an existential standpoint, for it is the only kind of knowledge that allows some happiness. Science, with all its Cartesian exactness, only reveals «the nothingness in everything», and has today led to anxieties never experienced before. Literature thus becomes «the most useful of all utilities», as the only means capable of making the individual truly happy.

**KEYWORDS:** Giacomo Leopardi; Ludwig Wittgenstein; Humanities; Existentialism; Philosophy of Science; Artificial Intelligence.

**PAROLE-CHIAVE:** Giacomo Leopardi; Ludwig Wittgenstein; Humanities; Esistenzialismo; Filosofia della scienza; Intelligenza artificiale.

### I. THE CRITICAL CONTEXT

Scholars have long shown how 17th- and 18th-century scientific thought has deeply influenced Leopardi's. First and foremost, Gaspare Polizzi, who stressed the role of the sensistic and the enlightenment traditions in France and England, concluding that Leopardi's philosophical approach is essentially scientific (2003; 2008; 2015). The same critical line was adopted by the important works of Andrea Campana (2008) and Alessandro Della

Corte (2008). As Polizzi implicitly acknowledges, however, the picture of Leopardi's intellectual world is not reducible to science alone (POLIZZI 2003, p. 256), for Leopardi does take at times decisive turns from science. The scholarship has thus also recognised another side to Leopardi's thought which, if it is an exaggeration to call «anti-scientific», it can most certainly be defined «anti-rationalistic». One should therefore not be afraid of calling this second side with its logically equivalent label of «irrationalistic». This irrationalistic side of Leopardi's thought has been noted and so defined early on, especially by Giuseppe Rensi (1919, p. 115) and Adriano Tilgher (1940, p. 46), and more recently, by Mario Andrea Rigoni (1982, pp. 26-27) and Elio Gioanola (1995, p. 360; 2005, p. 145). In this essay I would like to focus on the irrationalistic component of Leopardi's thought, to show that these are: these are the only grounds capable of providing some kind of alternative to our otherwise tragic human condition.

## 2. ON THE UTILITY AND DAMAGE OF REASON FOR LIFE

In the mature phase of his thought, Leopardi advances a clear distinction between science and art when it comes to their theoretical foundations: science is grounded in reason and understands the world analytically; art is grounded in the heart and understands the world synthetically.

If we are to speak of influences, one could say that Leopardi also derives this distinction from French thought, for, alongside the *raison* of the *philosophes*, he always keeps in mind the *coeur* of Pascal (PASCAL 2008, *passim*).<sup>1</sup> The opposition between reason and heart (*Zib.* 3237, and *passim*) mirrors the one between reason and nature (*Zib.* *passim*), upon which Leopardi insists a great deal.<sup>2</sup> Outside the *Zibaldone*, this opposition materialises in the characters of Porphyry (reason) and Plotinus (nature/heart). In the *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, we all know to whom Leopardi gives the last word, even though that needs not necessarily equate Leopardi's own last word on the issue.

On the *utility* of reason, there is not much to dispute, and this side of Leopardi's thought has been widely studied, as I said above. It is on its damages that we should now focus. Leopardi is very explicit on the damages caused by an abuse of reason. They are mainly two: an existential damage, and an epistemological one. In reference to the first, Leopardi writes: «la ragione [...] è potentissima; ma [...] dannosa. [...] A proporzione che cresce

<sup>1</sup> Notably, the notion of «heart» is similarly employed in *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Camus ([1942] CAMUS 1975, *passim*).

<sup>2</sup> References to the *Zibaldone* are taken from the Damiani edition (see LEOPARDI 1997).

il suo potere, scema quello di chi la esercita» (*Zib.* 2942, 11 luglio 1823). This happens because «ella rende piccoli e vili e da nulla tutti gli oggetti sopra i quali ella si esercita, annulla il grande, il bello, e per così dir la stessa esistenza, è vera madre e cagione del nulla» (*ibid.*). Reason thus leads us, as it were, to an existential nothingness.<sup>3</sup> The first damage of reason is the one of making us unhappy. Let us come to the second.

