

And he loved light rather than darkness: Giacomo Leopardi's Poetics and Pessimism in the Work
of Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, and A. E. Housman

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines a selection of the work of three Victorian writers: Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, and A. E. Housman, in light of their interest in the Romantic-era Italian poet-philosopher Giacomo Leopardi. While often described as Italy's greatest poet apart from Dante, Leopardi has attracted only very slight attention from anglophone literary critics and scholars. The extensive bodies of literary criticism on Arnold, Eliot, and Housman, for instance, contain just a handful of essays that discuss their (explicitly acknowledged) interest in Leopardi. This thesis is an attempt to (begin to) rectify this neglect. It commences by examining Leopardi in his Romantic context and the way he was criticised by the Victorian periodical press, before turning to a brief examination of Leopardi's generally unfamiliar poetics and philosophy. The remainder of the thesis is divided into four chapters, the first two treating Arnold's response to Leopardi, the third Eliot's, and the fourth Housman's. These writers were selected not only for the conspicuous nature of their responses to Leopardi, but, of course, for the significance of these responses and how they furnish interesting new perspectives on the Victorian writers' own work. But Arnold, Eliot, and Housman were also chosen as providing a representative cross-section of different Victorian responses to Leopardi. Arnold, who was seminal in introducing Leopardi to an anglophone Victorian readership, responded primarily to Leopardi's poetics and his solidarist-pessimistic philosophy, especially in the conclusion to "Dover Beach." In contrast to Arnold (and to Housman), Eliot responded most intensely to Leopardi's early republican poetry and, in particular, to an important ode of his – "All' Italia" – that is repeatedly quoted in her final novel *Daniel Deronda*. And Housman, unsurprisingly, was fascinated by Leopardi's pessimistic philosophy, which informs the structure of *A Shropshire Lad*. While prioritising close textual readings of all four writers, this thesis also examines what such readings reveal about Arnold's, Eliot's, and Housman's philosophical approaches. Thus, this thesis examines the work of pessimistic philosophers, such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Leopardi himself, but also to the work of, for instance, the seventeenth century philosopher Giambattista Vico and the modern Cosmopolitan Kwame Anthony Appiah.

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Chapter one: Introduction

I. Why Leopardi

In 1979, Italo Calvino made this assessment of the sharp disjunction between Leopardi's reputation in Italy and his reputation elsewhere:

For [Italians] Leopardi is a presence that gets increasingly bigger and closer; for a long time, every literary generation constructed its own Leopardi, different to that of the preceding generations, and [each generation] defined itself via its definition of Leopardi; and Leopardi can bear all these experiences. And yet, outside the borders of Italy, Leopardi, simply, does not exist. (72-73)¹

Leopardi's "non-existence" in England, in particular, is a common theme of the nineteenth-century criticism of the Italian poet; again, and again, critics emphasise Leopardi's "obscurity." George Henry Lewes, for instance, writes that "[t]o English ears [the name Leopardi] is a mere sound signifying nothing" (659). An anonymous writer in the *Prospective Review* "imagine[s]" that "[f]ew of our countrymen...have read the writings, not many even heard the name, of one of the most remarkable men of modern Italy" (157). And Margaret Oliphant can claim in the 1860s that "[t]he works of Leopardi are so little known in England, that it is scarcely presumption to fancy that it is a new poet whom we are about to introduce to a large number of our readers" ("Giacomo Leopardi" 459). But this neglect is not confined to the nineteenth-century – as Calvino's comment implies; in fact, it was highlighted very recently by the pre-eminent Leopardi scholar Franco D'Intino in the introduction to the complete English translation of Leopardi's notebook-miscellany – the *Zibaldone* – that he and Michael Caesar edited, the publication of

¹ All translations of Calvino's paper are my own.

which was a truly seminal event in the reception of Leopardi in the English-speaking world.

“Giacomo Leopardi is the most radical and challenging of nineteenth-century poets and thinkers,” D’Intino points out, “yet the recognition of his genius outside his native Italy has been sporadic, at times enthusiastic and engaged, at others distracted” (“Introduction” xi).

And yet Leopardi is undoubtedly one of the most important poets of the entire tradition of Italian poetry – perhaps second in importance only to Dante. It is thus that the publisher introduced Leopardi on the book jacket to D’Intino and Caesar’s translation of the *Zibaldone*: “Giacomo Leopardi is widely recognized as Italy’s finest modern lyric poet, for many the greatest after Dante.” This assertion is, in fact, a common theme for cover copy of Leopardi editions (in both Italian and English). On the book jacket of Patrick Creagh’s translation of Leopardi’s *Moral Essays*, Leopardi is described as “Italy’s greatest writer after Dante – poet, scholar, and essayist,” and on the reverse of Ugo Dotti’s important scholarly edition of Leopardi’s *Canti*, he is described, somewhat superfluously, as being “of noble family” but also as “one of the greatest poets and thinkers of Europe.” Such comments are not confined to the outside of editions of Leopardi’s work. The editor of Dover’s *Introduction to Italian Poetry*, Luciano Rebay, refers to Leopardi as “one of the greatest Italian poets of all times” (103), and in his monumental *Storia della Letteratura Italiana*, Dotti calls Leopardi the “greatest poet of the nineteenth-century and, probably, of our modern times” (485).² Leopardi’s *Canti* are, according to their most recent English language translator, Jonathan Galassi, now recognised as “one of the most influential works of the nineteenth-century” in European literature (Introduction xiii).

Given Leopardi’s stature in the canon of Italian – and European – poetry, given the small resurgence in Anglophone interest in his writing (as represented by the work of scholars and

² All translations of Dotti’s history are my own.

translators such as D'Intino, Caesar, and Galassi), and given the singular “power” Italy “exercised” upon “the British imagination in the mid-nineteenth-century” (Cotsell 29), it is surprising that so little has been written on the various ways in which nineteenth-century English writers responded to Leopardi’s work. Despite Leopardi’s significant impact on European poets – in terms of his philosophical pessimism, his “direct” (even confessional) poetics, and his liberation from traditional verse forms (Galassi, Introduction xiv, xvi-xvii) – English Victorian and Edwardian writers’ diverse responses to his oeuvre have been almost entirely ignored. While significant work has been done on Leopardi, Romanticism, and Europe and a little on his reception in England (some of which is discussed below), I have identified fewer than half a dozen essays on Leopardi and the Victorian poets and novelists whose engagement with his work I have studied: Matthew Arnold, who was instrumental in introducing Leopardi to a wider, English-language audience; George Eliot, who references Leopardi’s most important republican ode three times in *Daniel Deronda*; and A. E. Housman, who closely studied Leopardi’s work. Introducing Leopardi into the history of Victorian literature, however, allows us to recognise and understand Arnold’s experiments with Leopardi’s innovative poetics and his attraction to stoic pessimism, Eliot’s deployment of Leopardi’s republican poetics in *Daniel Deronda*, and Housman’s drawing upon Leopardi’s *Canti* in the structuring of his own *A Shropshire Lad*.

Despite Arnold’s monumental reputation as a Victorian poet and critic, his European focus (Park Honan, “Matthew Arnold” 143), and the recent flourishing of transnationalist criticism on the interactions between nineteenth-century writers in England and Italy, Arnold has been underrepresented in studies of Victorian literary cosmopolitanism. With the exception of Christopher Keirstead, who discusses Arnold’s “strong intellectual and emotional desire...to embrace the challenge of Cosmopolitanism” within the European context (4), there are rarely

more than brief mentions of Arnold in recent major works in this field by Maura O'Connor, Matthew Reynolds, Stephanie Kudak Weiner, and Alison Chapman – perhaps, in part, because Arnold's poetry is increasingly not discussed at all by twenty-first century critics. Moreover, when Arnold's European outlook is recognised, scholars usually focus on his German influences. Similarly, in relation to George Eliot, while the context of Judaism in *Daniel Deronda* has been thoroughly examined, very little has been written on how Eliot's representation of the proto-Zionist movement is inflected by her interest in the Italian Risorgimento and in Leopardi's republican poetics. (Andrew Thompson's excellent *George Eliot and Italy* is an obvious exception to this general observation.) Finally, with reference to A. E. Housman, although his deep interest in Leopardi was acknowledged in one of his most revealing letters, the scholarship on this is confined to one short (and quite old) essay by Ghan Singh and to one seminar that was delivered by a non-specialist a few years ago: Carlo Caruso's "A. E. Housman and Giacomo Leopardi: A Chance Encounter?" delivered at Durham University in 2016. Victorian and Edwardian writers' encounters with Leopardi were, however, hardly matters of "chance"; the fact that those, like Arnold, Eliot, and Housman, who had a strong understanding of European culture read and admired and responded to Leopardi's work is hardly surprising, in the end, given Leopardi's stature.

II. Leopardi's oeuvre in nineteenth-century Italy and Britain

Admired for both his poetry and his philosophical (and philological) writings, Leopardi produced a diverse body of work in his short life. Most famously, his oeuvre comprises his collection of 41 lyric poems, the *Canti*, that range in subject from republican-themed odes on Italy's lost greatness to deeply melancholic, introspective lyrics; his *Operette Morali* or *Moral Essays*, as the most recent translation is titled; and the compendious, above-mentioned *Zibaldone* – a vast

notebook of Leopardian *pensées* to which the writer contributed throughout much of his adult life. Leopardi's *Canti*, which were composed sporadically between 1818 and 1836, went through numerous editions in his lifetime, expanding with each new publication. The first two poems: "All'Italia" ("To Italy") and "Sopra il monumento di Dante che si preparava in Firenze" ("On the Monument to Dante Being Erected in Florence"), were composed and published together for the first time in 1818, and another early "canzone" – roughly translatable as "ode" – "Ad Angelo Mai" ("To Angelo Mai") was published two years later, in 1820. A few years later, these three canzoni were re-published, along with seven others, in Bologna (1824), but the first edition of Leopardi's poems that appeared under the final title *Canti* was not published until 1831, in Florence. A second, expanded edition of the *Canti*, which included the "Aspasia" cycle (treating Leopardi's passionate love for Fanny Targioni Tozzetti – 1830), "Il passero solitario" ("The Solitary Thrush"), the so-called "sepulchral odes," and "Palinodia al Marchese Gino Capponi" ("Recantation for Marchese Gino Capponi"), was published in Naples in 1835, shortly before Leopardi died in that city. All the *Canti*, including "Il tramonto della luna" ("The Setting of the Moon") and "La ginestra" ("Broom") – the last two poems that Leopardi wrote – were published in Leopardi's friend Antonio Ranieri's edition of 1845. A few of Leopardi's philosophical dialogues, the *Moral Essays*, which were largely composed in 1824, were first published in editor and Risorgimentalist Giovan Pietro Vieusseux's literary journal *L'Antologia* in 1826. The following year, they were collected together into the first book-length edition in Milan, and they were re-published in a second edition in Florence in 1834. Finally, Leopardi's *Zibaldone*, to which Leopardi added entries between 1817 and 1832, was not published for the first time until 1898-1900, when it was edited by an Italian national commission headed by the Nobel-prize winning poet Giosuè Carducci.

In nineteenth-century England, it was the *Canti* and, later, the *Moral Essays* that were the most read elements of Leopardi's diverse body of work. Nineteenth-century British periodical literature was crucial to the dissemination of Leopardi's poetry both because critics and reviewers produced numerous essays introducing the poet to the reading public, and because they often published Leopardi's poems – in either Italian or English translations – in these essays. Although, as Daniela Cerimonia points out in her monograph on Shelley and Leopardi, the translations included often “cement[...] the critical perspective of the translator-reviewer” (78). While the first complete translation of Leopardi's *Canti*, by Francis Henry Cliffe, did not appear until the very end of the nineteenth-century (1893), readers of periodicals such as *Fraser's*, the *Quarterly Review*, and *Blackwood's* did have some (infrequent and sporadic) access to Leopardi's poetry in English translation before that date. (Of course, the writers considered in this thesis – Arnold, Eliot, and Housman – would have read him principally in Italian, and did not, therefore, rely on translations such as Cliffe's). Of the *Canti*, the poems that were either published in Italian or translated into English most frequently in the nineteenth-century British periodical press were “To Italy” (at least eight versions of which I have found), followed by “Amore e Morte” (“Love and Death”) and “A se stesso” (“To Himself” – of which I have found four versions). The latter two are closely followed in frequency of publication by “On the Monument to Dante,” “Bruto Minore” (“Brutus”), “Il primo amore” (“First Love”), and “Sabato del villaggio” (“Saturday in the Village”) with three publications each.

The popularity of “To Italy,” on the one hand, and of “To Himself,” on the other hand, neatly reflects – even in the contrast indicated by the titles – two different strands of interest in Leopardi in the nineteenth-century: interest in Leopardi as an Italian Republican writer and interest in his exquisitely lyrical pessimistic introspection. As a case study, the publication of

these two poems also seems to reflect an interesting process in the evolution of Anglophone interest in Leopardi. For instance, “To Italy” appears in the British periodical press on at least six separate occasions (both in Italian and English) before the completion of Italian Reunification in 1870, and only a couple of times subsequent to the achievement of that long sought goal. In contrast, “To Himself” is published in the British periodical press only in the final three decades of the nineteenth-century, from 1872 onwards. Thus, interest in “To Italy” appears to be connected to the strong British interest in the Italian Risorgimento, with which Leopardi was, to an extent, connected at the time (as is evident in the review of British criticism of Leopardi below), while interest in “To Himself,” one of Leopardi’s most pessimistic (and personal) lyrics, appears to be catalysed by the decline in religious faith and concomitant increase in interest in pessimism in late-nineteenth-century England (a point developed below at pp. XXXVI ff.).

The latter developments also seem to have fuelled an interest in Leopardi’s pessimistic philosophy, especially as contained in his *Moral Essays*. While these are referred to, and sometimes quoted, in the periodical literature throughout the nineteenth-century, the first complete publication of Leopardi’s prose work did not appear until Charles Edwardes produced his not terribly faithful translation in 1882. Even then publication may have been premature. The single letter of his in which Arnold mentions Leopardi’s name is addressed to Edwardes at the end of 1881, just before the *Moral Essays* were published. In it, Arnold is scathing of Edwardes’ project: “Allow me to say that the public would read with much more interest a translation of the *poems* of Leopardi, plainly and correctly executed in *prose*, than any translation of his prose writings” (*The Letters* 179). Arnold’s response is probably symptomatic of his disapproval of Leopardi’s pessimism, which (as described below) he compares very unfavourably to the joy-

rendering optimism of Wordsworth. In a similar vein, the *Spectator* reviewer of Edwardes' translation sharply disparages his intent:

We do not greatly share the desire [to propagate Leopardi's work throughout England], nor at all the hope, which has inspired [Edwardes'] labours. For even if the extreme beauty of style which charms us in the original could ever survive the process of translation...still, we would no more choose to feed the minds of our countrymen and women with the despairing utterances of the pessimist poet, than we would their bodies with hasheesh. (236)

The Victorian poet James Thomson, best known for his bleakly pessimistic "City of Dreadful Night" (1874) that bears an epigraph drawn from Leopardi's *Canti*, and Patrick Maxwell were not, however, dissuaded from publishing their own translations of Leopardi's *Moral Essays* – selected in Thomson's case; complete in Maxwell's – around ten years later. While Thomson had, in fact, published a few individual pieces in the *National Reformer* in the late 1860s, the twelve dialogue-essays that he translated were not published in book form until 1893 (the same year as Maxwell's), by which point British periodical critics were beginning to demonstrate an appreciation of Leopardi's pessimism (see pp. XXXVI ff.).

III. Leopardi and his Romantic context

For much of the nineteenth-century, however, Leopardi's pessimism was (as will be explored further below) a significant obstacle to appreciation of the poet both in England and in Italy. As Cosetta Veronese explains, with reference to the Italian context, "the pessimistic-materialistic dimension of Leopardi's thought represented a problem for the nineteenth-century reader – a problem that was, for the most part, circumvented by maximising Leopardi's poetic profile to the

detriment of his philosophical one” (448-49).³ This critical approach to Leopardi had strong parallels, as Veronese observes, to that taken in relation to Byron in Italy, and the two, despite their obvious poetic differences, were frequently discussed together in nineteenth-century Italian criticism. Veronese again:

‘Melancholy’, ‘discontent’, ‘pain’ on the one hand, ‘nobility of soul’ and ‘poetic genius’ on the other, are, thus, the thematic and spiritual affinities that legitimise the Leopardi-Byron parallelism, oscillating between an ‘explicative’ function (Byron is cited to evoke Leopardi), and a ‘exemplative’ one (the two authors converge in the representation of a certain spirit, a certain philosophy, a certain way of confronting the world, life, poetry). (453)

This comparative tradition is especially interesting given the fact that, as Leopardi scholar Pino Fasano observes, for the anti-Romantic Leopardi, the “Romantic” was practically synonymous with Byron. Leopardi’s concept of “Romantic,” Fasano writes, is “the English *romantic*, of which Byron, in Latin countries, is made...the paradigm” (19).⁴ Accordingly, it is Byron, the poet with whom Leopardi was often compared by nineteenth-century Italian critics, who was at the forefront of Leopardi’s mind when he composed his anti-Romantic polemic: “Discorso di un italiano intorno alla poesia romantica” (“Discourse of an Italian on Romantic Poetry”).

In the 1818 “Discourse,” which responded to the prominent Italian Romantic Ludovico Di Breme’s review of a translation of Byron’s *Giaour* but which was not published during his lifetime, Leopardi strongly condemns the Romantics’ emphasis on poetry’s appeal to the modern intellect. He opens his essay by claiming that the Romantics “wish to make poetry consort with the intellect” (“Discourse” 115). However, any attempt to appeal to the intellect in poetry is

³ All translations of Veronese’s essay are my own.

⁴ All translations of Fasano’s book are my own.

mistaken, according to Leopardi, because “the intellect cannot be captivated and beguiled by poetry, while the imagination not only can be but is indeed often beguiled” (“Discourse” 115, 117). In other words, the Romantics’ argument that poetry must “appeal[...] to [the] modern intellect” (Camilletti 51), rather than to the imagination, is “grounded in a fallacy: the intellect can never be cheated by means of poetic effects, only the imaginative faculty can; and the imaginative faculty can only be charmed and seduced when some aesthetic suggestion brings it close to nature” (Camilletti 51). Interestingly, Camilletti connects this aspect of Leopardi’s poetics, the idea that the imagination is willingly deceived by poetry (whereas the intellect is not), to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s concept of the “willing suspension of disbelief” (Camilletti 53). Both Romantic era poets argue that the reader of poetry participates in their own beguilement by poetry, and that this is, in fact, part of the point of poetry.

According to Leopardi’s argument, the poet must “imitate nature” in order to arouse “poetic illusions” in the reader that, in turn, produce “delight” (“Discourse” 118, 119, 118). As Leopardi describes it:

the poet must be free to beguile, to transport us to the days of the first men, and to bring back before our eyes that nature that has disappeared from sight, or better, to reveal her continued presence, unchanged and beautiful as she was in the beginning, and to make us see and feel her, to arouse in us those superhuman delights of which we have lost almost all, with the exception of desire. (“Discourse” 126)

The ancient poets were capable of “imitat[ing nature] in such a way as to make her appear not imitated but actually transported into their verses” (“Discourse” 147), but the Romantics have, according to Leopardi, abandoned this prerogative. Modern or Romantic poets were, in Leopardi’s perspective, guilty of allowing their own personalities to intrude: “the poet speaks

incessantly, there speaks the philosopher, there speaks the experienced and subtle connoisseur of the human mind and the man who knows, or firmly believes, that he is sensitive” (“Discourse” 153). Leopardi, as Fasano puts it, takes issue with what he perceives as the Romantics’ “shift of poetic attention from ‘naked nature’ painted and imitated ‘for itself’ ...to the feeling that nature causes” (21). Instead of “transport[ing]” nature into their poetry in order to appeal to the reader directly, the Romantic poets establish themselves as intermediaries who concern themselves with matters of the intellect, i.e. reason and philosophy, rather than matters of the imagination, i.e. nature and the poetic illusions that it inspires. As Nicholas Perella writes, in describing Leopardi’s perspective, “the more the poet talks in the first person, the more he intrudes himself in his description, the less he imitates and the more he departs from the only true fount of the pathetic, which is nature bare” (70).

In contrast to the Romantics – as Leopardi conceives of them – the Ancients aimed at, and were capable of, as hinted above, transposing nature into their poetry, and they did so in a natural, “nonchalan[t]” manner: “The ancients imitated...natural things, with a divine nonchalance and *sprezzatura*, frankly, and we may say, innocently, ingenuously even, writing not like one who contemplates himself...but like one who receives a dictation from this heart, and exactly in that way writes it down” (Leopardi, “Discourse” 153). Their ability to do so is what renders Ancient poets so appropriate for the study and imitation of Romantic poets; “in order to poetically imitate nature in her virginal primitiveness, and to speak the language of nature...it is almost indispensable to engage in long and profound study of the ancient poets” (Leopardi, “Discourse” 142). Although Romantic poets cannot hope, in the modern, reason-plagued society, to imitate nature directly themselves, they can approach doing so through imitation of the Ancient poets who could. Thus, “[a]iming to support the arguments of

Classicism,” Leopardi’s essay, in suggesting how modern poetry might accomplish the objective of true poetry, “equally proposes itself as an artistic manifesto for a renovation of Italian culture, pursued through a critical engagement with classical antiquity” (Camilletti 7).

Leopardi’s self-identification as a Classicist in his “Discourse” occurred at a time when the Italian literary scene was distinguished by a heated “quarrel” – as Camilletti terms it – between the supposedly conservative “Classicists,” like Leopardi, and the supposedly liberal and revolutionary “Romantics,” like Di Breme. As Peter Brand and Lino Pertile suggest in the *Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, the debate was frequently framed in terms of a simplistic, false dichotomy:

On the surface there appeared to be two opposing parties, the classicist, upholding the values of tradition, and the Romantic, opting for experimentation and innovation, which included embracing some of the ideas and techniques found in contemporary foreign literatures (including the term *romantic*). (402)

Such a dichotomy is “simplistic” and “false” because, as Brand and Pertile point out, writers such as Leopardi and Foscolo “expressed the modern sensibility in impeccably traditional form” (402; see also Camilletti 12) and cannot, therefore, be accurately designated as either purely Classicist or Romantic-modern. The nature of the debate is even further confused by the fact that the Romantics’ “self-definition...was not univocal” (Camilletti 26), and the suspicion that, as Gina Martegiani bluntly put it in 1908, “Italian Romanticism does not exist” (qtd. in Brand & Pertile 402). This suspicion was based on the fact that a) “Italian authors of the early nineteenth-century continued to emulate the same Greco-Roman classical culture that the rest of Romantic Europe had begun to regard with suspicion”; b) “Italian Romanticism promoted a pious Catholicism that was out of step with the more rational Protestant cultures of northern Europe”;

and c) “Italian Romantic authors failed to transcend the chaos and contingencies of Italian history and politics to address international currents of thought” (Luzzi 30). However, at the time, and irrespective of the question of labels and definitions, participants in the Classicism vs. Romanticism debate were “animate[d]” by questions such as the “enhancing or rejecting the continuity of Italian literature with classical antiquity and the Renaissance” (Camilletti 8). And the virulence of the debate on questions such as this surprised European Romantic figures, including Goethe and Byron (Camilletti 29-30).

Ultimately, perhaps, the adoption of one label or the other indicated more about the intentions of the adopter than the actual doctrine at stake; as Fasano puts it, whoever understands “the notions of ‘classicism’ and ‘romanticism’ as ‘cultural parties’, will have to avoid referring to an abstract and rigid orthodoxy of the doctrine of each ‘party’, and underline, rather, the subjective aspect of the adoption of those terms on the party of each protagonist” (18). Leopardi, as will be clear from the positions he maintains in the “Discourse,” adopts the position of a “Classicist” because he believes not only that the adherence to ancient precepts of poetry is the best principle for contemporary poets, but also because he insists that it is the only way. For Leopardi, poetry can only delight the reader in the presentation of poetic illusions through the imitation of nature, and the imitation of nature can, under modern circumstances, best be achieved through the study and imitation of ancient poets. For this reason, the Romantic “theory of poetry is grounded in fallacy and contradiction, in that they want poetry to be modern and progressive, whereas the only true poetic effect consists in returning to an *ancient* state of mind, through a backward movement” (Camilletti 52). In other words, Classicism, in terms of its adherence to ancient tradition, was not only better than Romanticism, it was “the only [way forward for] true poetry” (Camilletti 53).

Despite Leopardi's self-identification as a Classicist and his attack on Romantics like Di Breme (and Byron), his positions as outlined in the "Discourse" are not, as already suggested, purely anti-Romantic. As Camilletti observes, while Leopardi

question[s] and demystif[ies] Italian Romanticism in the name of a strongly asserted continuity with classical antiquity, nonetheless [he also] presents themes and arguments that nowadays we would ascribe without reservation to a broadly intended category of 'Romanticism.' (8)

For example, as Fasano suggests, even in his "Discourse," Leopardi appears to obliquely adhere to the Romantic tenet of the primacy of feeling in poetry. While Leopardi rejects what he interprets as the Romantic poets' self-intrusion in describing the feeling aroused in them by nature, his rejection "is motivated by the consideration that only the objective imitation of nature can guarantee the excitement of the 'depth of feeling' in the reader" (Fasano 21). Unsurprisingly, then, due to such contradictions between Leopardi's adoption of the label "Classicist" and his stated positions, his status as a Romantic poet has been the source of much debate in Italian scholarship, and perhaps, ultimately, the best (and simplest) "policy is to define as 'Romantics' those who called themselves such, leave it at that, and not pursue a controversy on labels which already seemed pointless at the time to a few perceptive minds such as Leopardi's, or Byron's" (Brand & Pertile 403). In this case, Leopardi could not be described as a Romantic. Whether or not there is such a thing as an Italian Romantic, and whether or not Leopardi was one, there are, however, ways in which his work intersects with the English Romantic poetry that, for him, provided the paradigm of Romanticism. Probably as with any literary figure who finds his-/herself in an anomalous position with respect to a predominant movement, there are strands of Leopardi's thought and poetics that he shares with that predominant movement.

To begin with, Leopardi did hold some typically Romantic notions on the naturalness of poetic composition. John Keats's formulation of the proposition that poetry should be a spontaneous growth is, undoubtedly, the most famous. In his letter to John Taylor of 27 February 1818, Keats memorably writes, among a host of other axioms, that, "if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all" (Keats 944). Although Leopardi at no time registers an interest, or even awareness, of Keats, he does manifest a remarkably similar notion of poetry-making in one of his own letters. In writing to his cousin Giuseppe Melchiorri, six years after Keats on 5 March 1824, Leopardi describes his own poetic process: "In writing [poems] I've never followed anything but an inspiration (or frenzy); when it came on me, in two minutes I formed the outline and plan of the whole composition" (*Letters* 150). Then, in an analogy remarkably similar to that of Keats in its naturally derived imagery, Leopardi adds: "if inspiration does not come of its own accord, it would be easier for water to come from a tree trunk than a single line from my brain" (*Letters* 150). In a related vein, D'Intino has pointed out that, much as Leopardi shared with Keats this notion of poetry as spontaneous, organic growth, so did he share with Coleridge the ideal of organic form, containing the potential for all forms inside itself: "a Work-organism of which one cannot distinguish the parts and which lives only in the re-reading" ("Coleridge-Leopardi" 103).⁵

Leopardi's response to the Romantics' insistence on the primacy of feeling, as outlined above, was complicated. As Fasano suggests, Leopardi implies a complex concurrence with the Romantics' privileging of emotion as early as the "Discourse" (21-22). However, at this point, Leopardi did not believe that "sentiment," which he defined as "that depth of feeling which is felt by sensitive hearts through the impression that some natural thing has upon the senses"

⁵ All translations of D'Intino's essay are my own.

(*Zibaldone* 15), was the *exclusive* subject of modern poetry. Later in his career, having exhaustively searched for possible modern sources to produce the same or a similar delight as that experienced by the ancients, Leopardi ultimately reaches the conclusion that “sentiment” is, indeed, the only possible subject for modern poetry: “The criterion of faith to ‘partial nature’ carries with it the definitive and convinced acceptance of ‘sentimental’ or ‘melancholic’ poetry as the *only* possible kind in the modern world” (Fasano 32). As Leopardi puts it in the *Zibaldone* in March 1821 – a few years after composing the “Discourse” – “[s]entimental poetry belongs uniquely and exclusively to the present time” and this is because “the sentimental is founded upon, and springs from, philosophy, experience, and knowledge of men and things, in short, from the true” (734-35). However, this conclusion, as can be heard in the passage just quoted, is only arrived at with regret. At the time, Leopardi believed that such a conclusion actually entailed the impossibility of modern poetry: “we might well conclude that poetry is scarcely proper to our times, and not be surprised if it now languishes, as we see” (*Zibaldone* 734-35). Related to this was Leopardi’s idea that the introspection or self-reflexivity often touted as a Romantic tenet was both characteristic of modern poetry and actually destructive of true poetry. “[W]hat came easily to Homer” – i.e. the natural representation of nature – “was no longer easily available to the moderns, who introduced the presence of the representing subject into representation itself (Byron being a prime example in the *Zibaldone*)” (Caesar & D’Intino lix). However, again, due to the nature of the age, Leopardi “did accept...the romantic identification of modern poetry with abstract thought and philosophy” (see *Zibaldone* 1650; Caesar & D’Intino), although he inevitably saw it as a decline from what he considered to be true poetry.

Then again, a parallel might be drawn between Wordsworth’s famous notion of “emotion recollected in tranquillity” as the proper subject of the poet (273) and Leopardi’s later primacy of

memory in poetic composition. “In a note of 1827,” Leopardi records in his *Zibaldone* that “‘recollection’ is the faculty that allows modern man...to return to an ‘almost’ natal source” (see *Zibaldone* 4286-87; Caesar & D’Intino). While not a whole recuperation of the child’s Ancient imagination, it was, perhaps, the next best thing – “a recollection, a repetition, a re-echoing or reflection of the old image” (Leopardi *Zibaldone* 515). Caesar and D’Intino explicitly compare Leopardi’s belief that “[t]he self, the ‘I,’ does not reside in that which is remembered, but in the very activity of remembering, which alone is able to bring back to life, as does the spirit, the dead letter of the text” to Wordsworth’s *Prelude* (8.428-36 – Caesar & D’Intino xl). Another fascinating parallel with Wordsworth might be identified in their prioritisation of the experience of childhood, marked as this state is for both of them, by the freshness of the individual’s imagination. For Leopardi, an imaginative power similar to that of the Ancients is experienced, even in the modern period, in the individual’s years of childhood, and this experience can, to an extent, be drawn upon in the production of modern poetry – a mode that is very close to Wordsworth’s own. As Caesar and D’Intino observe, “just as man conserves within him traces of childhood as he grows – Leopardi’s poetry, as that of Wordsworth, consists precisely in the recuperation of this originary imprint” (xxx). A further way in which Leopardi’s poetics coincided with those of Wordsworth was in the prioritisation of the ordinary as a fit subject for poetry; as Wordsworth writes in his famous “Preface”: “The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life” and “to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way” (264). Just as Wordsworth aimed, in *Lyrical Ballads*, to isolate the extraordinary in the ordinary, so did Leopardi believe in the “exigency of making the ‘similar to oneself’ the object of poetry, and, thus, the known, the familiar, the national, that

instigate memory, and, therefore, the ‘delight’ of the reader” (Fasano 31). Applying this notion to the category of people that were the fit subject of poetry, Leopardi writes, in August 1820, “[w]e are only really interested in people like ourselves...people of extraordinary character are not suited to poetry” (*Zibaldone* 224-25).

This aspect of Leopardi’s poetics resulted in the rejection of what he perceived as Byron’s “excess,” and his emphasis on the foreign, for an insistence on simplicity and moderation, and a prioritisation of the everyday (Fasano 30-31). This rejection of what Leopardi conceived of as unnatural or unfamiliar constituted his major criticism of Byron (Leopardi even takes specific aim at Byron in the above quoted passage of the *Zibaldone*): that his treatment of extreme psychological states in his poetry was unnatural and, therefore, not “useful.” Thus, earlier in the August 1820 passage quoted in the previous paragraph, and with specific reference to *The Corsair*, Leopardi writes:

Lord Byron’s poetry...is for the most part an extremely obscure treatise on psychology, and not a very useful one at that, because the characters and the passions he describes are so strange that they do not correspond in any way to the feelings of the reader but strike in an awkward fashion, almost like angles or shards, and the impression that they create is much more external than internal. (*Zibaldone* 224)

Although Leopardi came to – somewhat – reverse his position on Byron several years later (September 1823 as noted in the *Zibaldone*), the praise he records of the English Romantic in his notebook is not without a note of ambivalence. In the pertinent passage, Leopardi concludes that Monti, the Italian Romantic, “is infinitely less a poet than [Byron] is”; however, this praise only occurs subsequent to an unfavourable comparison of Lord Byron’s work with Monti’s, including, for example, observing that “Lord Byron’s poems are less poetic, considered in their own right,

than Monti's are" (*Zibaldone* 3478). Interestingly, although Arnold would not have known the "Discourse," he makes a somewhat similar comparative judgment of Byron and Leopardi. Byron, he concludes, is the greater poet as a result of the force of his personality, despite the many superior qualities to be found in Leopardi's poetry ("Byron" 358, 360).

Just as Leopardi rejected the treatment of extreme or extraordinary subjects in his theory of poetics, and in his poetry itself, so did he reject the treatment of the grotesque or supernatural. At the opening of his "Discourse," Leopardi claims that the Romantic poets who were his contemporaries "went looking for poetic arguments among the riffraff of all classes, especially the absolute dregs of society, and among *the most bizarre, crazy, ridiculous, vile and superstitious opinions and stories* that they could possibly find" (116 – my emphasis). While there are "macabre descriptions" in Leopardi, as the author of an article on his Romantic themes Anna Cerbo acknowledges, "his horror and his macabre are always sustained by a moral and spiritual energy" (121).⁶ "For [Leopardi]," Cerbo continues, "true art, and therefore true poetry, is founded on the true natural, both that which is beautiful and that which is ugly, without exaggerating one way or the other" (124). In accordance with this belief, Leopardi rejects themes such as "incestuous love" and "evil and monstrous passion" (Cerbo 124) that he saw as characteristic of the paradigmatically grotesque Romantic Lord Byron.

Finally, not to neglect two of the most important aspects of English Romantic poetics in this brief summary of the Italian Romantic's relationship to this, Leopardi has a distinctly more ambivalent conception of nature than that of poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge. This fundamental aspect of Leopardi's poetry will be explored in a later section of this introduction, but, in brief, Leopardi's concept of nature evolved from a positive appreciation of nature as the

⁶ All translations of Cerbo's essay are my own.

source of poetic illusions that sustained humankind, to a (misogynistic) conception of nature as a cruel “step mother” who must be combatted by a united humanity. As Caesar and D’Intino put it, “[t]he earlier myth of nature as a harmonious and ‘stupendous’ order (*Zibaldone* 2936-38) is reversed, with the resultant vision of a blind mechanistic world of production and destruction in which evil and monstrosity (or what man perceives to be so) are connatural with it” (*Zibaldone* 4510-11 – 1). Whereas the young poet Leopardi may have been “immediately attracted by the fury of the natural elements” (112), as Cerbo argues, the older poet Leopardi does not demonstrate a particular interest in the natural sublime, except perhaps in his final poem “Broom,” which is situated on the highly symbolic, arid slopes of the Sicilian volcano Mt Etna. However, Leopardi’s poetics of the indefinite did have very strong similarities to the Romantic poetics of the sublime (Caesar & D’Intino lxi). This is, as Perella persuasively argues, partly a consequence of Leopardi’s shared interest with the Romantics in Longinus’s and Edmund Burke’s theories of the sublime. On the one hand, Leopardi, like the English Romantics, was strongly influenced by Longinus’s idea that “the poet uses imagination (or images) in order to enthral or ‘surprise’ us into an ecstasy (or wonderment)” (Perella 77). On the other hand, he was intimately familiar with, and sympathetic to, Burke’s “idea that the concept of infinity...is a major source of the sublime” (Perella 88). Unlike the English Romantics, however, Leopardi “in no way accepted the idea...that the yearning for the infinite or the experience of the sublime was proof of man’s immortality and of his ultimate perfectibility” (Perella 104). In other words, the sublime was *not* for Leopardi a symptom of humankind’s inherently transcendental nature.

IV. Leopardi’s reception in nineteenth-century Britain

While Leopardi’s distinctly untranscendental, materialist-pessimism resisted such an approach, it is now well established that Italy was, in general, the subject of English romanticization during

the nineteenth-century (see, for example, Laura Bandiera & Diego Saglia, Matthew Reynolds, Maura O'Connor, and Alison Chapman and Jane Stabler). Both the Romantics earlier in the century, and the Victorians later in the century, indulged in imaginative constructions of Italy that did, at different points in the century, serve different purposes. In the Romantic period, according to Laura Bandiera and Diego Saglia “[m]ost of the literary figures we now associate with late eighteenth-century and Romantic-period literature were learners, readers, and speakers of Italian” (14) and their imaginative identification with Italy was central to their construction of a “freer,” national literary identity. As Bandiera and Saglia put it, “interest in Italy and Italian literature is an integral part of a wider revisionist movement that progressively dismantled neo-classical aesthetics through the rediscovery and re-appropriation of the national past” (8). According to these scholars, in this “revisionist movement” – this “battle for the emancipation of poetry from classicist norms” (12) – English Romantics identified a strong kinship between English and Italian literature, in opposition to French literature.

As the century progressed, however, “Italian partly began to lose its pre-eminent position as a prestigious foreign language” – as did its “literature and culture,” according to Bandiera and Saglia (24). Instead, they argue, the English Victorians privileged German literature (8). However, even if it is true that English interest in Italian literature waned in the course of the nineteenth-century, it did not entirely vanish – far from it. As is evident in Alison Chapman and Jane Stabler’s *Unfolding the South: Nineteenth-century British Women Writers and Artists in Italy*, Victorian women writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot, as well as lesser known figures such as Vernon Lee and Theodosia Garrow Trollope, remained profoundly engaged with Italy. For these writers, Chapman and Stabler suggest, Italy was a “utopian space” (4), but not simplistically so; in fact, “women writers of the nineteenth-century categorise Italy as

a set of paradoxes, most notably an aesthetic place and a home for the expatriate and exile, but also a place of political turmoil and homelessness” (11). Despite, or perhaps because of, its paradoxical nature, Italy was central to “a resurgence of Victorian women’s poetry,” as Chapman argues, in her more recent monograph (*Networking the Nation* – xxix). This “resurgence” was owed, in particular, to women poets’ “engagement with one of the most pressing European political and cultural crises of the mid-century, the Risorgimento” (Chapman, *Networking the Nation* xxix).

In fact, this phenomenon – the re-unification of Italy – was the subject of much interest among Victorians of both genders; while English interest in Italian literature perhaps weakened during the Victorian period, the English engagement in the idea of an Italian nation and in Italian politics strengthened. As Reynolds writes, “[f]or British people in general, the Risorgimento was the grandest and most moving instance of nation-building in this period” (38), although he adds that people with different political inclinations tended to have different responses to the Risorgimento. Thus, Tories tended to believe that “Italians were...constitutionally prone to be carried away by fanciful notions” (38), while to others more admiring of Italy’s cultural achievements, “the progress of the Risorgimento could look like a version of poetic composition” (38). A prime example of the latter would be Algernon Charles Swinburne, who dedicated his collection of poems *Songs before Sunrise* to the chief theoretician of the Risorgimento, Giuseppe Mazzini. It might be suggested, then, that the more purely literary interest of the Romantic period gave way to a more political interest in the Victorian period, although such schematising is never unproblematic, and there were, of course, numerous prominent Victorians, such as Barrett Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Swinburne, who were deeply interested in Italian literature.

As well as being fascinated by the “making” of Italy, however, the English were also interested in using images of Italy to help “make” England, and to assuage the English sense of identity. In other words, as Annemarie McAllister argues, representations of Italy were used in the mid-nineteenth-century to allay English cultural concerns about, for example, rapid urbanisation; to reaffirm the English sense of racial superiority; and to allow for a vicarious and liberating participation in stereotypical Italian characteristics (McAllister 22, 23, 25). Somewhat troublingly, the

power relations implicit in representation mean that although Italy was not in a colonial relationship with England, the strategies seen in colonial discourse of transforming foreign space into controlled, known and therefore inferior space can also be seen operating. (McAllister 23).

Far from being less important in the mid- to late-nineteenth-century, Maura O’Connor demonstrates, in her monograph *The Romance of Italy and the English Political Imagination*, that the “romance of Italy” was very “influential...in the project of imagining a bourgeois, liberal, and, above all, English social order during a critical historical period when class society was being reconfigured and the parameters of national identity were being renegotiated in Britain” (1). In creating these “romantic narratives” of Italy, English men and women both “laid claim” to Italy and “infused their idea of Italy with ‘English liberal ideals’” (3), thus, in a way, colonising constructions of Italian identity. According to Reynolds, who coined the term “Italianism” for England’s colonial-like approach to Italy, “English Italianism is [in part] continuous with the Italians’ understanding of themselves,” but it is also “driven by a need on the part of the English to establish the Italians as Other than themselves, and thereby to define their own identity” (83).

Perhaps surprisingly, despite Leopardi's already considerable reputation in Italy, the first time that he appeared in the Italy-obsessed, British press, it seems, was the year of his death (1837). It was Giuseppe Mazzini, in his article "Italian Literature Since 1830," who was the first to mention Leopardi's name, and he did so in the *Westminster Review* (during its iteration as the *London and Westminster Review*). Unfortunately for Leopardi's legacy in Britain, however, Mazzini, almost certainly led astray by his ideological prejudices, claims in this piece that Leopardi will be forgotten. Leopardi's "Petrarchian songs," Mazzini denigrates, do not deserve "the high reputation they have acquired from the sentiments of patriotism with which they abound" ("Italian Literature" 78-79); they "breathe a spirit of profound melancholy, a characteristic of the age, but they are nevertheless efforts of a transitional period, which the future is destined to efface" ("Italian Literature" 79). Mazzini's statements constitute an inauspicious beginning to Leopardi's recognition in the British press, especially given his high profile in England around the time – boosted further by the Post Office Scandal in 1844 (Stone, "On the Post Office" 14) – and his close friendships with numerous prominent writers, such as Dickens and Carlyle, whose opinions on Italian literature he may have influenced. Mazzini seems, in part, to have been offended by Leopardi's pessimism, but his friend and fellow exile Alessandro Herzen suggested, in addition, that "if Leopardi had participated in some revolution...his judgement towards him would have been less severe" (qtd. in Veronese 460). Almost as though Mazzini's very words had willed such an effacement, Leopardi's name did not appear again in the British press until 1848 – 15 years later.

At this point in time, Lewes published his article on the "Life and Works of Leopardi" in *Fraser's* and, probably with much justification, opens his piece with lines – quoted in part above – that describe the fissure between Leopardi's Italian reputation and his British one: "Giacomo

Leopardi is a name which makes the heart of almost every cultivated Italian beat with a certain sorrowful pity and a noble pride. To British ears it is a mere sound signifying nothing” (659).

Lewes attempts to rectify the emptiness of Leopardi’s name by placing emphasis on what he may have intuited would appeal to his – Lewes’s – readers: Leopardi’s patriotism. At the same time, Lewes does not neglect Leopardi’s pessimism, and he prints and translates a diverse selection of Leopardi’s odes and lyrics. However, Leopardi’s name, at least given the evidence of the British periodicals, would continue to “signify[...]” not very much for many years to come.

In the 1850s, there were just three articles published on Leopardi, although they were fairly substantial pieces and some were published by powerful men such as future prime minister William Ewart Gladstone (although his piece, “Works and Life of Leopardi” in the *Quarterly Review*, was not published under his name, and it appeared many years before he was prime minister). There was also a similarly long piece in *The Prospective Review* in 1854 and another in the *Westminster Review* (when it was being published as *The Westminster and Foreign Quarterly*), in which Mazzini’s piece had appeared 27 years previously. Similarly, in the 1860s, only a few published essays mentioned Leopardi, including Louisa Anne Merivale’s survey of “Italian Poetry and Patriotism” in *Fraser’s Magazine*, in which Leopardi receives a very brief treatment, and an anonymous review of Merivale’s section of Italian poetry in the *Athenaeum* (a couple of years later). The Scottish novelist, Margaret Oliphant, wrote a much more substantial (and very interesting) piece dedicated entirely to “Giacomo Leopardi” in 1865, which appeared in *Blackwood’s*. However, this seems to be all the attention that Leopardi received in the British press in that decade, although Christina Rossetti did write a short biography on him that was published in the *Imperial Dictionary of Universal Biography* in 1857. In fact, the attention paid to Leopardi seems to be in decline at this point, given that the three substantial pieces of the

1850s have dwindled to just one in the 1860s. This trend, which may well be connected to a decline in political interest in post-Risorgimento Italy, would, furthermore, continue into the 1870s in which there were only two substantial pieces published on Leopardi: another interesting one by Oliphant in *The Cornhill Magazine* (1876) and one by Helen Zimmern, the German-born translator, in *The New Quarterly Magazine* (1878). Apart from these pieces, there were a couple of much briefer references to Leopardi in a review of a new French study of his work that was published in *The Academy* and in Linda Villari's "Florence Letter," which also appeared in *The Academy*.