Illusions, Leopardi writes, «rivelano all'uomo come per un lampo improvviso, i misteri più nascosti, gli abissi più cupi della natura, i rapporti più lontani o segreti [...], dietro alle quali cose il filosofo esatto, paziente, geometrico, si affatica indarno tutta la vita e a forza di analisi e di sintesi» (*Zib.* 1856, 5-6 ottobre 1821). If reason is used exclusively, it causes an epistemological damage as well. The bias our age has developed towards the logico-scientific approach, especially after the recent achievements of AI, is largely based the mistaken assumption that scientific knowledge is certain and definitive, while humanistic knowledge is inherently ambiguous and therefore weaker. A deeper assessment reveals that uncertainty and non-definitiveness lie at the heart of science as well. Leopardi is fully conscious of this problem. In his terms, «nature precedes reason»: «la ragione [...] è posteriore alla natura, e da lei dipendente, ed ha in lei sola il fondam. e il soggetto della sua esistenza, e del suo modo di essere» (*Zib.* 1842, 4 ottobre 1821).<sup>4</sup> Let us see what that means, and what implications this important idea holds for subsequent thought.

In a nutshell, the idea that «nature precedes reason» means that illusions are more originary than rational thought, or, if you will, that we engage with the world with our heart first, and that reason comes afterwards. This idea has been latently present throughout the history of Western thought. Aristotle, for example, already recognised that the principle of non-contradiction cannot itself be proven, since, if it could, it would not be the principle of all principles (*Metaphysics*, 1005b in ARISTOTLE 2020). Aristotle says that we know PNC to be true through intuition (*Posterior Analytics*, 100b in ARISTOTLE 1994), and yet we must still trust that our sense of intuition is correct – and have faith, for instance, that no Cartesian demon is deceiving us. This suggests the hypothesis that at the outset of any epistemic enterprise lies faith, which, in Leopardi's terms, would be an illusion, as we need faith only insofar as we lack rational knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> We are obviously always talking about an *abuse* of reason, not reason per se: «Io dunque non condanno la ragione in quanto è qualità naturale ed essenziale nel vivente, ma in quanto (per sola forza d'indebite e non naturali assuefazioni) cresce e si modifica in modo che diviene

il principale ostacolo alla nostra felicità» (*Zib.* 1825, 1° ottobre 1821).

<sup>4</sup> Leopardi asserts repeatedly that nature is superior to reason (see *Zib.* 168 and *passim*). That is because, we might add, nature is more originary than reason.

The same kind of faith is usually held by scientists in the principle of cause and effect, «upon which all of science rests» as Gödel writes (see GÖDEL 2021, p. 303. Princeton, 6<sup>th</sup> October 1961). It is an admittedly reasonable faith, yet a faith nonetheless, since many observations point to the correctness of the principle, but none clearly indicates its universal validity – and in fact quantum mechanics puts it in serious question. Alongside faith, at the very heart of the scientific enterprise lies hope – hope in the possibility of attaining certain and definitive knowledge. In Leopardi’s view, hope is another illusion. And indeed quantum mechanics shows that at the very heart of matter lies in fact uncertainty (cf. Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, 1927). Ancient mathematics already, on the other hand, shows that irrationality also lies at the core of reality: irrational numbers such as  $\sqrt{2}$ ,  $\pi$ , and  $e$  are perfect examples. One could go further, noting the role of habits, choices, and interpretations in the making of science, elements often thought to belong to the humanities only. In this sense, one can argue that science rests on intrinsically non-logical, human factors, i.e., illusions. This is what Nietzsche meant when he wrote that «science, too, rests on a faith» and that «there is simply no “presuppositionless” science» (*The Gay Science*, § 344 in NIETZSCHE 2001).<sup>5</sup> That human factors underpin the scientific enterprise can be seen confirmed by the behaviour of the most advanced product of modern science: Artificial Intelligence. The biases, errors, and unpredictable outcomes of Large Language Models (the so-called problem of opacity) can only be accounted for if such human factors are taken into account.<sup>6</sup> In this sense illusions seem to be more originary than rational knowledge. On a different note, one might find it noteworthy that contemporary psychological studies tend to confirm Leopardi’s perspective. Possibly the most solid account of the issue is offered today by the hugely famous works of Daniel Kahneman, who shows the brain to work by two systems. When faced with any general problems in our life, we first try to use the first system, System 1, because it «operates automatically and quickly, with little to no effort» (KAHNEMAN 2012, 16). System 1 is quick but makes mistakes, being prone to what Kahneman calls «cognitive illusions» (2012, 20) and «biases» (2012, *passim*). If System 1 fails, we engage System 2, which «allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations» (2012, 16). System 1, however, is also associated with «good mood, intuition, cre-

5 To the surprise of many, scientists tend to agree with this idea. See for example the Swiss-American physicist Joseph M. Jauch in JAUCH 1973, pp. 63-65, echoed by Douglas Hofstadter in his famous *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (see HOFSTADTER 1999<sup>2</sup>, p. 409). A very similar point is made by Karl

Popper in *Conjectures and Refutations* (see POPPER 2002<sup>2</sup>) and Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (see KUHN 1962).

6 The work of Luciano Floridi also points to this direction (see, for example, FLORIDI 2023).

ativity, gullibility» (2012, 41); System 2 is more precise and is associated with rationality, but also with «sadness, vigilance, suspicion, an analytic approach» (2012, 41). System 1 corresponds to Leopardi's illusions; system 2 with reason.

With his two theorems of incompleteness, Gödel showed that, in a formal system powerful enough to include Peano's arithmetic, it is impossible to prove all the theorems without allowing contradictions (cf. GÖDEL 1965, pp. 5-38). In simpler terms, mathematics cannot prove all its truths by relying on itself alone. Douglas Hofstadter concludes that logic cannot be proven using logic itself (HOFSTADTER 1999, p. 212), which was Aristotle's point. Then, there must be some other ground of knowledge which *precedes* logic. As Heidegger writes: «the idea of "logic" itself disintegrates in the turbulence of a *more originary* questioning» (in HEIDEGGER 1998, p. 92. Italics mine) – a questioning which cannot but be non-logical. This is what Leopardi means by «nature precedes reason». With these and the following reflections, Leopardi contributed to a much larger conversation about the status of humanistic knowledge. Leopardi's answers have been developed by Friedrich Nietzsche, Miguel de Unamuno, and the existentialists after them. Leopardi's attempt to create a poetic philosophy, the «ultrafilosofia», was replicated by Nietzsche in the great project of the *Gay Science* (1882), and, even more so, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885). Existentialism as a movement, after all, was emerging in the same decades as the writings of Wittgenstein, Carnap, and logical positivism, in response, one should note, to the same problem of meaninglessness (RENAUDIE in REYNOLDS et al. 2023, p. 276).

### 3. THE CHARGE OF MEANINGLESSNESS

One could hardly say that science moves specific criticism to the arts, but one can also reasonably say that our time has developed a strong bias towards science, at the expense of the humanities. Science tends to overshadow art as an allegedly weaker form of knowledge, or perhaps denying art any epistemic power in the first place. This is the critique that logical positivism moved to continental philosophy, which was attacked because of its vague and indefinite language, and ultimately accused of sheer meaninglessness. Such is Rudolf Carnap's critique in the 1932 article *The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language* (see CARNAP 1959). This essay is an excellent standpoint to understand why Leopardi (and the existentialists) prefer poetry to logic. Carnap was *de facto* applying Wittgenstein's theses expressed in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* published some ten years before (1921), which, by its author's own suggestion, can be summarised in

the idea that «what can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent» (WITTGENSTEIN 2023, p. 3). Carnap targeted Heidegger explicitly, but had in mind the general approach to philosophy adopted by continental philosophy, to which Leopardi – it is by now uncontroversial to say – also belongs. By «metaphysics» and «metaphysicians», we should thus understand the so-called «continental» tradition. «Metaphysics» is understood by Carnap in the Aristotelian sense, i.e., as an intellectual endeavour which seeks to establish truths beyond the domain of empirical experience. According to Carnap, metaphysics (but really continental philosophy) falls into meaninglessness in two possible ways:

1. semantically, when it employs concepts that appear meaningful but are in fact empty. For example, the concept of «nothingness» for how Heidegger employs it, as it denotes no real object in the world. Again, Carnap explicitly mentions Heidegger only, but the notion of «nothingness» has been employed as a philosophical concept by Nietzsche, Sartre, the existentialist tradition, and in fact Leopardi himself.

2. syntactically, when it employs legitimate concepts but violates the rules of grammar. For example, the proposition «I am», in Descartes' famous argument, for the verb «to be» grammatically works only in connection with a predicate (CARNAP 1959, p. 74). For Carnap, «to be» is not a predicate itself, as also most logicians hold in the wake of Kant.<sup>7</sup> The proposition «I am» is thus meaningless. The sentence «I am a *philosopher*» would instead be correct.