However, the alleviation of Leopardi's neglect began at the end of the 1870s, perhaps, in part, because of a greater tolerance of pessimistic philosophy in that period, but also, particularly, because of Arnold's intervention in the Italian Romantic's reception in England. To begin with, in his preface to his selection of Wordsworth (1879), Arnold describes Leopardi as one of the greatest poets of the nineteenth-century. Then, two years later in 1881, Arnold continued to wield his powerful critical influence in favour of Leopardi in publishing his seminal treatment of the Italian Romantic in the preface to his selection of Byron's poetry. In this essay, Arnold praises Leopardi's poetry as surpassing both that of Byron and of Wordsworth in several key aspects, such as its technical perfection and its manifestation of profound knowledge and philosophy – this despite the fact that Wordsworth is generally acknowledged as the supreme English poetic influence on Arnold. Although he ultimately concludes in favour of the merits of the English Romantics, Arnold, in this intervention, had an almost immediate impact on the attention paid to Leopardi in the British press. To give a general idea of the steep rise in Leopardi's popularity among literary journalists from this point onwards, there were more essays and reviews of Leopardi's work published in the last twenty years of the nineteenth-century than

in the 81 years preceding Arnold's essay. As Peter Lecouras puts it, in his piece on "Leopardi's Reception in England: 1837 to 1927," "Matthew Arnold put Leopardi on the literary map by comparing him to Wordsworth and Byron" (313). After Arnold's essay, more than 30 pieces were published on Leopardi in the last 19 years of the nineteenth-century, including biographical treatments, treatments of his pessimism, as well as translations, reviews, and reviews of translations.

The most pronounced trend in the British periodical literature on Leopardi is the simultaneous praising of his technical ability as a poet and dismissing of the ideas that inform his poetry, especially his philosophical pessimism and his atheism. Sometimes such dismissals erupt into entertaining Victorian vitriol. One critic for *The Speaker* worries, for example, that Leopardi's pessimism is anything but morally nourishing, claiming that

Leopardi as a poet has no ethical value. Rather, he saps the vigour of those who yield to his fascination. His refrain is always the same; however you view it; life is a wretched, paltry, and deluding experience, and you may only find relief from it in the imagination.

(15)

Lecouras' statement that "readers and reviewers could not cope with Leopardi's philosophical pessimism" (314) seems fully justified in relation to a critic such as this one, but it also applies to many of those British periodical writers who were more sensitive to Leopardi's literary worth. Even Lewes, in what was the first sustained treatment of Leopardi in the British press, emphasises the Romantic Italian's despair, and implies that this feature of his poetry is both limiting and condemnatory. "As the 'poet of despair,'" Lewes claims, "we know of no equal to Leopardi. But he is too limited ever to become popular"; "his lyre had but few strings," Lewes adds (664). The idea that Leopardi's despair *limited* his appeal to readers is one that recurs in

later critics, such as the anonymous reviewer in *The Westminster* (437-38) and Oliphant (1865 473). Moreover, at least in Lewes' case, the observation on Leopardi's limited appeal is not a neutral one:

We have introduced the name of a great writer and most unhappy man, and, in a general way, indicated the nature of his genius and the cast of his thoughts. It remains for those who can appreciate and enjoy the one, without being ungenerous towards the other, - *who can admire the writer while condemning his opinions...* - it remains for them to seek in Leopardi's works a clearer, fuller knowledge, of the man. (669 – my emphasis)

Lewes does discuss Leopardi's "manly, vigorous" patriotism (660-61), and his association of literature and action (668) – both important elements of Lewes's essay in the context of this thesis given Lewes's association with George Eliot, who references Leopardi's patriotic ode "To Italy" at several highly charged moments in her final novel *Daniel Deronda*. However, Lewes also initiates a trend of depicting Leopardi as a narrow-minded, gloom-laden poet who would appeal to the very few, and only to those who could put their own "cast of thoughts" to one side while reading him.

Two years later, in 1850, Gladstone was more strident in his critique of Leopardi's despair, although his specific target was slightly different to that of Lewes: Leopardi's atheism (as opposed to his pessimism, although the two were intimately related). While Gladstone conscientiously outlines Leopardi's "singular disadvantages," or disabilities, in an early section of his piece (295-96), he then goes on to criticise the atheism and self-reflexivity of Leopardi's work (300-01). Firstly, Leopardi was, according to Gladstone, "endowed in a peculiar degree with most of the faculties which belong to the highest excellence," but not with "the solid and consistent wisdom which can have no other foundation in the heart of man than the Gospel

revelation” (310). Secondly, Leopardi was, according to Gladstone, “stronger in the reflective than in the perceptive, or at any rate than in the more strictly creative power” (310). Gladstone does, very warmly, praise Leopardi’s poetics (his “choice and flowing diction, a profound harmony, intense pathos” – 311), but he transitions very quickly to an attack on Leopardi’s philosophy, refusing to quote from his *Moral Essays* because “the dark and hopeless doctrine blackens nearly every page, to make the gloom more palpable and thick” (320). The overall impression of Gladstone’s opinions, as expressed here, is, in fact, a little schizophrenic.

Ultimately, Gladstone returns to where he began with his exploration of the external “causes” of Leopardi’s “abiding sorrow” (328), attributing Leopardi’s philosophical pessimism to his external, personal circumstances – another very common critical move in both England and Italy.

“After Gladstone’s article,” Lecouras writes, “two images of Leopardi surface: ‘Leopardi the doomed, suffering Romantic artist (following Lewes); and Leopardi the apostate genius (following Gladstone)’” (319). Perhaps, however, there is little to distinguish these very similar approaches. While suggesting that Leopardi’s poetry succeeds (in part) *despite* the ideas with which it is permeated, both approaches emphasise and reject the two fundamental aspects of Leopardi’s pessimism: both his nihilistic materialism and his atheism. On the one hand, for example, the anonymous writer of an 1859 essay on “Modern Poets and Poetry of Italy” for *The Westminster Review* focuses on Leopardi’s “despair” (437), which the author finds both distasteful and limiting: “It cannot be denied that this continual suffering, physical and moral, too often bounds his horizon and lends a certain melancholy monotony to his verse” (437-38). On the other hand, in her 1857 entry for the *Imperial Dictionary of Universal Biography*, Rossetti focuses on Leopardi’s atheism, noting that the writer and classical scholar Pietro Giordani “probably...exercised a baleful influence on his mind” in converting him to atheism (162). She

does note that Leopardi was also “a true poet” (162), but does not identify, describe, or explore his poetry to any extent. Her response to Leopardi is, thus, more circumspect than that of her brother William Rossetti, who delivered a lengthy lecture on Leopardi towards the end of the century (see below p. 38). (Interestingly, a third Rossetti, Dante Gabriel, showed at least a passing interest in Leopardi when, in 1869, he translated Leopardi’s translation of Antoine-Vincent Arnault’s “La feuille.”)

Some critics, however, resist the pervasive critiques exemplified by *The Westminster Review* and Christina Rossetti and, as the century progressed, manifested a greater appreciation for Leopardi’s highly personal, poetic introspection. Oliphant’s 1865 piece makes one of the first notable contributions to Leopardi criticism of this century in her emphasis on his modernity. In comments that presage the way many Leopardi critics describe his importance today, Oliphant asserts that he has “a mind of our own century” (459) and insists on the personal, self-reflexive nature of his poetry, which she implies is at the root both of his interest as a poet and of his modernity. Unlike the more eminent genius of a Shakespeare or Homer that is “too broad, too large, too all-embracing to be peculiar,” Leopardi’s genius, according to Oliphant, “betrays him, and makes all his irregularities, his weaknesses, his heights and hollows, visible to the spectator” (1865 460). Moreover, Oliphant appears to link Leopardi’s quality of personal introspection to the modern nature of his mind and poetry, given that it is immediately after describing the latter that she comments: “Of such [type of genius] was Leopardi, whom we think we are justified in calling one of the greatest of modern Italian writers” (1865 460). Even when Oliphant does discuss Leopardi’s despair, and how this might be attributed to his ill health and circumstances, it is interesting to note that, especially in her second, 1876 piece in *Blackwood’s*, Oliphant pre-

emptively defends Leopardi against reader's accusations of monotony – something which earlier critics like that of the 1859 writer in *The Westminster Review* did not:

the reader will find in Leopardi's shorter poems so many lovely pictures and thoughts that the monotony of this refrain [his "deadly melancholy"] will lead him more to an unspeakable pity than to any sense of disapproval or painful perception of weakness. He is not a harper upon one string, making his mournful perpetual cry echo through the world; but a true poet, whose fancy and his heart continually cheat him out of his despair.

(347)

In this way, Oliphant has, perhaps, better right than Arnold to claim to be the first Anglophone critic to recognise Leopardi's great artistic importance. However, there were very few (if any) nineteenth-century critics as influential as Arnold, so it is probably accurate to describe his contribution to Anglophone Leopardian criticism as seminal.

Arnold's criticism of Leopardi, briefly described above, comprises the two prefaces to selections of English Romantic poets that he made – the earlier of Wordsworth (1879) and the later of Byron (1881). The first is only worth mentioning in terms of the way Arnold names Leopardi among "the chief poetical names of the Continent" (although he asserts that Wordsworth has the greater "poetical achievement" – 335). Arnold's "Byron" is of more particular importance since it is here that the poet-critic undertakes his most thorough examination of the comparative merits of Leopardi, Byron, and Wordsworth. Initially, Leopardi comes off best. He is an "exquisite master of language" who has "the very qualities which we have found wanting to Byron; he has the sense for form and style, the passion for just expression, the sure and firm touch of the true artist" as well as "a grave fullness of knowledge" (Arnold, "Byron" 356). Similarly, Arnold praises Leopardi's intellect and artistry above Wordsworth's:

He has a far wider culture than Wordsworth, more mental lucidity, more freedom from illusions as to the real character of the established fact and of reigning conventions, above all, this Italian, with his pure and sure touch with his fineness of perception, is far more of the artist. (“Byron” 357)

Yet Arnold concludes that Byron’s force of personality and Wordsworth’s joyful philosophy render them superior to Leopardi (“Byron” 358). Notably, in his final assessment of Wordsworth, Arnold seems to allow his famously ideological notions regarding the function of poetry to trump his instincts for Leopardi’s many superior qualities. In his preface to *Poems* (1853), Arnold demands that poetry should “inspirit and rejoice the reader”: “[i]t is not enough that the Poet should add to the knowledge of men, it is required of him also that he should add to their happiness” (204). It is, ultimately, with reference to this criterion that Arnold elevates Wordsworth over Leopardi; the former is superior “in the power with which [he] feels the resources of joy offered to us in nature, offered to us in the primary human affections and duties, and in the power with which...he renders this joy, and makes us, too, feel it” (“Byron” 357). Thus, Arnold finally ranks the infamously pessimistic Italian below the joy-rendering Englishman; Wordsworth “gains so much by his criticism of life being, in certain matters of profound importance, healthful and true, whereas Leopardi’s pessimism is not” (“Byron” 358).

Among those essays published subsequent to Arnold’s “Byron,” H. F. Brown’s 1887 essay “Leopardi” is notable in that, while typical of other nineteenth-century pieces in its criticism of Leopardi’s philosophy, it does acknowledge that such pessimism is a part of the truth of human existence: “Leopardi had grasped and expressed, as no one else has done, a truth of life. Our only objection is that one truth not be taken for the whole truth” (96). Moreover, Brown seems better attuned than most of his contemporaries to the way in which Leopardi’s poetry

works – to the singular importance of its pure sound and the intricate connections between this and its philosophy, which are discussed in tandem in the following chapter. Brown’s sensitivity is evidenced when he comments on how Leopardi “uses language as a vehicle for feeling and thought, not indirectly through the meaning conveyed, but directly through the sound, the weight, the cadence of his phrases” (102). Brown’s piece, then, seems to justify Lecouras’s statement that “[g]radually a new perspective emerges [among nineteenth-century Leopardi critics]: ‘that of Leopardi as a spokesman for pessimism, a growing phenomenon in the latter decades of the century’ (Casale and Dooley)” (319). Even Brown himself acknowledges “Leopardi has steadily won his way to a more exalted place among the writers of his own country, and to a wider recognition abroad” (88); however, despite Brown’s sympathetic and nuanced understanding of Leopardi, the well established pattern of critics’ praising Leopardi’s poetry while damning his philosophy reasserts itself with Thayer (1883) and others. Thayer, in *The Continent*, comments, typically: Leopardi’s “philosophy, if I may dignify by this name the pessimism which is itself the surest proof of pitiable want of philosophy, overshadows all his works, prose and poetry alike; but even this cannot seriously mar their exquisite beauties” (151). Similarly, in his 1891 Tylorian Lecture, William Rossetti repeats this duality: “he is the *most* unhappy among men of literary genius; and he is the *most* finished master of style in Italian letters” since Petrarch, attributing his “unwelcome assertions of pessimism” to “his own chronic suffering” (55, 90, 68).

Perhaps the purest praise that Leopardi received from an English critic came right at the end of the century in W. Knox Johnson’s piece for the *Fortnightly Review* (“Giacomo Leopardi – Poet, Philosopher,” 1898). Johnson is much less ambivalent regarding Leopardi’s stature as a

poet than previous critics were, in part, it seems, because he acknowledges the long tradition of pessimism in which Leopardi participated:

The void in the soul, the sense of nothingness, the discord of 'sin,' the sadness of unrest, on those shelves so mute they had their thousand tongues. There echoed the soul's complaint, since the very dawn of thought; from east to west, by the Jew and by the Greek, the trouble of the saint, the perplexity of the philosopher, the strident theme of psalmist and preacher, a solemn undertone in his Hellenic poets, deep-sounding in the equable Sophocles himself, who saw life, men said, so steadily and whole! (34)

Interestingly, Arnold is clearly at the forefront of Johnson's mind as he writes this piece. Not only does he quote Arnold's "To a Friend" at the end of this passage ("be his / My special thanks... Who saw life steadily, and saw it whole" i.e. Sophocles – 12-13), but he also compares Leopardi's poetics to Arnold's. "[Leopardi's] peculiar power of language, with its union of stateliness and simplicity, of austerity and sweetness," Johnson claims, "recalls Arnold before any other English writer; but, unlike Arnold, he is so evenly supreme that nearly every one of his poems has been singled out, by native critics, as the best, or among the best, of his collection" (23-24). Ultimately, while not wholly disregarding the thought that permeates Leopardi's philosophy – as Arnold ultimately appears to do – Johnson argues that the greatness of Leopardi's poetry is such that you can be "fascinate[d]" by it without sharing in his beliefs (24).

V. Chapter outlines

Given the history of nineteenth-century periodical literature outlined above, in which successive writers – including Lewes and Oliphant – emphasise Leopardi's obscurity, each approaching the subject of his poetry as though he or she were the first critic to introduce Leopardi to the English reader (Corrigan), Leopardi's neglect by scholars of Victorian literature might seem justified.

The intermittent (and often unsympathetic) discussions of Leopardi's work in nineteenth-century periodicals are not, however, necessarily a reflection of a concomitant lack of interest among Victorian poets and novelists. There is, in fact, strong evidence to suggest that major writers such as Arnold, Eliot, and Housman responded to Leopardi's thought and poetry in their own writing, drawing not only on his increasingly experimental form, but also on his philosophical pessimism and republican poetics.

Matthew Arnold, the subject of chapters two and three, was instrumental, as described, in establishing Leopardi's reputation in England. Arnold's admiration for Leopardi's technical skills bore, I argue, poetic fruit in the anomalously experimental poetics of "Dover Beach," but Arnold was also imbued with the Italian's late stoic pessimism, which becomes evident in the conclusion to this masterpiece of introspective melancholy. As well as their formal and philosophical resemblances, Arnold and Leopardi also shared similarly cyclical historical perspectives and a fascination for a figure that is the product of such a system: the redundant ancient, the figure of the poet who survives into a transitional epoch that is hostile to his vocation. When both "The Scholar-Gipsy" and "Empedocles on Etna" are considered in the light of Arnold's interest in Leopardi, it is possible to interpret the heroes of each as, to borrow the phrase that Sainte-Beuve employed to describe Leopardi, an "ancient born too late." Moreover, a comparison of Arnold's and Leopardi's despairing belief in the practical impossibility of composing modern poetry illuminates (and justifies) Empedocles' famously monotonous and prosaic speech in "Empedocles."

George Eliot, whose partner Lewes wrote the second English-language essay on Leopardi ever published, includes highly significant and barely discussed references to Leopardi's "To Italy" in her final novel *Daniel Deronda*. Eliot is, therefore, the only writer of the three I discuss

to respond more intensely to Leopardi's youthful Republican poetics in her work, as well as being the only novelist that I discuss. The references to "To Italy" signal, I argue, crucial stages in Deronda's sympathetic evolution to a partial cosmopolitanism, that balances competing Cosmopolitan and nationalist tendencies. This evolution occurs, in part, via his recognition of the association between Jewish and Italian national movements, in which "To Italy" participates very effectively. "To Italy" also provides, however, an evocative background of *cultural* cosmopolitanism to Deronda's *political* actions, which inhabit the novel's foreground, representing the dynamic between these two species of cosmopolitanism necessary to cultivate what Eliot saw as an inevitable international alliance. More specifically, "To Italy," in its very structure, which, like *Daniel Deronda*, encourages the cultivation of one nation's patriotism via the inspiring example of another, reflects the culturally cosmopolitan attitude so central to Eliot's novel.

Finally, A. E. Housman, like Arnold and Eliot, greatly admired Leopardi, whom he claimed to have studied very closely. Whereas with Arnold I investigate his connections to Leopardi's poetics and philosophy, with Housman I turn to his apparent sympathy with the philosophically informed structure of the *Canti*. An examination of the parallels between the development of the speaker's relationship to the world in Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* and in Leopardi's *Canti* illuminates Housman's conscientious organisation of his own work. This is significant because scholars have been reluctant to admit that there is any structural coherence to Housman's work and have, thus, neglected an important element of *A Shropshire Lad*. However, when the two collections are compared, very strong parallels in these two narratives of the progress of a soul emerge, definitively suggesting that *A Shropshire Lad* was not a haphazard assemblage of individual lyrics.

I should mention here one writer whom I was tempted to discuss, but whom I rejected in favour of Housman: Thomas Hardy. Hardy, like Eliot, mentions Leopardi by name in one of his novels: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. At one point, the narrator describes the “determinis[tic]” creed of “Old Mr Clare” – Angel’s father – as “almost amount[ing] to a vice, and quite amount[ing], on its negative side, to a renunciative philosophy which had cousinship with that of Schopenhauer and Leopardi” (187). However, this comment is unique and does not – as far as I can tell – operate in any reverberative, meaningful way as lines from Leopardi’s “To Italy” do in Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*. It might also be tempting to identify (as I tried to do) a parallel between the similarly titled “The Darkling Thrush” of Hardy and “Solitary Thrush” of Leopardi, but the two poems are actually quite antithetical in meaning. On the one hand, in Hardy’s poem, the speaker and bird are isolated from one another by the latter’s “joy illimited” (20), which the speaker imagines could be the result of “Some blessed Hope” of which the bird is preternaturally aware, but of which the speaker is ignorant (31). In “The Solitary Thrush,” on the other hand, the speaker initially imagines that there is a strong kinship between himself and the thrush: “how much your ways resemble mine!” (17) However, he quickly realises that he and the bird are profoundly divided by their relationship to nature – the bird abiding, almost mechanistically, by its natural instincts, and the speaker perversely refusing them (stanza three).

Hardy does seem, on the surface, to share much of Leopardi’s philosophy – his materialistic, atheistic pessimism for instance, but also his belief in a kind of Schopenhauerian “Will” that exerts a fatalistic power over humankind. In addition, it is known that Hardy was thinking about Leopardi in the late 1870s, before he published his first book of poems (Trevor Johnson 51). However, when Hardy first read Leopardi, he was already an old man with thoroughly established perspectives and attitudes, and I could not find any evidence of a specific

poetic or philosophic response to Leopardi's work in Hardy's poetry that could not be accounted for by these. In fact, after preliminary investigations, I remained much more ambivalent about the concreteness of Hardy's interest in Leopardi – and its results – than I did with Arnold or Eliot, especially given the fact that Hardy did not read Italian (unlike Arnold, Eliot, and Housman), and my instincts drove me to explore the case of Housman when I discovered that he had explicitly commented on his admiration for Leopardi in uncharacteristically warm terms.

Chapter two: Leopardi's Philosophy and Poetics

While Leopardi is often heralded as a great poet-philosopher, for some, he is not a philosopher at all – or, for Victorian critics, not a very good one. For others – such as the pioneering Risorgimento-era literary scholar Francesco De Sanctis (“Studio” 263) and the eminent philosopher-literary critic Cesare Luporini (4) – he was a great *moral* philosopher, rather than an impressive metaphysician. De Sanctis and Luporini imply, with this distinction, that Leopardi was more concerned with questions regarding how to live well, with what would make humanity happy. Interestingly, this is precisely what Leopardi thought philosophers should concern themselves with: philosophers, he writes in his *Zibaldone* in November 1820, “should ascribe usefulness...to those [things] which make it worthwhile, that is, really happy” (351-52), although his philosophical pessimism made it impossible for him to believe that humans could be “really happy.” The following year, 1821, Leopardi confirmed this philosophical bent in describing “moral philosophy” as “the greater, and perhaps the most useful part of philosophy” (*Zibaldone* 1354). Whether or not Leopardi's disparate ideas on “moral philosophy,” pessimism, nature, reason, and pleasure – to name just a few of the subjects that most interested him – can be considered a coherent body of philosophy, they were fundamental to his work. These aspects of his moral philosophy permeate his works both in prose and, more importantly for the purposes of this thesis, in poetry. For this reason, it is vital to introduce these ideas in prefacing a consideration of his poetry, especially in an Anglophone context in which such knowledge cannot be assumed.

In 1832, five years before he died at age 38, Leopardi wrote to his friend Luigi De Sinner about a poem he had written more than a decade previously: “Brutus” (first published 1824). In

his letter, Leopardi makes two significant claims on the persistence of and on the philosophical nature of his despair, both of which are crucial elements of his moral philosophy:

My feelings towards fate were and still are those I expressed in *Bruto Minore* [“Brutus”].

It was a consequence of that same courage that, being led by my researches to a philosophy of despair, I did not hesitate to embrace it whole; whilst on the other hand, it has only been because of the cowardice of men, who need to be persuaded of the value of existence, that people have wished to consider my philosophical opinions as the result of my personal suffering, and persist in attributing to my material circumstances what is due solely to my understanding. (*Letters* 262-63)

In other words, Leopardi asserts that he abides by the philosophical “despair” of his youthful masterpiece and that this despair is *philosophical*. Briefly, in this poem, the speaker is Marcus Junius Brutus, the tragic hero of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and here the representative of the moribund Roman Republic and of “the last age of imagination” (Galassi 401). As Italy lies in ruins, Leopardi’s Brutus imagines that the malignant gods make a spectacle of human pain:

Gods of stone
...you mock and scorn
the unhappy race from whom
you exacted temples and a fraudulent
law injurious to mortals. (19, 21-24)

These same “Gods” – the inventions of the religions of civilised humanity – are, thus, far more deleterious to our welfare and happiness than the original god: “Nature.” Nature’s rule was, according to Brutus, benevolent:

Nature, Queen and Goddess once, ordained

a life for us that wasn't suffering
and guilt, but free and pure in the forests. (52-54)

However, humankind's own "sacrilegious ways" (55), including the invention of those malignant gods mentioned above, destroyed her benevolent rule (55-57). As a consequence, nature, represented by the "bright moon" whom Brutus addresses (76), looks on humankind with indifference (76-83); human beings are alienated from the rest of our natural, animal brethren (stanza 7), because we corrupted ourselves and society with reason, destroying the illusion of an intimate rapport with nature that sustained us. Finally, Brutus kills himself, but without any invocation that he should be remembered; instead, he consigns his name and memory to the wind (120). Thus, Brutus's "is a suicide that...manifests itself as the only coherent end of a tremendous 'conquest' of reason: non-being is, for the modern man, preferable to being" (Campana 151).⁷

The conclusion Leopardi expresses in this poem, on the impossibility of happiness for humankind, was inevitable according to his belief that life was "nothingness," and that reason, in the modern age, had made this realisation inescapable. Leopardi was expressing his nihilism early in his twenties in letters to correspondents such as his friend Giordani: "this is the wretched condition of man, and the barbarous teaching of reason, that as human pleasures and pains are mere illusions, the anguish that comes from the certainty of the nothingness of things, is always and only right and true" (*Letters* 95). One very early statement in Leopardi's *Zibaldone* reads simply: "All is nothingness in the world, including my despair" (72). Leopardi was so wholly persuaded of the truth of this statement that he believed all philosophers must conceive of existence thus. In January 1820, Leopardi claims that the perspective, or "way[...] of looking at

⁷ All translations of Campana's edition are my own.

things,” of “philosophers and men of feeling” is to “find and feel everywhere nothingness and emptiness, and the vanity of human cares and desires and hopes, and of all illusions so inherent in life that without them it is not life” (*Zibaldone* 102-03). Similar statements on the nothingness of life, and the impossibility of happiness, are repeated throughout Leopardi’s notebook-miscellany (see, for example, 1342, 1463-64, 1974, and 2607), as well as in his correspondence (see, for example, his letter to Vieusseux of 4 March 1826).

However, perhaps contrary to the evidence of his letters and *Zibaldone*, Leopardi’s philosophical pessimism was not monolithic in nature. In fact, many critics identify several different phases in its development – phases that are defined by the scope and consequences of Leopardi’s perspective at different points in his life. It is common, to begin with, to identify an early phase of what some critics label Leopardi’s “historical pessimism” (Casale, Introduction 14), this designation being owed to “the linear fall he ascribes to man, from a state of nature to one of civilization” (Casale, Introduction 14). This “historical pessimism” and its implied “linear fall” is a vital component of Leopardi’s antithesis between the ancient world – the inhabitants of which lived closer to nature and were, therefore, happier – and the modern world – the inhabitants of which are dominated by reason, a force that Leopardi initially thought inimical to happiness. Greatly influenced by the Romantic philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Leopardi, as other Romantics were, “was aware of the distance between the *élan vital* of the ancients, absolutely natural and completely directed toward the external, and its modern version, oriented toward the internal” (Caesar & D’Intino xxxviii). According to one critical narrative, however, Leopardi soon discovered many ancient examples of pessimism and, consequently, developed a new system of “cosmic pessimism,” according to which “unhappiness was not...the consequence of a detachment from nature, but was inherent in nature itself” (Timpanaro, “I filosofi antichi”

204-05).⁸ Leopardi's cosmic pessimism was an impediment to his reception in both England and Italy, but could be compared to Byron's pessimism, and was in fact by contemporary Italian critics. However, such pessimism seems more akin to that of later Victorians like Arnold (a reluctant pessimist) and Housman. These figures, of course, survived into an age in which religious convictions were more thoroughly problematised, rendering Leopardi's pessimism more compelling, and they also shared Leopardi's classicism – so instrumental in the evolution of his cosmic pessimism.

Eventually, Leopardi's pessimism underwent another evolution, becoming tinged with stoicism – a philosophy about which, nevertheless, he felt very ambivalent. On the one hand, in a letter to the German diplomat and scholar Baron von Bunsen, Leopardi advocated the “useful[ness]” of stoic philosophy (“I find I have embraced [stoic philosophy] naturally, and [it] is very useful to me” – *Letters* 176); indeed, De Sanctis claimed that Leopardi considered his translation of Epictetus's *Manual* to be his most important work (“Studio” 303).⁹ On the other hand, the modern critical consensus is that Leopardi considered stoicism a meagre compensation available to those unable to confront the truth of humanity's existence and to pursue an active, heroic life (Binni, “Generose illusioni” xii; Luporini 82-83; Timpanaro, “Alcune osservazioni” 163). Nevertheless, the stoic doctrine of striving for immunity to external circumstances and the vicissitudes of fortune, which Leopardi specifically criticises in his *Zibaldone* (June 1823, 2801) and in his *Moral Essays* (especially the 1827 “Detti memorabili di Filippo Ottonieri” [“The Memorable Sayings of Filippo Ottonieri”] – 168), is a vital component of the attitude advocated in later *Canti*, such as “To Himself” (1835) and “Broom” (1845).

⁸ All translations of Timpanaro's essay are my own.

⁹ All translations of De Sanctis's essay are my own.

As indicated above, Leopardi's initial, "historical" pessimism was informed by his Rousseauian conviction that ancient peoples were happier because they were closer to nature and susceptible to sustaining illusions. This belief in the ameliorating effect of an intimate rapport with nature was another strong vein – at least initially – of Leopardi's philosophy. For Leopardi, as he writes in June 1820, "everything beautiful and good in this world is pure illusion" (*Zibaldone* 125) and it is nature itself that has provided for these "illusions" as compensation for the insufficiency of any more substantial pleasure in life (July 1820; *Zibaldone* 167-68). Humankind, however, is only able to cultivate illusions when living in a state of nature, in which their imaginations thrive in the absence of *excessive* reason; thus, the ancients are superior to the moderns precisely because of their ignorance (July 1820; *Zibaldone* 168-69). (Variations on these themes occur again and again in the *Zibaldone*; see, for example, 326, 341, & 410.) This dichotomy between the ancient world – with its emphasis on cultivating illusions in proximity to nature – and the modern world – with its emphasis on cultivating reason that alienates us from nature – is fundamental to Leopardi's thought at this stage. But Leopardi also believed that there was a parallel between the natural lives of children and of the ancients, since both were more susceptible to the potency of illusions (due to their active imaginations). Thus, in his unpublished "Discourse" on Romanticism (composed in 1818):

what the ancients were, so have we all been, and what the world was for centuries, so were we for some years, and that is, children; participants in that ignorance and in those fears and delights and beliefs and in that excessive fantasizing that belongs to childhood. (122)

Luporini also links the distinction between ancient and modern, nature and reason to another key concept that is associated with illusions: "vitality." For Leopardi nature was "vitality," according

to Luporini, and this notion of vitality was at the heart of the Romantic Italian's distinction between ancient and modern (i.e. the ancients had it, the moderns do not). It is undoubtedly true, as Geoffrey Bickersteth asserted in his excellent English-language introduction to Leopardi, that "the whole" of Leopardi's "philosophy is based upon the difference, as he saw it, between the ancient and modern world" (93). Bickersteth too identified this distinction as being based on the ancients' employment of the imagination that nature had bestowed on them in order to cultivate the illusions that made life (seem to be) worthwhile: "the ancients by employing their imagination, wherewith Nature endowed them for no other purpose...veiled the ugliness of the truth with beautiful illusions. And these illusions made life, for them, worth living" (94).

However, Leopardi eventually overturned this conception of a benevolent nature. As the renowned Italian scholar Walter Binni describes, while Leopardi began his poetic and philosophic career believing implicitly in the "antithesis" of nature and reason, the "material and theoretic contradictions inherent to the conception of nature" led to his evolution of a new antithesis – one between humankind and nature (*La protesta* 84).¹⁰ Ultimately, then, Leopardi arrived at the view of nature as inherently indifferent or hostile to humankind and he debuts this concept "of the indifference or hostility of nature" in "Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese" ("The Dialogue of Nature and an Icelander" – 1827), as Fubini notes (9).¹¹ In this important work – one of the philosophical dialogues that comprise his *Moral Essays* – Leopardi imagines an encounter between an Icelander, who is searching for a place where he can live unmolested by other people, and by nature, and that very nature, whom the Icelander meets as he "round[s] the Cape of Good Hope" (*Moral Essays* 99). The Icelander explains his purpose to Nature, and how he has continuously been thwarted by her refusal to allow humans to live in peace, concluding:

¹⁰ All translations of Binni's book *La protesta* are my own.

¹¹ All translations of Fubini's introduction are my own.

you are the declared enemy of men, of the other animals, and of all your works...now you ensnare us, now you threaten us, now you attack us, now you sting us, now you strike us, now you rend us, and at every moment you hurt us or persecute us...by custom and institution, you are the butcher of your own family, and so to speak of your own flesh and blood. (*Moral Essays* 102)

This utter reversal in Leopardi's conception of the benevolence of nature appears to be the inevitable result of his long-held nihilistic beliefs and – concomitant to this – of his conclusion that the experience of pleasure was impossible for humankind. If nature was responsible for a meaningless, miserable existence, she could hardly be, at the same time, a benevolent protector. As Luporini argues, "Leopardi's nihilism in fact concludes with the hostility of nature towards life in general and towards that of man...in particular. Hostility made of indifference, or of *nothing*" (70).¹² Interestingly, it is to this iteration of Leopardi's conception of nature that Luporini ascribes Leopardi's ultimately "progressive" stance: "the development of the positive value of human work, of human energy, in the socially constructive element of universal solidarity of men against the hostility or indifference of nature" (90). Eventually, this evolution in Leopardi's thought would also lead to a new conception of reason, since reason had always suffered in Leopardi's opinion due to its antithetical relationship with nature. As Binni points out, with nature "demystified and revealed in its indifference-hostility towards man," only reason was left (*La Protesta* 84). However, this was not Leopardi's youthful conception of reason.

Initially, in fact, Leopardi abhorred reason and the effects that he considered it to have wreaked on human nature and society. As discussed in the introduction (see p. 14 above), he

¹² All translations of Luporini's essay are my own.

argued in his “Discourse” that the Romantic intellectualisation of poetry, and its concomitant focus on sentiment, had led to the destruction of true poetry. Leopardi’s abhorrence of reason is at the root of his interest in two myths, that of the Tree of Knowledge (*Zibaldone* 234, 238) and that of Psyche (*Zibaldone* 329). Both of these myths appealed to Leopardi because they comprised narratives that depicted reason – and humankind’s excessive desire for reason – as culpable for the corruption, and unhappiness, of humankind. Thus, as Leopardi interprets it in September 1820, in the *Genesis* myth, “[t]heir sin, their pride, consisted in nothing other than reason, absolute reason” (*Zibaldone* 238). There were few evils for which reason could not be blamed: it was inimical to human happiness (*Zibaldone* 94, 181-82, 326), but also to human greatness (*Zibaldone* 14); it was the source of “barbarism” (*Zibaldone* 356), or the “corruption” of human society, which exacerbated human unhappiness (*Zibaldone* 403); and, in destroying nature and illusions, it undermined democratic government (*Zibaldone* 573-574). At the height of his passion against reason, in October 1821, Leopardi claims that reason could not even reason well: “When reason has no knowledge about the system of beauty, about illusions...and what belongs to the imagination and the heart, it is itself an illusion, and a creator of mythology, as are those other things. Though of a very ugly, very harsh mythology” (*Zibaldone* 1841-42). Alfredo Bonadeo summarises these ideas well when he writes, “the increase of reason does not serve man to enlarge his knowledge of his existence and to better it; it serves to reveal to him his imperfection and to put in doubt the meaning and value of his same existence” (10).¹³

However, as indicated in the brief exposition of Leopardi’s views on nature, his views on reason did evolve, or were, in fact, more subtle than is usually understood. Directly after Leopardi’s philosophic reversal on nature, he was still writing entries in his *Zibaldone* claiming

¹³ All translations of Bonadeo’s essay are my own.

that reason was “an obstacle” to humankind: “It is not possible to be great except by thinking and working against reason” (August 1822; 2610). However, in May 1825 he would declare to Giordani that “truth” was his only goal – truth obtained by reason:

I no longer seek anything but the truth, which I once so hated and loathed. I take satisfaction in ever more clearly discovering and tangibly feeling the wretchedness of men and things, and in experiencing a cold horror, reflecting on this unhappy and terrible strangeness of life in the universe. (*Letters* 154)

On the one hand, such a declaration of the “satisfaction” Leopardi takes in truth and reason seems antithetical to his earlier stance in which he derived no satisfaction – only horror – at the bitter fruits of reason. It seems as though, having been disillusioned by the benevolence of nature, Leopardi almost perversely turns to his old enemy for consolation (as Binni and Luporini imply above). On the other hand, Luporini suggests that Leopardi never actually attacked all rational reflection, so much as the “faculty of analysis, calculation, and reflection” (46).

According to this argument, Leopardi had a dual conception of reason: reason could “become that which integrates nature and, leaning on this, founds society and civilisation, or that which supersedes nature, going beyond the point of equilibrium and causing the corruption of society and civilization” (44). In support of this, Luporini quotes a short passage from October 1821 in the *Zibaldone*: “I...do not condemn reason insofar as it is a natural quality, essential to living beings. I condemn it insofar as it grows and is modified...in such a way that it becomes the main obstacle to our happiness” (1825). However, it does seem to be, in fact, the “faculty of analysis, calculation, and reflection” that Leopardi describes having embraced in his letter to Giordani. It is as though, at this point in his life, this mode of thinking is all that remains for Leopardi: the confrontation of the awful truth about our human condition through reason.

In other words, Leopardi decided to dispense with “illusions” – those beautiful, abstract concepts that were yet, somehow, substantial, and which had been so fundamental to his early system of philosophy. What Leopardi means when he writes of illusions is, perhaps, made most clear in his dialogue, “Storia del genere umano” (“The History of the Human Race” – 1827). Here, Leopardi describes how Jove “sent amongst them [the early human beings] certain phantoms of the most excellent and superhuman appearance, ceding to these a very great share of the government and administration of these peoples: and they were called Justice, Virtue, Renown, Patriotism and names of that sort” (*Moral Essays* 38). These “phantoms” are what Leopardi means when he talks of illusions, and in this origin story he claims that they contributed more to humankind’s happiness than anything else had previously, and that their reign lasted for centuries (*Moral Essays* 39). One of the most interesting aspects of these illusions, is the fact that, despite their being “phantoms,” they are, paradoxically, “substantial.” Thus, in a letter of 30 June 1820 to Giordani, Leopardi writes: “I do not consider illusions to be insubstantial, but as things which in some way have substance, since they are not personal caprices of this person or that, but natural and inborn as part of our being in everybody; and they make up the whole of our life” (*Letters* 105). This is a thought that Leopardi reiterates in his *Zibaldone* (see, for example, 51 & 271-72), even admitting the seeming paradox: “It seems absurd and yet it is absolutely true that, since all reality is nothing, there is no other reality or other substance in the world but illusions” (January 1820; *Zibaldone* 99). Even one of Leopardi’s most cynical speakers in the *Moral Essays*, Eleander, from “Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro” (“The Dialogue of Timander and Eleander” – 1827), expresses great respect for illusions: “I laud and exalt...those beautiful and happy imaginings, although unreal, that give price to life; the natural illusions of the mind; and in short those ancient errors” (*Moral Essays* 187). (Eleander

does not, however, believe that these “ancient errors” can be “br[ought] back to life” – *Moral Essays* 187.)

Without these illusions, people are, according to Leopardi, prey to unhappiness; thus, as Antonio Prete puts it: “the wisdom of the ancients makes of illusions and of ‘errors’ a defence against unhappiness...[but] the knowing of the moderns consists instead in the ‘knowing and feeling’ their own unhappiness” (99).¹⁴ In fact, Leopardi went further than this, writing in August 1820, that illusions were necessary to our very survival. If, he argues, the state of society

force[s] us to give up all our illusions....to lose them forever, and have constantly before our eyes, with no escape, the pure, naked truth, there will be nothing left of the human race but the bones, like the bones of other animals that were talked about in the last century. (*Zibaldone* 216)

While Leopardi wrote this entry in his early twenties, he maintained this stance almost a decade later. When writing to Giordani in the summer of 1828, Leopardi scorned the work that people had undertaken to achieve “the perfection of civil states and the happiness of nations,” asserting, instead, that the “study of beauty, of feelings, imagination, illusions, is more effective than anything else. So it is that the delightful seems to me more useful than everything useful, and literature more truly and certainly useful than all these very arid disciplines” (*Letters* 222). As will become clear from his poetry, Leopardi was also convinced that true virtue was the offspring of illusions, or, as he puts it in his notebook, “[t]he only virtue that is both constant and active is that which is loved and professed through nature and illusions” (December 1821; *Zibaldone* 2245).

¹⁴ All translations of Prete’s book are my own.

Unfortunately, according to Leopardi, as the world matured, and reason and philosophy developed, the power of illusions faltered. As Leopardi allegorises in his “History of the Human Race,” humankind begged Jove to send them Truth, as he had sent the illusions that governed their society for so long, and the god responded to their wish, “g[iving] her perpetual abode and government amongst them.” The result, as Jove foresaw, was that “not being able either to escape or to rebel against her tyranny, mortals lived on in that incomparable misery which they suffer to this day, and will always suffer” (Leopardi, *Moral Essays* 43). The same degradation also occurs on an individual level, during the course of a human being’s development from childhood to adulthood. While children (and ancients) are susceptible to the power of illusions, adults (and moderns) lose the power to conjure them as they grow older – as Leopardi suggests in the above quoted passage from his essay on Romanticism (see “what the ancients were, so have we all been...”). Thus, while children can directly access illusions through their imagination, adults must rely on the memories that they retain from childhood in order to have any contact with illusions. Leopardi’s ideas on children and the imagination have strong parallels with English Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth, as described above (p. 21 ff.), although there is no evidence that Leopardi had actually read Wordsworth.

Closely associated with Leopardi’s conception of “illusions” in his philosophy, then, is his notion of the power of the imagination, which generates illusions in childhood, and in the childhood of humankind i.e. in the ancient world. This faculty, its ability to generate the illusions that are the substance of life, renders the imagination a blessing, but it also fulfils a less virtuous, but still fundamental, function with reference to pleasure. Leopardi had a highly developed theory of pleasure, which will be discussed below, but, briefly, he believed that every human being’s desire for pleasure was infinite and that it was only the imagination that could straddle

the otherwise devastating divide between this infinite desire and its impossible fulfilment. Thus, “the infinite pleasure that cannot be found in reality can thus be found in the imagination, from which derive hope, illusions” (July 1820; *Zibaldone* 167).

Perhaps more surprisingly – given the opposition he perceives between illusions and the imagination on the one hand, and truth and reason on the other – Leopardi also posited that the imagination was a superior form of reason to reason itself. Leopardi based this conviction upon the imagination’s power to discern the fundamental relationships in the natural environment:

these [relationships] cannot be well known without a mastery of nature, a mastery that nature itself gives you by raising you above yourself, without the power of an eye that sees at a glance. All these are things that can only exist and derive from imagination and what is called genius in the fullest sense of the term. (October 1821; *Zibaldone* 1854-55)

Because of the vital insight provided by the imagination, philosophers must, according to Leopardi, imitate children who enjoy “livel[y]” imaginations and, therefore, “discover and see clear similarities and affinities, and find abstruse relationships, between very disparate things” (October 1821; *Zibaldone* 2019). In this way, Leopardi’s concept of the unifying power of imagination somewhat resembles Coleridge’s concept of the secondary imagination, which unites the matter on which it operates. As Coleridge puts it in the *Biographia Literaria*: the secondary imagination “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify” (1.304).

According to Stefano Biancù, the imagination is, ultimately, for Leopardi, the basis of all knowledge: “the imagination...is capable of seeing relationships and links between propositions and accumulating such a quantity of syllogisms, that the methodical reason would require

‘centuries’ to traverse” (235).¹⁵ Leopardi, then, ultimately exploded the antithesis between the imagination, which was vital to the composition of poetry, and philosophy or reason, erecting in its place the concept of the “enthusiasm of reason” that merged both. As Leopardi observes in September 1823, “[t]he great truths, especially in the abstract, in metaphysics, psychology, etc., are discovered only by means of what is almost an enthusiasm of reason, and are only discovered by those who are capable of such enthusiasm” (Leopardi, *Zibaldone* 3383). In other words, poetry and philosophy were profoundly connected branches of knowledge: “Leopardi did not accept either the path of the primacy of philosophy, or that of the primacy of poetry, he saw them as though on the same level, as the summit of human activities, as the two faculties with the greatest affinity” (Binni, *La Protesta* 91).

Another aspect of Leopardi’s “philosophy” – one linked, as mentioned above, to his ideas on the imagination – is his theory of pleasure. For Leopardi, the desire for pleasure – in all living creatures – is born of self-love (June 1820; *Zibaldone* 138), and, being infinite, it can never be satisfied. “[A]ll pleasures must be mingled with displeasure,” Leopardi argues, “because in the process of obtaining them the soul is deliberately searching for something it cannot find, that is, an infinity of pleasure, or the satisfaction of an unlimited desire” (June 1820; *Zibaldone* 130). Moreover, because humans have the greatest self-love of all creatures, they also have the greatest unfulfilled desire, and are, hence, the unhappiest of all living creatures:

man, having by his nature...greater feeling or greater sensibility than all other living beings [has more] self-love than any other type of living being. Hence man by his own inseparable essence is, and is born, more unhappy, or less capable of happiness, than any other type of living creature or being. (May 1822; *Zibaldone* 2411-12)

¹⁵ All translations of Biancù’s essay are my own.

For Leopardi, the fact of humankind's unhappiness is a consequence, as implied, of the fact that desire for pleasure can never be satisfied, because pleasure is always circumscribed whereas the desire for it is not. As the figure of Farfarello puts it in Leopardi's "Dialogo di Malambruno e di Farfarello" ("Dialogue of Malambruno and Farfarello" – 1827): "as you necessarily love yourself with the greatest love you are capable of, you necessarily desire your own happiness as intensely as you can; and never being able by a long way to be satisfied in this craving, which is supreme, it follows that you can in no way avoid being unhappy" (*Moral Essays* 63).

Pleasure, then, is *never* fulfilled, according to Leopardi; pleasure is either hoped for, or looked back upon (although it never existed), but, as he writes at the beginning of 1821, "[t]he act of pleasure, strictly speaking, never takes place" (*Zibaldone* 532) – it is endlessly deferred. (One cannot help but think of those words Lewis Carroll puts in the Queen's mouth in *Through the Looking Glass*: "The rule is, jam to-morrow and jam yesterday – but never jam *to-day*" – 247.) Thus, in his highly autobiographical "The Memorable Sayings of Filippo Ottonieri," Leopardi ventriloquizes through the speaker, Ottonieri's pupil, his claim that the moment of so-called pleasure is highly unpleasurable: "the worst moments [in human life] are those of pleasure: because the hope for and remembrance of these moments, which fill the rest of life, are better and far sweeter things than the delights themselves" (*Moral Essays* 42). As Prete puts it, "Leopardi is inside the condition of the modern research, that makes of pleasure the place of perpetual dissatisfaction, and poses, Faustus-like, the defeat in the impossibility of reading the instant" (37). Ultimately, the only kind of "pleasure" that Leopardi would suggest really exists is the absence of pain. As Leopardi explains, "ills" are in fact a true good "not only because those ills put the goods into relief, and because one enjoys health more after illness and calm after a

storm, but because without those ills goods would not even be good for long” (August 1822; *Zibaldone* 2601-02).

Leopardi’s fascination with these philosophical matters informed not only the subject matter of his poetry, but also his poetic theory. The poet Leopardi, for example, believed that the purpose of poetry was to delight the reader by inspiring him or her with a sense of the infinite, since, although we crave the infinite, it is impossible to experience it in reality. This is, as described in the introduction (see p. 25 above), another point where Leopardi’s poetics closely intersects with that of the English Romantics; his interest in producing a sense of the infinite, or “wonder,” in the reader, has a strong parallel in English Romantic interest in the wonder-inducing power of the sublime. “[T]he beauty of discourse and poetry,” Leopardi writes in June 1821, “lies in its awakening groups of ideas in us, and causing our minds to wander through a host of concepts, and all that is vague, confused, indeterminate, and uncircumscribed about them” (*Zibaldone* 1236 – an idea that is repeated at pp. 1574 and 1745). Leopardi’s emphasis on the importance of the “infinite” or “indefinite” in poetry had two important consequences for the way he composed poetry.

The first is the way in which he prioritised the use of words that contained, as he perceived it, a sense of the infinite. As Natalino Sapegno explains, for Leopardi, “certain words are poetic in themselves, in so much as they contain a vast, indefinite, and uncertain idea, because rich in resonances, vibrating, suggestive, implying an impression of multitude, of amplitude, of greatness, of length” (829).¹⁶ Thus, in a very famous passage of the *Zibaldone* dating to December 1821, Leopardi writes: “*Antichi, antico, antichità; posteri, posterità* are very poetic, etc., words because they contain an idea that is (1) vast, (2) indefinite and indeterminate,

¹⁶ All translations of Sapegno’s essay are my own.

especially *posterity*, which we know nothing about, and *antiquity*, which is similarly obscure to us” (2263). The second consequence relates to Leopardi’s use of images, in particular, his idea that the best poetry evoked a sense of the infinite by constantly presenting new images to the mind of the reader. Thus,

A swift, concise style is pleasing because it offers the mind a crowd of ideas simultaneously, or ideas that follow one another so rapidly that they seem simultaneous, and set the mind adrift in such an abundance of thoughts, or of spiritual images and sensations, that either it is incapable of embracing them all, and each one fully, or it does not have time to be idle and without sensations. (November 1821; *Zibaldone* 2041; see also 2049-50 and 2054-55)

In a sense, however, the “infinite,” of which poetry should provide a glimpse to the reader, is, for Leopardi, just one illusion among many that are the proper subject of poetry. The poet should, according to Leopardi’s poetic theory, “choose[...] those illusions that to him seem best, and those which are likely to find favour with us and which are suited to the office of poetry, that is, to imitate nature, and to its end, which is to delight” (“Discorso” 118). Thus, poetry, for Leopardi, was founded on the false – on those beautiful illusions that were vital to human happiness and, therefore, to ideal poetry: “Literature, and especially poetry, has nothing to do with subtle, rigorous, and precise philosophy, for it has the beautiful as its object, which is as much to say the false, because the true...was never beautiful” (June 1821; *Zibaldone* 1228).

Early in his poetic career, Leopardi also believed that poetry, in presenting beautiful illusions to the reader, should stimulate him or her to virtuous action. In the spring of 1822, according to Binni, “a vital and natural feeling of energy and energetic hedonism and pedagogy dominates [Leopardi’s *Zibaldone*], via the illusions, that is clarified...by the convergence of

literature and action and literature and the stimulus to act” (*La Protesta* 58). Leopardi, Binni continues, “insists...on the fact that the effect of poetry in general is an energetic effect; poetry does not make the soul serene or calm, but the opposite – it deeply stirs it” (*La Protesta* 89). This conception of the proper effect of poetry is, perhaps, best articulated by the cynical Eleander in “Dialogue of Timander and Eleander” when he reveals that he has “a low opinion of that kind of poetry which when read and meditated on, does not leave in the reader’s mind so noble a sentiment, that for half an hour it prevents him from entertaining a base thought, or performing an unworthy act” (*Moral Essays* 181). In other words, Leopardi believed that poetry should render the reader more virtuous – at least for a little while – a belief that is most manifest, perhaps, in “To Italy,” which Eliot deploys to such great effect as a virtue-inspiring anthem for her eponymous hero Daniel Deronda. This approach, it seems, waned during the middle period of Leopardi’s poetic career; however, as Binni points out, it does re-emerge in his later poetry – those poems from “To Himself” onwards that Binni sees as espousing a “new poetics.” In these poems, “every word is directed and chosen by its function of energy, expression of an urgent life of present feeling, of a sentimental present in contrast to which the past fades, loses its charm by now consumed in the great poetry of ‘remembrance’” (*La Protesta* 133). Thus, at the end of his career, Leopardi’s poetry reassumed the “vital and natural feeling” that was evident in his much earlier writing.

Despite formulating these lofty goals for poetry, Leopardi, as noted above, saw poetry as being under threat, perhaps even as extinct, in the modern world, and precisely because of the existential threat reason posed to the illusions that were supposed to be the proper subject of poetry. For Leopardi – and this is an idea that is central to his “Discourse” – modern poetry – could only treat “sentiment” or feelings as opposed to the “illusions” generated by the

imagination, which were the true subject of poetry. This critique of what he perceived as the Romantic obsession with the primacy of feeling entailed a contradiction that plagued Leopardi throughout his life:

the sentimental is founded upon, and springs from, philosophy, experience, and knowledge of men and things, in short, from the true, whereas the original essence of poetry lay in being inspired by the false. And if we consider poetry in the sense in which the term was first used, the sentimental can hardly be said to be poetry, but rather a form of philosophy or eloquence, except that it is more splendid, more ornate than the philosophy and eloquence of prose. (March 1821; *Zibaldone* 734-45)

In other words, while modern poets wrote almost exclusively about sentiment, the proper subject of poetry was the opposite of sentiment: the imagination. Therefore, modern poetry could not really be poetry at all.

Leopardi's last point in the paragraph quoted above, on the "ornate[ness]" of modern poetry, provides a neat segue to another vital aspect of his poetics: his insistence on simplicity and clarity. For Leopardi the poet, clarity and simplicity were "indispensable," "fundamental strengths of any sort of writing" (July 1823; *Zibaldone* 3047-48). Firstly, the idea of "simplicity," for Leopardi, was intertwined with that of naturalness: "simplicity is usually beautiful, that is, seems to be beautiful: (1) because it tends to be characteristic of nature...(2)...because very often it is nothing other than naturalness" (July 1821; *Zibaldone* 1411-12). Secondly, clarity "derive[s]" from the "clarity with which the writer or speaker conceives and has in mind a particular idea" (July 1821; *Zibaldone* 1372-72). Thus, the reader does not, necessarily, "conceive a clear idea of a thing in itself" from the poem, "but a clear idea of the precise state of [the poet's] mind, whether it sees clearly or sees obscurely" (*Zibaldone*

1372-73). Importantly, the invocation of the infinite, or indefinite, and the necessity for “clarity,” were not contradictory in Leopardi’s mind; a poetic word is not poetic because it is muddy in its connotations, but because it is multiple in its connotations. As Margaret Brose explains, such a word “has the capacity to lead a poem’s process of signification towards the indefinite, and away from mathematical and logical clarity” (13). Thus, poetic language, while simple and clear, should inspire the imagination to glimpse the infinite that was such an evasive delight to human beings, rather than perform the task of cold analysis, or ratiocination, that was actually a detriment to human knowledge.

This is, inevitably, a brief introduction to those aspects of Leopardi’s philosophy and poetics that are not, necessarily, the most important, but are those that are most relevant to the discussions in the later chapters of this thesis. Thus, Leopardi’s stoic pessimism and later solidarist approach to humankind – the consequence of his revelation regarding the indifference or even cruelty of nature – are vital to my discussion of Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” and the way in which it appears to respond to Leopardi’s work. I also discuss, in this same chapter, the innovative poetics of “Dover Beach” that appear to have been derived – at least in part – from Leopardi’s Modernist poetics, but have reserved discussion of this quite complex subject to that chapter. Leopardi’s philosophical pessimism was also important to Arnold in the context of his composition of “The Scholar Gipsy” and “Empedocles on Etna,” in which Arnold explores a pessimistic historical perspective that combines elements both of Leopardi’s historically inflected pessimism and of his cosmic pessimism discussed here. Moreover, this chapter explores Arnold’s and Leopardi’s shared promotion of a simple, even stark, prosaic poetics that conforms to the exigencies of the bleak ages that they perceived themselves as inhabiting. With reference to George Eliot, instead, it is Leopardi’s fascinating – and seemingly uncharacteristic – ideas on

the vital, virtue-inspiring nature of poetry that are most relevant to her use of “To Italy” as a catalyst for her eponymous hero Daniel Deronda’s moral evolution. Finally, it is Leopardi’s conception of illusions that reveals the coherent structure of A. E. Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad*. Leopardi’s conviction in the power of illusions, which are intimately connected to nature and the imagination, to ameliorate the human condition, and the struggle he identified in maintaining these in adulthood and, more generally, in the modern world, illuminates the narrative treating the loss of these that is, I argue, at the heart of *A Shropshire Lad*.

Chapter three: Matthew Arnold and Giacomo Leopardi: Modernist Lyric Poetics and Stoic Pessimism in “Dover Beach”

Both the Romantic-era poet Giacomo Leopardi and the Victorian bastion of “culture” Matthew Arnold have been identified as pioneers of a distinctly pessimistic form of Modernism. On the one hand, Leopardi – notorious for his pessimism among Victorian critics (see p. 29 above) – wrote the *Canti*, which Jonathan Galassi has described as “the first truly modern lyrics, the wellspring of everything that follows in the European poetic tradition” (xiii). On the other hand, Dwight Culler observes that “[i]t is only the modern poet who has followed Arnold in his vision of the tragic and alienated condition of man” (41). Culler’s uncompromising statement was echoed several decades later by Alan Grob, who claims, in his monograph on the poet, that Arnold’s “courageous recognition of the painful cosmic circumstances of secularized man” situated him “in the main line of modern development” (*A Longing Like Despair* 17, 28). Yet, despite the intriguing implications of these comments, regarding the poets’ shared Modernist poetics and philosophical pessimism, Arnold and Leopardi are discussed together in but a (tiny) handful of essays. Only sporadically have critics such as J. C. Maxwell, Ghan Singh, and Ottavio Casale and Allan C. Dooley drawn attention to these poets’ profound affinities.

Such attention is overdue, given how much it adds to our reading of Arnold’s work, including our reading of his great lyric “Dover Beach” – still Arnold’s “most popular poem” as of 2016 (Machann 331). The Leopardian context of this poem illuminates, for instance, Arnold’s often misunderstood experimental prosody (see, for example, Perry 166-67). Unusually anarchic in the context of Arnold’s oeuvre, “Dover Beach” presages the Modernists’ *vers libre* and, I speculate, does so – in part – via Leopardi’s innovation of the “canzone libera” (free verse ode, more-or-less). In addition, Arnold’s conception of the delusive forces operating in the world, so

clearly in evidence in “Dover Beach,” is also at the root of his structural prioritization of sound, which is another distinctive element of his poetry that betrays an affinity with Leopardi’s work. The Victorian poet-critic’s pessimistic disavowal of the world we *see*, however, gives way to a solidarist stoic pessimism that is highly reminiscent, even in its expression in the “night battle,” of Leopardi’s late poetic testimony, “La ginestra” (“Broom”). Thus, in light of Arnold’s response to Leopardi, “Dover Beach” can be read not only as opening out to a bleak, anarchic world, but as culminating in an appeal to solidarity among humankind – a reading that has, recently, been much neglected.

Besides deepening our understanding of Arnold’s work (and of its proto-Modernism), a comparison of Leopardi and Arnold also highlights an important and neglected aspect of Arnold’s cosmopolitan poetics and of his attitude towards Romanticism. While scholars recognize Arnold’s indebtedness to French writers, such as George Sand, and to German writers, such as Goethe,¹⁷ they tend to marginalize his interest in Italian writers. At least one critic has claimed that Arnold had little understanding of Italian culture – an assertion that is at least complicated by Arnold’s acute sensitivity to the extraordinary qualities of Leopardi’s poetry. In addition, Arnold’s admiration for Leopardi complicates the critical consensus on the Victorian critic’s dismissive attitude towards Romanticism, since Arnold clearly recognized in Leopardi a Romantic-era poet who, in a reversal of Arnold’s famous judgement of English Romantic poets, *did* “know enough” (“Function of Criticism” 262). In fact, despite Arnold’s reputation as an anti-Romantic, it was he who consolidated Leopardi’s reputation in nineteenth-century England, and he did so in the context of discussing two other (English) Romantic poets whom he greatly

¹⁷ On Arnold and Sand, see Ruth apRoberts (“Matthew Arnold and George Sand”), Mary Byrd (“George Sand and the Poetry of Matthew Arnold”), and Kenneth Allott (“Matthew Arnold’s ‘The New Sirens’ and George Sand”); on Arnold and Goethe, see Rodney Stenning Edgecombe (“Goethe Schiller, and ‘Empedocles on Etna’”), David DeLaura (*Matthew Arnold and Culture*), and Jamie Simpson (*Matthew Arnold and Goethe*).

admired: Wordsworth and Byron. These illuminating comparisons are found in Arnold's 1881 essay "Byron," which was originally published as the introduction to his selection of Byron's poetry, and was seminal to the recognition of Leopardi's stature in nineteenth-century England. As Peter Lecouras puts it, "Matthew Arnold put Leopardi on the literary map by comparing him to Wordsworth and Byron" (313).

In light of Arnold's appreciation of Leopardi, I argue that the Italian poet's *Canti* should be considered among the significant predecessors for "Dover Beach" in terms of their formal experimentation; their structure, including the vital significance of sound – and recurring sounds – as a catalyst for cognitive movement; and their stoic-pessimistic perspective. Recently, critics have discussed "Dover Beach" within the tradition of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "conversation poem," and it could also be argued that Arnold's experiments with verse are indebted to Coleridge's own in poems such as "Dejection: An Ode"¹⁸ – not to mention an even earlier pioneer of free verse, the authors of the poetry of the King James Bible. My wish is not to remove Coleridge (or any other poet) from discussion of the context of Arnold's work, but to enlarge this discussion through the inclusion of an Italian poet routinely neglected by Anglophone scholars. So, while Coleridge's model may illuminate some aspects of Arnold's poem, I propose that there are lyrics among Leopardi's *Canti* (1831-1845) – such as "A Silvia" ("To Silvia" – 1831), "La sera del dì di festa" ("The Evening of the Holiday" – 1825), "Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia" ("Night Song of the Wandering Shepherd in Asia" – 1831), and "Broom" (1845) – that are equally important literary precedents.¹⁹ Although "Dover

¹⁸ I think "Dover Beach" is, however, not very like "Dejection: An Ode," since the latter lacks Arnold's formal restraint, his experimentation with enjambment, and the obscuring of rhyme that results from the running over of lines.

¹⁹ All quotations, including translations, of Giacomo Leopardi's *Canti* in this essay are taken from: Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti: Giacomo Leopardi*, trans. Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010). Hereafter cited by line number. The only exception to this rule are the examples of abrupt enjambments in "Night Song" towards the end of section II that I translated myself on page 17-18 of this chapter.

Beach” predates Arnold’s seminal essay on Leopardi by thirty years, there is much evidence that, just as Arnold had read Wordsworth and Byron decades before he made selections of their work, so had Arnold read Leopardi decades before he introduced the Italian poet to a wider English reading public. Without insisting on a direct “influence,” I would like to highlight the striking formal and philosophical affinities that connect Arnold and Leopardi – affinities that go beyond “Dover Beach.” While Arnold’s melancholic lyric is my primary focus here, the following chapter will explore similar affinities between Arnold’s “Empedocles on Etna” and “The Scholar-Gipsy” and Leopardi’s *Canti*.

I. Arnold’s Prose Assessment of Leopardi: “Byron.”

In Arnold’s comparative assessment of Byron, Wordsworth, and Leopardi – more fully discussed in the “Introduction” (31-32) – the Italian Romantic *initially* receives the highest praise. He is an “exquisite master of language” who has “the very qualities which we have found wanting to Byron; he has the sense for form and style, the passion for just expression, the sure and firm touch of the true artist” as well as “a grave fullness of knowledge” (“Byron” 229). As with Byron, Arnold considers Leopardi’s intellect and artistry to surpass Wordsworth’s: “He has a far wider culture than Wordsworth, more mental lucidity, more freedom from illusions” and “above all, this Italian, with his pure and sure touch with his fineness of perception, is far more of the artist” (“Byron” 230). But Byron’s force of personality – what Swinburne called his “excellence of sincerity and strength” – and Wordsworth’s joyful philosophy ultimately, for Arnold, triumph over Leopardi’s “knowledge” and “artist[try]” (“Byron” 231). Notably, in his concluding assessment of Wordsworth – as mentioned in the “Introduction” (32) – Arnold’s famously ideological notions regarding the function of poetry trump his instincts for Leopardi’s many superior qualities. Finally, he ranks the pessimistic Italian, whose poetry Arthur Schopenhauer

praised for its supreme depiction of the misery of human existence (*The World as Will and Idea* 391), below the joy-rendering Englishman; Wordsworth “gains so much by his criticism of life being...healthful and true, whereas Leopardi’s pessimism is not” (“Byron” 231). (Interestingly, while Leopardi did believe that poetry should delight in its engagement of the reader’s imagination (see “Leopardi’s Philosophy” p. 53 above), Arnold does not seem to have found Leopardi’s poetry delightful in this sense.)

Despite Arnold’s conclusion, his comparative assessment of Wordsworth and Leopardi in “Byron” remains especially telling both because of its resemblance to Arnold’s criticism of his own work and because of the unique importance of Wordsworth to Arnold.²⁰ It is remarkable, to begin with, that Arnold’s criticism of Leopardi is identical to his criticism of his own poetry, especially to his famous analysis of “Empedocles on Etna” contained in the preface to *Poems* (1853). Here, Arnold acknowledges that “enjoyment” may be derived from “the most tragic circumstances,” implying that a poem need not have a “happy” subject to “rejoice the reader” (“Preface” 2). However, he continues, “no poetical enjoyment can be derived” from situations “in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done,” and Arnold accuses “Empedocles” of depicting just such a situation (“Preface” 2-3). Arnold’s condemnation of his own “Empedocles”, which, of course, he banished from the 1853 *Poems*, seems to be intimately related to his final censuring of Leopardi for an unrelenting pessimism that, as a “criticism of life,” is not “healthful and true” (“Byron” 231), and, as I discuss in the third chapter, “Empedocles on Etna” does seem to be distinctly Leopardian in its historical perspective, choice of protagonist, and style. In any case, the essay’s

²⁰ See, for example, T. S. Eliot’s “Matthew Arnold” and U. C. Knoepfelmacher’s “Dover Revisited: The Wordsworthian Matrix in the Poetry of Matthew Arnold.”

conclusion does not alter the fact that “Byron” constitutes a pivotal moment in the history of Leopardi’s reception in England. Like Lecouras, Casale and Dooley describe how, “[i]n conferring his approval on a writer whose English reputation was by no means solidified at the time...Arnold brought to a climax the curious drama of Leopardi’s acceptance by the Victorians” (44).

But for my purposes, it is even more important that Casale and Dooley maintain that Arnold had taken decades to arrive at this assessment of Leopardi (60). While Arnold’s public recognition of Leopardi occurs late in his own career, it “arrive[s],” according to these critics, “with the weight of long consideration behind it” (Casale and Dooley 60). Even though Arnold does not mention Leopardi in his early reading lists, Kenneth Allott acknowledges that these are very incomplete in that they “exclude imaginative literature” (“Matthew Arnold’s Reading-Lists” 257). Similarly, the near absence in Arnold’s correspondence of Leopardi’s name may be explained by the fact that there was a certain stigma attached to it that seems to have engendered reluctance on the part of prominent men to acknowledge his greatness.²¹ This is strikingly evidenced, in particular, by Antonio Panizzi, the head librarian of the British Museum, who, in a letter to Gladstone – himself a Leopardi critic (see discussion of his review in the Introduction p. 28) – acknowledges that Leopardi “comes next to Tasso among our great poets – that is the truth: only I dare not say so” (Rhodes 67). In the absence of this kind of evidence, however, there is very convincing circumstantial evidence that establishes Arnold’s knowledge of Leopardi’s poetry well before the publication of “Byron”: his knowledge of Leopardi criticism, his personal acquaintances who knew Leopardi, and his education.

²¹ As mentioned in the “Introduction” (7), despite his evident admiration for Leopardi, Arnold only mentions Leopardi once in his correspondence.

To begin with, Arnold certainly knew Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve's highly laudatory essay on Leopardi, whether he read it when it was first published in 1844 in *Les Revues des Deux Mondes* or, later, when it was published in *Portrait Contemporains* (1847), which Arnold owned (Casale and Dooley 60). While there is no concrete evidence to confirm the date of Arnold's first acquaintance with this major critical work, *Les Revues des Deux Mondes* was widely read by Arnold's contemporary English men and women of letters (Casale and Dooley 60). Arnold himself was "an assiduous reader of this journal and an admirer of Sainte-Beuve" (Singh, "Leopardi e Matthew Arnold" 41)²² whom, on one occasion, he called the "first of living critics" ("Maurice de Guérin" 12) and, on another, "the most notable critic of our time" ("Sainte-Beuve" 106). This fact makes the earlier date for Arnold's first reading of Sainte-Beuve's essay – 1844 – a strong possibility. While it is highly likely, then, that Arnold had read Sainte-Beuve's essay many years before he composed "Dover Beach," it is also highly plausible that he was familiar with the Leopardi criticism published by his fellow Englishmen George Henry Lewes (1848) and William Gladstone (1850), since he "regularly read many leading periodicals," including those in which Lewes' and Gladstone's essays were published: *Fraser's Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review* (Casale and Dooley 60; Singh, "Leopardi e Matthew Arnold" 41).

But Arnold did not merely read about Leopardi – he also knew men who had known and admired the poet himself. Such men included Karl Baron von Bunsen, the German diplomat and scholar and an old friend of the Arnold family, and Barthold Georg Niebuhr, the German-Danish statesman and historian, both of whom were friends (and champions) of Leopardi, whom they had met when the young poet visited Rome (Casale and Dooley 60; Park Honan, "Matthew Arnold" 145). In addition, it is highly likely that Arnold would have heard of Leopardi from

²² All translations of Singh's essay are my own.

Thomas Arnold's friend, and Matthew Arnold's acquaintance, Henry Crabb Robinson – the only Englishman to have written about an encounter with Leopardi (in *Diary, Reminiscences and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson* 1870), whom he met in Florence (154). But perhaps most intriguingly, Arnold's (potential) contact with the Italian tutor Aurelio Saffi at Oxford may have led to his early exposure to Leopardi's poetry. As Singh writes, Arnold "had the opportunity of encountering Leopardi's work through Saffi, professor of Italian at Oxford and fervent admirer of the Recanati native" ("Leopardi e Matthew Arnold" 42). Although I have not been able to discover its whereabouts, Singh cites in support of his claim an unpublished letter in which Saffi describes how he and Arnold would meet twice a week to discuss Italian literature. While Arnold and Saffi certainly discussed Dante – according to this letter – Singh believes that it is "more than probable that in these lessons Saffi also discussed Leopardi" ("Leopardi e Matthew Arnold" 42), especially given Leopardi's stature in Italy (see Introduction p. 2 above).

While there may never be direct evidence of Arnold's having read Leopardi before composing "Dover Beach," the abundant circumstantial evidence of such a reading – and an admiring one – seems to be reflected in strong poetic and philosophical affinities between Arnold's "Dover Beach" and Leopardi's *Canti*. It should be noted that, as with many of his opinions, it is very possible that Arnold's opinion on Leopardi developed as he aged. Although there is little direct evidence to suggest how such a development might have occurred, it seems likely that Arnold's fascination for Leopardi, and his exquisite melancholy, may have been at its most intense during his early and similar fascination for Étienne Pivert de Senancour. During the period of his life in which Arnold was composing poems like "Dover Beach" and "Empedocles on Etna", "Arnold saw [Senancour] as the very type of the modern soul, more relevant than either Wordsworth or Goethe, for his icy clarity of despair is of more use" (Trilling 85). Perhaps,

then, at this time Arnold recognized, and admired, much the same lucid pessimism in Leopardi and, only later in life, as manifested in the essay “Byron,” came to regard this pessimistic approach – that represented by both Senancour and Leopardi – as unhealthy and untrue.

II. Modernist Poetics in Arnold’s “Dover Beach” and Leopardi’s *Canti*

“Dover Beach,” with its irregular stanzas, rhyme, and metre, is one of Arnold’s most formally experimental poems, and several critics (Ruth Pitman and John Racin prominent among them) have attempted to identify appropriate ways to describe and explain its anomalous irregularity. Only one critic has suggested, and this only in passing, that the irregularity of “Dover Beach” may owe something to Arnold’s reading of Leopardi. When Maxwell concludes his brief exposition of a line that may allude to Leopardi in Arnold’s “The Scholar-Gipsy,” he claims that “the closest parallels...to the poems in irregular metre such as *Dover Beach* are [Leopardi’s] *Canti*” (183). This suggestive, though passing, comparison is worth exploring. As Kenneth and Miriam Allott describe it, in the Longman edition of Arnold’s poems, “Dover Beach” “is a lyric consisting of four unequal verse-paragraphs irregularly rhymed” with lines “vary[ing] between two and five stresses” (although, as they note, “more than half the lines are five-stressed” – *Poems* 240)²³. Thus, the verse paragraphs that comprise “Dover Beach” are irregular in terms of their overall length, the unpredictable alternation of shorter and longer lines, and their asymmetrical (though frequent) rhyme – all of which features distinguish Leopardi’s own innovative use of the Italian “canzone.”

²³ All quotations of Matthew Arnold’s poems are taken from this edition. Hereafter cited by line number.

The “canzone” is, much like the English ode, a traditionally elevated, lyric form: “a verse composition...of highest prestige and, principally, lyrical in theme” (Bertone 38).²⁴ Typically, its composition conforms to the following criteria:

With reference to the metrical structure, the essential characteristic of the c[anzone] is that of being composed of...stanzas...(of a variable number, but generally five or six), which are all equal: each stanza must have the same number of lines (usually hendecasyllables and “settenari,” or just hendecasyllables) and the same types of line must follow each other in the same order and with the same rhyme scheme. (Blazzina and Grossi 28)²⁵

The hendecasyllable is often treated as the Italian equivalent of iambic pentameter, and it might be suggested that the settenario translates to a line of iambic trimetre or tetrametre. While deliberately working within the tradition of the canzone throughout his career, Leopardi systematically dismantled many of its formal conventions. “From the very start,” as Galassi observes, “Leopardi is formally revolutionary, gradually revising and relaxing the rules of his genre” (Galassi xix). Such was the impact of Leopardi’s poetic experiments within the Italian lyrical tradition that today the “free” canzone is also called the “Leopardian” canzone (Bertone 42; Blazzina and Grossi 30).

Many Italian scholars have suggested that Leopardi’s renowned innovations reached their fruition in “To Silvia.” Here, Leopardi abandons the strictures regarding the canzone’s stanza length, line order, and rhyme scheme. The most recent editor of Leopardi’s *Canti* Andrea Campana, for instance, notes that “To Silvia” is the first “free canzone” and he describes how it is “composed here of six stanzas that are irregular in the number...and distribution of lines, and

²⁴ All translations of Bertone’s metrical dictionary are my own.

²⁵ All translations of Blazzina and Grossi’s rhetorical dictionary are my own.

in the presence/absence of rhymes”; in fact, Campana adds, “the single repeated element is found in the final word of each stanza, which always rhymes with the final word of one of the preceding lines” (Campana 319).²⁶ In other words, in “To Silvia” Leopardi abandons many of the traditional elements of the canzone – a point made by many of his Italian editors.²⁷ Thus, the first stanza reads:

Silvia, remembri ancora
Quel tempo della tua vita mortale,
Quando beltà splendea
Negli occhi tuoi ridenti e fuggitivi,
E tu, lieta e pensosa, il limitare
Di gioventù salivi? (1-6)

Or, in Galassi’s English translation:

Silvia, do you remember still
that moment in your mortal life
when beauty shimmered
in your smiling, startled eyes
as, bright and pensive, you arrived
at the threshold of youth? (1-6)

Here, Leopardi composes a six-line stanza, with the rhyme scheme ABCDED (although there is assonance in the final words of ll. 2 and 5) and a unique arrangement of seven- and eleven-syllable lines: 7-11-7-11-11-7. Significantly, no other stanza in this poem repeats this pattern.

²⁷ See, for example, Galassi’s translation of Leopardi’s *Canti* (240); Niccolò Gallo and Cesare Garboli’s edition (169); Dotti’s edition (352); Gavazzeni and Lomardi’s edition (394), and Rigoni’s edition (962).

Beginning with the composition of “To Silvia,” Leopardi irrevocably discards the rigid canzone scheme, instead relying on irregularly alternating lines of hendecasyllables and settenari, irregular (though often frequent rhyme), and, increasingly, on other pronounced sound devices such as abundant assonance, strong caesuras, and stark enjambments.

On the surface, then, there are intriguing formal parallels between the shape of “Dover Beach” and that of the Leopardian canzone. The key features of the latter: irregular stanzas, uneven line lengths, jagged metrics, and frequent, though unpredictable rhyme, are also prominent in the former, Arnold’s metrically experimental “Dover Beach.” Like Leopardi, Arnold uses unequal verse paragraphs; alternation of longer and shorter lines; irregular, though frequent rhyme; and other prominent sound devices – both heavy alliteration (ll. 2, 4, 7, 8, 12 in the first paragraph alone) and notable assonance (“sea meets” – 8; “melancholy long” – 25; “withdrawing roar” – 25). Most significant, perhaps, of these common formal features is the alternation of shorter and longer lines, and, concomitant to this, Arnold’s anomalously abrupt enjambments: “the light / Gleams” (3-4), “roar / Of pebbles” (9-10), “we / Find” (18-19), “true / To one another” (29-30), that are so highly reminiscent of Leopardi’s modern, fragmented verse. In Leopardi, the lines shift between 11 syllables, with two fixed stresses (on either the fourth or the sixth syllable and on the tenth syllable), and seven syllables (with a fixed stress on the sixth). As mentioned above, while the hendecasyllable is considered to be the Italian equivalent of iambic pentameter, it might be suggested that the settenario translates to a line of iambic trimeter, with six syllables, or tetrameter, with eight – the two second most common lines in “Dover Beach” (there are six and ten of each in this poem respectively).

I would like to pay particular attention to the similar, unsettling rhythmical experiments of “Dover Beach” and Leopardi’s “Night Song of the Wandering Shepherd in Asia” (“Night

Song”). Like “To Silvia,” “Night Song” is one of the great Pisano-Recanatesi *Canti*: those poems composed subsequent to Leopardi’s five-year composition drought that are considered to be his finest achievements. Arnold’s alternation between lines of pentameter (the most frequently occurring line length) and those of trimeter or tetrameter (the two second-most common line lengths) has a rolling, sonorous effect as the lines “draw back” (10), on the trimetre and tetrameter lines, and then “return” (11) up the beach of the verse, on the pentameter lines. Perhaps the best example of this somewhat melancholy music occurs towards the end of the first verse paragraph, from l. 7 onwards:

...from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanced land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in. (8-14)

This alternation between longer and shorter lines in Arnold’s verse has the interesting effect of mimicking the motion of the waves that is such a crucial metaphor in the poem.

This rocking or wave-like motion has often been commented upon, but its potential parallels with the rhythms of Leopardi’s poetry has not. However, the rhythms of “Dover Beach” are highly comparable to those evoked by Leopardi in a poem such as “Night Song.”

Fascinatingly, the eminent Leopardi editor Emilio Bigi describes the music of the late *Canti*, including “Night Song,” as “an *undulating* tapestry of sonorous motifs, between the soft and

desolate, that rise up, gather for an instant, and are lost” (Bigi 154-55).²⁸ Crucially, Bigi attributes this “undulating” movement to one of the principal techniques that distinguishes Leopardi’s free canzone: the irregular shifting of lines between seven syllables (with a fixed stress on the sixth) and 11 syllables (with two fixed stresses on either the fourth or the sixth syllable and on the tenth syllable). As Bigi puts it, Leopardi’s wave-like music in these poems is the result of the “free alternation of two metrical measures, the hendecasyllable and the settenario, which are of diverse length but which are not dissonant between themselves: ampler waves and briefer ones, which follow each other melodiously” (Bigi 155). This rise and fall rhythm, produced by the alternation of shorter and longer lines, is evident in the first stanza of “Night Song.” The first (truncated) hendecasyllable expands across five accents: “Che fai tu, luna, in ciel? dimmi, che fai” (“What are you doing, moon, up in the sky” – 1), before contracting into two settenario lines: “Silenziosa luna? / Sorgi la sera, e vai” (“what are you doing, tell me, silent moon? / You rise at night and go” – 2-3). Subsequently, the fourth line stretches back out to a hendecasyllable: “Contemplando i deserti; indi ti posi” (“observing the deserts. Then you set” – 4), before again contracting to a settenario: “Ancor non sei tu paga” (“Aren’t you tired” – 5), and re-expanding in l. 6: “Di riandare i sempiterni calli?” (“of plying the eternal byways?”). Finally, the penultimate line sustains the greater line breadth: “Ancor non prendi a schivo, ancor sei vaga” (“Aren’t you bored? Do you still want” – 7), before ultimately retracting into another settenario: “Di mirar queste valli?” (“to look down on these valleys?” – 8). The undulating motion – not so evident in the less mellifluous sounds of the anglo-saxon tongue – is, I think, particularly marked in the last few lines of the Italian original of this section, lines which coincide with the introduction of Leopardi’s famous interrogatives.

²⁸ All translations of Bigi’s essay are my own

The wave-like roll of Leopardi's verse is also invested in the construction of the individual line. Of the six hendecasyllables in this first stanza, five are hendecasyllables "a maggiore," meaning that one of the two *fixed* stresses falls on the sixth syllable (the other must fall on the tenth). However, Leopardi has a peculiar way of letting "the accent of the sixth fall on a truncated word...or on the first vowel of a synaeresis...or, more often, on a flat word that elides with the following one"; in other words, Leopardi places these fixed accents on words that are not significant or forcefully enunciated themselves. The result, according to Bigi, is that the "line...with its ebbing of one measure into a shorter one [the second part of the line], gives a sense of a melody that falters and extinguishes itself" (Bigi 158). In other words, within individual lines there is an accumulation of tension – as in a wave approaching the shore – that is subsequently, in the second half of the verse, released and withdrawn. An excellent example of this is l. 4 – "Contemplando i deserti; indi ti posi" – in which the sixth syllable accent on "deserti" occurs in a word that, according to the rules of Italian prosody, is elided with the following word: "indi." Similarly, in l. 7, the sixth syllable accent on "*schivo*" falls on a word that is elided with the following one "ancor." Arnold does not – cannot – avail himself of such a technique, which relies on the prominence of vowels in Italian; however, in Leopardi's poem, it contributes to the undulating rhythm of the verse that so strongly resembles that distinguishing feature of Arnold's "Dover Beach."

The shifting back-and-forth of metrical weights in "Dover Beach," in addition to sonically evoking the key oceanic metaphors in the poem, also has the effect of unsettling or disorienting the reader with its refusal to resolve into a predictable rhythm. This sensation is, furthermore, reinforced by the disorienting ruptures between and within Arnold's lines, which

are highly reminiscent of Leopardi's fractured verse. Perhaps the second stanza of Arnold's "Dover Beach" is the best example of his use of striking enjambments:

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea. (15-20)

Disruptive enjambments, such as: "brought / Into," "flow / Of," "we / Find," and shifting caesuras – compare the strong, late caesuras of ll. 16 and 18 with those earlier ones, unidentified by punctuation, in ll. 17, 19, and 20 – create moving rifts in Arnold's verse that circumvent the creation, or recognition, of fluent rhythms, reassuring in their predictability. In "Dover Beach," the perplexing movement of the variously measured lines and their uneven textures evoke the treacherous nature of the faithless sea at the heart of this poem – that is, of life without the comfortable reassurance of revealed religion.

Arnold's evocative experiments with line endings and caesura in "Dover Beach" can, again, fruitfully be compared to Leopardi's "Night Song." This free canzone is notable for, in addition to its rolling rhythms, the fractured, hurried rhythm of the second stanza, which describes the "[l]ittle old white-haired man" (21) and his arduous (and pointless) journey across country that Leopardi presents as a parable of life. The "little old white-haired man,"

Per montagna e per valle,
Per sassi acuti, ed alta rena, e fratte,
Al vento, alla tempesta, e quando avvampa

L'ora, e quando poi gela,
Corre via, corre, anela,
Varca torrenti e stagni,
Cade, risorge, e più e più s'affretta,
Senza posa o ristoro. (24-31)

Galassi has done an estimable job in translating these aural effects:

up mountain and down valley,
over sharp rocks, across deep sands and bracken,
through wind and storm,
in burning, freezing weather,
runs on, running till he's out of breath,
crosses rivers, wades through swamps,
falls and climbs and rushes on
ever faster, no rest or relief. (24-31)

In this stanza, the precipitate and directionless movement of the old man is evoked by Leopardi's uneven lines and dislocating pauses, creating a disjointed surface that is, I believe, an important precedent for that of "Dover Beach." Numerous lines bear abundance of commas that interrupt their fluency (such as ll. 25, 26, 28, 30, and 32), and others manifest disrupting enjambments, for example: "quando avvampa / L'ora" (26-27) (when it flares up / the hour); and, later in the stanza, "infin ch'arriva / Colà" (32-33) (until he arrives / there); and "Vergine luna, tale / È la vita mortale" (37-38) (Virgin moon, such / is mortal life). Leopardi's scattering his verse with these disruptive pauses, both in the middle and at the end of his lines, creates a rough texture that aurally conjures the harsh, torturous nature of the old man's journey. Thus, even though the

harsh, precipitous irregularities of sound in “Night Song” differ from the sonic undulations of “Dover Beach,” just as in “Dover Beach,” Arnold’s rhythmic unbalancing reflects a world where man has lost the stabilizing force of faith, so in Leopardi’s “Night Song” the similar formal turbulence reflects the hazardous and ultimately pointless journey of his archetypal man.

The idea that Arnold may have been imbued with a Leopardian poetics at this point in his career is, I believe, provided with further testimony by the poem “A Summer Night,” which was composed between 1849 and 1852 (Allott and Allott, *Poems* 267) i.e. more-or-less contemporaneously to “Dover Beach” (“probably late June 1851” – Allott and Allott, *Poems* 239). This poem, in which the speaker ponders the choice, which it seems humankind must make, between living as a “slave” to “some unmeaning taskwork” (75, 40) or as a passion-infused “madman” (75), is, formally, very close to “Dover Beach” – closer than any of Arnold’s other poems. It exhibits the same alternation between longer and shorter lines, the same frequent though irregular rhyme, the same abrupt enjambments (particularly in the third-to-last stanza), and even several instances of common diction and phrasing. In the first stanza, for instance, Arnold alternates between lines of five accents (8 lines), four accents (7 lines), and three accents (10 lines), although all the four-accent lines occur in the first half of the stanza, so the alternation between longer pentameters and shorter trimetres becomes much more evident in the second half of the stanza:

And to my mind the thought

Is on a sudden brought

Of a past night, and a far different scene.

Headlands stood out into the moonlit deep

As clearly as at noon. (11-15)

As anyone familiar with “Dover Beach” will notice, the first two lines of this section are highly reminiscent of the second stanza of the more famous poem, in which the speaker describes how the sound of the sea “brought / Into [Sophocles’] mind” the concept of “human misery” (16-17, 18) and likewise instilled the speaker with “a thought” (19). In fact, the entire visual scene depicted here is strongly reminiscent of that described in the opening to “Dover Beach” with the headlands echoing the cliffs in that poem, and the clear moon the fair one. However, what might go unnoticed is the way that the rush and retraction of the lines echoes the effects of that in “Dover Beach” by both seeming to evoke the “spring-tide’s brimming flow” (16), much like the wave’s motion on the beach in the earlier poem, and to reflect the tumultuous state of the speaker who remembers a “past night” during which his heart “vainly throbb[ed]” (13, 24). Here, too, the reader encounters (very) frequent, though irregular rhyme, the first ten lines exhibiting a scheme in which each line is rhymed with another: AABBCDECED. Finally, perhaps the most notable stylistic similarity is the abrupt enjambment that is especially frequent in the second-to-last stanza of “A Summer Night” – the stanza, notably, that describes the turbulent life of the “madman” who, in Arnold’s metaphor for his unruly existence, sails “the wide ocean” (53):

And the rest, a few,
Escape their prison and depart
On the wide ocean of life anew.
There the freed prisoner, where’er his heart
Listeth, will sail;
Nor doth he know how there prevail,
Despotic on that sea,
Trade-winds which cross it from eternity. (51-58)

Here, abrupt enjambments, such as “heart / Listeth” (54-55), “undebarred / By” (59-60), “braves / The freshening wind” (60-61), “between / The lightning-bursts” (62-63), / “is seen / Only a driving wreck” (63-64), seem, as in “Dover Beach,” to instill the reader with a vivid sense of unsettled existence. The recurrence of the striking formal parallels shared by “Dover Beach” and Leopardi’s *Canti* in this contemporaneous Arnold poem, “A Summer Night” testify, I believe, to the fact that the Victorian poet was keenly interested in the potential of the Leopardian canzone in English, experiments in which went beyond “Dover Beach,” but also beyond an adoption of similar poetic techniques.

III. Structural Parallels in Arnold’s “Dover Beach” and “A Summer Night,” and Leopardi’s *Canti*

Alongside their innovative and evocative versification, one of the most striking parallels between Arnold’s and Leopardi’s poetry is its movement – a movement that is reminiscent of the “Greater Romantic Lyric.” Before examining the more specific function of sound in “Dover Beach” and the *Canti*, I would like to briefly explore a general comparison of the movement of “A Summer Night” and the *Canti* that – in both cases – resembles the “Greater Romantic Lyric.” This genre of poem, as M. H. Abrams famously describes, “begins with a description of the landscape” and “an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely involved with the outer scene” (77). A little later in Abrams’ seminal study, he calls this movement the “repeated out-in-out process, in which mind confronts nature” (78). Generally speaking, this movement is essential to Arnold’s “A Summer Night” and “Dover Beach” – as it is to many of Leopardi’s *Canti*.