Because of its meaninglessness, Carnap concludes, philosophy done thus should be eliminated as an intellectual discipline altogether.<sup>8</sup>

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes: «we feel that even if all *possible* scientific questions were answered, the problems of life would remain completely untouched» (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.52). Wittgenstein thus agrees with the continental tradition that the crucial problems of existence have nothing to do with the logico-scientific enquiry. Equally crucial to understand this clash between the «logician» and the «existentialist» approach is Wittgenstein's notion of «showing». Wittgenstein holds that there are truths about the world that can only be intuitively apprehended rather than clearly expressed by language – which mirror Leopardi's notions of heart and reason. Thus, Wittgenstein suggests that alongside what language can *say*, there is what language can *show*. Wittgenstein himself,

7 That existence is not a real predicate was claimed by Kant in the context of refuting the ontological argument (cf. KANT 1998, B 626 ff.).

8 Carnap's position should not be taken necessarily as representative of *all* analytic phi-

losophy, as some contemporary analytic philosophers have rejected it. See for example VOLTOLINI 2022, p. 57 ff., and ORILIA 2024. It has nonetheless exerted a huge influence on all subsequent analytic philosophy.

though, and Carnap, and subsequent analytic philosophy always stopped short of delving into the *showing* potential of language, in the belief that vagueness and indefiniteness would impede understanding altogether. Leopardi would agree that one cannot speak clearly and distinctly about the truths apprehended through the heart, but he would add that one can nonetheless try to speak vaguely and indefinitely about them. And that is the business of poetry. One could indeed make many examples, but there is one passage above all else which best clarifies my point: 'Je est un autre' (Rimbaud, *Lettre à Georges Izambard*, 13 mai 1871, and *Lettre à Paul Demeny*, 15 mai 1871, in RIMBAUD 2009). This sentence, which could have well been a verse, deliberately violates the rules of grammar: now, if we were to abide by the indications of Wittgenstein and Carnap, we would have to conclude that this sentence is meaningless. And yet, we intuitively understand what the sentence means, even if it does violate the rules of grammar. And in fact precisely in the grammatical violation lies meaning that could not have been expressed through standard grammar.

Leopardi's move, then, is to make philosophy a form of art, rather than a degenerate form of science. The same will do Nietzsche and Unamuno in the wake of Leopardi. But the same maintained after all Wittgenstein himself: «philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. (The word "philosophy" must mean something which stands above or below, but not beside the natural sciences)» (*Tractatus*, 4.111). The difference between Leopardi and Wittgenstein is that, given the impossibility of making philosophy a form of science, Wittgenstein lends it to the service of science, like much analytic philosophy did after him, holding that «the object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts» (4.112); Leopardi, on the contrary, outrightly makes philosophy a form of art. In this sense does Leopardi hold that the greatest poets are also the greatest philosophers (like Dante and Homer; see *Zib.* 2133) and the greatest philosophers are also the greatest poets (like Newton; *Zib.* 1650, 2133 and *passim*).

#### 4. ILLUSIONS: A NEW KIND OF KNOWLEDGE

Leopardi writes that illusions «rivelano all'uomo [...] i misteri più nascosti, gli abissi più cupi della natura» (*Zib.* 1856, 5-6 ottobre 1821) because «la natura in quanto natura è tutta quanta essenzialmente poetica» (*Zib.* 1842, 4 ottobre 1821), and the epistemological tools to understand the poetic are the heart and imagination, since «queste facoltà nostre sono esse sole in armonia col poetico ch'è nella natura; la ragione non lo è» (*Zib.* 3242-3, 22 agosto 1823). There are truths about existence that cannot be grasped by means of intellectual analysis, but can be caught with a «colpo d'occhio»