Strikingly, “A Summer Night” opens with a device that is famously associated with Leopardi’s most famous poem: “Infinity.” Arnold’s poem opens with a description of his

constructed environment, the “deserted, moon-blanchèd street” (1) and “windows” (3) that create a sense of constriction. However, a “break between the housetops shows / The moon!” (6-7), and behind the moon “a whole tract of Heaven” (10). This sight then prompts the speaker’s remembering of a similar night during which, it seems, he haunted his lover, and this memory, in turn, prompts a more expansive meditation on the way man’s existence is caught between slavery and ungoverned passion. Similarly, in “Infinity,” it is the contrast between an expansive, infinite view and a contracted one that sparks the speaker’s meditation, this time on the nature of infinitude. Looking towards the horizon from his “lonely hill” (1) the speaker notices how a nearby “hedgerow...cuts off the view / of so much of the last horizon” (2-3), and this contrast between the infinite and the limited allows him, almost paradoxically, to better contemplate the former, the infinite. Thus, the speaker says, “sitting here and gazing, I can see / beyond, in my mind’s eye, unending spaces” (4-5). As the Leopardi editor Mario Andrea Rigoni explains: “a visual sensation (the hedge that excludes from sight “so much of the last horizon”) instigates the imagining of spatial infinitude” (946).²⁹ In fact, as Rigoni continues to explain, the infinite can only be accessed in this manner because it is the “imagination of that which one cannot identify or know the very real limits of, in other words, the *indefinite*” (947). This – the “indefinite” – is a “a key concept of both Leopardi’s theory of pleasure and of his poetics” (947), and on that betrays Leopardi’s sympathy for the Romantic concept of the Sublime (see Introduction p. 20 above).

Another canto that displays similarities in movement to “A Summer Night” is “The Calm After the Storm” (“The Calm”). While in “A Summer Night” the first stanza reaches its climax

²⁹ All translations of Rigoni’s commentary are my own.

with the revealing of “a whole tract of heaven” (10), in “The Calm” the opening similarly describes the renewed brightness of the sky:

...See, the brightness
breaks through in the west, above the hills.
The countryside unveils,
and the river shimmers in the valley. (4-7)

The locatory prelude of “A Summer Night” subsequently gives way – as mentioned – to a meditation on the human condition, on whether an individual can choose to live as anything but a “Madman” or a “slave” (75). Similarly, in “The Calm,” the contemplation of the natural scene, and of people’s joyful and productive response to the storm’s passing, triggers a meditation on the human condition, but on the nature of pleasure: “Pleasure, child of suffering, / empty joy, effect / of dread that’s past” (32-34). Ultimately, Arnold’s speaker addresses the “heavens” (78), and, although Arnold’s speaker lacks Leopardi’s sarcasm, he is similarly despairing. Having praised the “heavens” that are “calm” without “languor” (79), “great” but “untroubled and unpassionate” (80), he realises that they represent “[a] world above man’s head” (87). In other words, while man can aspire to the compassionate disinterestedness of the stars, he will always be mired either in the imprisoned life of the slave or in the anarchic life of the madman. Arnold’s concluding address too has a parallel in “The Calm,” in which Leopardi’s speaker addresses nature in a reproachful, sarcastic tone: “O gentle Nature...these are the delights / you offer mortals” (42; 43-44), and concludes that man is “Happy” to be “allowed / respite from sorrow, blessed when / death cures [him] of all sorrow” (52-54). Thus, both poems clearly display the “repeated out-in-out process, in which mind confronts nature” (683) that is characteristic of Abrams conception of the Greater Romantic Lyric.

More striking than these general parallels in movement, which reflect wider trends in Romantic poetry, is Leopardi's and Arnold's shared structural prioritization of sound and their concomitant disavowal of the credibility of sight, which evokes a sense of being ill at ease in a world devoid of the sustaining illusions of previous ages. While critics like Lauren Caldwell and Nils Clausson have attributed the peculiar movement in "Dover Beach" to the influence of the poetic precedent of Coleridge's "conversation poem," the pre-eminence of sound in Arnold's poem is also highly reminiscent of that in Leopardi's *Canti*. Clausson does note the structural prominence of the speaker's "responses to sound" in the opening of "Dover Beach" as one of the strong parallels between it and "The Eolian Harp," but the "structural" importance of sound is not confined to the opening of Arnold's poem. In fact, in three of the four stanzas in "Dover Beach," "sound images" – to borrow the Leopardi critic Margaret Brose's term – are vital in signaling a shift from the world as it seems to the world as Arnold sees it. The first stanza of "Dover Beach" begins with a portrait of tranquillity composed of a "calm" sea (1), a "fair" moon (2), and the "[g]limmering" Dover cliffs (4-5), but this peaceful beauty is swiftly undercut by the "grating roar / Of pebbles" (9) that reveals the "eternal note of sadness" pervading human existence (14). In the third stanza, similarly, the visual image of the "Sea of Faith" (21) as a "bright girdle" (23) protectively embracing the globe is undermined by the sound image of the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the same sea (25), which has abandoned the now "naked shingles of the world" (28). Finally, in the fourth stanza, the illusory "land of dreams" (31) that deceives with its beauty, is overwhelmed by the "confused alarms of struggle and flight" (36) that constitute Arnold's final vision of the world as a battle by night.

Perhaps the poem of Leopardi that exhibits a movement most reminiscent of that of "Dover Beach" is "The Evening of the Holiday" ("The Evening"). The parallels between the two

poems are remarkable and, while some of the most notable have been enumerated by Casale and Dooley, the centrality of what is *heard* to both is perhaps the most striking.³⁰ As in “Dover Beach,” in “The Evening” sound – and the absence of sound – is more vital than whatever is seen or not seen in terms of prompting the speaker’s meditation. Initially, it is the silence: “every lane is quiet now” (5), and the speaker’s loneliness in this silence, that prompts his address to his “lady” (4), whose easy sleep he contrasts with his agonized wakefulness: “Horrific days at such a tender age!” (24). In the second half of the poem, it is a sound contrasting with this silence: “the lonely song of the workman” (26) that instigates the climactic reflection of the poem. This ordinary song prompts a meditation on the way “time makes off with every human thing” (32), both seemingly eternal structures like the great Roman Empire (33-39) and the ephemeral pleasures of a holiday (40-46). Sound as the catalyst of memory or cognition, then, is critically important to the movement of both Arnold’s “Dover Beach” and Leopardi’s “The Evening” (and other *Canti*).

With reference to Arnold’s poem, the reliance on sound to understand the world seems to hint at a belief that sight is a superficial or untrustworthy sense. Along these lines, Culler comments that “more often than not Arnold penetrates through appearance to reality by exchanging the visual sense, which is suitable only for apprehending the surface of the world, for the more profound auditory” (357). A number of critics have noticed the central function of sound images in “Dover Beach” in passing,³¹ but perhaps John Tyree Fain is most illuminating in the way he describes Arnold’s treatment of sound in “Dover Beach.” “[S]ound,” Fain writes, “is

³⁰ The “muted evocations of moonlit nights” at the beginning of each; the “expan[sion] from the apparent peace of the immediate setting through the stimulus of ordinary sounds to a general comment on the human condition”; and “the clashing noise of armies – symbolic of all confused human activity temporarily dominating our consciousness” – see Casale and Dooley 63-64.

³¹ See Michael Timko in “Wordsworth’s ‘Ode’ and Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’: Celestial Light and Confused Alarms” (59), Casale and Dooley, “Leopardi, Arnold” (63), Grob, *Longing like Despair* (173), and Nils Clausson, “Arnold’s Coleridgean Conversation Poem: ‘Dover Beach’ and ‘The Eolian Harp’” (286).

more real than sight” and “[i]t may be that in the virtual world of [“Dover Beach”], sight is space and sound is time, and that sound would have more *staying* capacity” (41). It is telling that, although Fain did not have them in mind, his comments apply equally well to Leopardi’s *Canti* as they do to Arnold’s “Dover Beach.” As Franco d’Intino observes, Leopardi shared with Arnold a similar conception of the relative merits of sight and sound: his “poetics of the indefinite...really originates in the rejection of the seen,” which limits itself to recognizing the actual (“Coleridge-Leopardi” 100),³² and his disavowal of the visual sense in his poetry is linked to his avowal of the “direct” impact of sound. Although nineteenth-century readers would not have had access to Leopardi’s compendious notebook-journal, the *Zibaldone*, the Italian poet describes his conception of the impact of sound in what is now a well known entry. Whereas beauty is an “intellectual” pleasure, Leopardi writes, “the very spirituality of sound is a physical effect on our sensory organs and does not require the attention of the soul, because sound draws the soul directly to itself, and this is what moves us, even when our soul barely notices it” (*Zibaldone* 158).³³

Even without knowledge of the *Zibaldone*, Arnold would have encountered Leopardi’s prioritisation of sound in the *Canti* again and again. To give some other, brief examples of Leopardi’s poetics of sound, in “Il Passero Solitario” (“The Solitary Thrush”), it is the song of the thrush that first draws the speaker’s attention to it (“you keep on singing / to the countryside till the day dies” – 2-3) and to their superficial kinship, in terms of their solitary natures. This initial comparison leads the speaker to the realisation that, while the bird is only obeying its natural instincts and will have no regrets, the speaker is unnaturally spoiling his youth (“he “put

³² All translations of D’Intino’s essay are my own.

³³ All quotations are taken from Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, eds. Michael Caesar and Franco D’Intino (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013).

off every pleasure and enjoyment / to another time” – 38-39), which he will eventually repent. In “Infinity” it is – even more than the obstruction of the hedgerow – the intrusion of natural sounds that sparks cognition. Specifically, it is the “wind” that “stir[s] in [the hedgerow’s] branches” (9), and the contrast between this mundane “noise” (10) with the “endless stillness” (10) of his initial reveries regarding spatial infinity, which results in his comparing temporal infinity with human time, and, ultimately, drowning in an intellectual oblivion. One further example of the speculation sparked by song in Leopardi would be the famous canto “To Silvia.” In this poem, the young girl Silvia’s song is a particularly interesting case in that it is represented as affecting the speaker both in his extinct childhood, before Silvia died from a “hidden sickness” (41), and in the present. In the past, when the speaker was a young scholar, the effect of the song was indefinite, but clearly pleasurable: her “endless song” (9) brought him to the window to contemplate the “golden streets, the gardens, / and, far off, the sea here and the mountains there” (24-25). However, the memory of her singing, and the effect that it had on the speaker, incites a typical Leopardian reflection on the delight and hope of youth and the emptiness of adulthood; remembering the “light thoughts” and “hopes” (28-29) that Silvia and he shared, the speaker is prompted to bitter reflection on the delusive power of nature:

O Nature, Nature,
why don’t you deliver later
what you promised then? Why do you lead on
your children so? (36-39)

Sound, then, for Leopardi, as well as for Arnold in “Dover Beach,” is superior to sight in its ability to work directly on us and reveal a world beyond the surface that is accessed through sight.

Not only, however, is it a particular sound in itself that, in Arnold and Leopardi's poetry, stimulates meditation, and a profounder comprehension of the world; it is the *recurrence* of particular sounds that sparks the cognitive movement in both. In "Dover Beach" the sound of the waves reaching up and withdrawing from the shore does not in itself lead the speaker to contemplate his contemporary crisis of faith. While this "grating roar" sparks an initial intuition regarding the "eternal note of sadness" in the first stanza – i.e. of universal human suffering – it is the fact that Sophocles had "heard" the same sound "on the Ægean" before him, and was thus prompted to contemplate the "turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery," that instigates Arnold's speculations on the nineteenth-century religious crisis – i.e. on a temporary state of suffering. Just as Sophocles contemplated the historical fluctuations in human "misery," so does Arnold contemplate the withdrawal and return of the "Sea of Faith," which is implicit in the inevitability of, eventually, another high tide. In Leopardi too, it is very often the recurrence of a song once heard many years before that sparks a memory that then leads into the meditation at the heart of his poem. More specifically, Brose analyses how Leopardi considered "sound recurrence...the most indefinite and sublime of all effects," because it both retrieves memories in which "sensations and experience...are imbued with indefiniteness and immateriality," and is "the most immediate sign of both temporal loss and poetic resurrection" (4, 7). As in "The Evening" it is when the speaker hears *again* a "lonely" song, which reminds him of a song he heard as a boy, that he begins to contemplate the ephemeral nature of all human works. While the repetition of sound occurs across historical epochs in Arnold and within the speaker's lifetime in Leopardi, the parallel, nonetheless, is significant, especially since the poets' reliance on the aural faculty to interpret their world can be connected to their philosophical dispositions.

Specifically, Arnold and Leopardi's prioritization of sound, and the repetition of that sound, as the catalyst for cognitive movement is premised on a pessimistic disavowal of the reality of the visual world. The more superficial impact of visual beauty compared with the "spirituality of sound" is explored by Leopardi in his *Zibaldone*, as described above. In addition, the pessimistic critique conveyed by sound is affirmed by those poems – like "The Evening" and "To Silvia" – in which various sounds, but very often lonely songs, instigate reflections on the delusory nature of the world. Similarly, in "Dover Beach," Arnold connects sound with his pessimistic understanding of the world. Throughout the poem, natural sounds produced by the action of the sea on the beach provoke reflections on the suffering of modern humanity; sight, conversely, results in misconceptions of the world in which he lives. As the speaker concludes, the world "seems / To lie before us like a land of dreams / So various, so beautiful so new" (30-32), but it is really none of these things and, ultimately, our reliance on unreliable vision leads, in the "night battle," to a chaotic, wretched struggle.

IV. The Anti-Pastoral in Arnold and Leopardi

This anti-pastoral quality is a key feature that links Arnold's poetry with Leopardi's *Canti*, and that distinguishes both from Coleridge's conversation poems, in which nature is often presented as a stimulating and consoling presence. Arnold and the mature Leopardi, in general, share a distinctly ambivalent perspective on nature, often accusing it of indifference towards humankind. While the Romantic "faith asserted...that man stands in a loving relation with God, nature, and his fellow men," as Culler somewhat crudely puts it, for Arnold "God does not exist, nature is indifferent, and human beings find it impossible to communicate with one another" (28).³⁴ While

³⁴ This is a point reiterated by a number of other critics, including Gottfried (206), Knoepfelmacher (50), and Jamison (26).

Culler's bald statement on the differing attitudes to nature of Romantic and Victorian poets is too simplistically dichotomous, it is true that a poet like Coleridge, with his lyrical and consoling portraits of nature in lyrics like "The Eolian Harp," "Frost at Midnight," and "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," appears to conceive of nature as a much less hostile entity, with respect to humankind, than a poet like Arnold or Leopardi does. Perhaps the most explicit account of Arnold's ambivalence towards nature is contained in the ironically titled "In Harmony with Nature." Here, the speaker rails against a preacher who has, it is implied, delivered a sermon on the benefits of a life lived as the title suggests. Arnold's speaker retorts: "Know, man hath all which Nature hath, but more, / And in that *more* lie all his hopes of good" (5-6); while nature, for example, is merely "cruel" (7), "stubborn" (8), and "fickle" (9), man aspires to peace (7), love (8), and stability (9). These disparities – between nature's being and man's aspirations – mean that the two can "never be fast friends" (13). Arnold's disparaging of a simplistic conception of nature as a benevolent protector of man, was shared by Leopardi – as indicated in "Leopardi's Philosophy" (see pp. 43 & ff. above) – who ultimately conceived of nature as humankind's ruthless enemy. Hostile notions regarding nature are also a prominent motif throughout the *Canti*. In "The Evening," for instance, Leopardi portrays nature as an omnipotent being that exerts its power cruelly: it "created [the speaker] for suffering" and "den[ied]" him "even hope" (14, 15). In "To Silvia" the speaker questions nature's tendency to delude youth:

O Nature, Nature,
why don't you deliver later
what you promised then? Why do you lead on
your children so? (36-39)

And, similarly, in “The Calm,” the speaker bitterly accuses nature of stinting mankind of joy: “O gentle Nature,” he sarcastically begins,

You dole pain with a liberal hand: grieving
rises spontaneous, and the brief enjoyment
that now and then by miracle and marvel
is born of anguish, is great gain. (45-48)

Frequently, then, both poets reject the idea that a benevolent, wisdom-dispensing nature can replace religion in an age of troubled faith.

This is not to say that the “pastoral” has no place in the poems of Arnold and Leopardi – poems such as Arnold’s “The Scholar-Gipsy” and “Thyrsis” and Leopardi’s “To Spring” and “Infinity” testify to this. However, humankind’s relationship to nature is radically re-interpreted and, ultimately, abandoned. This rejection of the Romantic, revelatory relationship with nature is a key component of both Arnold’s “A Summer Night” and “Dover Beach,” in particular. In the former, the stars do provide the model of an existence that is a compromise between that of the “madman” or “slave”; however, theirs is a “world above man’s head” (87), which he can never attain, and, ultimately, they seem cold and indifferent to humankind’s fate. Though the stars are “tasked” with “shar[ing] in the world’s toil,” they “keep free from dust and soil” (82, 83, 82) – hardly the portrait of concerned, benevolent beings. Instead, Arnold’s final description of the stars creates the impression that they are indifferent witnesses to the fate of humankind from which they are far removed. “Dover Beach” is even more emphatically anti-bucolic. Here, the natural scene, rather than presenting a utopic alternative, reflects man’s actual dystopic state. The sea’s waves “bring / the eternal note of sadness in” (13-14) and the fullness of the tide (2) reminds the speaker of the “Sea of Faith” (21) – “once, too, at the full” (21) – that has retreated

from the world's shore, leaving it "naked" (28), stripped of the consolatory religious feeling that once protected man from despair. Finally, the world, which is superficially "beautiful" (32), is actually a dark and disorienting battlefield where man risks turning against friend instead of foe (35-37).

In an important essay on the structure of the *Canti*, Nicola Gardini argues that Leopardi's collection of poems is shaped by two principal "cultural matri[ces]": the historical and the pastoral (76). For Leopardi, Gardini claims, the "pastoral is part of a horizontal imagination which, through temporal suspension and utopian evasion, saves the individual from despair, providing some kind of reprieve from historical decay" (84). This "horizontal imagination" is clearly at work in "Infinity," which Gardini describes as "a modern pastoral" (84); however, according to Gardini, "the triumph of the poetics of the pastoral as expressed in 'L'infinito' is but a provisional and illusory achievement" (87). Here, the speaker's brief "foundering" (15) in his meditations on past, present, and eternity cannot endure because this state is the product of his specific circumstances, described in the first part of the poem: his sitting on the "lonely hill" (1) where his panoramic view is obstructed by the hedgerow that ignites the cognitive process resulting in his mind-dissolving reverie. The disintegration of Leopardi's unique pastoral begins with "Le Ricordanze" ("The Recollections"), according to Gardini, and reaches "complet[ion]" in "Night Song," in which the shepherd-speaker "far from achieving freedom from historical decline or experiencing any...['sweet foundering'], ends up contemplating ['boredom'] and death" (89). Nevertheless, these two poems, "Infinity" and "Night Song," do provide a striking contrast in terms of the speaker's experience of nature and the different quality of reflection that this induces. In the earlier idyll, "Infinity," the speaker's particular experience of nature, as described above, stimulates a pleasant process of cognition in which he becomes passively

subject to ruminations on all time – a subject so “immens[e]” (14) he happily drowns in it. In contrast, in “Night Song,” the shepherd’s observation of the moon catalyses a proliferation of existential questions the answers to which evade him, questions like: “what good / is the shepherd’s life to him / or yours [the moon’s] to you?” (16-18) and “[i]f life is misery, / why do we endure it?” (55-56). In contrast to the sweet abstraction provoked by the horizon in “Infinity,” the night sky in “Night Song” provokes only agitated, wondering despair:

Why all these lights?

What does the endless air do, and that deep

eternal blue? What is the meaning of

this enormous solitude? And what am I? (86-89)

In the absence of answers from the supposedly omniscient yet frustratingly mute moon, the shepherd relies on his own experience of life: “This I know and feel...life for me is wrong” (100, 104). A conclusion that, ultimately, he extends to all creatures: “Maybe in whatever form or state / be it in stall or cradle, / the day we’re born is cause for mourning” (141-43). The anti-bucolic tendency exhibited by both Arnold and Leopardi signals their divergence from Romantic predecessors, and from Coleridge’s conversation poems in particular – as does another of their affinity’s: their philosophical pessimism.

V. The Solidarist Stoic-Pessimism of “Dover Beach” and the late *Canti*

As indicated in section three, the poetic and structural parallels between Arnold’s “Dover Beach” and Leopardi’s *Canti* are manifestations of profound resemblances in the solidarist stoic-pessimism that underlies both works. The predominant interpretation of “Dover Beach” represents the poem as the archetypal statement of “the emptiness of faithless Victorian life,” as David Riede puts it (199). This consensus reading was pioneered (in the modern era) by Culler

and reiterated by Riede, Grob and Clausson (among others – Culler 28; Grob, *A Longing Like Despair* 182; Clausson 286). However, the Leopardian context of Arnold's admittedly bleak masterpiece illuminates a vein of specifically solidarist stoicism in the poem's conclusion, which is usually disregarded. One or two critics have suggested that the pessimism of the poem may be "qualif[ied]" by the speaker's call for a renewed sense of human community (Fain 42; Timko 62.), but a comparison of the philosophical affinities of Arnold and Leopardi (specifically the Leopardi of "Broom") encourages a more emphatic affirmation of the solidarist stoicism of the poem's conclusion.

While Arnold explicitly admired Leopardi's artistry, and seems to be influenced by this in "Dover Beach," the latter's embodiment of poetry as a "criticism of life" ("The Study of Poetry" 163) must also have appealed to Arnold – as Singh suggests ("Leopardi e Matthew Arnold" 40). Just as Arnold was highly concerned with "see[ing] things as they really are," as he famously puts it in "Hebraism and Hellenism" (165) so Leopardi was a "fervid inquirer into the 'why of things' [...] or into the truth in the most intrepid sense of the word" (Singh, "Leopardi e Matthew Arnold" 49). While early in his poetic career, Leopardi believed that poetry was associated with beauty and opposed to truth, the object of philosophy, later he arrived at the belief that the poet and the philosopher shared the same intellect. In his *Zibaldone*, Leopardi marvels that "poetry, which by its nature and property seeks out what is beautiful, and philosophy, which fundamentally searches for the truth...should be the faculties that are most similar to each other, so that the true poet is supremely disposed to be a great philosopher, and the true philosopher to be a great poet" (3382). Thus, both Leopardi and Arnold required that the poet "ought to know life and the world before dealing with them in poetry," as Arnold puts it,

that he should, in other words, be a poet-philosopher in search of the truth (“Function of Criticism” 261).

It is not merely, however, the critical-philosophical approach manifest in their poetry that Arnold and Leopardi share, but also a confirmed philosophical pessimism. Arnold’s “bleakness,” according to Grob, pervades all of his best and most important poetry, including “Dover Beach” (Grob, *A Longing Like Despair* 21). In this vein, Grob insightfully analyses the way the noumenal Will, and humanity’s subjection to it, is symbolized in “Dover Beach” in the contrast between the respective existences of the stars and moon, the sea, and the pebbles. Here, according to Grob, the sea represents the metaphysical will and the pebbles are the symbolic equivalent of men who are helplessly subject to the latter’s force, while the stars and the moon are “seemingly idealized representation[s] of the autonomy and self-dependence” that Arnold “professes to be the highest goal and good of the individuated consciousness” (*A Longing Like Despair* Grob 172, 173). While Grob recognizes Arnold as a “poet of pessimism,” he dismisses Leopardi as one, attributing the Italian Romantic’s own “bleakness” to personal circumstances rather than to a philosophical stance (as many of the poet’s critics have done – *A Longing Like Despair* 24, 32). Grob’s derogation of Leopardi’s pessimism, however, contradicts the pioneering philosophical pessimist Schopenhauer’s opinion of Leopardi’s position in the tradition. Whereas Grob calls Arnold the “poet of pessimism” and Schopenhauer its “philosopher” (*A Longing Like Despair* 24), Schopenhauer himself appoints Leopardi the poet laureate of the “misery of human existence” in *The World as Will and Idea*:

No one has so thoroughly and exhaustively handled this subject as, in our own day, Leopardi. He is entirely filled and penetrated by it: his theme is everywhere the mockery and wretchedness of this existence; he presents it upon every page of his works, yet in

such a multiplicity of forms and applications, with such wealth of imagery that he never wearies us, but, on the contrary, is throughout entertaining and exciting. (401)

In fact, while Arnold explicitly “reject[ed]” Schopenhauer’s philosophy (Grob, *A Longing Like Despair* 28), Leopardi, despite his apparent ignorance of the German philosopher’s work, demonstrates strong affinities with Schopenhauer’s thought. Leopardi’s concept of “desire,” for example, which I briefly examined in “Leopardi’s Philosophy” (see p. 51 above), is highly reminiscent of Schopenhauer’s noumenal Will. Schopenhauer’s Will is not a “force” or “energy” – Schopenhauer being an idealist – but, rather, a “blind impulse to exist” (Lewis 94, 96). Most interestingly, in terms of a comparison with Leopardi, this “impulse” is “insatiable”: “willing (the fundamental error) can never be satisfied”; for...obtaining the object of our desire will not bring satisfaction,” but merely new desires (Lewis 90). In other words, the Will drives “the world as a restless inferno of endlessly striving phenomena” (Lewis 93). Leopardi’s concept of “desire,” which also goads man into “endless[...] striving,” is highly reminiscent of Schopenhauer’s Will. Humankind, as Leopardi puts it, “never stops desiring the good for itself, and it desires the good to have no limits. This good is essentially nothing other than pleasure. Any pleasure, even if great, even if real, has limits. Hence no possible pleasure is proportionate to and equal to the measure of the love that the living being has for itself. Hence no pleasure can satisfy the living being” (*Zibaldone* 646-47). The expression of this sentiment, furthermore, is not limited to the philosophical musings of Leopardi’s notebook; his concept of an unappeasable desire occurs again and again in his poetry. It is, for instance, central to each of the Leopardi *Canti* discussed so far: in the speaker’s berating nature for failing to deliver on the promises of youth in “To Silvia” (36-9), in the shepherd’s acknowledgement that he cannot, like sheep can,

be content with sitting still but is stung with desire (113-23), and in the child's bitter disappointment at the ending of the holiday he had desired, endlessly, in "The Evening" (40-46).

The Schopenhauerian philosophical pessimism of Arnold's "Dover Beach" and Leopardi's *Canti* is another key element in which the English Victorian demonstrates strong affinities with the Romantic Italian, and in which, according to Culler and Grob, both anticipate strains of Modernist thought. As Grob puts it, Arnold, and I add Leopardi, "would have perceived [their poetry's] affinity with modernity to reside in its courageous recognition of the painful cosmic circumstances of secularized man, in its willingness to render unflinchingly what Hardy... would call 'the ache of modernism'" (Grob, *Longing Like Despair* 17). Generally, Arnold's poem ends not in the ecstatic reassurance "that man stands in a loving relation with God, nature, and his fellow men" (Culler 28), as Clausson claims, or in the pretence of such assurance, which might more accurately describe the conclusions to many of Coleridge's conversation poems, but in the fundamentally delusory nature of those relations with God and nature. While critics like Culler, Clausson, and Riede undoubtedly simplify the "consolations" supposedly provided by Arnold's Romantic predecessors, it is true that he does share an overt pessimism with Leopardi – a pessimism that Coleridge at least appears to attempt to expunge from his conversation poems. Thus, Arnold dares to describe a world that has "really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / – Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain" (33-34), much as, in a verse paragraph of "Broom" that Arnold admired very much (see p. 94 below), Leopardi confronts the cosmic nothingness of earth, which is like a "grain of sand" (191) in relation to the vast universe in which it is located.

But allied with this "cosmic pessimism" in Arnold and Leopardi is a strong vein of solidarist stoicism – a fact not normally recognized by critics of "Dover Beach." In Arnold's

lyric, the speaker re-addresses his auditor and implores: “Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!” (29-30), thus declaring the necessity of their being loyal to “one another” though surrounded by a world bereft of beauty. Interestingly, Fain proposes that Arnold’s phrase: “To one another” can be read more inclusively than it traditionally is. Rather than referring merely to the speaker and his wife, and suggesting that they “escape into [their] dream world and enjoy the only consolation still possible,” Fain suggests that perhaps the speaker addresses all mankind, asking people to “defy the world in its meaninglessness and be true to *one another*” (my emphasis – Fain 41). While “love” in the preceding line seems to refer to the auditor, traditionally identified of course as Arnold’s bride and previously addressed at l. 9, it is possible – even probable – that he shifts from an exclusive address in this first line, to an all-embracing one in the second. “After all,” as Fain puts it, “he does say ‘one another,’ not ‘each other’” (Fain 41). In this way, Arnold appears to invoke the stoic endurance of humankind, or at least that portion of it reading his poem. Though the world they inhabit is a treacherous scene of delusive beauty, they must endure its reality together, reinforcing their solidarity with one another.

In his later work, especially in his masterpiece “Broom,” Leopardi also manifests a disposition towards a stoic solidarity that provides an interesting point of comparison with “Dover Beach.” Significantly, as alluded to above, Arnold assigned high praise to the philosophy of “Broom” in his essay “Byron”: “whoever wishes to feel the full superiority of Leopardi over Byron in philosophic thought, and in the expression of it, has only to read one [verse] paragraph [the fourth] of one poem”: “Broom” (356). In the previous verse paragraph to that which Arnold highlights (i.e. the third), Leopardi calls on men to ally themselves with each other against nature. The “noble nature” – in the sense of character – according to the speaker of “Broom,”

must recognize that nature is responsible for human suffering and, as a consequence, ally himself with other men in a futile confrontation with “her.” Nature

he calls his enemy, and believing
the whole human company
arrayed against her,
as they are in fact,
considers all men allies from the outset
and embraces all of them
with true love, offering
and expecting real and ready aid. (126-133)

Thus, just as Arnold’s speaker turns to his listener/s and pleads for her / their co-operation in confronting a hostile world, so does Leopardi write that the noble man is he who “considers all men allies from the outset,” loves them, and seeks to cooperate with them in confronting their natural enemy. Both recognize the inherently hostile nature of the environment into which humans are helplessly born, and the futility of attempting to render it amenable, while seeking to mitigate human suffering in this world through an alliance of “the whole human company.”

It is particularly noteworthy, in comparing the philosophical approaches manifest in the conclusions to “Dover Beach” and “Broom,” that both Arnold and Leopardi adopt images of confused battle to present their view of a world in which men fail to be allied with one another. Arnold, of course, deploys the famous night-battle image: “we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night” (35-37). Although Leopardi does not specifically reference Thucydides, he does describe men’s failure to recognize their enemy in a very similar image of confused battle:

...to take up arms
against a man, or set a trap
or make trouble for his neighbor
seems to him [the noble nature] as stupid as,
surrounded by hostile soldiers
during the heaviest fighting on the field,
to forget your enemies
and battle fiercely with your friend. (135-42)

In both poets' similes men are mired in battles in which they find themselves fighting their friends. While Arnold's vision exculpates men in that they are "ignorant" – they cannot see, in the dark of night time, who is a fellow soldier and who is an enemy – the obfuscating of men's sight could constitute a metaphor for the lack of ethical insight that is depicted in Leopardi's poem. In other words, Arnold's description of men who cannot "see" or identify their true enemy may be a figurative way of representing what Leopardi suggests is man's peculiar "stupid[ity]": his tendency to make war with his neighbor, rather than joining with him against the common enemy, nature.

Arnold's interest in a pan-European culture has been identified by many modern critics, including Park Honan, who writes, "[a]t the heart of Matthew Arnold's best writing, one senses an acute awareness of Europe. His idea of 'criticism' is that nothing in the art, politics, religion, or social structure of a modern nation can be well understood unless we compare," especially with European nations ("Matthew Arnold" 143). However, Honan also comments on Arnold's "defect[ual]" Europeanism, citing his lack of knowledge of Italy as an example of this

(“Matthew Arnold” 156). Conversely, I argue that Arnold’s sympathy and admiration of Leopardi, at least in part, refutes this idea, illuminating both Arnold’s experimental poetics and the solidarist stoic-pessimism of the conclusion to “Dover Beach.” Striking affinities with Leopardi’s *Canti* permeate Arnold’s “Dover Beach”; here, shared formal innovations reflect a shared unease in their contemporary world. While critics have recently discussed Arnold’s masterpiece as consciously echoing Coleridge’s conversation poems, especially in terms of its movement, this feature can also be read in the tradition of Leopardi’s *Canti*. Perhaps, as Clausson argues, Coleridge’s conversation poems supplied a useful model with which Arnold could articulate a rejection of what he perceived as his Romantic predecessors’ implicit faith in nature and revealed religion; however, Arnold’s reliance on this model is, at the very least, inflected by his reading of Leopardi, his admiration for the Italian’s craft and his unwilling (but seemingly instinctive) embracing of pessimism. As their parallel visions of life as a confused battle suggest, it is Arnold and Leopardi’s typically Modern “ache,” their relentless depiction of the “misery of human existence” (to borrow Schopenhauer’s phrase), and their solidarist stoic confrontation of this, that constitute some of their strongest affinities. In the next chapter, in which I explore a comparison of Arnold’s “The Scholar-Gipsy” and “Empedocles on Etna” with Leopardi’s *Canti*, another strong set of (related) affinities will be explored: their cyclical historical perspectives, the consequences of such an approach for those inhabiting transitional ages, and how all of this is reflected in their prioritization of an almost prosaic contemporary poetry.

Chapter four: Titanic pessimism vs. “Happy and Gracious Flexibility”: The Leopardian Context of Matthew Arnold’s “The Scholar-Gipsy” and “Empedocles on Etna”

In the late 1840s and early 1850s, when Arnold was, I argue, reading Leopardi and writing much of his best poetry (see chapter two pp. 65 ff. above), it was not only the Italian Romantic’s modern poetics and late solidarist pessimism that appealed to Arnold’s imagination. While “Dover Beach” – in part – reflects Arnold’s response to Leopardi’s poetics and philosophy, more-or-less contemporaneous works such as “Empedocles on Etna” (“Empedocles”) and “The Scholar-Gipsy” reflect the cyclical conception of history that Arnold shared with Leopardi. More specifically, central to both of Arnold’s early poems is the figure of the temporally displaced person, a figure that might be referred to as the “ancient born too late” – a phrase that the French critic Sainte-Beuve used to describe Leopardi. Leopardi could, conceivably, have applied such an epithet to himself since, as Nicola Gardini puts it, his “identity stems from a conception of oneself as coming after, that is late” and his “notion of the self is one with decrepitude, exhaustion, and superannuation” (79). Likewise, Arnold famously felt ill at ease in his supposedly unpoetical age – at least during his poetic career. Thus, this figure the “ancient born too late,” constitutes a profound nexus between both poets’ conception of history and of themselves, and attention to this nexus adds nuance and clarity to a reading of poems like “The Scholar-Gipsy” and “Empedocles.” These works of Arnold’s treat the dilemmas of two figures: the scholar gipsy and the philosopher-poet Empedocles, who are perceived as, or perceive themselves as, the victims of history, surviving into eras to which they cannot adapt. It is the similarity of the dynamic between these poems’ protagonists and their respective contexts that call for a treatment of “The Scholar-Gipsy” and “Empedocles” together, and it is the light that

Leopardi's poetry and thought sheds on this dynamic that urges a comparison with his "Brutus Minore" ("Brutus") and "La ginestra" ("Broom").

To elucidate Arnold and Leopardi's shared conception of history, and obsession with the figure that I will refer to as the redundant ancient, "The Scholar-Gipsy" and "Empedocles" are best compared to these two poems, which constitute two of Leopardi's central poetic "testimonies." Arnold and Leopardi shared a cyclical conception of history that may, in both cases, have been informed by their interest in the eighteenth century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico. This shared historical perspective, and their belief in the existence of distinct epochs that are more or less conducive to poetry, seems to inform Arnold's presentation of the scholar gipsy and Empedocles as temporally displaced poets inhabiting poetically barren transitional ages. Leopardi, as presented in Sainte-Beuve's influential essay on the poet, and the speaker of Leopardi's vital poetic manifesto "Brutus" are forerunners of Arnold's protagonists in their self-identification as poets inhabiting a challenging shift from an epoch dominated by the imagination and poetry to one dominated by reason and philosophy. The unexplored parallels between "Empedocles" and Leopardi's late masterpiece "Broom" are particularly fascinating, since these poems, both of which are set on the arid slopes of an active volcano, manifest a strikingly similar concern with the redundant ancient's desperate need for "flexibility" in order to adapt to the hostile age in which he finds himself.

The Leopardian context of Arnold's early work highlights vital features of key poems like "The Scholar-Gipsy" and "Empedocles" that circumvent the polarised traditional critical approaches to these poems, resulting in a fruitfully altered perspective. Arnold critics have traditionally focused on the idealism – or lack thereof – of the scholar gipsy and of Empedocles, and on biographical readings, especially in the case of "Empedocles." For instance, with respect

to “The Scholar-Gipsy,” critics frequently assert variously that the poem’s wandering pastoral protagonist represents the model poet (Knight, Seturaman, Culler, Wilder), or a sterile recluse with whom the reader is not supposed to sympathise (Dyson, Nebeker), or even Arnold’s own (reluctant) withdrawal from dilettantism and poetry (DeLaura; Grob, “Use and Abuse of History”; Coulling; Farrell). In addition, there are at least two critics (Oram, Slinn) who conclude that such tensions between the scholar gipsy’s inspiring, single-minded dedication to his mesmeric pursuits and his perpetual passivity as he “wait[s] for the spark from heaven to fall” (120) are unresolved. Similarly, with respect to “Empedocles,” several critics have described Callicles as embodying the idealised or Romantic poet in opposition to Empedocles’s bleak philosopher (Houghton, W. Stacy Johnson, Culler, Fulweiler, and Buckler), or as representing youth while Empedocles represents old age (Roper and Langbaum). Others have read similar distinctions in the context of Arnold’s personal life, arguing that Callicles and Empedocles represent, for instance, “two aspects of Arnold’s divided soul” (Gottfried 127; see also Tinker & Lowry, W.S. Johnson, E.D.H. Johnson, Madden, Bush, Buchanan, and Collini).

However, placing the scholar gipsy and Empedocles within the context of Arnold’s historical system, and that of his interest in Leopardi, results in a shift of focus to these figures’ relationship to the particular society that they inhabit. Such relationships were, we know, of much importance to Arnold who believed, for instance, that the production of great poetry required not only the individual genius, but the appropriate cultural moment that could foster such a genius. A comparison of the parallels in Arnold’s and Leopardi’s historical perspective highlights, for instance, the (early) anti-progressive views of Arnold that are at work in “The Scholar-Gipsy” and “Empedocles,” his belief in a historical degeneration that operates between successive epochs, and Arnold’s attraction to the figure of the redundant ancient – a figure

defined by his historical alienation. Moreover, such an investigation also reveals the fact that this figure's sense of "redundancy" is partly the consequence of his inability to adapt to his age, to deploy the quality of "flexibility" that Arnold and Leopardi (at least at the end of his life), valued so highly. Thus, the central question in the critical tradition surrounding "The Scholar-Gipsy" – the protagonist's ambivalent portrayal as an ideal – is, perhaps, not as interesting as the question of the poet's relationship to his age. Similarly, in "Empedocles," the Leopardian context reveals another fascinating element of the dynamic between Callicles and Empedocles: their respective abilities to adapt to the age in which they live. As with "The Scholar-Gipsy" it is, in a way, a little beside the point to ask whether or not Empedocles' suicide is an "ideal" act – it is a consequence of the poet's alienation from the age and his lack of flexibility. Finally, the consideration of Arnold's work alongside that of Leopardi's poetically justifies the (much complained of) prosaic monologue in "Empedocles" as the result of the exigencies of modern poetry, of poetry written in an age in which it was, to all intents and purposes, impossible. While criticism of this aspect of Arnold's poetry has been a recurrent theme in writing on the poem, for Arnold the prosaic style appears to have served the purpose of exploring a modern poetry fit for his "barren" age.

I. Arnold and Leopardi's shared cyclical perspective on history

Both Arnold's and Leopardi's work manifests a belief in a cyclical view of history, in which earlier, more poetical epochs inexorably degenerate into less poetical and more rational ones, before the cycle between epochs is repeated. Such a belief can probably be traced to the influence of Vico on both poets' thinking. In Vico's imaginative vision of history, human society eternally cycles through three successive ages: that of gods, of heroes, and of men. In the earliest epoch of an individual cycle, the human intellect is predominantly poetic: "before [man] can

articulate, he sings,” Vico writes. However, poetry’s intellectual sovereignty declines across the three epochs, while the human mind becomes more and more dominated by reason. Thus, as Vico describes it, the “first nature” – that of gods – “was a poetic or creative nature which we may be allowed to call divine,” and the last or third nature was “human nature, intelligent and hence modest, benign, and reasonable, recognizing for laws conscience, reason, and duty” (336). As indicated, this progression through the first, second, and third “natures” perpetually repeats itself, according to Vico, all over the world. “The nations will be seen to develop in conformity with this division [gods, heroes, and men], by a constant and uninterrupted order of causes and effects present in every nation, through three kinds of natures,” Vico writes, until, suffering from the “great disease of cities,” society returns to the initial phase of barbarism (Vico 335, 424; see also Croce 122). Interestingly, while this “eternal cycle is considered almost exclusively as exemplified in the history of nations,” as the eminent Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce puts it, Vico posited a parallel between the universal historical system and the individual lives of humankind (Croce 122). As Croce explains: “primitive tribes were transformed into crowds of ‘sublime poets’ just as in the ontogenesis corresponding to this phylogenesis, children had been made into poets” (57). Thus, in Vico’s historical system, just as those inhabiting the early epochs of humanity’s historical system are poets, so are the children of each epoch poets.

Arnold would undoubtedly have been introduced to the principal ideas of Vico as a student at Rugby and as the son of that school’s principal, Thomas Arnold. As one Arnold scholar, Paul Day, puts it, “it is inconceivable that he should have been ignorant of the fact that his father set great store by the *Scienza Nuova*” (Day 5). Thomas Arnold was particularly interested in books four and five of Vico’s *Scienza Nuova*: those that “set forth his principle of the inevitable cycles of history” and in which Vico declares “that poetry is the earliest form of

utterance of barbaric man” (6). It was these books that Thomas Arnold summarised in his appendix to the edition of Thucydides that he prepared and that was used by pupils at Rugby during those years that Arnold attended the school (4-5). In fact, a Vichian historical approach permeates much of Arnold’s poetry. While clearly governing the pervasive image of the sea tide in Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” which implies that though the speaker can “only hear” the “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of the “Sea of Faith” (24, 25, 21), it is probable that one day the sea’s tide will again be “at the full” (22), it receives its most explicit treatment in “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse” and “Obermann Once More.” In the former, the speaker famously describes himself as “[w]andering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born” (85-86); however, later he does look forward, tentatively, to an age: “More fortunate, alas! than we, / Which without hardness will be sage, / And gay without frivolity” (158-60). But perhaps the most definitive statement regarding the cyclical fluctuations in humankind’s historical circumstances occurs in “Obermann Once More.” Here, the speaker encounters Obermann, the protagonist of Étienne Pivert de Senancour’s eponymously titled novel, who alerts him to the fact that the earth is about to be re-born (79-80). Just as the Roman Empire, once wealthy and potent but spiritually dead (85-92), was usurped by a Christian society (115-16), so will the current, faithless nineteenth-century civilization soon be replaced by a new world: “A green, new earth appears. / Millions, whose life in ice lay fast, / Have thoughts, and smiles and tears” (286-88).

In “Empedocles” and “The Scholar-Gipsy,” Arnold’s Vichian historical approach is treated mythologically. The scholar gipsy, mired in a version of the third epoch of unpoetic, rational man, is a kind of mythical figure who “looks back,” as Day puts it, “to a previous age when poets were spontaneous interpreters of powerful feelings” (38). Arnold’s Vichian historical

sense is also clearly in evidence when he describes the (supposedly failed) project of “Empedocles” in his 1853 “Preface”:

I intended to delineate the feelings of one of the last of the Greek religious philosophers, one of the family of Orpheus and Musaeus, having survived his fellows, living on into a time when the habits of Greek thought and feeling had begun fast to change, character to dwindle, the influence of the Sophists to prevail. (203)

In this passage, according to Day, Orpheus is the representative figure of Vico’s “age of the gods,” Musaeus of the “age of the heroes,” and the Sophists of the “age of the common man.” Furthermore, Day suggests that when Arnold implies his contemporary society is not necessarily the best source of “excellent action[s]” (“Preface” 213) – those that “most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections” (“Preface” 205) – it is because Arnold believes that his society belongs to the third epoch, that “of the common man, with its exaltation of intellect and reason, its devaluation of intuition and religious feeling” (Day 16). Arnold, then, “sees Empedocles as a man ‘wandering between two worlds’: the heroic world with its content of myth and its atmosphere of settled belief” and “a newer world of logical thought, which has seen the weakening of traditional patterns of piety, dependent as they are on emotions and states of mind” (Day 30).

Curiously, the relation of Arnold’s Empedocles to the historical Empedocles has been explored very little; critics have, traditionally, denied that there is any such relation (Tinker & Lowry 288; E.D.H. Johnson 172-73; Warren D. Anderson 39; Allott, “A Background” 87-88; Buchanan 6-7). But there are ways in which the historical source reinforces the centrality of a cyclical historical perspective to Arnold’s verse drama. At least one critic, John Woolford, contends that the fragments of Empedocles that we have inherited do, in fact, comprise an

important source for many of the ideas in Arnold's "Empedocles." While Woolford focuses on Empedocles as a (very early) pioneer of the pantheism now associated with the Romantics, and of Stoicism, another vital component of Empedocles' philosophy, and one that accords with Vico's cyclical historical system, is also deeply imbedded in Arnold's poem: his conception of the forces of "Love" and "Strife." John Coates, in an essay describing Callicles' songs as an "implied sketch of cultural history" that traces the "development of the rational ordering intellect, Apollonian or Olympian, over the other gods" (776), asserts that the version of history on display in "Empedocles" is inexorable. "The process" of replacing the "primitive and natural" intellect with the "rational" one is, Coates observes, "irreversible and the new order has come to stay" (777). Conversely, I suggest that the historical system operating in Arnold's mythological account of the ancient Sicilian philosopher is a cyclical, Empedoclean-Vichian one.

In D. O'Brien's important reconstruction of Empedocles' *Cosmic Cycle*, he describes how, according to the fifth-century BC philosopher, the earth's four elements: earth, air, fire, and water "are ruled by two forces, Love and Strife" – the former the "cause of happiness and unity" and the latter "the cause of separation and misery" (1). Significantly, "[t]hese two forces rule in turn." While "Strife" is in the ascendant, it "makes the elements many, and so long as the elements are many they are moving" (1), and while "Love" is in the ascendant, it "makes the elements into a single whole, the Sphere. In the Sphere the elements are at rest" (1). This notion of a historical cycle ruled alternately by Love and Strife results, according to O'Brien, in some imaginative ideas regarding the origin and destruction of organisms. As Strife's power increases, the unified, homogenous Sphere progressively deteriorates into separate and distinct organisms and, subsequently, parts of organisms: "separate limbs will wander disconsolately about the world on the eve of the dissolution of all things into four separate elements," O'Brien writes (3).

Conversely, as Love's power increases, the separate parts of organisms' anatomies are assembled together – sometimes into “monstrous” arrangements, but eventually into the flora and fauna that we would recognise and, ultimately, into the One, the homogenous Sphere (O'Brien 2-3). Thus, in the classicist W. K. C. Guthrie's concise summary:

There is a period when Love rules unopposed, having fused all the elements into a unity. Then Strife enters the Sphere and begins to separate them until finally he has taken full possession and each element is isolated from the rest. After this Love reasserts herself, pervades the whole once more and gradually brings the separated elements together until once more they are completely united. (167)

Significantly, just as Arnold believed that his particular historical moment was peculiarly unpoetic, so Empedocles believed that his epoch was one in which Strife was on the increase and, as a consequence of this, that his contemporary society was in a state of degeneration (Guthrie 174). Thus, Vico's early, poetic historical epochs can be interpreted as akin to Empedocles' Love-dominated phase, and Vico's later, rational historical epochs to Empedocles' Strife-dominated phase. Moreover, their cyclical-degenerative historical systems can be identified as important complementary contexts for Arnold's mythological treatment of a poetic figure struggling to inhabit an unpoetic, reason-dominated age.

Much like Arnold, Leopardi expressed distinctly Vichian views on history, although he maintained a distinctly negative view of the “progress” of history as decline. Leopardi's perception of the anti-progressive historical tendency is linked to his version of human history as an intensification of man's alienation from nature and, conversely, of his increasing reliance on reason, which results in the corruption of humankind and a despoliation of our welfare and happiness. As he writes in 1820 in his *Zibaldone*: “the history of mankind shows nothing but a

continual passage from one degree of civilization to another then to an excess of civilization, finally to barbarism, and then back to the beginning” (238). Here, Leopardi implies that history comprises cyclical shifts from a “civilization” that is closer to nature, to a “corrupt” “barbarism” – meaning perhaps counter-intuitively an excess of civilization – and “back to the beginning.” While in some passages of the *Zibaldone* (for example, later on in this same entry – 248-49), Leopardi denies that it is possible to return to earlier stages of civilization, he appears to reverse this conclusion a few years later, aligning his historical perspective with the one that Arnold would later adopt:

In the process of time and of circumstances and of moments of enlightenment man attempts to come nearer that nature from which he has moved away, and certainly through no other force or route than that of society. Therefore civilization is a process of coming nearer to nature. (25-30 October 1823; 1563)

Evidence that this was Leopardi’s conclusive position is provided by his final masterpiece, “Broom.” In this, one of Leopardi’s very last works, which Arnold certainly read (see chapter two pp. 37-38), the speaker looks forward to a time when man will *once again* recognise nature as the true “enemy” (126) and establish a resolute fraternity based on the imperative of presenting a united front in the face of nature’s indifference. When this happens,

and the fear
that first joined mortals in a common pact
against unholy nature
shall be revived to some extent
out of real wisdom, then an honest,
just society of citizens

and right and piety will take root. (146-53)

Thus, Leopardi's speaker imagines his contemporary society, which has entered the phase that Vico described as the "great disease of cities" (423), returning to a state of barbaric nature, or as Vico puts it: "the primitive simplicity of the first world of peoples" (424). The main difference between Leopardi's and Vico's historical perspectives is that, while Vico identifies a general progressive tendency in humankind's development (Costelloe), Leopardi perceives a general regressive trend.

Significantly, for both Arnold and Leopardi the early epoch in an individual historical cycle, like an individual's youth, is associated with poetry while the last epoch, like an individual's maturity, is associated with philosophy and prose. As Robert Langbaum points out, "Arnold initiates a symbolical characterization [in "The Scholar Gipsy"]...according to which modern men are represented as old to suggest diminished identity and the old age of an era" (60). Contrariwise, of course, the scholar gipsy, a young man, is represented as a poet figure from an earlier era. This "symbolical" index is reinforced in "Empedocles," in which the protagonist's "problem is both personal and historical" in that his "modern mind," his "[d]epleted feeling and abstractedness of thought characterize the old age of [both] an individual and a culture" (75). In other words, the aging philosopher, Empedocles, has survived beyond the more poetical epoch of his youth and entered an intellectually hostile, Sophist-influenced age in which, in his maturity, he is reduced to pure rational thought: "Nothing but a devouring flame of thought – / But a naked, eternally restless mind!" (2.1.329-30). However, while Langbaum states that Arnold "sees as a *modern problem* the excessively conscious man of critical intellect" (my emphasis – 61), it seems more likely that Arnold perceived this situation as a historically recurring phenomenon, and that he resembles Leopardi in doing so.

Leopardi's philosophical pessimism was supported by a notably similar symbolic framework regarding, on the one hand, youth and poetry and, on the other hand, maturity and philosophy, or rational thought: much of his work is conceptually structured around the juxtaposition of hopeful youth and disillusioned adulthood, the active virtue of the ancient world and the apathetic languor of the modern. Just as Vico and Arnold did, Leopardi saw the ontogenesis of the individual – from the poetic child to the rational adult – as parallel to the phylogensis of humankind – from the imaginative ancient poets to the rational modern human – although, as mentioned above, Vico did not interpret this progression in the same intensely negative light that Leopardi did. A proof of the centrality of these ideas to Leopardi's philosophical perspective is the fact that these contrasts are the central pivots in his own autobiographical sketch. In a crucial passage of the *Zibaldone* from 1820, Leopardi writes: as a child, “my condition then was exactly the same as the ancients,” but

[t]he total transformation that took place in me, my passing from ancient to modern, happened...when, deprived of my sight and the constant distraction of reading, I began to feel my unhappiness in a much bleaker way, I began to abandon hope, to reflect deeply on things...to become a professional philosopher (instead of the poet I was before), to feel the incontrovertible unhappiness of the world, rather than knowing about it, in part also because of a state of bodily languor, which removed me even further from the ancients and brought me closer to the moderns. (116)

This conceptual structure occurs throughout the *Canti*. In canto no. 7: “Alla Primavera” (“To Spring”), for example, the speaker wonders whether the springtime will rejuvenate him, returning the “bella età” or “sweet time” (i.e. his youth) to him, along with its lovely, sustaining illusions (11). At the same time, an implicit parallel is evoked between his lost youth and that of

human society. While, in an age that is equivalent to Vico's first epoch of gods, humanity once perceived its natural environment as animated by mythological creatures (stanzas 2-4), in the speaker's current age, one that is equivalent to Vico's third epoch of humankind, humanity is estranged from nature (81-87). In canto no. 19: "Al Conte Carlo Pepoli" ("To Count Carlo Pepoli"), the speaker announces his abandonment of the youthful pursuit of poetry and beauty for the mature one of philosophy and truth (123-49), and, while he wishes that the addressee of the poem will always enjoy his illusions (120-22), it is implied that such good fortune would be unusual: "He is fortunate a thousand times / who doesn't lose the fleeting power / of sweet imagination with the passing years" (112-14). As in "To Spring," the imaginatively barren situation of the individual speaker is compared to that of his superannuated, contemporary age in which people of his class, deprived of poetry, distract themselves from their stultifying boredom with modern devices, for example:

the cult of clothing and hairdressing,
of doing, coming, and going, the empty interest
in carriages and horses,
busy salons and noisy squares and gardens,
games and dinners and exclusive dances. (63-67)

Similarly, in canto no. 32: "Palinodia al Marchese Gino Capponi" ("Recantation for Marchese Gino Capponi"), the speaker connects the spiritual degradation of the individual within his lifetime (Nature "wears him down and out, until at last he lies / defeated and undone by his pitiless mother" – 180-81) with that of his contemporary age, contempt for which saturates lines such as these:

It's a golden age the Fates'

spools are unwinding, Gino. Every paper,
though languages and pagination differ,
promises it to the world in unison
in every country. Universal love,
railroads, expanded commerce, steam,
typography and cholera the most far-flung
peoples and climates will embrace together. (38-45)

In this, and many other equally vicious denunciations of his century's faith in technological progress, the speaker effectively juxtaposes what would be true spiritual progress, the institution of "Universal love," with the actual achievements of a late human society that places more faith in the rational intellect than in the poetic one: newspapers, rail travel, and the spread of disease. An examination of Arnold's and Leopardi's cyclical perspective on human history thus illuminates instructive parallels regarding the recurrence of successive stages of more wholesome, and more poetic, human epochs and less wholesome, more prosaic human epochs, which are reflected in the individuals whose lives are confined to either epoch. Moreover, Arnold's and Leopardi's application of the individual's ontogenesis – from a childhood of poetry and illusions to an adulthood of reason and philosophy – to humankind's phylogenesis – from the imaginative ancient poets to the rational modern human, proves particularly suggestive when considered in relation to "The Scholar Gipsy" and "Empedocles."

II. "The Scholar-Gipsy," "Empedocles," and the "ancient born too late"

As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, Arnold's and Leopardi's cyclical perspectives on human history, especially their vision of recurring periods of decline from originally poetic epochs, are connected to a figure that is vital to their poetry: what Sainte-Beuve termed the

“ancient born too late” (in his 1844 essay on Leopardi – 37). Both Leopardi and Brutus are forerunners of Arnold’s scholar gipsy and Empedocles in their self-identification or representation as poets inhabiting a difficult age of transition, from an earlier epoch dominated by imagination and poetry to a later one dominated by reason and philosophy. Both the scholar gipsy and his counterpart in the poem, the “intellectual” king, inhabit a transitional epoch between the earlier and later epochs within the Vichian historical cycle, and they represent two distinct responses to living in such an epoch. Such a characterisation of these figures ultimately explains Arnold’s adoption of an almost paradoxical elegiac-celebration of the impossible ideal of the scholar gipsy. To an extent, the dynamic between Callicles and Empedocles mirrors that between the scholar gipsy and the “intellectual” king in that Callicles, like the scholar gipsy, can be read as a poet inadequate to his age and Empedocles, like the “intellectual” king, a philosopher of despair, although Empedocles, it should be remembered, has also been a poet.

Both the scholar gipsy and Empedocles resemble Sainte-Beuve’s description of Leopardi as “an ancient born too late” (Sainte-Beuve 37), as well as recalling figures that are central to Leopardi’s philosophical perspective, such as Brutus. While Leopardi recognised Brutus’s last cry as the “last sigh of antiquity at the point in which the age of imagination is about to die” (Sainte-Beuve 37), Sainte-Beuve remarks that it is Leopardi himself who can be identified as the last ancient: “He considers Brutus the last of the ancients, but it is actually he who is so. He is sad like an ancient born too late” (Sainte-Beuve 37). As Sainte-Beuve points out, “Brutus” is worth close attention due to the way that the poem “embraces the key of all Leopardi’s negative philosophy, the original, personal seal of his poetic sensibility” (35). The hero of the poem, Marcus Brutus – the same Brutus who is the hero of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* – was a partisan of Republican liberty who, alongside Cassius, was defeated by Mark Antony and

Octavian at the Battle of Philippi in 42 BC (Dotti, *Canti* 254). In a poem that closely resembles, in form, the dramatic monologues of Arnold's contemporaries, Leopardi "puts in Brutus's mouth...a bitter and disdainful invective against both the fantasy of virtue and the 'stone gods,' who are hostile towards those men who are animated by a sense of justice and piety" (Rigoni 930). According to the prologue introducing his monologue, Brutus's speech heralds, and is a symptom of, the collapse of Italy:

Now that Italian valor lies uprooted,
one huge ruin in the dust of Thrace,
where fate is readying barbarian horses
to trample the green valleys of Hesperia

[...]

[Brutus] curses the implacable gods and hell itself,
and assails the sleeping air in vain
with savage cries. (1-4, 13-15)

In this passage, Brutus is depicted as speaking on the brink of Italy's "ruin" and it is the death of "Italian courage" (79), the "crumb[ling]" of "ancient Rome" (81-82), and the approach of the "barbarian's heel" (89) that incites him to self-destruction:

Let the voracious bird flap his black wings
above me, let the beast have at me,
and the shades carry off my nameless corpse,
and the wind take my name and memory. (117-20)

Ugo Dotti (*Canti* 255) links the depiction of Brutus here to Leopardi's *Zibaldone* entry for 15 January 1821:

the ancients, ever greater, nobler-minded, and stronger than ourselves, faced with an excess of misfortunes, and thinking upon their necessity, and the invincible power that rendered them unhappy and held and bound them to their wretchedness...would conceive hatred and fury against fate, and curse the Gods, and proclaim themselves in a way the enemies of heaven, powerless, certainly, and incapable of victory or vengeance, yet not defeated, or tamed, or diminished. (504)

In light of this entry, Brutus can be read as the archetypal figure of ancient “misfortune,” resistance, and imagination, but he is also a figure who inhabits a transitional age from which he feels alienated and which he ultimately chooses to abandon.

This reading is supported by Leopardi’s essay: “Comparison of the sayings of Brutus Minor and Theophrastus on the verge of death,” which was published alongside the poem. Here, Leopardi writes,

We can say that the times of Brutus constituted the last age of the imagination, prevailed over, finally, by science and the knowledge of truth, which was disseminated among the people sufficiently to lead to the old age of the world. For if this had not been, neither would he have had occasion to flee from life, as he did, nor would the Roman Republic have died along with him. (401)

Ultimately, then, Brutus is not only *an* icon of ancient struggle, but the last such icon – an isolated surviving specimen of a near extinct species of ancient courage and imagination – and he was compelled to commit suicide precisely because of his (near) unique status in a world in which the “imagination” and “antiquity” were disappearing, much like Empedocles. It is important to note that, while “Brutus” is an early poem, just five years before his death Leopardi maintained that it remained at the centre of his thinking. In a letter to Luigi De Sinner, composed

24 May 1832, Leopardi writes: “My feelings towards fate were and still are those I expressed in *Bruto Minore*” (*Letters* 262-63).

While “Brutus” is notable for the protagonist’s futile yet ferocious denunciation of the “stone gods” that rule cruelly over humanity, Leopardi insisted – in the same letter to De Sinner – that he too would heave a final denunciation of his hostile age before his own death. In the same De Sinner letter, Leopardi continues:

it has only been because of the cowardice of men, who need to be persuaded of the value of existence, that people have wished to consider my philosophical [pessimism] as the result of my personal suffering...Before I die, I’m going to protest against this invention of weakness and vulgarity. (*Letters* 262-63)

While there is no such “protest” in prose, internal evidence suggests that his late poetic masterpiece, “Broom,” which denounces the delusionary, self-aggrandising optimism of his contemporaries (38-51, 185-201), the century’s intellectual regression (52-58, 72-86), and men’s petty squabbling amongst themselves (135-44), constitutes such a protest. Here, the speaker criticises the “geniuses” of his “century” who, “unlucky enough to have had [it] as a parent / sing [its] praises, / although among themselves they often scorn [it]” (59-62). “Not so shamefully,” the speaker boasts,

shall I go to my death;
rather, the disdain for you
that is locked inside my breast
I’ll have displayed as openly as possible,
though well aware oblivion obscures
him who was too disliked in his own time. (63-69)

“Broom” has traditionally been read as Leopardi’s “spiritual testament” (Rigoni 989-90) with the poet and speaker being closely identified. Accordingly, the poem is frequently situated in the moment in which it was written: very shortly before Leopardi’s death. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given Leopardi’s identification of the central importance of “Brutus,” the dying poet’s testimony of “nature’s destructive omnipotence” and his denunciation, “between laughter and pity” of the “magnificent, progressive destiny” (Rigoni 989-90), constitute a monologue that has very strong parallels with Brutus’s. Both men express disdain for the world that they are about to quit and both futilely, yet impressively, denounce the vanity and injustice of the same world immediately before abandoning it. Both Leopardi and Brutus, then, are represented as the last figures of a dying, ancient race, figures that inhabit edges of time between two epochs: one dominated by the poetry and imagination of an older race, and one distinguished by “barbaric” (to use the term in Leopardi’s distinctive manner) philosophy. Both, in other words, are the forerunners of the scholar gipsy and Empedocles who are also impotent transitional figures unable to fulfil their poetic vocations in what seem to be poetically barren ages.

Sainte-Beuve’s Leopardi, Leopardi’s Brutus, and the speaker of “Broom” are all incarnations of the “ancient born to late” that is key to understanding Arnold’s Empedocles and scholar gipsy. There may, in fact, be evidence that Arnold was thinking very specifically of Leopardi when he composed “The Scholar-Gipsy.” Providing a kind of counterpoint to Arnold’s eponymous hero is the “intellectual” king, an enigmatic figure whom the speaker describes thus:

...amongst us one

Who most has suffered, takes dejectedly

His seat upon the intellectual throne;

And all his store of sad experience he

Lays bare of wretched days;
Tells us his misery's birth and growth and signs,
And how the dying spark of hope was fed,
And how the breast was soothed, and how the head,
And all his hourly varied anodynes. (182-90)

David DeLaura convincingly argues that the “intellectual” king is based upon one of Arnold’s heroes, Goethe, noting that Arnold himself acknowledged this identification (199). However, J.C. Maxwell counters that Arnold’s statement on the identity of the “intellectual” king was made “many years later” and that “it is hard to think of everything that is said in the stanza as applying to Goethe” (182). Indeed, as Allott and Allott note in their edition, “ll. 185-90 are an apt description of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (1850)” and the phrase “intellectual throne” is “borrowed from Tennyson’s ‘The Palace of Art’ (l. 216)” (*Poems* 365). Perhaps, then, it is best to regard the “intellectual” king as a “composite figure” and, in such a case, “Leopardi has at least as good a claim as Tennyson,” according to Maxwell (182).

To support his claim, Maxwell musters some persuasive evidence. For example, he notes that “The Scholar-Gipsy’s” “contrast between the single-minded spontaneity of the ancients...and the [modern] wisdom that has brought with it only uncertainty and unhappiness is pure Leopardi” (182; see chapter one p. 42 above). In addition, Maxwell argues that the first six lines of the stanza, which describe the “intellectual” king’s unique “suffer[ing]” (183), his elevated isolation on the “intellectual throne” (184), and his presenting his “sad experience” in his poetry, “are a better description of Leopardi than of either Goethe or Tennyson” (183). But perhaps most persuasively, Maxwell highlights “similarities of phrasing between” Sainte-Beuve’s aforementioned 1844 essay on Leopardi, which Arnold had likely read by the time of

composition (see chapter two pp. 63 & ff. above), and “The Scholar-Gipsy” (183). For example, Sainte-Beuve writes, “[t]he human spirit...has discovered the nakedness and the skeleton of things” (Sainte-Beuve 36-37), which Maxwell compares to Arnold’s representation of the “intellectual” king who “all his store of sad experience he / [l]ays bare of wretched days” (184-85). Again, Sainte-Beuve writes that “humanity strips its potent robe and enters in the years of mourning and sad experience” (Sainte-Beuve 37), the last phrase of which is also echoed in the lines just quoted (184-85). Finally, Sainte-Beuve describes Leopardi as “sad like an ancient born too late” (37), which Maxwell (183) suggests is an “apt pendant to the scholar-gipsy” who, as he points out, was “born in days when wits were fresh and clear” (201).

If, as Maxwell argues, Arnold did, in part, identify the “intellectual” king with Leopardi, then, on the surface, the scholar gipsy might be read, in contrast, as the Wordsworthian poet able to instil readers with his own joy. In his 1881 essay “Byron,” Arnold faulted Leopardi’s poetry for its unrelenting pessimism: while Wordsworth’s “criticism of life,” he writes, is “in certain matters of profound importance, healthful and true,” Leopardi’s “pessimism is not” (358). On the one hand, then, Arnold’s description of Leopardi resembles that of the aloof sufferer who can do little for mankind but present “his store of sad experience” (185). DeLaura usefully points out that, in this stanza, Arnold “put[s] [the “intellectual” king] in his place” by suggesting he is *not* one of the “spiritually regenerate” (212), and, although DeLaura identifies the figure with Goethe, I suggest that Arnold would be more likely to direct such a criticism at Leopardi since he similarly disavowed the Italian Romantic’s unwholesome pessimism. On the other hand, the scholar gipsy with his heaven-sent moments of inspiration and vital connection with his natural environment seems, at least in part, to be modelled on Wordsworth.

It is, in particular, Arnold's representation of the scholar gipsy as passive of inspiration and generous of spirit that initially suggests a tentative connection with Wordsworth. As noted above, the scholar gipsy can only learn the "secret" of the gipsies' "art" – mesmerism – during "heaven-sent moments" (48, 50). Similarly, Arnold describes Wordsworth as a poet singularly dependent on inspiration beyond himself: "Nature herself seems...to take the pen out of his hand, and to write for him with her own bare, sheer, penetrating power" ("Wordsworth" 53). In fact, Arnold remarks, Wordsworth has no "style" of his own and is, because of this, a highly inconsistent poet: "No poet, perhaps, is so evidently filled with a new and sacred energy when the inspiration is upon him; no poet, when it fails him, is so left 'weak as a breaking wave'" ("Wordsworth" 51). Another parallel between Arnold's representation of the scholar gipsy, in his poem, and of Wordsworth, in his prose, is their shared desire – as Arnold sees it – to communicate their knowledge to the world. The scholar gipsy tells two "scholars" whom he knew at Oxford: "'And I...the secret of their [the gipsies'] art, / When fully learned, will to the world impart" (48-49). Similarly, Arnold's critical conclusion regarding the relative merits of Wordsworth and Leopardi was that the Englishman was superior "in the power with which [he] feels the resources of joy offered to us in nature...and in the power with which...*he renders this joy, and makes us, too, feel it*" ("Byron" 357 – my emphasis). Thus, in "The Scholar-Gipsy," Arnold might be read as constructing an opposition not only between ancient and modern individuals, but also between the unhealthily pessimistic poet in the Leopardian tradition and the wholesome, hope-inspiring poet in the Wordsworthian tradition – a poet with a "soothing voice" and "healing power" ("Memorial Verses").

Ultimately, however, the scholar gipsy is a sterile ideal, and it is unlikely that Arnold closely connected him to Wordsworth. As Helen Nebeker observes, the scholar gipsy is an

impotent figure “isolated from the mainstream of life” (60). While he is resurrected from an imagined death in the stanza beginning at l. 131, and while he is “wait[ing]” in “hope” (unlike his contemporaries – 170) towards the end of the poem, ultimately the scholar gipsy does no more than “wait” in Arnold’s poem. Furthermore, his intention to impart his knowledge of the poetic art of mesmerism to his peers is rendered problematic, if not impossible, by the speaker’s repeated injunction to him to “fly our paths, our feverish contact fly!” (221). How can the scholar gipsy, one wonders, teach those from whom he must flee? Ultimately, then, it is more appropriate to read the scholar gipsy *not* as a Wordsworthian figure, but as an impotent poetic figure who cannot fulfil the role that Wordsworth did in his society. Living, as he does, in an un-poetic age, unlike that in which he was born, the scholar gipsy cannot attain the Wordsworthian ideal. Perhaps, in fact, no one can – as in the conclusion to “Memorial Verses”:

...where will Europe’s latter hour
Again find Wordsworth’s healing power?
Others will teach us how to dare,
And against fear our breast to steel;
Others will strengthen us to bear –
But who, ah! who, will make us feel? (62-67)

The scholar gipsy, then (much like Empedocles, who will be discussed below), is a figure caught, in those famous lines from “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse,” “[w]andering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born” (85-86). While the scholar gipsy was “born in days when wits were fresh and clear” (201), in other words, in an eminently poetic age, he has lived on into an age that is acutely un-poetic, an age marked by “this strange disease of modern life” (203) – an image that strongly recalls Vico’s description of the corrupt third epoch

marred by the “great disease of cities” (424). Tainted, it appears, by the nature of the age in which he lives, the scholar gipsy is reduced to waiting passively for poetic inspiration, to “wait[ing] for the spark from heaven” (171), which, at least within the poem, does not arrive.

The seminal Leopardi critic, the nineteenth-century literary scholar Francesco De Sanctis, famously wrote of Leopardi’s poetry:

Leopardi produces the contrary effect to that which he proposes to. He does not believe in progress, and he makes you desire it; he does not believe in liberty and he makes you love it. He calls love, glory, and virtue illusions, and he lights an inexhaustible desire [for them] in your chest” (“Schopenhauer e Leopardi” 407).³⁵

In other words, De Sanctis suggests that Leopardi’s poetry, in denying the possibility of realising ideals such as “progress,” “liberty,” and “love” in this world, perversely makes us long for them as a consequence of his eloquent and elegiac depictions of such impossible dreams. This is very similar to what Arnold achieves in “The Scholar Gipsy.” While Arnold famously asked Clough, in a letter dated 30 November 1853, what the poem “did for [him]” (*To Arthur Hugh Clough* 146), just as Leopardi’s lyrics make one long for the lost illusions they eulogise, so does Arnold’s “The Scholar Gipsy” inspire regret for the ideal represented by its protagonist: both the Romantic, “delicate and evanescent” wanderer of the first section of the poem and the “grave representative of an ancient civilization” of the final section of the poem (Culler 182, 190). Such regret is aroused despite the speaker’s implication that such an ideal cannot be achieved in this world – hence the need for the scholar gipsy to fly the contact of those who inhabit it. Some critics, such as A. E. Dyson (261), have been puzzled by the elegiac nature of the poem, questioning whether it is possible to reconcile its note of mourning with a celebration of the

³⁵ All translations of De Sanctis’s dialogue are my own.

poem's eponymous hero. The elegiac tone or atmosphere, however, is attendant upon Arnold's semi-paradoxical elegiac-celebration of an impossible ideal, that of the scholar gipsy, and in this way the poem is very similar to those Leopardian lyrics that celebrate comparable ideals that the poet denied could be realised in his world.

As with "The Scholar-Gipsy," it is illuminating to read Arnold's verse drama "Empedocles" in light of his and Leopardi's complementary historical perspectives. In particular, the dynamic between Callicles and Empedocles mirrors that, in "The Scholar-Gipsy," between the eponymous "hero" and the "intellectual" king. Instead of interpreting Callicles as embodying the idealised or Romantic poet in contrast to Empedocles' bleak philosopher, or as representing youth in contrast to Empedocles' decrepitude, or as two halves of Arnold himself, I argue that, like the scholar gipsy and the "intellectual" king, Callicles and Empedocles inhabit a transitional stage between earlier and later historical epochs, and that they embody two starkly different responses to living in such an age. In this age, as Arnold describes it in the "Preface," "the habits of Greek thought and feeling had begun fast to change, character to dwindle, the influence of the Sophists to prevail" and "the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves; we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement, of Hamlet and of Faust" (203). On the one hand, Callicles, like the scholar gipsy, resembles the Romantic poet Wordsworth in that he refuses to confront the whole of life. In his essay "Heine," Arnold writes, "Wordsworth retired...into a monastery...he plunged himself in the inward life, he voluntarily cut himself off from the modern spirit" ("Heine" 121); similarly, Callicles ignores the "modern problems" that emerge in his own epoch. As Frank Kermode usefully puts it: "Callicles [is] the Romantic poet who does not know enough" (13), who, in fact, *refuses* to know enough. "To the young Callicles there is nothing genuine in the plight of Empedocles. Callicles

has not yet understood” that “he too must have this ‘root of suffering’” (Kermode 15). On the other hand, Empedocles, as Arnold noted on his manuscript of the poem, has the courage to “see[...] things as they are – the world as it is – God as he is: in their stern simplicity” (qtd. in Allott & Alott, *Poems* 154). Thus, for Kermode, “Empedocles is the Romantic poet who knows enough” (13) – much like Leopardi.

Callicles, as mentioned, fails the responsibilities of the poetic vocation in being unable to confront and interpret the realities of his age. The young harp-player retreats to the exquisite lyricism of his myth-based songs, which provide a counterpoint chorus to Empedocles’ musings, and advocates a Wordsworthian immersion in nature in order to take refuge from suffering. Examples of such attitudes occur throughout Arnold’s verse drama. At the very beginning of the poem, Callicles advises Pausanias that Empedocles should be distracted from his prevailing gloom by the picturesque landscape in which they wander: “lead him through the lovely mountain-paths, / And keep his mind from preying on itself” (1.1.156-57). He also, in the same conversation with Pausanias, dismisses all of Empedocles’ concerns regarding the contemporary world (“’Tis not the times, ’tis not the sophists vex him; / There is some root of suffering in himself” – 1.1.150-51), some of which, one might assume, must be true, especially given Arnold’s description of the poem’s historical context and of Empedocles’ lucid intellect (see p. 14 above). In addition, in his poetry, Callicles avoids treating life directly; instead, he persists in veiling his message to Empedocles in ancient myths, whether the story of Chiron the centaur, Cadmus and Harmonia, or Marsyas and Apollo. While Empedocles says that Callicles “fables, yet speaks truth” (2.1.89), Empedocles, it could be suggested, can only praise Callicles in this way because he consistently misinterprets the younger man’s songs. Ultimately, even when Empedocles commits suicide, by leaping into Mount Aetna’s live volcanic crater, Callicles shuns

this horror. Instead of acknowledging the tragedy of Empedocles' desperate act, Callicles' final song, which treats "Apollo and the Muses, singing of gods and men on the moonlit slopes of Mount Helicon," constitutes, as Houghton writes, "a final affirmation of art" (334-35) and one that displaces the suffering he witnesses.

The incompatibility of Callicles' and Empedocles' perspectives – of the younger man who is reluctant to "see things as they really are" ("Hebraism and Hellenism" 165) and the older who cannot help doing so – results in their persistent and mutual miscomprehension of each other; as Paul Zietlow comments: "Isolated by their private assumptions and preoccupations, the three characters [including Pausanias] talk and act at cross purposes" (254). Linda Ray Pratt also highlights the miscommunication between Callicles and Empedocles; she contends that Callicles' lyrics constitute moralistic counsel against "def[ying]" the "cosmic order" and that "Arnold quietly condemns Empedocles" for "overstep[ping] the bounds of human limitation" (310, 311). This analysis, however, contradicts Arnold's praise for Empedocles, which was founded precisely on his lack of intellectual limitations: Empedocles has the courage to "see[...] things as they are – the world as it is – God as he is: in their stern simplicity" (qtd. in Allott's edition, p. 154). Given Arnold's use of the phrase here – "sees things as they are" – which echoes one of his most famous formulations of the merits of Hellenism and the duty of the critic, it would be a strange departure if Arnold intended to reproach Empedocles for his gift of penetrating vision. Instead, Callicles and Empedocles' miscommunication seems to result from their incompatibility of perspectives, from their contrary responses to a maturing age.

The first evidence of their misunderstanding occurs in Empedocles' response to Callicles' song about the fate of Cadmus and Harmonia. This pair of Thebans transformed to snakes, "[w]holly forget their first sad life, and home, / And all that Theban woe, and stray / For ever

through the glens, placid and dumb” (1.2.458-60). Although Callicles does not, precisely, intend that Empedocles should be rendered “placid and dumb,” the description of the ancient couple “forget[ting]” their past immersed in nature does recall Callicles’ earlier injunction that Pausanias should encourage Empedocles also to escape among the “lovely mountain-paths” (1.1.156). Empedocles, however, refuses to hear this message in Callicles’ song, dismissing it as merely inspired by the latter’s “love[...]” for “the Theban story” (1.2.463). Empedocles also subsequently insists on being “alone” (1.2.465), implicitly rejecting the companionable example of Cadmus and Harmonia.

More striking, perhaps, is Empedocles’ mis-reading of Callicles’ story of Typho, who was imprisoned in Mount Aetna’s crater by Zeus. Callicles’ description of this enemy of the gods appears to resemble Empedocles himself. Typho inhabits his “sad lair,” “[n]ever [...] ceas[ing] to writhe” and never “try[ing] to rest” (2.59-60). In these lines, it is possible to recognise Callicles’ earlier description of Empedocles as “too scornful, too high-wrought, too bitter” (1.1.149); both Typho and Empedocles, Callicles implies, are perverse in their refusal to enjoy the “sweet notes [of the lyre] whose lulling spell / Gods and the race of mortals love so well” (2.64-65). However, while at the close of this song Empedocles asserts that Callicles “fables, yet speaks truth” (2.89), it is clear that he mis-interprets the nature of Callicles’ truth. Instead of understanding the song as a critique of his perverse spirit and his unwillingness to reconcile himself with the world, Empedocles reads it as a fable of his own situation as a great philosopher persecuted by society:

What anguish of greatness,
Railed and hunted from the world,
Because its simplicity rebukes

This envious, miserable age! (2.104-07)

Finally, Callicles' account of Apollo's musical competition with the faun Marsyas, which, of course, ends in Marsyas's defeat and flaying and death, also invokes an oblique reaction from Empedocles. Callicles' song places strong emphasis on Marsyas's friend Olympus's grief for the faun, ending on the repeated lament: "Ah, poor Faun, poor Faun! ah, poor Faun!" (2.190), but lines earlier in the song linger on Marsyas's mentoring of Olympus:

...aloof, on the lake-strand,
Did the young Olympus stand,
Weeping at his master's end;
For the Faun had been his friend.
For he taught him how to sing,
And he taught him flute-playing. (2.166-70)

These lines recall the relationship between Empedocles and Callicles himself, who describes the elder philosopher's enigmatic power over him in one of his first speeches:

...such a spell
In his severe looks, such a majesty
As drew of old the people after him
In Agrigentum and Olympia,
When his star reigned, before his banishment,
Is potent still on me in his decline. (1.1.61-66)

Callicles' intention is to warn Empedocles not to succumb to his naturally hubristic attitude, which resembles Marsyas's presumption in competing with a god: Empedocles "still lets the people, whom he scorns, / Gape and cry *wizard* at him, if they list" (1.1.138-39). While

philosophers from a different tradition, the Sophists, may have ascendancy in their age, Callicles hopes that Empedocles will not respond self-destructively. Typically, however, Empedocles ill comprehends Callicles' intentions, focusing his excoriation not on himself but on Apollo's cruelty: "Though young, intolerably severe!" and Empedocles withdraws his worship of the god: "lie thou there / My laurel bough! / Scornful Apollo's ensign, lie thou there!" (2.190-92). Interestingly, Empedocles explains his decision to abandon music on the basis not only of his "sever[ity]" but also of the solitude required by Apollo: "I am weary of the solitude / Where he who bears thee must abide" (2.199-200). In Callicles' song, however, the pan-player Marsyas, mourned by his friends Olympus and the Maenads, did not lack companionship. Thus, Empedocles justifies his rebellion against Apollo on an assertion of the necessity of solitude that directly contradicts the scenario in Callicles' lyric.

In contrast to Callicles, who adapts himself to his epoch by withdrawing from full knowledge of it, Empedocles cannot adapt to the same epoch, in which he feels redundant; as a result, Empedocles is compelled – by his own sense of alienation – to live in exile. Despite the superficial parallels between the scholar gipsy and Callicles, in this way the scholar gipsy actually more closely resembles Empedocles. With reference to the scholar gipsy, Langbaum observes: "Arnold deals with the peculiarly modern personality that, caught between two or more worlds without feeling at home in any, must be perpetually choosing among cultures and therefore perpetually living in the intellect" (58). The scholar gipsy and Empedocles, then, share a recurring historical situation. The objection may be made that the scholar gipsy's purported origins are in the seventeenth-century, since he emerges as a figure in Joseph Glanvill's 1661 *The Vanity of Dogmatising* (Allott & Allott, *Poems* 357). However, his affinity with the ancient world is revealed both in the early description of the classically inspired pastoral world in which

the scholar gipsy is embedded as a *genius loci* (Farrell 285) and, even more tellingly, in the evocative, but controversial similes at the conclusion of the poem in which the scholar gipsy is compared first to Dido and then to the Tyrian trader. As Culler argues, the “new conception of the Gipsy” in the latter half of the poem – as a “wanderer with the emphasis upon the goal” – is evoked using images “from a sterner world of classical antiquity” (188, 189). On the one hand, the Dido simile, Culler suggests, is “appropriate” because Dido was betrayed by the founder of Rome – “the most practical empire in the world” (189) – much as the scholar gipsy is threatened by his contemporary society. The Tyrian trader simile, on the other hand, depicts the scholar gipsy as “the grave representative of an ancient civilization which, finding itself superseded by low cunning, refuses to compete, but indignantly strikes out to a new world, harder but more pure” (190). Ultimately, however, it does not matter which absolute age the scholar gipsy comes from so much as which relative epoch within a particular historical cycle, and, as explored above, he is clearly described as issuing from an earlier, more poetic epoch than the one in which the poem’s speaker is situated. The scholar gipsy’s relationship to the nineteenth century recalls that of Empedocles to the maturing classical age in which he lived. In accordance with Arnold’s cyclical view of history, the same redundancy that a figure like Empedocles experienced in relation to his own age of transition is experienced by figures like the scholar gipsy (and men like Arnold himself) in relation to their own transitional ages.

Thus, Empedocles shares with the scholar gipsy a sense of being “born too late,” in Sainte-Beuve’s terms, or of being redundant to his contemporary society. While the scholar gipsy appears to be immortal – he has not “felt the lapse of hours!” (141) – he is no more well adapted than Empedocles to the world in which he endures. The scholar gipsy survives due to his self-imposed exile from diseased mankind: “For early didst thou leave the world, with powers /

Fresh, undiverted to the world without” (161-62), and his continued survival rests on his continued exile: “fly our paths, our feverish contact fly! / For strong the infection of our mental strife” (221-22). Ultimately, like the Tyrian trader in the coda, the scholar gipsy must isolate himself because he has endured past the era when he could live uncontaminated by his peers. Similarly, and despite the striking differences between the scholar gipsy and Empedocles, as Arnold describes in his manuscript notes, Empedocles is condemned to an intolerable isolation in his world in which “his friends are dead: the world is all against him.” Arnold continues, “his mind is overtaken by the effort to hold fast so great and severe a truth in solitude: the atmosphere he breathes not being modified by the presence of human life” (qtd. in Allott & Allott, *Poems* 155). Once a truth-seeking young man, Empedocles found the world teeming with poetic pleasures: “[t]he sports of the country-people, / A flute-note from the woods, / Sunset over the sea” (2.251-53). As Pausanias tells us, Empedocles was a musician – a profession closely associated, of course, with that of the poet. When younger, “there was a time / (But that is passed), he would have paid [Callicles’] strain / With music to have drawn the stars from heaven” (1.1.80-82); now, however, Empedocles has lost such balance. In an image that vividly expresses the devastative power of thought, Empedocles describes himself as “A living man no more [...] / Nothing but a devouring flame of thought - / But a naked, eternally restless mind!” (2.328-30). As Houghton puts it, Empedocles remembers a time when “[h]e had not yet...become a philosopher enslaved to abstract speculation and so cut off from the natural life of man” (320) – a process he refers to as the “death of a poet” (321).

Ultimately, then, the scholar gipsy and Empedocles are temporally displaced figures who are the “by-products” of Arnold’s Vichian-Empedoclean historical perspective and who, in striking ways, resemble Leopardi himself – as represented by Sainte-Beuve – and of those

characters, like Brutus, that remained vital symbols for Leopardi throughout his life. Arnold realises this conception of Empedocles in his speech at the beginning of Act Two. Once he has found himself alone, Empedocles explicitly describes himself as “come too late,” echoing the phrase Sainte-Beuve used in relation to Leopardi: “No, thou art come too late, Empedocles! / And the world hath the day, and must break thee, / Not thou the world” (2.16-18). It is a very striking coincidence that Arnold should use such a similar phrase to describe Empedocles to one that Sainte-Beuve used to describe Leopardi, especially given the notable parallels between Empedocles and Leopardi (and Leopardi’s Brutus). Although most likely unconscious, this coincidence in phrasing speaks to the fact that when Arnold was composing “Empedocles,” Sainte-Beuve and Leopardi and Vico were all present to his mind.

III. The Exigencies of Modern Poetry in “Empedocles” and “Broom”

A comparison of “Empedocles” with “Broom” highlights the way in which Arnold’s verse drama explores the exigencies of modern poetry – a poetry that is philosophical in substance and somewhat prosaic in nature – in a way that has fascinating parallels with Leopardi’s similar exploration. While both Arnold and Leopardi believed “that a poet and a philosopher shared the same intellect” (1.18) and that this “intellect” was a Hellenistic one courageous enough to “see things as they really are” (Arnold, “Hebraism and Hellinism” 165), both – as has been described – identified a contemporary “aridity” that was the result of a superfluity of prosaic thought and writing, and which made the composition of poetry in their own age impossible. As Howard Foster Lowry writes of Arnold, in the introduction to his edition of Arnold’s correspondence with Clough, “[t]o few men...was the *Zeitgeist* a stronger or more dispiriting force” (*To Arthur Hugh Clough* 32). While Arnold later argued that the prosaic nature of Thomas Gray’s age had “choked his poetry,” he too “fe[lt] himself surrounded by a modern situation that neither Goethe

nor Chateaubriand ha[d] analysed in its ‘true blankness and barrenness’” (*To Arthur Hugh Clough* 33). Arnold’s dejection in relation to the age is a frequent theme in his correspondence with Clough. In February 1849, Arnold asks Clough to consider whether he is able to “attain the *beautiful*” or produce “PLEASURE” in his poetry, implying that perhaps Clough cannot because “the age and all one’s surroundings” are so “deeply *unpoetical*”: “Not unprofound, not ungrand, not unmoving: – but *unpoetical*” (*To Arthur Hugh Clough* 99). Later that year, in September, Arnold returns to this theme, lamenting:

My dearest Clough these are damned times – everything is against one – the height to which knowledge is come, the spread of luxury, our physical enervation, the absence of great *natures*, the unavoidable contact with millions of small ones, newspapers, cities, light profligate friends, moral desperadoes like Carlyle, our own selves, and the sickening consciousness of our difficulties. (*To Arthur Hugh Clough* 111)

A few years later, subsequent to the publication of *Empedocles and Etna and Other Poems* in 1852, Arnold is exculpating himself to Clough for the bleakness of his collection, writing “[b]ut woe was upon me if I analysed not my situation: and Werter, René, and such like, none of them analyse the modern situation in its true *blankness* and *barrenness*, and *unpoetrylessness*” (*To Arthur Hugh Clough* 126). Still, the following year, Arnold issues a short prayer at the end of another letter to Clough: “God keep us both from aridity! *Arid* – that is what the times are” (*To Arthur Hugh Clough* 131).