(*Zib.* 1853, 5-6 ottobre 1821), which is Leopardi's poetic version of Aristotle's intuition (cf. *Posterior Analytics*, 100b). Leopardi's, however, is not an *intellectual* intuition, but, as it were, an emotional one. «Colpo d'occhio» is just a metaphor: one does not know by seeing, but by feeling: «il poeta lirico nell'ispirazione, il filosofo nella sublimità della speculazione, l'uomo d'immaginativa e di sentimento nel tempo del suo entusiasmo, [...] vede e guarda le cose come da un luogo alto e superiore» (*Zib.* 3269, 26 agosto 1823). «Chi non sa quali altissime verità sia capace di scoprire e manifestare il vero poeta lirico?» writes Leopardi (*Zib.* 1856, 5-6 ottobre 1821). It is clear, however, that such «truths» that only the poet can discover are «truths» in a very peculiar sense: they are not rational/scientific truths about the world; they are truths only *sub specie cordis*, so to speak, that is only from the point of view of the heart.<sup>9</sup> The truths *sub specie cordis* are not truths because they correspond to state of affairs in the world, but because they correspond to feelings of other hearts. Thus, if the poet expresses the truth of their own heart, I perceive it as truth because it mirrors my own «moti del cuore» (cf. *A se stesso*, v. 8).

Now, these truths *sub specie cordis* are such that one can only feel confusedly rather than see clearly with reason: they are by definition the truth of illusions – in the peculiar Leopardian way in which an illusion can be true. The truth of illusions can only be seen from far above perhaps even in the sense that illusions should not be scrutined too closely if one does not want to unveil their illusory nature. One should thus stay far enough away, so that enough vagueness and indefiniteness is maintained for the heart to still dream and imagination to still feign the infinite. Yet it is also important to bear in mind that illusions also derive their very name from the perspective of reason: illusions are illusions only *sub specie rationis* – *sub specie cordis*, they are true. And if it is the case that «dal vero al sognato, non corre altra differenza, se non che questo può qualche volta essere molto più bello e più dolce, che quello non può mai» as the Spirit<sup>10</sup> says to Tasso, then there is no substantial difference between illusions («il sognato») and rational truths («il vero») beyond the fact that illusions can be sweeter and more beautiful.<sup>11</sup> In other words, there is no real epistemological difference: they are both

9 It is tempting to link this kind of truths in Leopardi to Pascal's «truths of the heart» but the two do not coincide. The truths of the heart in Pascal are truths apprehended through what Aristotle called «intuition» in the *Posterior Analytics* and which cannot be proved with reason. Such truths are for Pascal the existence of space and time, the existence of numbers or of ourselves (PASCAL 2008, p. 36). Leopardi is talking about something different:

what the «poeta lirico» discovers is the truth of illusions – true for the heart, false for reason.

10 Cecchetti's translation in LEOPARDI 1982.

11 Note that Leopardi qualifies dreams with adjectives usually referred to illusions. For «belle», see for example *Zib.* 415, 1724, 3990, *Ad Angelo Mai*, vv. 115-6; for «dolci», see for example *Zib.* 1084, *Al Conte Carlo Pepoli*, v. 122, *Il risorgimento*, v. 110.

entitled to knowledge to the same degree. Only, they have different domains, as reason investigates the world, whereas the heart investigates other hearts.

The reader might feel the need for an example of what such «truths of the heart» are, and rightly so. Leopardi remains faithful to vagueness even in his examples, and he mentions «i grandi misteri della vita», «i destini», «le intenzioni [...] della natura» (*Zib.* 3242-3, 22 agosto 1823). Yet his vagueness does impede understanding this once, as nature has no intentions, and there is no destiny in Leopardi's philosophy: the *Cantico del gallo silvestre* clarifies that «solo intento della natura [...] è la morte» (*Cantico del gallo silvestre* in LEOPARDI 2008, p. 471, 10-16 novembre 1824). And even in the *Zibaldone*, a few years later, Leopardi explicitly clarifies this point:

quando io dico: la natura ha voluto, non ha voluto, ha avuto intenzione ec., intendo p. natura quella qualunq. sia intelligenza o forza o necessità o fortuna, che ha conformato l'occhio a vedere, l'orecchio a udire; che ha coordinati gli effetti alle cause finali parziali che nel mondo sono evidenti. (*Zib.* 4413, 20 ottobre 1828)

Yet this «intelligenza o forza o necessità o fortuna» is much closer to chance for Leopardi rather than any sentient and willing entity. This emerges explicitly in *La ginestra* (1836), where the broom is where it is «non per voler, ma per fortuna» (v. 313). Nature «herself» says to the Icelander that «la vita di quest'universo è un perpetuo circuito di produzione e distruzione» (LEOPARDI 2008, p. 280, 21, 27-30 Maggio 1824).<sup>12</sup> Nature has no intentions. The same applies to entities such as «fate», «destiny», and the like, which are again feigned by the imagination as scapegoat of the tragic character of the human condition:

è nato che egli [*sc.* l'uomo] ha immaginato i nomi e le persone di fortuna, di fato, incolpati sì lungamente dei mali umani, e sì sinceramente odiati dagli antichi infelici, e contro i quali anche oggi, in mancanza d'altri oggetti, rivolgiamo seriamente l'odio e le querele delle nostre sventure (*Zib.* 4070-1, 17 aprile 1824).