As mentioned above (see p. 104 above), Arnold’s famous preface to *Poems* (1853) – the collection subsequent to “Empedocles on Etna” and *Other Poems* that expels the offending title poem – obliquely comments on the “*unpoetrylessness*” of the age in implying that it lacks examples of “excellent action” that could provide fit subjects for the aspiring poet. Thus, Arnold

seems, in his first important piece of literary criticism, to be consolidating some of the obsessions that surfaced in his correspondence with Clough. These “obsessions,” however, receive their fullest treatment in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (1865), in which Arnold appears to justify his relinquishing of poetry on the basis of the nature of his historical circumstances. In this essay, Arnold argues that “the exercise of the creative power in the production of great works of literature of art...is not at all epochs and under all conditions possible” (“Function of Criticism” 260). This is because the literary power depends, for its operation, on an atmosphere of ideas; it “must find itself amidst the order of ideas” since ideas are what nourish the literary power (“Function of Criticism” 261). Therefore, in the production of great literature, “two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment” (“Function of Criticism” 261). One of the ways to cultivate the proper environment for poetry is through the writing of criticism: the critical power, via the circulation of ideas, “tends...to make an intellectual situation of which the creative power can profitably avail itself” (“Function of Criticism” 261). The “business of criticism” is, of course, according to the famous definition contained in this essay, “simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas” (“Function of Criticism” 270). At this point in his life, when Arnold was relinquishing the writing of poetry for the writing of criticism, he appears, then, to be making a two-fold justification for doing so: not all ages are conducive to the writing of poetry, and Arnold clearly believes that the current one is not; so, he will devote his energies, instead, to “creat[ing] a current of true and fresh ideas,” through criticism, in order to foster an appropriate environment for the composition of great works of literature.

Although Leopardi never definitively gave up writing poetry, producing, in fact, some of his most highly regarded works at the very end of his life in Naples, he suffered a very similar form of despondency in relation to his contemporary age and its incompatibility with poetry. This despondency was expressed in the (at the time unpublished) pages of his *Zibaldone*. For example, in early 1821 Leopardi struck at what was the heart of the matter for him: the age in which he lived lacked the imagination that was, for Leopardi, the foundation of all poetry, although it did abound in sentiment, or the profound feeling that results from nature's operation on man (see introduction p. 15 above).

Sentimental poetry belongs uniquely and exclusively to the present time, just as true and simple...imaginative poetry belonged uniquely and exclusively to the Homeric age...From which we might well conclude that poetry is scarcely proper to our times, and not be surprised if it now languishes, as we see, and if, I won't say a true poet, but true poetry is so rare. For the sentimental is founded upon, and springs from, philosophy, experience, and knowledge of men and things, in short, from the true, whereas the original essence of poetry lay in being inspired by the false. And if we consider poetry in the sense in which the term was first used, the sentimental can hardly be said to be poetry, but rather a form of philosophy or eloquence, except that it is more splendid, more ornate than the philosophy and eloquence of prose. (8 March 1821; *Zibaldone* 734-45)

This idea, that the modern age is distinguished by sentiment, which is related to reason and philosophy; is hostile to the imagination; and is, therefore, incompatible with poetry is, really, the core of the essay that would develop from this entry: "Discourse of an Italian on Romantic Poetry." This essay, though, again, unpublished in Leopardi's lifetime, is, nevertheless, an

important testament to his hostility to his zeitgeist, in general, and to Romantic poetry, in particular, which he believed was dominated by the sentimental. Arnold would, in general, concur with the point of view that Leopardi enunciates here, although he would be unlikely to adopt Leopardi's ever idiosyncratic terminology, especially in associating the age's "aridity" with sentiment.

While the above passage dates to Leopardi's youth, his doubt regarding the possibility of a thing called modern poetry remained with him. In a slightly later *Zibaldone* entry (16 June 1821), for example, he repeats – in a much more succinct form – the kernel of the above statement: "Imagination, which is the basis of literature strictly understood, in both poetry and prose is not characteristic, and even if it is found today in some individuals it is not modern, because not only does it not derive from the nature of the times, but the latter are utterly opposed to it, or rather are its deadly enemy" (1174-75). In another entry from a couple of years later (12 July 1823), Leopardi observes, in strikingly Arnoldian terms, that it is fashionable to criticise poetry that is not contemporary enough, while countering that "everything can be this century's contemporary except poetry. How can a poet employ the language and adopt the ideas and display the customs of a generation of men...for whom in short illusions have all vanished" (*Zibaldone* 2944-45). Even at the very end of this momentous tome, in May 1829, Leopardi is complaining that his age has made poetry impossible by "depriv[ing] it of most of its beauty, which is its essence; or, against its proper nature, to subordinate beauty...to truth, or what is called truth" (*Zibaldone* 4497). In other words, this "unpoetic century...want[s] a poetry that is not poetic...indeed a poetry that is not poetry" (Leopardi, *Zibaldone* 4497).

While Arnold would not have had access to these pages, he did, we know for certain, read "Broom" (see chapter two, p. 94, above), which is, in a way, the poetic fruit of these

concerns about the unpoetical nature of the age. Here, more than anywhere else in his *Canti*, Leopardi experiments with an unpoetic or prosaic poetry that he may have considered more appropriate to his historical circumstances. This opposition between poetry and philosophy is formally invoked in the way both Arnold and Leopardi very strikingly juxtapose more lyrical poetry against prosaic verse in their work. In “Empedocles,” this dichotomy is identifiable in the contrast of Empedocles’ notoriously monotonous and unpoetical philosophical monologue, which, significantly, he “speaks” (according to the dramatic directions), and Callicles’ famously lovely lyrics, which he “sings.” This sharp contrast is perhaps most evident in the close of Empedocles’ prosaic homily since Callicles’ “Cadmus and Harmonia” lyric immediately follows. Empedocles’ final stanza is a typical example of his verse, which comprises four lines of iambic trimetre followed by an alexandrine:

I say: Fear not! Life still
Leaves human effort scope.
But, since life teems with ill,
Nurse no extravagant hope;
Because thou must not dream, thou need’st not then despair! (1.2.422-26)

Here, the heavily punctuated verse is broken into fragments, thus obscuring the units of trimetre, although the weight of the very regular iambs instils the stanza with a droning repetitiousness. In contrast, Callicles sings:

Far, far from here,
The Adriatic breaks in a warm bay
Among the green Ilyrian hills; and there
The sunshine in the happy glens is fair,

And by the sea, and in the brakes. (1.2.427-31)

Callicles' song exhibits a much more flexible metrical approach than Empedocles' speech; note, for example: the truncated first line, which has just two accents (compared with five in all but one of the other lines); the pyrrhic-spondaic substitution in the last two feet of the second line; and the elision in the third line in the word "Illyrian." The resulting, organic lyricism, combined with the sensual images offered here, is, perhaps, appropriate to the mythologically escapist Callicles.

The "deficiency" of the poetry of "Empedocles" seems always to have been a theme of the criticism of Arnold's poem. Arnold's much younger contemporary Algernon Charles Swinburne praised the "majesty and composure of thought and verse, the perfect clearness and competence of words" in Arnold's poetry (65); yet, he criticised the blank verse in Arnold's drama as not being "sonorous, not vital and various enough....its simplicity is stony and grey, with dry flats and rough whinstones" (56). It is possible, however, to concur with Swinburne's criticism while acknowledging (as Roper did) that Arnold very purposefully chose to oppose very different poetic styles. Arnold believed that the modern age needed poetry of "content" that employed plain, even severe, language; as he writes to Clough in October 1852, "[m]ore and more I feel that the difference between a mature and a youthful age of the world compels the poetry of the former to use great plainness of speech as compared with that of the latter" (*To Arthur Hugh Clough* 124). This conception of modern poetics is, for Arnold, based on the fact that contemporary poetry must "becom[e] a complete magister vitae...by including...religion with poetry" (*To Arthur Hugh Clough* 124). "[T]he language, style and general proceedings of a poetry which has such an immense task to perform," Arnold concludes, "must be very plain direct and severe: and it must not lose itself in parts and episodes and ornamental work, but must

press forwards to the whole” (*To Arthur Hugh Clough* 124). As Roper observes, the “contrast between Elizabethanizing Romantics and the plain severity” of the poetry required in Arnold’s day, is “exemplified by the songs of Callicles and [Empedocles’] homily of the upper slopes” (199). “Empedocles,” Roper continues, “is not only about the quality of life in different epochs, it is also about the kinds of poetry appropriate to different epochs” (Roper 199). Thus, the almost dreary prosaicness of Empedocles’ long philosophical monologue can be interpreted as exemplary of the genre of poetry that Arnold thought the nineteenth-century needed.

Leopardi’s “Broom” has, traditionally, also been criticised for its prosaic style. As Galassi notes, “Broom” “has been criticized by Croce and others for the mixture of ‘poetry and non-poetry’”: “for the alternation between lyric description and philosophical argument” (471). While, more recently, Leopardi scholars such as Andrea Campana have felt compelled to defend “Broom” against this accusation (“nothing is further from the tensions of prose than this *canto*” – 479), it is undeniable that “Broom” represents an innovation in Leopardi’s poetics. Without, therefore, implying a criticism of “Broom,” it must, I think, be recognised that, as Dotti puts it, “[w]ith the last *canti* of the poet, ‘The Setting of the Moon’ and ‘Broom,’ the ultimate unfolding of what is now usually defined as Leopardi’s ‘poeticising thought’ is, without doubt, achieved” (Introduction 195).³⁶ More specifically, for Dotti, the “decisive novelty” of “Broom’s” “artistic representation of thought” is the use of “scientific language” (Introduction 199). The close of the fifth verse paragraph is as good an example of Leopardi’s “poeticising thought” or prosaic lyricism:

And, considering
the way you are down here,

³⁶ All translations of Dotti’s introduction are my own.

to which the earth I walk upon bears witness,
and that even so you see yourself
as lord and end assigned to Everything,
and how you were often flattered to relate
that the authors of the universe
came down to this mere grain of sand called earth
for love of you, and often condescended
to speak with you and yours,
and how you keep retailing absurd notions
insulting to the wise, down to our day,
which seemingly surpasses every other
in knowledge and civility; what emotion, then,
mortal unhappy race, what notion of you
finally assails my heart? It's hard to say
whether it's laughter or pity that prevails. (185-201)

While no English translation, of course, can reproduce, in identical fashion, the impression of the original Italian, Leopardi's prosy, rambling critique of the absurd vanity of mankind is captured well in Galassi's use of convoluted syntax, specifically the prevalence of both co-ordinating and subordinating conjunctions and the accumulation of parallel phrases articulating evidence of humankind's hubris, and the disregard for line endings and rhyme. It is intriguing, then, that, in his essay "Byron," Arnold wrote of this particular stanza, "whoever wishes to feel the full superiority of Leopardi over Byron in philosophic thought, *and in the expression of it*, has only to read one paragraph of one poem" – this one ("Byron" 230). Clearly, Arnold and Leopardi

shared a common conception of the exigencies of modern poetry, which should provide a penetrating “criticism of life” in a plain, even prosaic style.

IV. Titanic pessimism vs. happy and gracious flexibility

In a characteristically expressive vein, Swinburne observes how in “Empedocles,” Arnold has “wasted” no time on “that sad task of sweeping up dead leaves fallen from the dying tree of belief” (62). In the absence of “belief,” Arnold’s poem, according to Swinburne, espouses “the creed of self-sufficiency...which sees for man no dearer or deeper duty than that of intellectual self-reliance, self-dependence, self-respect” (62). With reference to nature, Swinburne continues “we, not it, must submit; submit, not by ceasing to attempt and achieve the best we can, but by ceasing to expect subservience to our own ends from all forces and influences of existing things” and, finally, man’s “self-sufficiency” is “an evangel not to be cancelled or supplanted by any revelation of mystic or prophet or saint” (62). What Swinburne does not explore, however, is the problematic nature of Empedocles’ attempted “self-sufficiency,” his final ability to submit in the way that is required of him in order to survive the modern, unpoetical epoch in which he finds himself. What is especially surprising about Empedocles, given what we know of the author’s belief in the consolations of classical culture, is the way the latter fails to help Empedocles endure his circumstances – something also noted by Zietlow: “Empedocles’ insusceptibility” to Callicles’ songs “is remarkable in light of Arnold’s personal values and interests” (252). In other words, Empedocles’ lack of the flexibility to submit – a characteristic that a comparison with “Broom,” specifically the eponymous hero of the poem, highlights – is key to Empedocles’ suicidal despair.

Although “flexibility” was a characteristic that Arnold clearly admired, since he dedicated his address to students at Eton on this concept, Empedocles’ lack of this quality is not

something that has been discussed by critics of Arnold's work. In Arnold's Eton address, he defines "eutrapelos, eutrapelia" or "flexibility" thus: "lucidity of thought, clearness and propriety of language, freedom from prejudice and freedom from stiffness, openness of mind, amiability of manners, – all these seem to go along with a certain happy flexibility of nature, and to depend upon it" ("Eton" 24). This "happy and gracious flexibility" was a defining feature of the Athenian temperament, according to Arnold ("Eton" 24). Thucydides, he says, "applauded the quality of nature which above all others made the Athenians the men for the new era, and he used the word *eutrapelos* in its proper and natural sense, to denote the quality of happy and gracious flexibility" (Arnold, "Eton" 30). While Empedocles exhibits some of the features outlined in Arnold's description of "flexibility" and its attendant features, for example: "lucidity of thought" and language (and, perhaps, "amiability of manners"), he seems to be deficient in others: "freedom from prejudice" and "stiffness"; and open-mindedness. An example of Empedocles' "prejudice" might be seen in his attitude towards the Sophists that have risen to prominence in the philosophical circles of his day. Empedocles presents a reductive portrait of the Sophists in his homily: "The sophist sneers: Fool, take / Thy pleasure, right or wrong" (1.2.132-33), and, later, he describes the animalistic-sounding "sophist-brood" as having "overlaid / The last spark of man's consciousness" (2.29-30). Empedocles' antagonism towards the Sophists appears to be the result of prejudice, rather than a just estimate, since Callicles states that "[t]he sophists are no enemies of his; / I hear, Gorgias, their chief, speaks nobly of him, / As of his gifted master, and once friend" (1.1.146-48). In addition, Empedocles' "stiffness" and closed-mindedness are characteristics that he recognises in himself. In a perspicacious speech that Empedocles makes shortly before hurling himself into Mount Etna, he explains his lack of "flexibility":

[...] he, whose youth fell on a different world
From that on which his exiled age is thrown –
 Whose mind was fed on other food, was trained
By other rules than are in vogue to-day –
Whose habit of thought is fixed, who will not change,
But, in a world he loves not, must subsist
In ceaseless opposition, be the guard
Of his own breast, fettered to what he guards,
That the world win no mastery over him –
Who has no friend, no fellow left, not one;
[...]
Joy and the outward world must die to him,
As they are dead to me. (2.262-75)

To paraphrase, he who has learned and absorbed one philosophical system and stubbornly protects this to the detriment of acquiring any new insight from a world he deems hostile cannot be happy. Thus, although Empedocles earlier recognised that people must adapt to the world in which they find themselves (“Born into life we are, and life must be our mould” – 1.2.186), he also recognises that he is incapable of doing so. It is significant that in the same perceptive speech on his deleterious lack of flexibility, Empedocles should mention his solitude. It seems that the old fashioned philosopher cannot withstand the effects of his isolation, given his lack of flexibility; he cannot be happy being alone, and he cannot foster human relationships by conforming to the times in which he lives – a quality that he praises, of course, in his philosophical homily.

This lack of flexibility contrasts, in instructive ways, with Leopardi's "Brutus" and "Broom." As described above, Brutus's dying invective against the gods exemplifies Leopardi's belief in the greatness of the ancient spirit, which did not falter in confronting the unjust cosmic order despite the futility of such a confrontation (c.f. the *Zibaldone* entry for 15 January 1821 quoted above). Thus, Brutus says: "The brave man, who's incapable of surrender, / Fights you without quarter to the death, unworthy fate" (38-40). Having been defeated in battle, and not wishing, presumably, to confront the "barbarian horses" that will "trample the green valleys of Hesperia / and Tiber's shore" (3-5), Brutus resorts to suicide. As Rigoni puts it, referring to Leopardi's *Zibaldone* (87), "No possibility...remains for the noble and strong spirit other than raising itself against 'iron Necessity,' defeating it in the 'terrible and almost barbaric happiness' of suicide" (930). Thus, when Brutus "bitterly...smiles at the black shades" (45), decisive in his wish to die, he "exults in...the human prerogative of suicide" (Rigoni 930). In other words, Brutus's titanic pessimism – the opposite of "happy and gracious flexibility" – and his insistence on dying despite the gods' decrees against suicide, is presented as an unequivocal triumph.

In a more nuanced version of stoicism, in "Broom," Leopardi's speaker praises both the broom's Brutus-like lack of supplication and its flexibility in the face of implacable death. The broom's "happy and gracious flexibility" of nature is signalled at the very beginning of the poem where it is described as adapting to the "dry flank" (1) of Mount Vesuvius where nothing else will grow. When "no other tree or flower brightens" the slopes, the speaker addresses the broom, "you spread your solitary thickets, / scented broom, / at home in the desert" (4, 5-7). But the broom, it becomes clear, is not wholly submissive, merely realistic regarding the futility of struggling with its fate. As the poem progresses, the speaker comes to be identified with the broom. As the broom, for example, "share[s] in the pain of others" (35) so does the "noble

nature” – the speaker’s surrogate – who “considers all men allies from the outset / and embraces all of them / with true love” (130-32). Most importantly, though, both assert the flexibility that Empedocles lacks. With reference to the speaker, this is evident at the key moment when he proclaims that (like Leopardi in writing the poem) he will not go “shamefully” to his “death” without having uttered his critique of his epoch: “rather, the disdain for you / that is locked inside my breast / I’ll have displayed as openly as possible” (63, 64, 65-67). However, the speaker (and Leopardi) knows that he cannot control the legacy of such a protest; instead, he is willing to accept the “oblivion” that comes to “him who was too disliked in his own time” (68, 69). Similarly, when the speaker returns to the, significantly, “pliant” broom (297) at the close of the poem, he describes how, up until the point of its destruction by another flood of lava, it “will not have bowed before, / hopeless abject supplicant / of your future oppressor” (307-09). However, when the time comes “unresisting, / [the broom will] bow [its] blameless head / under the deadly scythe” (304-06). Thus, in the broom’s combination of firmness and flexibility, the ability to bend when there is no other choice, the iconic plant presents a more nuanced version of stoic pessimism than Leopardi’s portrait of Brutus’s unyielding defiance.

Significantly, whereas the broom patiently waits for the inevitable eruption of lava that will destroy it, Empedocles hurls himself into the crater of an active volcano – a comparison that prompts a new interpretation of Empedocles’ suicide. Often, this act is interpreted as heroic, or at least ambivalently so (Houghton, Culler, Langbaum), although others, such as Pratt, describe it as a failure of Empedocles’ philosophy. In Pratt’s case, she reads Empedocles’ self-inflicted death as a failed attempt to resituate the self at the centre of a world devoid of faith (84). Yet another interpretation is that of Alan Grob, who claims that Empedocles’ suicide is the natural result of his metaphysics (*Longing Like Despair* 97). Grob describes “Empedocles” as Arnold’s

most obviously pessimistic work and, he claims, “[i]ts principal action culminates in suicide, the act that, more than any other, would appear most tellingly to express the life-negating tendencies of that form of pessimism” (*Longing Like Despair* 87) – Schopenhauer and Arnold’s philosophical pessimism. However, the Schopenhauerian pessimism that Grob ascribes to Arnold strongly proscribes suicide, and while Grob acknowledges Schopenhauer’s reservations on this point, he denegrates them as apparently trivial “disclaimers” (*Longing Like Despair* 87). But Schopenhauer’s thoughts on suicide, to which he dedicated the appropriately titled essay “On Suicide,” constitute more than an easily dismissed aside. In this essay Schopenhauer repudiates his contemporaries’ moralistic injunctions against suicide, while, at the same time, acknowledging that there is one aspect of suicide that does represent a failure of morality: its avoidance of the highest moral aim, that is, the denial of the will to live. Perhaps counter-intuitively, suicide is not, after all, according to Schopenhauer, a denial of the will to live, but exactly the opposite: the assertion of the will to live “if he could do so with satisfaction to himself; if he could assert his will against the power of circumstance” (48). Thus, the argument that Empedocles’ suicide is the natural outcome of a Schopenhauerian doctrine of pessimism seems flawed.

Instead, Empedocles’ suicide can be read as the consequence of his lack of “happy and gracious flexibility” in a hostile world. Forced to rely on his own resources, since he has “no friend, no fellow left” (2.271), Empedocles has failed; as he acknowledges himself, Empedocles has “not...in solitude / Maintained courage and force” so he is “dead to life and joy” (2.318-19, 2.321). This isolation, then, engenders despair and the inability to communicate with his companions – the best example of this being his persistent mis-reading of Callicles’ lyrics. Ultimately, however, it is not this that prompts Empedocles’ self-destruction, so much as his lack

of that defining characteristic of the Athenians: “flexibility,” portrayed as a vital element in the stoic attitude of the broom in Leopardi’s eponymous poem. While there appear to be fellow thinkers and poets who would willingly give him companionship – Callicles, Pausanias, even Gorgias – Empedocles lacks the flexibility to allow himself to treat them as allies. Instead, in the lines quoted above, he describes the inveterate stubbornness of his character and his unwillingness to engage with the new ideas of his epoch (and, therefore, those who espouse them). In Arnold’s manuscript notes, he elucidates Empedocles’ suicidal motives thus: “Before he becomes the victim of depression and overtension of mind, to the utter deadness to joy, grandeur, spirit, and animated life, he desires to die” (qtd. in Allott & Allott, *Poems* 203). Accordingly, there appears to be a note of exultation in Empedocles’ final speech: he asserts a kind of immortality, “it hath been granted me / Not to die wholly, not to be all enslaved. / I feel it in this hour” (II.405-07); he describes being able to “breathe free” (2.408); and, finally, he hopes to preserve this moment in death:

Ere it flag, ere the mists
Of despondency and gloom
Rush over it again,
Receive me, save me! (2.413-16)

However, Empedocles has already become the “victim of depression and overtension of mind, to the utter deadness of joy” – as he admits himself; therefore, it is too late for him to triumphantly avoid this fate in death – as Brutus, for example, does. Instead, his elation here appears to be the momentary consequence of his confrontation of a sublime aspect of nature, reminding one of the speaker’s anticipation of a dramatic storm in Coleridge’s “Ode on Melancholy” (which Arnold appears to imitate at the beginning of Act Two). Empedocles is fully cognisant of the fact that

this depression will return momentarily and his leap is an acknowledgement of failure: Empedocles knows that he will never be able to adapt to the world to which he has become redundant and, in a moment of sublime delirium, he abandons it. Like Schopenhauer's suicide, who paradoxically expresses his desire to "assert his will against the power of circumstance," Empedocles cannot relinquish his need to wield power over his circumstances, to live in a world where his ideas prevail, and, consequently, he prefers death. Instead of waiting, head erect, like the "pliant broom," for the flood of lava to overtake and destroy him, he rushes headlong into the boiling lake of lava.

Just as reading "Dover Beach" through the lens of Arnold's interest in Leopardi illuminates that poem's formal experimentation and reinforces a neglected reading of its conclusion, so does reading "The Scholar-Gipsy" and "Empedocles" through this same lens highlight the integral nature of Arnold's Vichian historical perspective and the figure of the redundant ancient, as well as the purpose of Arnold's prose poetry in the latter. While there is a long tradition of critical investigation into the "idealism" (or absence of such) of figures like the scholar gipsy and Empedocles, the comparative approach contained in this chapter, which considers the nexus of ideas shared by Arnold, Leopardi, and Vico, reveals that absolute conclusions on this question are less relevant than the figures' relative relationship to their historical circumstances. Moreover, this comparative analysis reveals the extent to which these figures should be treated as icons or myths of Arnold's peculiar historical approach: they do not represent the unique experience of a mid-Victorian in general, nor that of Arnold in particular (as so many critics have argued, especially in relation to Empedocles); instead, they represent the perennially repeated experience of a temporally displaced figure, a "redundant ancient" who discovers himself

inhabiting a world that has evolved beyond his capacity to adapt to it. This is the experience, to an extent, of Arnold, yes, but also of a figure like Empedocles or the scholar gipsy, and of Leopardi – as Sainte-Beuve recognised – and of many of his imaginative creations. In “Empedocles,” furthermore, the presentation and exploration of the situation of the redundant ancient prompts an investigation into the essential quality of “flexibility” – a vital aspect of this poem that has not, to my knowledge, been explored and which a confrontation with Leopardi’s “Broom” so effectively brings into focus. The similarities between these two poems, in their setting on the arid slopes of a volcano – symbolising the poetrylessness of Arnold’s and Leopardi’s contemporary ages – and their distinctive juxtaposition of passages of fecund lyricism with barren prose, tend to clarify the centrality of this quality of “flexibility” to the situation of each protagonist, and the consequences regarding whether it is exercised or not. On the one hand, in Arnold’s poem, it seems to be Empedocles’ lack of “happy and gracious flexibility” – a lack that he recognises within himself – that renders his life unbearable to him. On the other hand, in Leopardi’s poem, it is precisely the broom’s flexibility that prompts the speaker’s admiration of this plant, its ability to thrive in such a hostile environment, and its lack of servility coupled with the ability to bend when it must. While the consequences for Arnold’s and Leopardi’s protagonists are quite different, the poets’ share a deep interest in flexibility as an appropriate response to an alienating zeitgeist.

Chapter five: *Daniel Deronda*, Leopardi's "To Italy," and George Eliot's Cultural Cosmopolitanism

"We have had an unspeakably delightful journey," writes George Eliot in a letter recording her second trip to Italy, "one of those journeys that seem to divide one's life in two by the new ideas they suggest and the new veins of interest they open up" (*Letters* 3.311) – a joyful claim ringing with Eliot's appreciation of Italy's enriching her intellectual life. As Eliot retrospectively articulated in her first of two Italian travel journals: she "had looked forward to [this Italian journey] for years, rather with the hope of the new elements it would bring to [her] culture, than with the hope of immediate pleasure" (*Journals* 336), and the description of the trip as having instigated a new era in her life confirms that this hope was fulfilled. As well as reflecting an intense engagement with Italy's visual art, Eliot's travelogue testifies to her abiding interest in the Italian unification movement, the Risorgimento (Thompson, *Eliot and Italy* 30-32-49). However, Eliot was also interested in Italy's literature. This fact is attested to by the 17 Italian titles included in the library that she shared with G. H. Lewes (Baker, *The Libraries* 47) and by the multitudinous references to Italian literature in *Daniel Deronda*, which contribute almost as much to the novel's texture and significance as those learned references to Jewish texts that pervade the novel. In *Daniel Deronda*, there is one Italian text of singular prominence – singular not only because it is the only Italian work to which references recur in the novel, but, more importantly, because these references are full of significance in relation to the eponymous protagonist's – Deronda's – ethical development, and to Eliot's exploration of a kind of *cultural* cosmopolitanism.

This text is the patriotic ode "All'Italia" (1819) – "To Italy" – by Giacomo Leopardi. The Italian Romantic poet seems to have been of some importance to Lewes and Eliot: apart from the

prominent place this – Leopardi’s first – ode holds in *Daniel Deronda*, the couple owned a three-volume edition of Leopardi’s works (Baker, *Libraries* 36), Lewes wrote an important early essay on Leopardi, and “it seems likely that George Eliot came to Leopardi through discussion with Lewes or through reading his 11-page article on his life and work” (Thompson, *Eliot and Italy* 161). Despite Eliot’s special interest in Leopardi, critics have been little interested in the way in which Leopardi’s republican poetics operate within *Daniel Deronda*. References to “To Italy” in Eliot’s last novel, however, are vital in signalling Deronda’s shift from an impartial (and impossible) cosmopolitan stance to one that balances national and international sympathies, and in condensing Eliot’s complex views on these two types of sympathies – many of which views she shared with the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini. In particular, the multi-layered references to nationalist movements – a nascent proto-Zionist movement, the Italian Risorgimento, and the defence of ancient Greece – that result from Eliot’s incorporation of Leopardi’s poem reflects Eliot’s strategy of cultural cosmopolitanism.

Eliot’s use of “To Italy” in *Daniel Deronda*, has, however, been misunderstood. William Baker, for example, suggests that Leopardi was recognised by Eliot’s contemporaries as a nationalist poet, and Andrew Thompson, author of *George Eliot and Italy*, argues that Lewes’s “account” of Leopardi “firmly establishe[d] [him] within the literary tradition of the *Risorgimento* for the British reader” (163). Both, therefore, imply that Eliot’s selection of the ode “To Italy” to, as they put it, harness sympathy for Mordecai and Deronda’s Jewish nationalism is a conventional one. However, while it is true that “To Italy” was the most frequently translated poem of Leopardi’s *Canti* in nineteenth-century British periodical literature (see introduction p. 4), Leopardi was, as my introduction indicates (see pp. 23-26 above), relatively obscure until the last two decades of the century. He was, furthermore, at least as well known as a poet of

individual suffering and despair – a poet of pessimism – as he was a republican poet – as an essay such as Lewes’s indicates (see introduction pp. 27-28 above). Thus, Eliot’s use of Leopardi’s “To Italy” as an icon of a nationalist movement is much less conventional than has been acknowledged. A far more conventional, and familiar, choice, would, for example, have been the famous lines from Dante’s republican discourse in *Purgatorio*: “Ah slavish Italy” (6.76, 151), lines that, as Ronald L. Martinez and Robert M. Durling note in their commentary “had great influence on the emergence of a nationalistic concept of Italy and on patriotic poetry in the Renaissance and Risorgimento” (105).

English Victorians were, in fact, slow to recognise the patriotism of Leopardi’s work (Lecouras 315); there were surprisingly few attempts to treat this aspect of Leopardi’s poetry given the (relative) popularity of “To Italy.” In fact, as I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis (see p. 23 above), the very first time Leopardi’s name appeared in the English press, his patriotism was explicitly denied –and by no less a figure than Mazzini himself (“Italian Literaire” 78-79). It is highly likely, moreover, that Eliot was aware of Mazzini’s negation given her admiration for him and her subsequent hiring him to write for the *Westminster Review*. Lewes does, to an extent, counteract Mazzini’s position when he refers to Leopardi’s “manly, vigorous patriotism” (660-61), but, even while acknowledging this element in Leopardi’s early odes, Lewes writes, doubtfully, that there are “no means of ascertaining what effect was produced by these two odes upon the minds of [Leopardi’s] countrymen” (661). Interestingly, Louisa Ann Merivale is the sole critic to focus almost exclusively on the patriotic nature of Leopardi’s poetry (616); however, Merivale’s is only a very brief treatment of Leopardi, perhaps testifying to the very reluctance on the part of Leopardi’s critics to recognise him as a patriotic poet. Even as late as 1865, Margaret Oliphant makes only brief mention of Leopardi’s patriotism

(463-64), while emphasising its apolitical, personal nature: “The sentiment of national prostration aggravated the gloom of everything that surrounded himself. He was a soul bound hand and foot in a country bound hand and foot” (463). Interestingly, Oliphant returns to this theme in 1876, adding a speculation on the diffuse influence of “To Italy” (“How much indeed of the new life of Italy is due to him, and to such as him...will never be known” – 342), and mentioning Eliot’s bringing the ode to the reader’s attention in *Daniel Deronda* (348), but these later comments could hardly have influenced Eliot’s choice of the ode.

Contra Baker and Thompson, then, Leopardi was not generally or unambivalently perceived as a nationalist poet in England, and recognition of this fact allows for recognition of the peculiar significance of Eliot’s selection of Leopardi’s ode “To Italy” as the anthem of nationalist sentiment in *Daniel Deronda*. As Baker admits, even Lewes “stressed the personal rather than the public political nature of the poet” (*The Notebooks* 254-55). Oliphant’s suggestion of the diffusive influence of “To Italy” in its Italian context is, however, intriguing. While there is little recognition of the revolutionary force of Leopardi’s odes in the English-language essays treating his work during the nineteenth-century, one historian of Italy Denis Mack Smith observes that in Italy “Leopardi’s patriotic odes had to be confiscated by the Austrian censorship lest they should incite people to revolt” (10). Their capacity for “incit[ing] people to revolt” is, perhaps, exemplified best by the well known motto that circulated in Italy during the Risorgimento: “To church with Manzoni; to war with Leopardi!” Eliot’s selection of “To Italy” then, as a strong republican poetic statement, seems to align more closely with the Italian perception of Leopardi’s poetry – as containing an infectious, revolutionary vigour – than that which dominates the British periodical press. It is now generally agreed that “To Italy” – and two

contemporary odes – represent the zenith of Leopardi’s patriotism, but even if Leopardi himself lost interest in republican questions, his poetry clearly took on a life of its own.

In *Daniel Deronda*, “everything is connected to everything” (Eliot, *Letters* 6.290), as Eliot wrote to a friend in October of the year of its publication. Thus, it makes sense that, on investigation, Leopardi’s scrupulously chosen republican ode proves to be at the heart of Eliot’s formal development of a complex network of ideas on nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and art. Several critics of *Daniel Deronda* have observed how English sympathy for the Italian Risorgimento is harnessed in order to engage the English reader’s sympathy for Jewish nationalism (see Bellringer 91; Thompson, *Eliot and Italy*; and Jumeau 304). Perhaps Thompson’s is the fullest account:

Mirah and Daniel’s singing of settings of Italian texts is part of a more sustained association of Jewish characters with Italy and its culture, in what amounts to a deliberate and carefully calculated hermeneutic strategy whereby the Jewish part of the novel is often mediated through Italian cultural references. (*Eliot and Italy* 171)

However, the significance of Eliot’s use of “To Italy” is much broader than this single point suggests, although it is an important one. For instance, “To Italy” is prominent at the crucial moment that catalyses Deronda’s shift from an impractical, impartial cosmopolitanism, which rejects national allegiances, to a partial cosmopolitanism, which balances national allegiance with internationalist sympathy – the moment, in other words, in which Deronda embraces his Jewish identity and nationalist vocation. The representation of this moment is, of course, the distillation of Eliot’s complex views on national and international forms of empathy, many of which she shared with Mazzini. In other words, Deronda’s evolution towards a “cosmopolitan nationalism” reflects the achievement of a thoroughly deliberated stance on the competing

importance of these two tendencies on the part of Eliot. It is this stance that I argue is at the heart of the (much discussed) bifurcated plot of *Daniel Deronda*, which embraces both the domesticated English plot of Gwendolen's marriage and the non-domesticated proto-Zionist plot of Deronda's vocational awakening and emphasises, in both parts, the importance of local and non-local attachments. Eliot's incorporation of Leopardi's poem also, however, symbolises her twin ideas on the importance of a "separate" nationalist sentiment based principally on a shared cultural heritage and on the importance of "communication" between nations in a cosmopolitan vision of culture. This latter point in particular – Eliot's strategy of cultural cosmopolitanism – is powerfully evoked by the "Matryoshka doll" effect in her representation of the cause of proto-Zionism in *Daniel Deronda*, which embraces an ode on Italian sovereignty, which, in turn, embraced an imitation of Simonides address to the Spartan warriors in its representation of the cause of Italian patriotism.

1. Eliot and Mazzini's cosmopolitan nationalism and the bifurcation of Daniel Deronda's plot

Eliot's use of Leopardi's ode "To Italy," with its passionate advocacy for Italian valour and a celebration of ancient Greek heroism, neatly encapsulates two strands of her complex thinking on nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and art: what Avrom Fleishman termed Eliot's "cosmopolitan nationalism" (the subject of this section); and her cultural cosmopolitanism (the subject of the following section). On the one hand, as Bruce Robbins writes, Eliot's fiction involved, at its core, "nurturing empathy with people who stood outside the invisible circle that separated significant from insignificant" – an "obviously cosmopolitan" objective (400). But, on the other hand, this objective is complicated by Eliot's nationalist tendencies: "Writing in the era of heroes like Mazzini and movements like Italian unification, she is deeply appreciative of self-sacrifice

in the name of the larger national cause” (401). Eliot’s cosmopolitan nationalism, with its obvious internal tensions, closely resembled that of her acquaintance and sometime colleague, Giuseppe Mazzini, and a comparison of the novelist’s ideas with those of the theoretical architect of the Risorgimento is particularly appropriate given that Mazzini seems to have been at the forefront of Eliot’s thinking on these issues during the composition of *Daniel Deronda*. Moreover, such a comparison is illuminating with respect to the notorious bifurcation of the plot of *Daniel Deronda*. Perhaps somewhat curiously, given Eliot’s use of his ode to explore such thinking, Leopardi did not share Eliot’s and Mazzini’s balanced approach, believing, rather, that cosmopolitanism and nationalism were two mutually exclusive attitudes (see p. 179 below).

Mazzini wrote for the *Westminster Review* while Eliot was its editor; in fact, it was Eliot herself who invited him to write for the periodical (Smith 89). In a letter to Sarah Hennell, dated January 1852, Eliot explains that she is “trying out Mazzini to write on Freedom v. Despotism,” although it seems to be a secret: “Don’t tell of course” (Eliot, *Letters* 2.5). (This invitation resulted in the important Mazzini essay “Europe: Its Conditions and Prospects.”) While Eliot may have occasionally disparaged Mazzini’s oratorical skills, telling her friend Mrs. Taylor that she had “less to regret” than she thought in not hearing Mazzini speak because his “speeches are better read than heard” (Eliot, *Letters* 2.15), she nevertheless admired the political visionary. Although, in 1865, Eliot and Lewes refused to support a subscription that was initiated by Mrs. Taylor on Mazzini’s behalf, it was not because she or Lewes lacked “reverence” for the man. The actual basis of their refusal is a point of contention among scholars, the confusion appearing to rest on the interpretation of a somewhat unclearly worded and punctuated letter to Mrs. Taylor dated 1 August 1865 (Eliot, *Letters* 4.199-200). Thompson suggests that the couple were unwilling to support “the promotion of conspiracy” (“Giuseppe Mazzini” 107), while Mack

Smith, who wrote a biography of Mazzini, writes that, “while not opposed to financing conspiracy [they] were deterred by the fear of abetting another ‘hopeless’ enterprise” (175). In any case, Eliot’s “reverence” for Mazzini finds expression on the occasion of his death when she condoles with Mrs. Taylor in a letter of 17 March 1872: “Such a man leaves behind him a wider good than the loss of his personal presence can take away” (*Letters* 258). Mack Smith even notes how “George Eliot called him ‘a true hero’ whom ‘it was riches to have known’” (189). In fact, as Thompson notes, Eliot continued to admire Mazzini long after contemporaries like Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Barrett Browning had abandoned him (“Giuseppe Mazzini” 108).

In light of Eliot’s admiration of Mazzini and the similarly visionary and nationalist vocation of Eliot’s eponymous hero, some critics have identified a fraternal likeness between Deronda and Mazzini. According to Thompson, “[i]n many ways, Daniel can be viewed as a Mazzini figure – inspired by if not modelled on the Italian revolutionary” (“Giuseppe Mazzini” 104). Some of their similarities, according to Thompson, include their being “aloof and intellectual,” their shared ability to “lose [themselves] in the existence of others,” along with their “broad sympathy with mankind” and their “feel[ing their] own racial identity” and “wish[ing] to turn it into a *national* identity” (“Giuseppe Mazzini” 103-04). Having drawn all these parallels between Deronda and Mazzini, Thompson argues that it is no coincidence that “Daniel discovers his true identity” and his “mission...to work towards the establishment of a Jewish homeland” in Genoa – Mazzini’s own hometown (“Giuseppe Mazzini” 104). Such an account of the broad likenesses between the fictional Deronda and the historical Mazzini is compelling. What is of most interest to my purposes, however, is how the specific likenesses between Eliot’s and Mazzini’s thinking on the right balance of the competing priorities of

national and international allegiances illuminate the exploration of successfully balancing such competing allegiances in the novel *Daniel Deronda*.

Eliot's most strident espousal of a nationalist approach is contained in "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" (from *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*; henceforward referred to as "The Modern Hep"). Here, Eliot's speaker Theophrastus describes how the "great[ness]" of individual man depends upon his "belong[ing] to a nation" and claims that the belonging to such a nation should inspire any person with "a ready sympathy" for those desiring to establish one ("The Modern Hep" 148). In the same essay, however, Eliot's speaker reveals the actually quite strict limits of his sympathy for those who do not belong to his nation. In dismissing the advent of a world-historical cosmopolitan empathy, Theophrastus says:

The time is not come for cosmopolitanism to be highly virtuous, any more than for communism to suffice for social energy. I am not bound to feel for a Chinaman as I feel for my fellow countryman: I am bound not to demoralise him with opium, not to compel him to my will by destroying or plundering the first of his labour on the alleged ground that he is not cosmopolitan enough, and not to insult him for his want of my tailoring and religion when he appears as a peaceable visitor on the London pavement. ("The Modern Hep" 147)

This enunciation of the duties owed to non-English parties limits their rights to the right not to be interfered with – a kind of negative cosmopolitan approach – and has led critics like Robbins to call this essay "Eliot's most explicit and negative statement on the subject of cosmopolitanism" (401). The nationalist implications of these statements cannot necessarily, however, be assumed to transparently reproduce Eliot's own opinions, as they so often are. In addition, Theophrastus's outrageously curmudgeonly tone here seems to indicate that this passage should be read as

containing a strong dose of irony – an irony intended, in fact, as a sharp critique of England’s self-interested imperialist enterprises. *Theophrastus Such*, it should be remembered, is a piece of experimental *fiction* in which Eliot adopts the voice of a somewhat grumpy, conservative Victorian gentleman.

Yet Eliot and Mazzini both appear to subscribe to a belief in the ameliorating effects of a nation defined by a purpose derived from tradition. Theophrastus appears to voice this view of Eliot’s in defining national identity as “the divine gift of a memory which inspires the moments with a past, a present, and a future, and gives the sense of corporate existence that raises man above the otherwise more respectable and innocent brute”; this is what led to the creation of an independent Greece and an independent Italy, he argues (“The Modern Hep” 143-44). Again, Theophrastus cannot be assumed to voice Eliot’s opinion; however, whether or not this is Eliot’s own perspective, and it seems likely that it is, it is certainly one that has great resonance in *Daniel Deronda*, in which characters such as Mordecai and Mirah have a strong sense of Jewish nationalism based on tradition and in the absence of a geo-political state. Similarly, at the core of a sense of nationality for Mazzini was a kind of religious duty to fulfil a particular national objective (“The Italian Question” 107) – a duty, moreover, that was willingly undertaken by the people of a nation, not one that was imposed upon them. “Nationality,” was, for Mazzini, “a general reorganization according to the tendencies and vocations of the Peoples, freely approved by them” (*Selected Writings* 118). This “National aim,” for Mazzini, was “indicated by the past tradition, and confirmed by the present conscience of the country” (“The Italian Question” 103) – much as Eliot has Theophrastus argue.

Running somewhat counter to her espousal of nationalist sentiment is Eliot’s classic statement on the fundamentally cosmopolitan artistic objective of cultivating sympathy for the

unfamiliar alien. Eliot actually articulated this objective before she had published any novels, in her 1856 essay “The Natural History of German Life.” Here, Eliot argues that the “greatest benefit we owe to the artist...is the extension of our sympathies”: “a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of modern sentiment” (30). While, as mentioned, this aesthetic theory was enunciated before Eliot had properly become such an “artist,” it was to remain with her throughout her novel-writing career. Thus, subsequent to the publication of her final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot famously wrote to Harriet Beecher Stowe: “There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible than to arouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs” (*Letters* 6.301). Eliot’s concerted attempt to faithfully represent Jewish “customs and beliefs” (see William Baker, *George Eliot and Judaism*; Jane Irwin’s *George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda notebooks*), constitutes, in itself, an act of literary cosmopolitanism. More than a century after its publication, many literary critics – including Patrick Brantlinger (1991), Allan Arkush (1997), Amanda Anderson (2001), David Kurnick (2010), and Thomas Albrecht (2012) – continue to uphold the cosmopolitan impulses of *Daniel Deronda* (although few have denied that the novel’s cosmopolitanism is in tension with its nationalism).

It is particularly striking, in the case of Mazzini, that he refuses to use the term “Nationalism,” choosing, instead, to describe the collective, religious duty that, for both him and Eliot, defines a nation, as a sense of “Nationality.” According to Mazzini, the lack of “collective” feeling in Europe during his lifetime was due to the fact that “[t]he narrow spirit of Nationalism [had been] substituted for the spirit of Nationality.” The latter, far superior attitude, Mazzini

argues, should encompass that which “Nationalism” does not: the realisation that the “cause of the peoples is one, that the cause of the Fatherland must lean upon Humanity, that the aim of our welfare is the Holy Alliance of the Nations” (*Selected Writings* 116). Mazzini was clearly sensitive to the deleterious consequences, internationally, of each nation cultivating an exclusive loyalty to its own people, rather than fostering a spirit of global (or, at least, European) fellowship, and he associated the former with “Nationalism” and the latter with “Nationality.” While Eliot does not appear to have made this distinction explicitly in her work, the theory on the proper relationship of the nation to the world that she presents via Mordecai and Deronda is very closely related to Mazzini’s own. Here, Eliot seems to entertain a kind of Mazzinian belief in the “beneficial influence of distinct groups on the universal community” (Fleishman 200). That is, both Eliot and Mazzini entertained the notion that the division of the world into nations resembled the “division of labour.” Thus, in *Daniel Deronda*, Mordecai speaks of “[e]ach nation [having] its own work” and of all nations “absorb[ing] the thought of other nations” and “giv[ing] back the thought as new wealth” (444). Similarly, in his “Europe: Its Conditions and Prospects,” Mazzini describes a distinct nationality as a “workshop” participating in the “division of labour” among all humankind (292). Elsewhere, Mazzini reiterates this notion: “I regarded the question of Nationality –as it ought to be regarded by all of us – not as a mere tribute to local pride or local rights, but as a question of European division of labour” (*Selected Writing* 118).

It is probably true that in Mazzini’s work the aim of establishing a cosmopolitan community is more explicitly stated than in Eliot’s work. The Italian revolutionary even had a name for such a community, which he described as a “Holy Alliance of the Nations” (*Selected Writings* 116), and he indicated that such a community was the ultimate objective of all human

organisation: “Nationality and humanity are...equally sacred. To forget humanity is to suppress the aim of our labours; to cancel the nation is to suppress the instrument by which we achieve the aim” (*Selected Writing* 147; see also 140). Nevertheless, Eliot and Mazzini clearly share a sympathy both for the vital necessity of “disconnectedness,” in the sense of distinct national identities, and for the reciprocal benefits of “connectedness,” or international co-operation. In other words, both advocate a kind of “cosmopolitan nationalism” or “partial cosmopolitanism” – to borrow Kwame Anthony Appiah’s term (from *Cosmopolitanism*), which relies on both senses of “partial” – in which the welfare of the nation is balanced against the welfare of the international community in which it is located.

Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* testifies to her striving to reconcile the claims of her fellow English people and those of her fellow human beings. It is, to begin with, indisputable that, in *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot romanticises a particular kind of nationalism – as many critics have convincingly argued (Suzanne Graver, Katherine Bailey Linehan, Susan Meyer, Bernard Semmel, and Marc E. Wohlfarth) – and expresses a certain ambivalence about “an increasingly cosmopolitan Europe” (Henry 210). Thus, it has been argued, persuasively, that the Jewish people, despite their diasporic state, constitute an ideal (imagined) “nation” in *Daniel Deronda* due to their strong adhesion to a shared culture – a “nation” to which the hopelessly dissipated English can only aspire. As David Carroll points out, Eliot “seeks” in Judaism “a redemptive vision of coherence and unity” for Britain (*Conflict of Interpretations* 36) – a line of argument that persists, for example, in Marc Wohlfarth’s work that interprets *Daniel Deronda* as “function[ing] in many ways as a narrative and symbolic solution to Eliot’s emphasis on continuity as well as rupture” (190). Eliot’s emphasis on the “redemptive vision” of Jewish nationhood is reinforced, throughout the novel, by her pointed critiques of cosmopolitanism

lacking in strong national roots. The opening scene, for instance, reveals a negative vision of a cosmopolitan assemblage of gamblers who appear to symbolise the dissolution and anaemic unproductivity that result in the absence of a national centrifuge:

While every single player differed markedly from every other, there was a certain uniform negativeness of expression which had the effect of a mask – as if they had all eaten of some root that for the time compelled the brains of each to the same narrow monotony of action. (5)

Then there are Eliot's comments on the evils of globalisation with reference to the upbringing of the other protagonist, Gwendolen Harleth: "At five years old, mortals are not prepared to be citizens of the world, to be stimulated by abstract nouns, to soar above preference into impartiality" (15-16). This same "impartiality" is described as having afflicted the early life of Deronda, who suffers from excessive sympathy. As the narrator writes, at the time of his decision to study overseas, Deronda "longed...to have the sort of apprenticeship to life which would not shape him too definitely, and rob him of the choice that might come from a free growth" (151). And such an "apprenticeship" seems to leave him vacillating on the question of "whether it were worth while to take part in the battle of the world" (155) – surely not a laudable internal debate. Finally, several of the more subordinate characters, especially Leonora Halm-Eberstein, seem to embody the negative effects of cosmopolitanism (a point discussed below).

However, those critics who suggest that the novel constitutes a promotion of "racial essentialism" (Nestor 154), misrepresent Eliot's strongly culturally (rather than genetically) inflected approach to nationalism. While it is true that characters like Mirah express a strong preference for her own "people": "I will always be a Jewess. I will love Christians when they are good, like you. But I will always cling to my people" (315), this preference should be read as

being based on a shared culture – with religion as its central strand – rather than on a shared racial identity. In other words, Eliot’s concept of nationhood is based upon the common cultural heritage of a community of people (irrespective of their geographic position) and not on the ties of blood – as is Mazzini’s. In “Europe: Its Conditions and Prospects,” for example, Mazzini writes that the conception of a “nationality” is based, not on race, but on “the assertion of the individuality of a human group called by its geographical position, its traditions, and its language, to fulfil a special function in the European work of civilisation” (292) – in other words, predominantly on its own culture. Alison Milbank has also compared Eliot’s nationalism to that of Mazzini, suggesting the peculiar importance of the Italian example to Eliot.

What makes Italy so vital for Eliot’s view of the relation of nation to art is that its resurrection, completed (apart from Venice and Rome) at the chronological beginning of *Daniel Deronda* in 1865, is a spiritual renaissance in being also an awakening to its literary and artistic union as a culture owing its right to exist to its past cultural achievements. (91-92)

Thus, for Eliot, “it is the ‘common hearth’ of cultural memory that constitutes nationhood” (Milbank 96).

This – the crucial importance of a shared “cultural memory” to a sense of national belonging – is, perhaps, most forcefully represented by Mordecai and his intense desire for Deronda to inherit his “writings,” even to publish them, as his own. The acceptance of this literary work appears to be central, for Mordecai, to Deronda’s acceptance of his Jewish nationality. As Mordecai commands shortly after the announcement of Deronda’s discovery of his heritage: “Call nothing mine that I have written, Daniel; for though our Masters delivered rightly that everything should be quoted in the name of him that said it...yet it does not exclude

the willing marriage which melts soul into soul” (632). However, this tendency to equate nationality with culture is also evident in the other Jewish characters: in Deronda’s acutely sensitive response to the “chanted liturgies” in the Frankfurt synagogue (307-09), which is evidence – especially to Mirah – of his innate sympathy with Jewish culture; in Mirah’s profound attachment to a Jewish lullaby that her mother would sing to her, and which she treasures (despite not knowing the Hebrew words – 313-14); as well as in Deronda’s grandfather’s effort to accumulate a tangible cultural heritage to bestow on his male heirs in the chest that Deronda finally inherits (536) – a patrimony that Deronda’s mother finds so oppressive from her perspective as a gifted woman artist. In other words, time and again, it is Jewish culture that these characters “inherit” that helps them foster their sense of national identity, not the mere fact of having been born into a particular ethnic group.

Ultimately, then, it is impossible to define Eliot’s attitudes as expressed in *Daniel Deronda* as either wholly nationalistic or wholly cosmopolitan and, as Robbins concludes, her final novel can be (and has been) used to demonstrate either case (404). One critic, David Kurnick, has described Eliot as having been “intensely conflicted” between these competing tendencies. I would put it another way; I would say that Eliot sees merit in embracing both and that she, like Mazzini, envisaged nationalism and cosmopolitanism as mutually sustaining. As Mazzini writes, the “Pact of Humanity” – or his “Holy Alliance of the Nations” – “cannot be signed by individuals, but only by free and equal peoples, possessing a name, a banner, and the consciousness of a distinct individual existence” (*Selected Writings* 140). Thus, distinct nations must come before any possible alliance of such nations: “To forget humanity is to suppress the *aim* of our labours; to cancel the nation is to suppress the instrument by which we achieve the aim” (*Selected Writings* 147). This relationship of mutual reinforcement, and the necessity of a

basis of strong local attachments, is evident in Deronda's transition from a too extensive sympathy that paralyzes action to a more particular sympathy that is, nevertheless, balanced with a refusal to abandon his cosmopolitan attitude.

Deronda's transition has been described by Albrecht, borrowing Appiah's terminology, as one from an impossible "impartial" cosmopolitanism to a more ethical, though more difficult, "partial" cosmopolitanism that recognises separateness and difference. Appiah defines these terms in his introduction to *Cosmopolitanism*, in which he describes "impartial cosmopolitanism" as the "abjur[ing] [of] all local allegiances and partialities in the name of this vast abstraction, humanity" (xvi) and "partial cosmopolitanism" as aligning oneself "neither with the nationalist who abandons all foreigners nor with the hard-core cosmopolitan who regards her friends and fellow citizens with icy impartiality" (xvi-xvii). As Albrecht observes, Deronda never rejects cosmopolitanism – even when he discovers he is Jewish, he acknowledges the competing claims of different cultures within him, and the benefit that he has derived from such competition. "The Christian sympathies in which my mind was reared can never die out of me," Deronda acknowledges, and he considers his "wide...instruction and sympathy" to have been a great good (557). However, Deronda does move

from a simpler, impartial cosmopolitanism, one that regards all human beings as equal and as equally deserving of care, to a more nuanced, partial cosmopolitanism, one that remains sensitive to the suffering and needs of all human beings even while focusing its primary attention and care upon a select few. (Albrecht 391)

Thus, whereas in the beginning Deronda extends, indiscriminately, his full sympathy to women in distress such as Mirah and Gwendolen, ultimately, he prioritises his obligations (and love for) the former (and for Israel), while separating himself from Gwendolen. Significantly, however,

Deronda's imposing this "separateness" on Gwendolen does not do her harm; instead, it is at this point that "Gwendolen begins a transition... from a manifest egotism to an initial awareness of something that is outside of her" (Albrecht 409). In other words, in *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot espouses a dual approach of "partial cosmopolitanism," or of "cultivated partiality" (to borrow Anderson's term – 121) balanced with international partnership – an approach that is, perhaps, best summed up by Deronda's grandfather's phrase "separateness and communication" (608).

Importantly, Eliot's attempt to reconcile cosmopolitan fellowship with nationalist feeling is reflected in the much-debated bifurcated plot that is split between Deronda and Gwendolen, and in the relationship between the two protagonists (Ermarth 127; Henry 215), which, ultimately, embodies the ideal of "separateness and communication." As Catherine Brown summarises in a recent essay on "*Daniel Deronda* as Tragicomedy," since the novel's publication and up until the 1970s, most critics "have identified a deficiency of connection between the two stories," while in more recent decades critics have either "stressed the coherence of *Daniel Deronda*" or discovered "intended or unintended significance" in its lack of coherence (304). This controversy, regarding whether the novel's double plot ultimately coheres or not, seems to result from the fact that the two plots are, quite simply, both connected and disconnected. In this way, the structure of the novel in fact reflects its essential motto of "separateness and communication," two elements that Deronda's grandfather "used to insist" should be the foundation of "the strength and wealth of mankind" (608).

Carroll was, perhaps, the first to make this argument (in 1971) when he wrote that the organic unity of the novel springs from Deronda's psychological condition: his disease of sympathy is the reason why he finds himself in relationship with Gwendolen and

Mordecai, and the reciprocal movement consists in their demands curing him of his disease. (“Unity of *Daniel Deronda*” 378)

Thus, while at the beginning of the novel Deronda is drawn to both Gwendolen and Mordecai by a too impartial sympathy with all those suffering individuals whom he encounters, he learns to adopt a partial sympathy that sees him balancing the competing claims of his own nation (represented by Mordecai) with a more universalised, cosmopolitan fellowship (represented by Gwendolen). However, as Carroll implies, the bifurcation of the plot is also highly significant in terms of Gwendolen’s own story. She too must learn to recognise the competing demands of local and non-local attachments. At first, she demands too much of Deronda, barely recognising him as an autonomous person, but subsuming him to her own needs (as she does with many of those in her sphere of acquaintance). It is “only when she has been shaken out of her inability to recognise another person’s ‘equivalent centre of self’” that she is able to “achieve moral faith and...a position to communicate helpfully with others” (Carroll, “Unity of *Daniel Deronda*” 380). Thus, the balance of “separateness and communication,” the task of reconciling difference and fellowship, local and non-local sympathies, is seen, ultimately, to benefit both characters – although, of course, such benefit is much more ambivalent in the case of Gwendolen.

It might also be suggested that the early interrelation of these two plots is modelled on Eliot’s and Mazzini’s belief that local attachments are prior to non-local ones. Such a belief seems to be reflected in Eliot’s initial, and almost exclusive, focus on the critical juncture in Gwendolen’s life – whether or not to marry Grandcourt – which continues, almost unimpeded, for the first two (of eight) books of the novel. Gwendolen’s own attachments are ambivalent in that, on the one hand, they are extremely localised in focusing almost exclusively on herself, while, on the other hand, lacking in a profound connection to a specific geographical home (as

described above – see p. 161 above). However, as an object of interest, a focal point for the reader, she and her (relatively) small circle of acquaintances may be read as representing an object of local interest, a network of personalities and relationships that constitute Austen’s conception of the ideal subject for a novel. As Austen put it herself in a September 1814 letter to Anna Austen: “3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on” (Austen 287). Thus, Eliot’s initial cultivation in *Daniel Deronda* of the reader’s interest in Gwendolen and her environs might be reflective of her and Mazzini’s belief in the need to cultivate national interests and attachments before the realisation of a more cosmopolitan approach. In this way, readers who remain profoundly attached to the Gwendolen plot, to the exclusion of Deronda’s plot, which asks the English reader to cultivate sympathy for what is probably an unfamiliar culture and, therefore, to cultivate a cosmopolitan disposition, are, in a sense, failing to exercise cosmopolitan nationalism in their reading of the novel. In other words, instead of remaining rooted with – albeit once rootless – Gwendolen and her small community, the reader is invited to participate in a wider sympathy – that of the Jewish struggle to establish its own nation – and failure to do so, is a failure to understand the ethical approach at the heart of Eliot’s novel.

II. Eliot and Mazzini’s cultural cosmopolitanism

The terms “cosmopolitan nationalist” or “partial cosmopolitan,” both of which indicate a balancing of prioritised national attachment with concern for other nations’ welfare, impart a general sense of Eliot and Mazzini’s common approach to nations and international relations. Yet, both terms obscure more particular beliefs that Eliot and Mazzini entertained with reference to the cosmopolitan nature of art and to its position at the vanguard of an evolving cosmopolitan approach. Both Eliot and Mazzini appear to have conceived of the artistic world as one that naturally tended towards cosmopolitanism and the artist as a figure who heralded, in visionary

fashion, the ultimate cosmopolitan state of the “Holy Alliance of the Nations,” to use Mazzini’s term. Leopardi, in contrast, seems to have been little inclined to explore the cosmopolitan potential – so much as the nationalist potential – of literature (see p. 178 & ff. below). In an essay entitled “On a European Literature,” Mazzini describes how he perceived a Europeanising tendency in the world of letters that was pioneering a similar tendency in the political world. According to Mazzini, no single European literature has ever been completely isolated from the other European literatures: “No people has ever had a Literature so entirely derived from its own bowels that some foreign fragments weren’t mixed, from the beginning, with its traditions, and later with its conquests” (“European Literature” 97).³⁷ Now that “there is a European tendency” among the nations as political entities, according to Mazzini, it is vital that the European literatures accelerate their natural tendency to unite; “Literature...will have to make itself European” (“European Literature” 119). In fact, Mazzini argues that this was already happening: “The literary works of various peoples no longer present that impression of partiality, that exclusive Taste, because of which they could never obtain citizenship in foreign nations...an immensely more vast sphere has disclosed itself to the intellect” (“European Literature” 119). For Mazzini, the English Romantic poet Byron was the harbinger of the distinctly European literature that he perceived as emerging in his lifetime. In an essay on “Byron and Goethe” (1839), Mazzini subtly criticises the English people for not fully appreciating Byron and “the European *role* given by him to English literature” (419):

I know no more beautiful symbol of the future destiny and mission of art than the death of Byron in Greece. The holy alliance of poetry with the cause of the peoples...the grand solidarity of all nations in the conquest of the rights ordained by God for all his children

³⁷ All translations of Mazzini’s essay “On a European Literature” are my own.

[...] – and all that is now the religion and the hope of the party of progress throughout Europe, is gloriously typified in this image, which we, barbarians that we are, have already forgotten. (“Byron and Goethe” 418-19)

Thus, for Mazzini, Byron pioneered the role that art had to play in uniting the diverse peoples of Europe, and the promise of Byron – this most “beautiful symbol” of the “holy alliance” of poetry and people – was being realised in Mazzini’s own day. It is interesting to recall here that while Mazzini so highly rated Byron’s poetic legacy and so forcefully disapproved of Leopardi’s, especially what he saw as Leopardi’s moribund pessimism (see introduction pp. 23-24 above), other contemporary critics were actually quick to compare the two poets (see introduction pp. 8-9 above). As Mazzini states in “On a European Literature,” literature is “mak[ing] itself European.”

Unsurprisingly, given her association with him, Eliot was well aware of Mazzini’s (and Goethe’s) “advocacy of a European literature” (Thompson, *Eliot and Italy* 37). In fact, according to Thompson, Eliot herself, in her later novels, was participating in the movement, which Mazzini identified, towards the creation of a European literature. As Thompson puts it,

In George Eliot’s later fiction, and particularly in her last novel, there is a strong sense that Eliot....is using other literature, European and non-, to move beyond merely national identities, to communicate across, and break down, national divisions which reveal themselves to be radically unstable in her work. (*Eliot and Italy* 37)

This is a fundamental element of Eliot’s distinctly cosmopolitan attitude towards culture and is reflected in her populating the novel with cosmopolitan artists. It is surely significant that the three major artists in the novel – Leonora Halm-Eberstein, Hans Meyrick, and Herr Klesmer – assert cosmopolitan attitudes – with differing success – and reject narrow nationalisms. (Mirah –

with her nationalist sentiments – is an obvious exception to the general rule of cosmopolitan artistry; however, she always seems to be a somewhat reluctant artist and appears to abandon her music in marrying Deronda. Moreover, all too often Mirah constitutes a conduit for the more forceful aspirations of both Mordecai and Deronda, rather than expressing her own.)

Eliot's portrait of the cosmopolitan artist, Herr Klesmer, does erect him as a positive representative of a cosmopolitan world order, but those of Leonora Halm-Eberstein and Hans Meyrick seem to illuminate Eliot's *doubt* regarding the consequences of cosmopolitanism. Nevertheless, a closer investigation of the latter two figures reveals that Eliot's ambivalent portrayal of these characters is related either to an unrelated character flaw or to a distorted conception of cosmopolitanism. Halm-Eberstein, in whose characters issues of ethnicity and gender intersect, is the least successful example of a cosmopolitan artist in *Daniel Deronda*. In her first interview with her son, Halm-Eberstein tells Deronda that she greatly suffered under the restrictions placed on her as a woman: "you can never imagine," she tells Deronda, "what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl" (531). This "slavery," imposed upon her by her father, made Halm-Eberstein long "for the wide world" (530), which she gained in becoming "the greatest lyric actress of Europe" (538). However, Halm-Eberstein is not symbolic of an ideally united European culture. Believing that her voice is in "decline," she retreats from "the prospect of failure" to an advantageous marriage (538), which subsequently prevents her from continuing her career (when she realises her mistake). At the time of her interview with Deronda, she is suffering a mysterious "fatal illness" (529) and she describes herself as a "shattered woman" (559). Halm-Eberstein's tragic narrative of thwarted hopes leads critics such as Arkush to see her as "[t]he most graphic illustration of the damage that can result from too abrupt a desertion of one's ancestral ways" (Arkush 65; see also

Anderson 138). But it could, equally, be read as punishment for her egotistical hubris. Much like Gwendolen, Halm-Eberstein's desire to pursue a career in singing and acting is inspired more by her vanity than by a selfless passion for her vocation. So, when she believes that she is losing her pre-eminence as "the greatest lyric actress of Europe," Halm-Eberstein permanently abandons her vocation. In other words, like Gwendolen, she seems to care more for pre-eminence than for her art.

Hans Meyrick constitutes, perhaps, a more successful version of a cosmopolitan artist. In his own words, Meyrick believes in the "affinity of contrasts": "Nature designed Mirah to fall in love with me. The amalgamation of races demands it – the mitigation of human ugliness demands it – the affinity of contrasts assures it" (391). This belief, and his hope that "diversity, accompanied by merit, will make itself felt as fascination" (541), are typical of Meyrick's cosmopolitan outlook on life. However, Meyrick's cosmopolitanism is shallow in terms of its refusal of difference – the stance that Deronda ultimately rejects in the course of his developmental trajectory. In fact, Meyrick wishes to dissolve difference, especially Mirah's difference: "Hans had a secret desire to naturalize the Jewess in private life, which he was in danger of not keeping secret" (413). When Mirah insists to Hans that she is Jewish, Hans rebuts that she is "a perfect woman" – not wishing to think of Mirah as belonging to a race other than his own – and Mirah's smile in response "made [Hans] feel still more of a cosmopolitan" (413). In other words, Hans's cosmopolitanism, unlike that of Deronda (eventually), Mordecai, Mazzini, Eliot or Appiah, cannot tolerate separation between distinct national, racial, and cultural identities. He seems to wish, instead, that all races be subsumed into the Anglo-Protestant culture to which he belongs himself, and in which he feels comfortable. Tellingly, Eliot refuses him the opportunity of erasing Mirah's Jewish identity.

Eliot hints at the genuinely cosmopolitan nature of Herr Klesmer, the composer and music teacher who marries the English heiress Miss Arrowpoint, in the first sentence of his introduction; Klesmer was, she says, “a felicitous combination of the German, the Slave, and the Semite, with grand features, brown hair floating in an artistic fashion, and brown eyes in spectacles” (38). While his multi-racial identity does not, of course, alone render him a cosmopolitan, it is symbolic of the political attitude that Klesmer expresses later in the novel. In other words, Klesmer’s own “fusion” of races within himself symbolically presages his desire that such a “fusion” should happen on a global scale. Klesmer’s sincerely felt cosmopolitan opinions erupt during a dinner held at the Arrowpoints at which he encounters the “esteemed party man” Mr Bult, who “had the general solidity and suffusive pinkness of a healthy Briton on the central table-land of life” (202). Mr Bult is described as having “strong opinions concerning the districts of the Niger, [as being] much at home also in the Brazils, [and as speaking] with decision of affairs in the South Seas” (202). In other words, Bult’s interest in other nations lies exclusively in the commercial potential that such countries present in connection with England. Presumably in repeating such “strong opinions,” Bult arouses an “outburst” from Klesmer “on the lack of idealism in English politics, which left all neutrality between distant races to be determined simply by the need of a market” (202). While Bult assumes that Klesmer must be a “Panslavist” – “the name given to the movement which sought to unite all Slavonic peoples in one nationality” (according to a note in the Oxford edition – 698) – Miss Arrowpoint corrects him, ““Herr Klesmer has cosmopolitan ideas...He looks forward to a fusion of the races”” (203).

Of course, this is Miss Arrowpoint’s articulation of Klesmer’s cosmopolitan outlook, not Klesmer’s own. It is unclear whether Klesmer would describe his aspirations as towards a “fusion” of races, or as a co-operative co-existence that respects difference; however, his

interactions with others, particularly with Miss Arrowpoint and with Mirah, reveal an approach more closely aligned with the latter, with a form of cosmopolitanism that does not deny difference. On this very significant point, Klesmer differs from Meyrick: at no point does he attempt to suppress or to erase the difference between himself and either Miss Arrowpoint or Mirah. While Miss Arrowpoint is culturally alien to him, in being an English heiress, Klesmer says of her that “her fortune has been the only thing [he has] had to regret about her” (209); he does not wish her to accommodate herself to the differences between them, except in this superficial material fashion. Compare to Meyrick’s wish to suppress Mirah’s Jewishness. Again, while so many of Mirah’s acquaintances, including the Meyricks and even Deronda himself (on occasion), wish to suppress – to a greater or lesser extent – her Jewishness, Klesmer is interested exclusively in her ability as an artist and acknowledges her as an equal: “Let us shake hands: you are a musician” (409). With neither woman does Klesmer wish to alter or dilute their racial or cultural identity.

Several critics have commented on the scene in which Klesmer confronts Bult with the latter’s lack of idealism, remarking that Klesmer is either the voice of cosmopolitan ideals, or their very embodiment. Delia de Sousa Correa, for instance, suggests that Klesmer represents a kind of cosmopolitan ideal in the novel: “Klesmer seems to represent a homogenous cosmopolitan ideal” (171). However, none of these critics succeeds in explaining why, if Klesmer is the crucial counterpoint to English nationalism and an embodiment of ideal cosmopolitanism, he is not given more scope for development within the novel. In this respect, the best analysis of Klesmer’s character is Arkush’s. For Arkush, “Klesmer’s ‘supra-nationalism’ is, for George Eliot, an attainable ideal, one that can be reached even today by exceptional individuals and one that may or may not become more broadly accessible in the future” (62-63).

However, unlike other critics, Arkush explains that Klesmer is relegated to a marginal position because Eliot is suggesting, as Theophrastus puts it, that “[t]he time is not come for cosmopolitanism to be highly virtuous” (“The Modern Hep” 147). According to this argument, while she may believe that, ultimately, the human races will enjoy an ideal “fusion,” Eliot does not think that most people are prepared for such a development, except for a few progressive cosmopolitan artists like Klesmer. Klesmer can, in other words, be read as a symbol of future ethical developments of the relations between races.

Both Eliot and Mazzini believed that a global cosmopolitan order was in the process of evolution – and that cosmopolitan artists like Klesmer were its forerunners - but, as described above, that strong nationalist sentiments had to be fostered in order for this utopian goal to be realised. In other words, Mazzini theorised that without separate and distinct nations, there was no way for various peoples to co-operate *internationally*. Thus, in order for the global cosmopolitan order, what Mazzini termed the “Holy Alliance of the Nations,” to emerge, “distinct” nations with strong identities must first exist in order to enter into such an alliance. Thompson relates this evolutionary approach to cosmopolitanism back to Mazzini’s dedication to Italian reunification: “Mazzini...was working towards the establishment of the Nation of Italy as a step towards the ultimate unity of mankind” (“Giuseppe Mazzini” 110). Such an attitude is also evident in Eliot’s work, even beyond *Daniel Deronda*. In “The Modern Hep,” Theophrastus observes that emigration and immigration are inevitable: “The tendency of things is towards the quicker or slower fusion of races” (160); however, he also suggests that the role of the nation state is preparative, and protective, against the too-fast execution of this “fusion.” In other words, the “spirit of separateness” – that is at the heart of an individual national identity – “has not yet done its work in the education of mankind” (“The Modern Hep” 160). In the same way, in

Daniel Deronda, the creation of Israel is an important good in itself, but it is also a necessary step in order for Israelis to participate in the “brotherhood” of the world. As Mordecai says at the close of the Philosophers Club:

‘Let us contradict the blasphemy, and help *to will our own better future and the better future of the world* – not renounce our higher gift and say, “Let us be as if we were not among the populations;’ but choose our full heritage, *claim the brotherhood of our nation, and carry into it a new brotherhood with the nations of the Gentiles*. (my emphasis – 454)

Arkush neatly summarises this stance: “[o]ne cannot understand Eliot’s approbation of nationalism unless one remembers that she sees it as a transitory phenomenon, a form of group loyalty that will in the end be superseded by a ‘fusion’ of all races” (63). As argued above, this belief in the preparative role of distinct nations is evident in both aspects of the double plot in which *Deronda* and *Gwendolen* must cultivate genuine local attachments before cultivating cosmopolitan ones. Furthermore, this model of development even appears to be embedded in the structure of the novel itself in which the reader is encouraged to sympathise with the more domesticated character of *Gwendolen*, before engaging with the more unfamiliar *Deronda*.

Both Mazzini and Eliot perceived culture as being, on the one hand, at the forefront of nationalist sentiment and, on the other hand, at the vanguard of a global cosmopolitan order. As described above, and as Milbank has argued, both believed that the culture and tradition of a particular nation were crucial to that nation’s cultivation of a distinct identity. However, both also believed that artists, and their cultural products, constituted the avant-garde of the cosmopolitan movement. Thus, in “On a European Literature,” Mazzini argues that the literary works of separate European nations are beginning to display European traits, rather than English,

German, French, or Italian ones, long before a European political community has come into existence (119). Similarly, in *Daniel Deronda*, the artistic figures espouse – whether successfully or not – cosmopolitan attitudes that contradict the ruling political class’s purely commercial interest in the world beyond British borders (as symbolised by the conservative Bult). These artistic cosmopolitans – Leonora Halm-Eberstein, Hans Meyrick, and Herr Klesmer – could, therefore, and despite their limitations, be interpreted as being predictive in their subscription to, as Meyrick puts it, the “affinity of contrasts.” However, these cosmopolitan artists either retreat into “decline and failure” or are relegated to the side-lines of the novel’s action. Halm-Eberstein tragically personifies the lonely difficulties of foregoing national allegiances in order to embrace the “wide world,” particularly as a woman, as well as the dangers of a hubristic attitude in the absence of any “higher” allegiance. Less tragically, Meyrick, and his form of difference-erasing cosmopolitanism, is rendered obsolete by the end of the novel. Unsuccessful in his pursuit of Mirah, and his quest to expunge her Jewish identity, Meyrick is not even present at her and Deronda’s wedding. Finally, Klesmer, though a “successful” and appealing cosmopolitan figure, disappears from the action of the novel after auditioning Mirah as a singer. The most plausible explanation for Klesmer’s disappearance is that, as Arkush argues, Eliot did not believe her era was prepared for the “highly virtuous cosmopolitanism” that he represented. According to Arkush, in “embrac[ing] Mordecai and Daniel’s Jewish nationalism” and “holding Klesmer’s universalism at arm’s length,” Eliot is merely trying to restrain the pace of the “fusion” of the human races (63). But another interpretation of Klesmer’s role could be that he is the herald of the eventual “Holy Alliance of the Nations” – a role peculiar to the artistic figure – and that *Deronda*, instead, represents the political force necessary to foster the “nationalities” that will ultimately compose such an alliance.

III. Eliot's use of "To Italy" in *Daniel Deronda*: Deronda's cosmopolitan nationalism

Deronda's evolution towards this role, his acceptance of a vocation in helping to found Israel, is signalled at crucial moments by the highly significant use of Leopardi's ode "To Italy." The principal theme of "To Italy," as the eminent Leopardi editor Mario Rigoni puts it, is the "contrast between the decadence and the obscurity of contemporary Italy...and the immortal Glory" of ancient civilizations, especially of Ancient Greece (917), represented in the poem by the Spartans' legendary effort to restrain the Persians from invading their country. The poetic dramatisation of this contrast is intended both to model an example of inspiring patriotism and to participate in the rejuvenation of "decaden[t]" and "obscur[e]" Italy by doing so. After all, as Leopardi puts it in the poem's dedication to the contemporary poet Vincenzo Monti, Italy survives exclusively on the heritage of her literature and fine arts:

today, whoever deplores or exhorts our fatherland, can do nothing but remember, with infinite consolation, You, who together with those very few others...sustain our late glory, by which I mean to say that glory that derives from scholarship and particularly from literature and the fine arts, so much so that one cannot say that Italy is dead.

("Dedicatorie" 155)³⁸

Thus, while Leopardi was so often denigrated as a poet of "despair," his early ode "To Italy" is presented in this dedication as part of an exclusive movement to "sustain [Italy's] late glory" and, in fact, to sustain Italy's life through its citizens' literature – hardly a "despairing" objective. This poem, then, demonstrates an entirely different type of pessimism to that which prevails in much of the rest of Leopardi's oeuvre. As Sebastiano Timpanaro writes, the pessimism of this poem is "rather an intense refusal of the atmosphere of the Restoration, and a desire for a

³⁸ This translation of Leopardi's "Dedicatorie" is my own.

Republican society...capable of living an intense life under the impulse of energetic and magnanimous illusions” (“Alcune Osservazioni” 153).³⁹ “To Italy,” then, manifests Leopardi’s willingness – at this point in his poetic career – to embrace “energetic and magnanimous illusions” in his fight to ameliorate the degradation of Italy, rather than succumbing to a disillusioned acceptance of a pessimistic philosophy that insists on the nothingness of life. More recently, critics like Galassi have recognised that the representation, in the second half of “To Italy,” of the ancient Greek poet Simonides’ voice is Leopardi’s “first representation of the poet’s self-consciousness, his definition of the poet’s calling and his anxiety for fame” (386), and that the poem is, therefore, a “precursor of Leopardi’s own autobiographical testimonies, and hence of our modern ‘confessional’ lyric” (386). Such critics seek to deny – or at least diminish – the traditional distinction between Leopardi’s early patriotic odes and the later, personal lyric meditations, so deeply impressed with Leopardi’s philosophical pessimism. However, while such a perspective allows us to regard “Leopardi’s *Canti* in a new, unitary light,” as Dotti points out, the “traditional civil and patriotic aspects of the poem” (Introduction 12) cannot be negated – nor the ode’s afterlife during the Risorgimento (see pp. 151 above). Instead, it should be recognised that both patriotic and “existential” elements are intertwined in Leopardi’s early patriotic odes, but that these odes do demonstrate a more vigorous kind of pessimism.

Leopardi never seems to have been troubled with the dilemma of reconciling nationalist and cosmopolitan sentiment, only ever having been subject to the former. There is scant evidence for a cosmopolitan outlook on Leopardi’s part, although he does, seemingly approvingly quote the words of the literary cosmopolitan Prince Castel-Forte (from Madame de Staël’s *Corinne*) in his *Zibaldone*:

³⁹ All translations of Timpanaro’s essay are my own.

“It seems to me we all need each other. To those who know how to appreciate it, the literature of every country reveals a new sphere of ideas. Charles V himself said that ‘a man who knows four languages is worth four men.’ If that great political genius held this opinion about worldly affairs, how much truer must that not be for literature?” (1729)

While Leopardi does not comment on these lines, meaning it is not entirely clear how he perceives this statement, it seems unlikely that he would bother to copy them down if he violently disagreed with their claim. Generally, Leopardi describes the nationalist and cosmopolitan attitudes as mutually exclusive; as Cesare Luporini puts it, Leopardi equated “love of country, national spirit” with “hatred of the foreign” (15). For example, in his *Zibaldone* in 1821, a couple of years after the composition of “To Italy,” Leopardi writes “[w]herever there has been true love of the homeland, there has been hatred of the foreigner: wherever the foreigner is not hated as a foreigner, the homeland is not loved” (880). As a young man, Leopardi did have a strong “love of country,” but one that was “exclusively linked to literary questions,” as Luigi Blasucci, an Italian scholar whose seminal work revived interest in the early patriotic odes, puts it (“Sulle due prime canzoni” 40).⁴⁰ In fact, according to Blasucci, Leopardi’s patriotic fervour was extinguished by the time he concluded writing his “Discourse” against Romanticism (1821). However, around the time of his composing “To Italy” (1819), Leopardi expressed strong patriotic sentiments in his correspondence. In an 1820 letter to Giuseppe Montani, Leopardi utters one of his most rousing pronouncements on his love of Italy and his belief that a national literature was fundamental to his country’s “regeneration”:

I’ll not let anything I can do remain undone, and I shan’t fail to respond to your exhortations. To my mind [political unification and autonomy] is not something Italy can

⁴⁰ All translations of Blasucci’s essay are my own.

hope for until she has books suited to the times, read and understood by the common reader, and available from one end of the country to the other; a thing as frequent among foreigners as it is unheard of in Italy. And it seems to me that the very recent example of other nations shows us clearly how much truly national books can do in this age to rouse the slumbering spirits of a people and produce great events. (*Letters* 75)

It is, then, Italy's cultural, especially literary, heritage that, for Leopardi, ensured Italy's survival as a nation: it was "that glory that derives from scholarship and particularly from literature and the fine arts" that meant "one cannot say that Italy is dead" (Leopardi, "Dedicatorie" 155).

Ultimately, questions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism were not, for Leopardi, the most vital ones, but "To Italy," the ode that represents the high point of Leopardi's Republicanism, is an anomaly in this respect.

It is the more "vigorous," patriotic pessimism of "To Italy" on which Eliot draws when she directly references Leopardi's ode in *Daniel Deronda* on three separate occasions. At Mirah's audition with Klesmer, she chooses to sing "a fine setting of some words selected from Leopardi's grand Ode to Italy" (408). These words include the first four lines, which contrast the contemporary ruins of Italy with her past "glory":

O my country, I can see the walls
and arches and the columns and the statues
and lonely towers of our ancestors,
but I don't see the glory. (1-4)

(O patria mia, vedo le mura e gli archi
E le colonne e i simulacri e l'erme

Torri degli avi nostri,

Ma la Gloria non vedo. [1-4])

These are followed by three lines that come later in the poem and express the “blessedness” of the Spartans who were fortunate enough to die for their own country, rather than for another country (as Italian soldiers who fought in Napoleon’s armies did):

Most blessed, you

whose chests took the foe’s spears

for love of her who gave you to the Sun. (84-86)

(Beatissimi voi,

Ch’offriste il petto alle nemiche lance

Per amor di costei ch’al Sol vi diede. [84-86])

Finally, Mirah sings the concluding lines of the penultimate stanza that, again, laud the “blessedness” of the Spartans whose memory is legendary:

Oh live, oh live, forever. You are blessed

as long as men will live to tell your story. (119-20)

(Oh viva, oh viva:

Beatissimi voi

Mentre nel mondo si favela o scriva. [118-20])

As Eliot describes it, the tone of the arrangement Mirah sings matches the tone of the lines of the ode on which it is based. Thus, the opening lines that lament Italy’s degradation are “a mournful melody, a rhythmic plaint,” the energetic eulogising of the Spartans’ sacrifice is “a climax of

devout triumph,” and the final lines a “joyous outburst of an exultant Allegro” (409).

Significantly, it is this piece of music that Klesmer “recommend[s] [Mirah] to choose” to sing at Lady Mallinger’s private concert – in order to attract clients for singing lessons – “as more distinctive of her than better known music” (469). Finally, the description of Deronda’s response to Mirah’s singing, which is influenced by his knowledge of the entire ode, is worth quoting in full. Deronda

knew well Leopardi’s fine Ode to Italy...and the few selected words were filled for him with the grandeur of the whole, which seemed to breathe as inspiration through the music. Mirah singing this, made Mordecai more than ever one presence with her. Certain words not included in the song nevertheless rang within Deronda as harmonies from one invisible –

‘Non ti difende

Nessun de’ tuoi? L’armi, qua l’armi: io solo

Combatterò, procomberò sol io’ (471)

The extra lines quoted here: “None of your own defend you? / To arms! Bring me my sword: / I’ll fight alone, I’ll fall alone” (36-38), occur at the end of the first two stanzas that, as mentioned above, lament the degradation of Italy and express the speaker’s willingness to fight and die for his country when no one else will. The description of Deronda’s response to Leopardi’s ode then continues; these lines

seemed the very voice of that heroic passion which is falsely said to devote itself in vain when it achieves the godlike end of manifesting unselfish love. And that passion was present to Deronda now as the vivid image of a man dying helplessly away from the possibility of battle. (471-72)

Here, Eliot purposefully leaves ambiguous the identity of the “man dying helplessly away from...battle,” probably because, I suggest, Deronda may be thinking of both Mordecai and Leopardi here, and identifying the one with the other in an association that is crucial to his embracing his nationalist Jewish vocation.

Before Lady Mallinger’s private concert, and until shortly after this event, Deronda exists, as Albrecht points out, in a state of impartial sympathy. Early in the novel, Deronda is represented as unwilling to define his destiny in a way that would exclude another destiny. As quoted above in the discussion of Deronda’s too impartial cosmopolitanism (15), Deronda “longed [...] to have the sort of apprenticeship to life which would not shape him too definitely, and rob him of the choice that might come from a free growth” (151). This state – of not being “shape[d]” “too definitely” – is eventually contrasted with that in which Deronda realises his vocation: working towards the establishment of a Jewish nation. “It was as if he had found an added soul in finding his ancestry,” Eliot writes,

his judgment no longer wandering in the mazes of impartial sympathy, but choosing, with that noble partiality which is man’s best strength, the closer fellowship that makes sympathy practical – exchanging that bird’s eye reasonableness which soars to avoid preference and loses all sense of quality, for the generous reasonableness of drawing shoulder to shoulder with men of like inheritance. (627)

Thus, as Albrecht describes, Deronda progresses from an “impartial sympathy,” which actually fails to acknowledge difference respectfully, to a partial sympathy, which allows him to do so, without contradicting his fundamentally cosmopolitan stance. The significance of the concert scene, I argue, is that it represents a key moment in Deronda’s vital shift from the former to the

latter stance – a shift which is catalysed by Deronda’s recognition of the parallels between Mordecai and the speaker of Leopardi’s “To Italy.”

While several critics have commented on the way Eliot’s concerted tracing of parallels between the Italian reunification movement and the proto-Zionist movement was intended to elicit the sympathy of her reader for the latter (see p. 152 above), I argue that the connection of the two movements is equally crucial to engaging Deronda’s own sympathy with Jewish nationalism. Deronda, it should be remembered, is, initially, as complicit in an instinctive anti-Semitism as any character in the novel. Shortly after meeting Mirah, the narrator acknowledges that Deronda was aware of “ugly stories of Jewish characteristics and occupations” and had “never cared to reach any more special conclusions about actual Jews than that they retained the virtues and vices of a long-oppressed race” (172). Thus, when Deronda thinks of assisting Mirah in her search for her mother, he is assailed by ugly imagined encounters:

he saw himself guided by some official scout into a dingy street; he entered through a dim doorway, and saw a hawk-eyed woman, rough-headed, and unwashed, cheapening a hungry girl’s last bit of finery; or in some quarter only the more hideous for being smarter, he found himself under the breath of a young Jew talkative and familiar, willing to show his acquaintance with gentleman’s tastes, and not fastidious in any transactions with which they would favour him – and so on through the brief chapter of his experience. (172-73)

By the time Deronda begins his desultory search for Mirah’s family, these prejudices have not dissipated – hence the desultoriness of the search. In fact, during his attempt to find “Ezra Cohen,” Deronda is continually afraid of discovering that Mirah’s Jewish relatives do not accord with his “sense of poetry” (319). While he “con[d]emn[s]” the “feeble, fastidious sympathy

which shrinks from the broad life of mankind,” he also “saw every common Jew and Jewess in the light of comparison with [Mirah], and had a presentiment of the collision between her idea of the unknown mother and brother and the discovered fact” (319-20). He is particularly concerned that “Ezra Cohen should not keep a shop” (320). When Deronda does come across a shopkeeper with Mirah’s brother’s name, his “first endeavour...was to convince himself that there was not the slightest warrantable presumption of this Ezra being Mirah’s brother” or, even if he were, that he should be obliged to “make known the discovery to Mirah” (321).

Deronda, however, soon becomes fascinated with Ezra Cohen’s more “poetic” boarder: Mirah’s brother Mordecai, who had “precisely such a physiognomy as that might possibly have been seen in a prophet of the Exile, or in some New Hebrew poet of the mediaeval time” (323). Deronda immediately feels a “certain awe” for Mordecai, and “an embarrassment at not meeting his expectations” (336), in not knowing he is Jewish or in not being able to speak Hebrew. After only a few meetings with Mordecai, he realises that he is “half dominated by Mordecai’s energetic certitude, and still more by his fervent trust” and this sense “rouse[s] his alarm” (429). While this alarm is owed, in part, to Deronda’s unwillingness to be dragged “along a dimly-seen path,” to abdicate control of his future direction – even to have a defined and definite direction – it is also a natural consequence of the earlier, tenacious prejudices and the alien-ness of Mordecai’s culture. Accordingly, Deronda puts to himself the rhetorical question, “[w]hy should he be ashamed of his own agitated feeling merely because he dressed for dinner, wore a white tie, and lived among people who might laugh at his owning any conscience in the matter” (429)?

Deronda’s alarm is, however, increasingly subdued and this is, in part, the consequence of his connecting Mordecai to important figures of the Italian Risorgimento, a movement for which he clearly has much enthusiasm – as so many English people did in the 1860s of the

novel's setting. The first instance of Deronda's making such a connection is, of course, during the Philosophers' Club meeting, at which he explicitly compares the proto-Zionist movement with that of Italian unification. In response to Mordecai's vision of a renewed nation of Israel ("let the unity of Israel which has made the growth and form of its religion be an outward reality" – 449), Deronda presents Mazzini's vision of a united Italy as an example of a similar prophecy that was fulfilled:

Look into Mazzini's account of his first yearning, when he was a boy, after a restored greatness, and a new freedom to Italy, and of his first efforts as a young man to rouse the same feelings in other young men, and get them to work towards a united nationality.