The truths *sub specie cordis* are the illusions, to which, after all, also belong the ideas of «nature's intentions», «destiny» etc. Therefore, «nature's intentions», «destiny» etc. can indeed be seen as examples of what the «colpo d'occhio» can apprehend and reason cannot, yet only insofar as they are considered illusions and not truths.

Leopardi does not explicitly provide any other examples, but by spending enough time with his texts, one can make an educated guess. One illusory

<sup>12</sup> The date is taken from Leopardi's autograph manuscript of the *operetta*.

truth is that life is worth something: if you look at the issue too closely (like Porphyry), you understand that life is not worth anything («non val cosa nessuna | i moti tuoi», *A se stesso*, vv. 7-8); but if you look at the issue from above (like Plotinus), you can still hold life in some regard, relying on other illusions such as friendship and love, which can still give existence meaning, provided that one leaves them veiled in vagueness. Vagueness is so crucial because in Leopardi there are no truths that we can only grasp with the heart and that are subsequently able to resist a «rational test». The truths that can do so are the ugly truths, like «all is nothing» (*Zib.* 72), yet these can also be grasped through reason: nothingness, for example, is an object of knowledge for *both* the heart and reason. This emerges very clearly in the opening of the *Plotinus*: «non solo l'intelletto mio, ma tutti i sentimenti, ancora del corpo, sono (per un modo di dire strano, ma accomodato al caso) pieni di questa vanità», says Porphyry (LEOPARDI 2008, pp. 551-2). What differentiates the epistemic power of the heart from the one of reason is the ability to be in touch with beauty. All beauty, however, is false for Leopardi. Consequently, there are no such truths that, first known through the heart, are then able to resist reason: in other words, there are no beautiful truths.

The heart and imagination are thus indispensable both to make us happy (to the small extent that the human condition allows for happiness) and to «understand» the world («understand», clearly, not in the scientific sense of the term).

## 5. THE REHABILITATION OF METAPHYSICS THROUGH POETIC SYNTHESIS OF LANGUAGE

Contrary to what one might think, Leopardi is well aware of the problem raised by Wittgenstein and Carnap, and he himself raised it, in the very same terms, in the *Zibaldone*:

spirito [...] è una parola senza idea possibile; o vogliam dire un'idea meramente negativa e privativa, e però non idea; come non è idea il niente, o un corpo che non sia largo né profondo né lungo, e simili immaginazioni della lingua piuttosto che del pensiero. (*Zib.* 4253, 9 marzo 1827)

“Spirito” «è una parola senza idea possibile» means «there is no object in the world the word “spirito” refers to». The same applies to the word «nothingness». And yet, Leopardi strives to go beyond the seemingly fatal meaninglessness of these words, in the following way. This meaninglessness is registered by reason: it is reason that cannot link any objects to the word «nothingness». The heart, however, understands perfectly. In the famous

letter to Jacopssen, for example, Leopardi writes: «Le néant des choses était pour moi la seule chose qui existait».<sup>13</sup> The heart understands all too well what that «néant» means. Nothingness is an object of knowledge of the heart, in fact, to a much greater degree that the poet himself would wish. The heart provides a different kind of meaningfulness, that needs not be dismissed merely because it is different from the one provided by logic. And because the heart is the main tool of expression of literature and the arts in general, so the arts too provide this new kind of meaningfulness: with their vague and indefinite language, they provide knowledge which is indeed less meaningful on the logico-linguistic plane, but much more meaningful on the existential one. Not just *more* meaningful, but in fact the only meaningful knowledge for the purpose of our existence, because reason and science «non fa[nno] ordinariamente altro che disingannare e atterrare» (*Zib.* 2709, 21 maggio 1823). And the same does philosophy, if performed analytically.

A few years before Carnap, Wittgenstein had claimed that «every philosophical proposition is bad grammar, and the best that we can hope to achieve by philosophical discussion is to lead people to see that philosophical discussion is a mistake».<sup>14</sup> Leopardi reached a very similar conclusion in the *Timandro*:

Io non ignoro che l'ultima conclusione che si ricava dalla filosofia vera e perfetta, si è, che non bisogna filosofare. Dal che s'inferisce che la filosofia, primieramente è inutile, perché a questo effetto di non filosofare, non fa di bisogno esser filosofo; secondariamente è dannosissima, perché quella ultima conclusione non vi s'impara se non alle proprie spese, e imparata che sia, non si può mettere in opera; non essendo in arbitrio degli uomini dimenticare le verità conosciute, e deponendosi più facilmente qualunque altro abito che quello di filosofare. In somma la filosofia, sperando e promettendo a principio di medicare i nostri mali, in ultimo si riduce a desiderare invano di rimediare a se stessa (*Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro*, in LEOPARDI 2008, p. 508).

That is why Leopardi advocates for a new philosophy of the heart and imagination: the «ultrafilosofia» (*Zib.* 115, 7 giugno 1820). Indeed, only the heart and imagination «sono atti a concepire, creare, formare, perfezionare un sistema filosofico, metafisico, politico che abbia il meno possibile di falso, o, se non altro, il più possibile di simile al vero, e il meno possibile di assurdo, d'improbabile, di stravagante» (*Zib.* 3243, 22 agosto 1823). While reason destroys and overthrows illusions, the heart patiently and tirelessly rebuilds them. As Tilgher writes, «appunto perché non è capace di generare le illu-

<sup>13</sup> Lettera a Jacopssen, 23 giugno 1823 in *Epist.*, I, p. 723.

<sup>14</sup> These are the words Bertrand Russell used in the famous historical introduc-

tion to the first English edition of the *Tractatus* to summarise Wittgenstein's intent in the book (see WITTGENSTEIN 1922, p. 10).

sioni, la ragione non è capace di distruggerle veramente e a fondo» (1940, p. 18). The same process is clearly transferrable to the level of the relevant disciplines: logic and science destroy illusions; poetry and art recreate them. Leopardi is re-admitting poetry into philosophy, the same poetry that Plato had expelled, and that «with exactly the same arguments that Plato uses to condemn [it]», i.e., the fact that poetry exalts the irrational within us (D'INTINO 2015, p. 26). Poetry interprets the world with the «colpo d'occhio» through the heart; science interprets the world with «analisi» through reason. This is the new way in which poetry and the arts «understand» the world. And this way we existentially need much more than the scientific one, which makes the world wither.

Through this new notion of «understanding», Leopardi holds the thesis that intelligence does not equate computation. The relationship between intelligence and computation is today at the core of the debate on the nature and risks of Artificial Intelligence. Notably, the same thesis that intelligence does *not* equate computation is endorsed by scientists such as Roger Penrose (1989, p. 220 and p. 558) and existentialism scholars such as Hubert Dreyfus (1992).

The strong bias towards science our age has developed generates the risk St. Augustine was warning against: «eunt homines mirari alta montium, et ingentes fluctus maris, et latissimos lapsus fluminum, et Oceani ambitum, et gyros siderum, et relinquunt se ipsos» (*Confessiones*, X, § 8 in AUGUSTINE 2014). Paraphrased in Leopardian terms – what is the point of knowing the world scientifically if we forget about our own happiness? In Wittgenstein's terms, «even if all *possible* scientific questions were answered, the problems of life would remain completely untouched» (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.52). The humanities are vital because they alone can still give us a reason to live (see *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*), and perhaps even to live happily for half an hour (see *Dialogo di Timandro ed Eleandro*). The humanities provide values, which are often rationally unjustifiable and certainly irreducible to science, but which can give us a direction in life, something, as Kierkegaard says, «for which [we are] willing to live and die» (KIERKEGAARD 1967, p. 34. Gilleleie, 1<sup>st</sup> August 1835). Only the humanities can help us understand values like friendship, hope, faith, love, which are illusions only *sub specie scientiae*, but they are the most solid truths of our existence. These values, not only can science not endorse, but, quite rigorously speaking, it cannot understand them, as they elude the domain of pure reason. Thus, not only is art still useful, but «utile sopra tutti gli utili»,<sup>15</sup> as the only means still capable of making us happy.

<sup>15</sup> *Epist.*, II, lettera 1319, a Pietro Giordani, 24 luglio 1828, p. 1535.

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