Almost everything seemed against him... Yet you see the prophecy lay with him. (452)

In this speech, Deronda asserts that, though Mordecai's fellow members of the Philosophers' Club are opposed to or incredulous of Mordecai's "yearning" for a restored nation of Israel, his vision may prove as prophetic as Mazzini's did with reference to Italy. In this way, Deronda attempts, not only to legitimise Mordecai's vision in the eyes of his skeptical companions, but also to convince himself of the sanity of his new mentor's desires and objectives.

The second instance of Deronda's making such a connection occurs during Mirah's singing at Lady Mallinger's concert. Given Leopardi's (lack of a) reputation in England at the time, it is unusual that Deronda should know Leopardi's "To Italy" so well – as he clearly does, given his recall of those lines that Mirah does *not* sing – and should feel intimately its "inspiration" towards patriotic action. The peculiar nature of this knowledge is, however, rendered less surprising within the context of Deronda's abiding interest in Italian culture: the first time we encounter Deronda the child he is reading "Sismond's History of the Italian

Republics” (137)⁴¹; a little later in the narrative we discover that Deronda the youth knows the gondolier’s song in Rossini’s *Otello* by heart (156); and his interjections at the philosopher’s club demonstrate a strong interest in Mazzini’s thought. Deronda’s response to Mirah’s rendition of Leopardi’s ode is, of course, fraught with meaning. Perhaps the most intriguing element of his reaction, is the way in which Deronda associates the speaker of Leopardi’s ode (and Leopardi himself, since he is so closely aligned with this imagined speaker), with the mystical, proto-Zionist Mordecai – as mentioned above (37). Like the speaker of “To Italy,” the poet who wishes to participate in a battle for his country not yet begun, Mordecai is dying of tuberculosis in London, far away from the Palestinian lands where he so passionately desires to assist in the battle for an Israeli nation that has, similarly, barely begun. Another key element of Deronda’s response, however, is his recalling lines from the ode that Mirah does *not* sing. Those lines: “None of your own defend you? / To arms! Bring me my sword: / I’ll fight alone, I’ll fall alone” (36-38), as mentioned above, express the speaker of the ode’s / Leopardi’s willingness to sacrifice himself for his country. Thus, when Deronda recalls these lines, he appropriates the speaker’s / Leopardi’s nationalist bellicosity, inserting himself in the struggle to acknowledge the precarious plight of his own nation and to accept a role in its salvation. In doing so, he also presages his own role in “fight[ing]” for his yet undiscovered nation to replicate Italy’s almost miraculous-seeming achievement of national unification and autonomy. And all of this occurs before Deronda has received confirmation of Mordecai’s hopes: his Jewish inheritance.

⁴¹ Interestingly, Eliot may have imagined Deronda coming across Leopardi’s name for the first time in this book, in which, in a brief note at the end, Sismondi writes: “In the nineteenth-century Leopardi, like an Atlas, bore a world of poetic sorrow and despair; he sang a swan song of the passing of Italy” (796). However, whereas Sismondi’s view of Leopardi seems to have much in common with Mazzini’s, Deronda’s has more in common with Eliot’s in its acknowledging of the poet’s vigorous expression of republican sentiment.

Deronda's association of the nationalist movements of Italy and Israel at the Philosophers' Club, and his connection between the speaker of Leopardi's ode and Mordecai, thus facilitate his own acceptance of a role in the struggle on behalf of a nation that was, previously, unappealing to his personal inclinations. In fact, Deronda's intensely personal response to Mirah's singing, and his recalling those lines that Mirah does not sing, but which comprise the speaker's call to arms, herald Deronda's embracing of such a vocation. Although at this point in the novel – at the beginning of Lady Mallinger's concert – he continues to experience the paralyzing effects of an impartial cosmopolitan sympathy, Deronda's response to "To Italy" is the first indication that he will abandon this impossible attitude in order to dedicate himself to his own "nation." While in the narrative that culminates in this scene, Deronda often manifests a disinclination to engage with Jewish culture, the connection that he consolidates here, between Leopardi and Mordecai, and that which he made between Mazzini and Mordecai at the Philosophers' Club, signal a nascent willingness to embrace the cultural heritage that he is about to discover, and to separate himself from other obligations. It is no narrative coincidence, then, that, shortly after this episode, Deronda receives the letter from his mother, Princess Leonora Halm-Eberstein, which prompts the necessary personal revelations (519). Finally, however, while the poem signals Deronda's shift to a more *partial* cosmopolitan nationalism, the context in which it appears must not be forgotten. During Lady Mallinger's private concert we witness a proto-Zionist Jewish woman singing an Italian ode, inspiring Deronda himself with patriotic zeal, and this is a cosmopolitan event in itself. It constitutes a demonstration of how one nation's cultural heritage can serve another culture's nationalist movement. Thus, the inclusion of the ode here, while deeply significant in terms of Deronda's ethical evolution from impartial

cosmopolitan to cosmopolitan nationalist, also reminds us that Deronda never abandons a fundamentally cosmopolitan approach.

IV. Eliot's use of "To Italy" in *Daniel Deronda*: cultural cosmopolitanism

Aligned with Eliot's theoretical ideas on cultural cosmopolitanism are the novelist's formal practices: her tendency to draw on the culture of one national movement in order to reinforce the claims of another. This tendency, of course, is most clearly evident in the character of Deronda whose ability to embrace the Jewish national movement as his vocation is, in part, catalysed by his connection of it to the Italian Risorgimento, and of Mordecai to figures within the movement like Mazzini and Leopardi himself. Culturally English, though of Jewish and Italian heritage, Deronda is shown to have an affinity for Italian scholarship and art. This is signalled from the very start of Deronda's narrative, when the reader encounters him reading "Sismond's History of the Italian Republics" (137), and it is, ultimately, his affinity for the Italian culture that, eventually – once Deronda connects the aspirations of the two nations – facilitates his embracing of his Jewish culture. This culturally cosmopolitan perspective is also reflected in Eliot's references of "To Italy" in *Daniel Deronda*, which create a kind of "matryoshka doll" effect, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter (see p. 153 above). As the Zionist Deronda draws on his familiarity with the Italian nationalist cause, and Eliot on the same, to harness sympathy for the Zionist cause, so does Leopardi himself draw on the example of ancient Greek patriotism to harness patriotic verve in defending Italy's cause in that ode.

Eliot's choice of "To Italy," then, may well have been inspired by this strategy – the harnessing of the vitality and sympathy of one national movement to another in a single work – which is also in operation in Leopardi's poem. In other words, as the patriotic ode "To Italy" functions in *Daniel Deronda* to catalyse Deronda's own embracing of the Jewish nationalist

cause, so the song of the ancient Greek poet Simonides in Leopardi's "To Italy" functions as inspiration for his appeal to Italian nationalist sentiment. While it is not clear from the way the ode is quoted in the novel, Eliot would certainly have been aware that the second half of the ode – and the more "vivid" half (as Galassi points out – 386) – comprises an imitation of a song Simonides might have sung at the close of the Battle of Thermopylae to eulogise the sacrifice of the Spartan warriors. Simonides [di Ceo] (556-468 B.C.), as Rigoni tells us, was a "Greek lyric poet who celebrated the fallen of Thermopylae in an encomium a fragment of which...was translated by [Leopardi's friend, Pietro] Giordani" (918). Dotti includes Giordani's translation of this fragment in his edition of Leopardi's *Canti*:

The fate of the dead at Thermopylae is glorious, the end is beautiful, the tomb an altar, praise the misfortune. The funeral vestments of those valorous men will not ever be consumed nor discoloured by time, which defeats every thing. Their sepulchre contains the Glory of the inhabitants of Greece. Leonida, King of Sparta, who left behind [an example of] the great beauty of virtue and perennial fame, is testament to this. (211)⁴²

(De' morti alle Termopile gloriosa è la fortuna, bello il fine, altare la tomba, lode la sventura. La funeral vesta di que' valorosi non sarà consumata né discolorata mai del tempo che vince ogni cosa. La loro sepoltura contiene la Gloria degli abitanti della Grecia. N'è testimonio Leonida, re di Sparta, che lasciò gran bellezza di virtù e fama perenne. [211])

⁴² This translation of Giordani is my own.

Leopardi was struck by the Spartans' legendary courage at Thermopylae in defending their nation – even writing in his own notes to the *Canti* that it was impossible to withhold one's tears in merely reading about it (Rigoni 147) – and chose this sacrifice as the symbol of a perfect, active patriotism that Italians must emulate in order to restore the greatness of their own nation.

Thus, in his “Argomento di una canzone sullo stato presente dell'Italia” (“Premise for a ‘canzone’ on the present state of Italy”) Leopardi talks of “imitat[ing] the song of Simonides” in order to harness his sublime patriotic song to the Italian cause, lamenting “if only I could sing as well for the Italians” (Rigoni 621). Significantly, in this same “Premise,” Leopardi talks of “passing to his [Simonides'] words all of a sudden [di colpo]” – in other words, he intends to shift, without signalling the shift, to the voice of Simonides, thus erasing the distinction between himself and Simonides. In fact, Leopardi's critics have pointed out that certain phrases in “To Italy” – such as the oxymoronic “the sacred band who died became immortal” (78) (“morendo / Si sottrasse da morte il santo stuolo” – 77-78) and “Your tomb is an altar” (125) (“La vostra tomba è un'ara” – 125) – are direct translations of Simonides' fragment. More generally, however, Leopardi's version of Simonides song borrows many of the ideas contained in this brief encomium. To begin with, while Simonides says that the death of the Spartan warriors at Thermopylae was a “glorious” destiny, a “beautiful...end,” Leopardi, in a similar vein, writes, as quoted above: “Most blessed, you / whose chests took the foe's spears / for love of her who gave you to the Sun” (84-86). The Italian poet furthers this suggestion, that their death was “beautiful,” by imagining that they ran “smiling” to their death (91-94) as though they were hurrying to “a dance or splendid banquet” (95). Leopardi also incorporates Simonides' idea that the Spartans' fame will endure eternally. Simonides, in the above fragment, uses the metaphor of the funereal vestments that will never decay, whereas Leopardi, in an imaginative image, writes:

Prima divelte, in mar precipitando,
Spente nell'imo strideran le stele,
Che la memoria e il vostro
Amor trascorra o scemi. (121-24)

(The stars will fall from the sky and into the sea
and scream as they're put out
before we forget you
and our love for you will die. [121-24])

Finally, while Simonides writes that the Spartans' "tomb contains the Glory of the inhabitants of Greece," Leopardi describes how the stones and clods of earth on which the Spartans died "shall be praised and glorious forever / from pole to pole" (130-31) ("fien lodate e chiare eternamente / Dall'uno all'altro polo" [130-31]).

As De Robertis puts it, "the poet [that is Simonides] is the voice of the fatherland" (qtd. in Gavazzeni & Lombardi 102), and, by incorporating this voice in "To Italy," Leopardi hopes to inspire those unworthy sons of Italy to take up and fight for their nation's cause.⁴³ As the speaker himself says in the second verse, he hopes that his "blood" – a metaphor for his literary work that he contributes to the fight for his country – will be "inspiring to Italian hearts" (40). Clearly, of course, the poem is trans-historical, as well as trans-national – as Rigoni points out, the poem is also about "the untiring obsession surrounding the contents of the ancient and of the modern and their enigmatic and decisive fracturing" (916). However, this does not negate the fact that Leopardi *also* draws on a legendary example of Greek patriotism in order to inspire Italians to a

⁴³ This translation of De Robertis's comment is my own.

similarly heroic act of Italian patriotism. Thus, both Leopardi and Eliot draw on alternate national movements within the context of their work – Greek and Italian – in order to harness vigorous nationalist sentiment to another – Italian and Jewish. Knowing the entirety of the poem, although she does not include more than a few lines in *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot would have been highly aware of what she was doing, and of the neat “matryoshka doll” effect created by espousing a strategic cultural cosmopolitanism by including a work that espoused a similar strategy of cultural cosmopolitanism.

To a reader without Eliot and *Deronda*’s knowledge of Leopardi and his patriotic ode, “To Italy,” the references to both in *Daniel Deronda* may not resound with the novelist’s complex thinking on cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and sympathy as strongly as they should. However, such references signal vital nexuses in Eliot’s thinking on nations and international relations and crucial stages in *Deronda*’s sympathetic evolution to a partial cosmopolitanism, which occurs – partly – via his recognition of the association between Jewish and Italian national movements. While Eliot and Mazzini were both, broadly speaking, cosmopolitan nationalists, this label also, ultimately, effectively summarises the approach of *Deronda*, and the crucial turning point in his development of such an approach occurs during the second scene in which Mirah sings Leopardi’s “To Italy.” But Eliot and Mazzini also saw connections between art and the cosmopolitan attitude and viewed artists as heralds of a “Holy Alliance of Nations.” While Leopardi’s subscription to such beliefs is less immediately obvious in his prose writings, his “To Italy” exemplifies this attitude in its very structure. This is why Eliot chose this ode to incorporate into the cosmopolitan structure of *Daniel Deronda*, which also includes the patriotic texts of alternative national movements in order to draw on sympathy for the Jewish one. What I

have called the matryoshka effect, as well as the portrayal of Klesmer, invoke a strong cultural cosmopolitanism and provide a kind of backdrop to the nationalist political actions of Deronda in fomenting the creation of an Israeli nation. Ultimately, however, both Mazzini (and Eliot) would argue that Deronda's nationalist political actions were the necessary precursor to the so-called "Holy Alliance of the Nations," and not, therefore, in opposition to the cultural cosmopolitan backdrop that is, actually, a kind of foreground.

Chapter six: The Structure of Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* and Leopardi's *Canti*

In 1933 the young French scholar Maurice Pollet approached A. E. Housman – via the poet's enduring friend and publisher, Grant Richards – to answer what were supposed to be a few questions on his life, his work, and his influences. At the time, Pollet was warned by Richards not to expect any “specific answer from [him]” (Richards 267), since, as Richards commented in a letter to Pollet, “[t]he note of Mr. Housman's character is his reticence” (qtd. in Richards 273). However, to Richards' surprise – perhaps even to A. E. H.'s own surprise – Pollet received an answer, and a pretty full one. Among questions of a personal bent (“Were those years you spent in Oxford decisive for your opinions – say, about life or man's destiny – as such years at a University sometimes are for students?”), and questions that sought explanations of certain aspects of *A Shropshire Lad* (“may I...rely on their general order to infer from it some sort of evolution which I seem to discern in certain themes?” – Richards 268), there was one that hopefully probed for information on Housman's philosophical and literary “opinion[s]”:

You may well understand that, besides these questions, I would very much like to know your own opinion about many people, ancients or moderns, among whom I would bring to the fore [in the critical essay he was planning on Housman]: The Stoics, the Epicureans; – Villon, Pascal, Verlaine; – Leopardi; Calderon; – Ed. Fitzgerald; – the German philosophers of the last century: Kant, Schopenhauer, Hartmann; – Th. Hardy; – and many others. (Richards 269)

Pollet had evidently associated the pervasive bleakness of Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* (*ASL*) with the philosophical pessimism of – among others – Leopardi. This association is clear from other questions Pollet posed, in which he asks Housman, for example, whether “Be still, my soul, be still” “followed a particularly sharp crisis of pessimism” (Richards 268).

In his response, Housman brusquely denies ever having “had any such thing as a ‘crisis of pessimism’” and defines himself as a “pejorist” rather than a “pessimist,” commenting that he resembles George Eliot in this respect who “said she was not an optimist but a meliorist” (Housman, *Letters* 329). However, Housman’s final reply to Pollet’s inquiry as to his literary and philosophical opinions, and the ways in which it differs from his draft reply, is fascinating in its suggestion of Leopardi’s importance to the English scholar-poet:

I respect the Epicureans more than the Stoics, but I am myself a Cyrenaic. Pascal and *Leopardi I have studied with great admiration*; Villon and Verlaine very little, Calderon and German philosophers not at all. For Hardy I felt affection, and a high admiration for some of his novels and a few of his poems. (Housman, *Letters* 330 – my emphasis)

Housman’s statement on his having “studied” Leopardi “with great admiration” is especially striking given that the author of *ASL* was not effusive – as is evident in the remainder of the above paragraph. Moreover, there are two versions of this letter, and the first one – the draft – gives a less full account of Housman’s specifically literary opinions:

I respect the Epicureans more than the Stoics, but my man is Aristippus of Cyrene, who was not afraid of words. Of the writers you mention the only two whom I have read and admired much are Pascal and Leopardi. For Hardy I had great affection, and admiration for some of his novels and a little of his poetry. (Housman, *Letters* 326)

While Housman is more expansive on his philosophical stance in this version, he mentions fewer literary authors than in the final version of his response to Pollet. In fact, it is as though Housman includes the names of Villon, Verlaine, and Calderon in the final version of his letter not only to address more of the young scholar’s specific inquiries, but also to use those names Pollet mentioned to highlight, via contrast, the strong, personal importance of Pascal and Leopardi. As

Carlo Caruso puts it in a 2016 seminar delivered on the subject of Housman and Leopardi, “[i]n the letter that was actually sent to Pollet, more names are mentioned, yet – as it appears – only for the sake of creating a marked foil for the warm approval already bestowed on both Pascal and Leopardi” (2). Why such unprecedented forthcomingness? According to Housman himself, who seems to have anticipated Richards’ curiosity, which he satisfied in a “laconic note,” he “thought that for the sake of posterity [he] might as well answer some of the young man’s Questions” (Richards 269).

Housman’s “great admiration” for Leopardi is also evident in his ownership of Charles Edwardes’ translation of Leopardi’s essays and dialogues – one of only three Italian works that were discovered in Housman’s library (Naiditch 177).⁴⁴ Housman’s possession of Leopardi’s prose exclusively should not, however, be taken as evidence that he was familiar only with this portion of the Italian’s work. To begin with, it is hard to imagine the accurate-minded and accurate-speaking Housman claiming to have “studied [Leopardi] with great admiration” without having read the second-greatest Italian poet’s poetry, especially given the primary significance of the *Canti* to nineteenth-century readers of Leopard (see Introduction p. 5 above). It is, in fact, quite possible that Housman once owned other copies of Leopardi’s works that were either removed from his library before his death or dispersed after his death, without being identified as having belonged to Housman. As P. G. Naiditch points out in “The Extant Portion of the Library of A.E.Housman,” “[n]o means exists to allow us to identify all of the books Housman possessed” both because of Housman’s own reduction of his library in his later years and because not all of his “non-classical books were fitted with a label commemorating their

⁴⁴ The others were Arthur John Butler’s translation of *Purgatorio* and the Rev. Henry Francis Cary’s translation of the whole of Dante’s *Commedia* (Naiditch 177).

provenance” (53). Furthermore, in his essay “Confines of Criticism,” Housman demonstrates affection for at least one aspect of Leopardi’s poetry, the stellar images:

If therefore you like to go out on a clear night and lift up your eyes to the stars, surrender yourself to the sentiment or meditation which they inspire, and repeat, as your choice may determine, the poetry which they have evoked from Homer or David, from Milton or Leopardi – do so by all means. (Housman, *Confines* 29-30)

The above quotation testifies to the fact that Housman was familiar with Leopardi’s poetry by the year 1911. However, those two scholars who have studied Housman’s interest in Leopardi have both placed the Englishman’s encounter with the Italian’s poetry much earlier, tentatively (though convincingly), dating it Housman’s attendance of Oxford during which he developed a profound knowledge of the work of Matthew Arnold. Most recently (2016), and on the basis of striking linguistic parallels between lyric XLVIII of *ASL* (“Be still, my soul, be still”) and Leopardi’s canto 28, “A se stesso” (“To Himself”), Caruso dates Housman’s “first contact with Leopardi around that year [in which *ASL* was published, 1896] at the very latest, or possibly earlier, during his years of study at Oxford” (1877-81). Ghan Singh proffered the latter suggestion first in an earlier essay (1962) in which he comments that he believes Housman read Leopardi before publishing *ASL* and “either during or shortly after his Oxford days 1877-81, when Leopardi’s vogue was at its height” (115). Singh’s speculation is supported by a compelling piece of circumstantial evidence: “Housman was twenty-one....when in 1881 Matthew Arnold’s preface to an edition of Byron’s works proved a decisive moment for Leopardi’s reputation in England” (Caruso 4) – compelling because at this stage of his career Housman was an ardent admirer of Arnold (see pp. 202 & ff. below), and Arnold was, of course,

instrumental in bringing Leopardi to the attention of English readers (see Introduction p. 25 above).

It is revealing, given Housman's probable encounter with Leopardi 15 years before he wrote *ASL*, that many contemporary critics' reviews of Housman's work are strongly reminiscent of early Anglophone critics' reactions to Leopardi's poetry. In other words, as the eminent Housman scholar B. J. Leggett notes in *Housman's Land of Lost Content*, Housman was routinely deprecated for his pessimistic approach to life in contemporary reviews, and in terms parallel to those employed by critics a generation previously to dismiss Leopardi. In what was, incidentally, the review that gave Housman "greater pleasure than any other" (Richards 9), Hubert Bland (1896) praises the lack of "artifice" in Housman's poetry; however, perhaps under Arnold's influence, he adds that "Mr. Housman's poetry is wanting in the note of gladness; that is to say, it is not the highest poetry. But it comes astonishingly near the highest" (37). Such a comment brings to mind, for instance, Gladstone's assessment of Leopardi almost fifty years earlier: "the reader, opening [Leopardi's poems] at hazard, will find no page of them without abundant beauties, though in some places they are scarred and blighted by emanations from the pit of his shoreless and bottomless despair" (315). Both poets' work, in other words, is criticised for its taint of gloom.

While the two were, thus, treated in a similar vein, it may have been the perceptive Leopardi critic, Geoffrey L. Bickersteth, who paired Housman and Leopardi's names for the first time, as Caruso suggests. In 1923, Bickersteth published "a bilingual edition of Leopardi's poems with an excellent introduction and extensive commentary" (Caruso 3), in which his annotations to Leopardi's "Il tramonto della luna" ("The Setting of the Moon") make reference to Housman's lyric XII, *Last Poems*: "The laws of God, the laws of man, / He may keep that will

and can” (1-2). Fourteen years later, Martin Cooper became (I think) the first critic to pair Housman’s and Leopardi’s names in a critical essay. In “Sunt Lacrimae Rerum,” Cooper compares Housman and Leopardi as pessimists, while arguing that Leopardi is incomparably the greater poet in the “universality” and intensity of the emotion conveyed in his lyrics (306). However, only Singh and Caruso have made (somewhat) substantial contributions to Housman’s response to the work of Leopardi in the 80-odd years since these fleeting mentions of the poets’ connection. In his piece, Singh compares Housman and Leopardi’s philosophical affinities, while explicitly denying that there is any strong verbal resemblance between their bodies of poetry. The critic concludes that “there is...such a great affinity of thought and sentiment between them, that one may say that not only did Housman study Leopardi ‘with great admiration’, but that to some extent, he was also influenced by him (133). And Caruso ‘s intriguing seminar further deepened our understanding of Housman and Leopardi’s shared philosophical approach, in terms of their pessimistic convictions, while also tracing fascinating parallels in their individual processes of composition. While reluctant to describe the relationship between Housman and Leopardi as one of direct “influence,” Caruso does acknowledge, like Singh, that there is a strong “affinity” between the two poets.

While there is, then, a strong kinship between Housman’s and Leopardi’s philosophical dispositions, and the way they composed their poems, what is, perhaps, more interesting – at least for my purposes – is how these connections manifest themselves in the structuring of Housman’s and Leopardi’s poetic masterworks: *ASL* and the *Canti* respectively. Moreover, such an analysis reveals how *ASL* should be read as a single poem – a key and much debated critical issue. It is important to note here that, while critics have often been sceptical of the idea that *ASL* can be read as a single, coherent work, Housman clearly did read it thus – a position manifest in

his vehement refusal to allow editors and publishers to anthologise selections of *ASL*. While he did, initially, accede to a few requests to anthologise individual lyrics from *ASL* (see letters on pp. 63, 77, 80, & 140 in Housman's *Letters*), Housman came to resent such anthologising. One of the strongest statements he made against the practice was in a letter to Richards, who was responsible for dismembering *ASL* in a way that infuriated Housman: "You must not treat my immortal works as quarries to be used at will by the various hacks whom you may employ to compile anthologies" (letter of 29 June 1907 – Housman, *Letters* 91). In the vast majority of Housman's letters subsequent to this one in the Henry Maas edition, the poet refuses such permission. In addition, he is incensed by an American publisher's attempt to produce a collected edition of *ASL* and *Last Poems*. When corresponding on this subject with Richards, Housman at one point asks: "Can I make them destroy the combined book?" (letter of 4 January 1925; Housman, *Letters* 225). Such an attitude towards anthologising suggests that Housman was concerned for the work's integrity as a whole, and this interpretation of his behaviour is substantiated by the fact that Housman was much less reluctant to allow those same editors and publishers to select pieces among *Last Poems* to publish separately.⁴⁵

In light of this evidence, of Housman's treatment of *ASL* as a cohesive, inalienable work, I argue that the collection of lyrics can be read as a single poem – one that delineates, generally, a modern man's "journey" from an "innocent" state, in which he enjoys the illusion of a direct relationship with nature, to a state of "experience," in which his relationship with his natural environment is indirect, to a more socially inclined state of stoic pessimism. One caveat about

⁴⁵ Housman makes this distinction in his attitude towards the two works clear in a letter to Richards of 23 September 1923: "I do not unconditionally prohibit the use of *Last Poems* as I do of *A Shropshire Lad*" (Housman, *Letters* 216). This letter is followed up by one to the publisher who had taken over from Grant Richards – Messrs Grant Richards – in which Housman writes: "I have never laid down any general rule against the inclusion of poems from *Last Poems* in anthologies. The rule regarding *A Shropshire Lad* still holds good" (letter of 14 March 1924; Housman, *Letters* 218).

Housman's interest in and response to Leopardi's work: Housman once told his friend, a general practitioner, that "[s]uch direct influences as he was conscious of were...the Old Ballads, Shakespeare's Songs, and Heine, and these he had studied intensively before a line of *A Shropshire Lad* was written" (from a memoir printed in Richards 392). However, as with all of my chapters, I am not arguing for any direct *influence*. Instead, I am considering the work of canonical Victorian writers through the lens of their interest in Leopardi to see what an understanding of each writer's response to Leopardi contributes to our interpretation of their work.

I. Housman and Leopardi (and Matthew Arnold)

Housman's admiration for Leopardi, as mentioned above, probably began with Housman's admiration for Matthew Arnold, which seems to have blossomed during the years Housman spent as an undergraduate at Oxford. As Housman's biographer, Richard Graves, comments, at the beginning of Housman's career as a student, "Matthew Arnold was rapidly becoming his favourite poet" and he "was busy in his spare time reading and learning by heart much of Arnold's work" (Graves 40). Astonishingly, Housman had trained himself so that, given any line of one of Arnold's poems, he could recite the successive line (Graves 40). Housman's attraction to Arnold's poetry can, according to Graves, be attributed to "the grave, melancholy beauty of Arnold's best work" in which "Housman found perfectly expressed many of his deepest feelings, such as his sense of loss after his mother's death, and his questioning of religious faith" (40). But Arnold's appeal to Housman endured beyond the most intense period of these crises, which occurred before Housman even entered Oxford in 1877 at age 18. As a lecturer at University College London, where he started working in 1892, for instance, Housman described Arnold as

“the great critic of our land and time” (Graves 85) and he produced an informal, and highly laudatory, paper on Arnold of which, unfortunately, only a scrap remains:

I go to Mr. Leslie Stephen, and I am always instructed, though I may not be charmed. I go to Mr. Walter Pater, and I am always charmed, though I may not be instructed. But Arnold was not merely instructive or charming nor both together: he was what seems to me no one else is: he was illuminating. (*Selected Prose* 197-98)

Housman's brother, Laurence Housman, confirms that Alfred's admiration for Arnold was tenacious when, in his memoir of Alfred, he states that “Matthew Arnold [Alfred] placed high: both as a critic and as an interpreter of human life in its relation to the Powers Above.” “His final words on Arnold,” Laurence continues, “were to defend him from those who said that his poetry lacked emotion” (67-68), thus implying that Alfred maintained a strong sense of the worth of Arnold's poetry throughout his life.

Perhaps where Housman and Arnold diverge, and where Housman and Leopardi converge, is in their attitudes towards tragedy as a proper subject for poetry. Arnold, on the one hand, believed that *unrelentingly* tragic subjects – “those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done” – could not constitute good art (“Preface” 204). Housman and Leopardi, on the other hand, and perhaps as a result of their unrelentingly tragic view of life, believed that such subjects could. In fact, both Housman and Leopardi suggest that when a great work of art treats a tragic subject the effect is not “distressing” because great art can transform any subject into an “exalting” experience for the reader. As Housman puts it, “if *The Ruined Cottage* were ‘a perfect poem’, it would be exalting and not distressing. The fourteenth chapter of Job is not distressing, nor the *Antigone*, nor even *King Lear*” (*Selected Prose* 113). Although

it is unclear whether Housman read the *Zibaldone*, which was not published for the first time (in Italian) until 1898-1900, the observation that Leopardi recorded here in 1820 on the way in which great literature always “exalts” and never “distresses” – no matter what the subject matter – suggests profound affinities in his and Housman’s conception of literature. “It is a property of works of genius,” Leopardi writes, “that, even when they represent vividly the nothingness of things...even when they express the most terrible despair, nevertheless to a great soul that finds itself in a state of extreme dejection...such works always bring consolation” (*Zibaldone* 259-60).

Both Housman and Leopardi believed that suffering was an inevitable part of, even integral to, humankind’s existence and that the universe (or nature) was indifferent to the latter. Moreover, in each, these beliefs found some relief in a stoic pessimistic approach to living. When Housman chose to attach a label to his personal philosophical approach, he selected the epithet “Cyrenaic,” or, as he explains to his young American fan Houston Martin in a letter dated 1936, an “egoistic hedonist” who “regard[s] the pleasure of the moment as the only possible motive of action” (Housman, *Letters* 390). While Housman uses the same term in a letter to J. B. Priestley in 1924 and, as we have already seen, in his responses to Pollet’s questionnaire, his life does not appear to have been that of a light-hearted pleasure-seeker – except, perhaps, when he was travelling in Italy and France. If he found consolation in the Cyrenaic approach to life, perhaps it was because it mitigated Housman’s keen sensitivity to the ubiquity of human suffering. As Graves hypothetically observes in his biography of the “scholar-poet,” “by getting some pleasure out of life [in travelling], Housman felt that he was doing something positive to set against the indifference of the universe,” and Graves also suggests that this “feeling” inspired Housman’s adoption of Cyrenaic philosophy (148). This speculation is partly justified by the way Housman highlighted the following statement from the introduction to his copy of

Leopardi's essays: "As [Samuel] Johnson has said: 'The curse for the greatest part of human miseries is not radical but palliative'" (qtd. in Caruso 8). Here, Housman's apparent approval of the idea that human "misery" cannot be cured lends credence to the interpretation of his Cyrenaicism as a "palliative" therapy, as a pragmatic way of approaching the problem of how to live, rather than as an ideology.

Whether this speculation regarding the nature of Housman's Cyrenaicism is correct, it is undoubtedly true that Housman believed humankind was doomed by nature to unhappiness, and that he was, in this sense, a pessimist. Thus, in a fascinating letter to the classical scholar, and friend of Housman's, Gilbert Murray, the poet writes:

I rather doubt if man really has much to gain by substituting peace for strife, as you and Jesus Christ recommend...*do you think you can outwit the resourceful malevolence of Nature?* God is not mocked, as St Paul long ago warned the Galatians. When man gets rid of a great trouble he is easier for a little while, but not for long: Nature instantly sets to work to weaken his power of sustaining trouble, and very soon seven pounds is as heavy as fourteen pounds used to be...It looks to me as if the state of mankind always had been and always would be a state of just tolerable discomfort. (Housman, *Letters* 52 – my emphasis)

Leopardi makes a strikingly similar observation in his *Zibaldone*:

It is often said that if a particular discomfort...were going to last, it would not be bearable. On the contrary, we would bear it far better through habituation and time. Conversely, we frequently say that a particular pleasure,...would have been very great if it had lasted. On the contrary, if it had lasted it would no longer have been pleasure. (1329)

Nature, then, is cruel to humankind, but poetry could be kinder, as Housman indicates in a 1915 letter to his sister, Kate, on the death of her son. While Housman is famous for the perhaps flippant definition of poetry in “The Name and Nature of Poetry” – “Poetry indeed seems to me more physical than intellectual” (*A Shropshire Lad* 254) – another definition that he gave of its purpose is far from frivolous. In the above letter to Kate, Housman approvingly quotes the suggestion that “the essential business of poetry...is to harmonise the sadness of the universe, and it is somehow more sustaining and healing than prose” (Housman, *Letters* 141).⁴⁶

That Housman and Leopardi both believed in the predominating “sadness of the universe,” particularly of humankind, is perhaps most concretely demonstrated by the way in which Housman marked his personal copy of Edwardes’ translation of Leopardi’s *Essays and Dialogues*. The latter is now housed in the Bryn Mawr College Library, and it was a visit to scrutinise Housman’s annotations that provided the occasion for Caruso’s seminar on the connection between the authors of *ASL* and of the *Canti*. While such annotations are apparently limited to the “tracing [of] a single line along the edge of the passage which had raised his interest” (Caruso 4), and while Caruso is right to warn that “the nature of the testimony is desultory and one can only assume that Housman’s marks are meant to express approval and similarity of views, perhaps even agreement on a more intimate level” (6), such “testimony” is, nevertheless, of strong interest in an examination of Housman and Leopardi’s shared philosophy. Of peculiar interest to my research, is the way in which Housman was interested in, and almost certainly shared (given the additional testimony of his poetry), the judgement Leopardi expresses on the integral nature of suffering to human life. Housman highlighted several passages in his

⁴⁶ This view on the function of poetry is, interestingly, antithetical to that of Housman’s hero, Arnold, who believed that poetry should “inspire and rejoice the reader” (“Preface” 204), and that Wordsworth’s poetry was great because it did so, it had the “power” to “render[...]...joy, and make[...] us, too, feel it” (“Byron” 357).

edition of Charles Edwardes 1882 translation of Leopardi's *Operette Morali* that explore this conviction. For instance, in "Dialogue between Nature and an Icelander," Housman highlighted the Icelander's questioning "[f]or whose pleasure and service is this wretched life of the world maintained, by the suffering and death of all beings which compose it?" (Caruso 8), evincing a profoundly nihilistic perspective. In "Remarkable Sayings of Philip Ottonieri," Housman is struck by the speaker's "praise" for the "saying" that "[t]hey who seek the greatest happiness, suffer most" (Caruso 9). And in "Dialogue between Timandro and Eleandro" Housman signals his interest in two of Eleandro's assertions on the impossibility of human happiness: "I cannot imagine such a thing as a joyous future, nor can I undertake anything with the hope of bringing it to completion," and "[m]y judgment is of myself alone, and I am quite sure I do not err in announcing my unhappiness. If other men are happy, I congratulate them with all my heart" (Caruso 11).

Both Housman and Leopardi also believed that the universe, or nature, was indifferent to the speculative unhappiness of all living creatures. This concept of nature is one that recurs throughout *ASL*. In lyric XXVI, for example, the speaker and his lover walk near an aspen tree that predicts the latter's death with cold accuracy; in lyric XXXVI, an unsympathetic moon passively observes the speaker who is forced to abandon his native village: "The moon stands blank above" (2); and in lyric XXXIX, the speaker reflects on the indifference of the changing seasons that refuse to wait his return: "Spring will not wait the loiterer's time / Who keeps so long away" (5-6), so that the speaker misses all the cherished signs of the world's annual rebirth. Housman's belief in nature's cruelty in neglect sometimes erupted in condemnations of its active cruelty. In the previously quoted statement to Murray, for example, in which Housman refers to

the “resourceful malevolence of Nature,” he suggests that nature is not merely passively but actively cruel.

As my introduction indicates, Leopardi held a similarly strong persuasion that nature was indifferent to humankind’s fate – and to that of all other organisms (see Introduction p. 41 & ff. above). While initially Leopardi thought of humankind’s closeness to nature as vital to our welfare and happiness, later he arrived at the belief that nature was a “malevolent” force (to borrow Housman’s epithet), one that humankind had to combat in a tightly knit fraternity. Such an evolution in thought occurred between Leopardi’s (temporary) abandonment of poetry-writing – around 1821, once he had completed the early idylls – and its resuscitation with the composition of “Il Risorgimento” (“The Reawakening” – 1828). It seems, in fact, that Leopardi had positively arrived at his conviction on the indifference of nature just one year after he ceased to write poems, in May 1822, at which point he baldly states in his *Zibaldone*: “Nature is blind and deaf to you, and you to it” (2432). While Housman, as already indicated, probably did not read this statement, he would have read Leopardi’s late poetic statements on the indifference of nature; he would have read, for example, canto 34: “Broom” (1845), in which Leopardi most clearly and forcefully enunciates his condemnation of nature. The noble man, he writes (in lines I have already quoted more than once),

assigns responsibility
to the truly guilty: she who is
mother of mortals when she gives us birth,
stepmother ruling us.

Her he calls his enemy. (122-26)

The “mother of mortals” or “stepmother” is named, later in this same stanza, as “empia natura” (148), in other words, as “unholy” or “cruel” Nature – a title that reveals the kinship with Housman’s “malevolent” force.

As might be intuited from each poet’s willingness to consider and re-consider these bleak facts of existence as they saw it, and to treat them in their poetry (again and again), Housman and Leopardi (like Arnold) believed in the severe necessity of a courageous confrontation with truth. Housman, in his “Introductory Lecture” delivered at University College of London (on his accession to a lectureship there), acknowledges that the pursuit of truth could be deleterious to human happiness “because it compels us to take leave of delusions which were pleasant while they lasted” (*Selected Prose* 19). However, this unfortunate reality did not convince Housman to abandon such a pursuit: “The house of delusions is cheap to build, but draughty to live in, and ready at an instant to fall; and it is surely truer prudence to move our furniture betimes into the open air than to stay indoors until our tenement tumbles about our ears” (*Selected Prose* 19). Ultimately, Housman concludes, “[i]t is and it must in the long run be better for a man to see things as they are, than to be ignorant of them” (*Selected Prose* 19-20). Similarly, the young Leopardi insists that “delusions” – or “illusions” as he tended to call them – could promote human happiness. However, later in life, Leopardi emphasises instead the necessity, and the beneficial effects, of pursuing the truth – as opposed to “veil[ing]” its “ugliness” with “beautiful illusions.” In a comment that aptly encapsulates both this necessity and the revelation that Leopardi expresses “Broom,” Binni writes that Leopardi came to realise how “the strength of man is, above all, that of recognising his condition of misery and littleness” and how “only thus will he be able...to attempt...to construct his own delusion-free and arduous civilisation,

reinforced by the battle against nature” (“generose illusioni” 82).⁴⁷ Thus, truth became, for Leopardi, a kind of second-best pursuit, but a second-best pursuit that was really the only one available. In lines from his dialogue “Detti Memorabili di Filippo Ottonieri” (“Memorable Sayings of Filippo Ottonieri”) – lines that Housman actually highlighted in his edition of Leopardi’s essays – Leopardi expresses this regretful conclusion: “The true is not necessarily the beautiful. Yet though beauty be preferable to truth, where the former is wanting, the latter is the next best thing” (133). To summarise, then, both Housman and Leopardi were greatly attracted to the idea that “dreams” or “illusions” – in a proto-Modernist vein of thinking – were vital to humankind’s happy existence and, therefore, of real substance; yet, both were, at the same time, cognisant of the fact that it is dangerous to live without truth, and that truth provided some compensation for the aridness of existence without “beautiful illusions.”

Related to Housman and Leopardi’s willingness to investigate, confront, and live with the truth, is the attitude of Stoic pessimism that both poets express in their work. Cesare Luporini puts it well, with reference to Leopardi, when describing how the Romantic-era poet came to subscribe to a “hero[ism] of the truth,” how “the truth bec[ame for him] the supreme dignity of man, and virtue,” and the only one – once his illusions had failed (74). This comment applies well to both poets, though it must be acknowledged that both Leopardi and Housman were ambivalent about Stoic philosophy. In a half-jesting definition of his own philosophical identity in the above-cited letter to J. B. Priestley (dated 18 September 1924), Housman writes:

I can easily swallow all the flattery brewed by you and F. L. Lucas; but I wish people would not call me a Stoic. I am a Cyrenaic; and for the Stoics, except as systematisers of

⁴⁷ All translations of Binni’s essay are my own.

knowledge in succession to the Peripatetics, I have a great dislike and contempt.

(Housman, *Letters* 222)

Nevertheless, the assumption of unnamed “people” who “call[ed]” Housman a Stoic was not wholly unjustified, since it is possible to detect a strong vein of pessimism tinged with Stoicism in many of Housman’s poems. Cleanth Brooks, having hit this vein, describes Housman’s poetic attitude as a kind of “Romantic despair” founded upon “the helplessness of man in an alien universe, *the Stoicism*, the Spartan courage, the Romantic bravado” (“The Whole of Housman” 105 – my emphasis). The Stoic element of Housman’s “Romantic despair” is, according to Graves, evident in “As I gird on for fighting,” “Oracles” (both from *Last Poems*), and “Lot” (from *More Poems*). With particular reference to the first of these, “As I gird on for fighting,” Graves explains that while the “general message of this poem is clearly that God, or the Universe, is unjust” the figure of Lot “pursues his road with quiet determination even though he knows that it will eventually lead to his own death” (100-01). Perhaps the strongest statement of this kind of Stoic courage, however, is the penultimate poem, lyric LXII, of Housman’s *ASL*: ““Terence, this is stupid stuff,”” discussed in part V of this chapter (see p. 238 below).

Like Housman, Leopardi, on the one hand, expressed an ambivalent approach to Stoicism, while, on the other hand, adopting an attitude of Stoic pessimism in his poetry. Leopardi admired Epictetus at least sufficiently to translate his *Manual* and, while this is not necessarily evidence of Leopardi’s adherence to Stoical doctrine, Sebastiano Timpanaro, one of the foremost scholars of Leopardi and the philosophical tradition, points out that Leopardi did acknowledge the (limited) usefulness of Epictetus’s philosophy. As Leopardi writes in his prologue to the *Manual*: the “teaching” of the *Manual* may be “in truth the height and summit, both of Epictetus’s philosophy, and of all human wisdom” (1046), but it is a philosophy of

“coldness of soul, and not caring, or, if you will, indifference” (1045). While acknowledging having benefited from such philosophy (1046-47), Leopardi, according to Timpanaro, “never resigns himself to a post-ancient ataraxic morality, which would be an evasion of his lucid and rational pessimism” (“Alcune osservazioni” 163). He never, in other words, resigns himself to abandoning the heroic, though futile, struggle against human fate in order to see “blessedness” and “happiness” (1045). However, as with Housman, a Stoical pessimistic disposition is strongly evident in some of his poetry, most notably in later poems like “Broom” – a point that was explored in chapter three (see p. 142 above).

Housman and Leopardi, then, shared some fundamental philosophic tendencies. Both were pessimists in their implicit belief in the inevitable suffering of humankind and considered nature to be an indifferent if not an actively malevolent entity. Both rejected the illusions that could mitigate our suffering at the hands of nature and seem, consciously or not, to depend on a Stoical approach in confronting the truth of human existence. Unlike Leopardi, however, Housman did not leave a very full account of his philosophical beliefs, so, instead of expanding this brief summary of their theoretical positions, it is more worthwhile to consider how they appear to operate in the structuring of Housman’s *ASL*, and how this can be seen to reflect Leopardi’s structuring of his *Canti*.

II. Housman’s “Terence” persona in *ASL* and the structure of Leopardi’s *Canti*

In the lyrics that comprise *ASL*, Housman adopts the persona of a young man from rural Shropshire who is named, we discover, Terence (lyric VIII, l. 3). While Housman never did extensively comment on the motivation behind this framing technique, it seems that such a persona allowed him to express an ingenuous point of view that he might otherwise have been unwilling or unable to voice – either because of his personal feeling or because of the way he

would have been received. As Leggett puts it in his exploration of Housman's *Poetic Art*, "the poems depend for their effect on the character of the persona, his ability to voice afresh sentiments which in the mouth of a more sophisticated speaker would appear trite" (49). But the adoption of the "Terence" speaker was not merely Housman's method of evading personal embarrassment; it is a technique that allows for the development of two key structures within the work's individual poems.

The first key internal structure, which dominates the first half of *ASL*, is "a progressive structure which carries the persona from innocence to knowledge or from expectation to disillusionment," guided, of course, by the poet (*Poetic Art* 63). Thus, in lyric IV, "Reveille," there is a shift from the speaker's "expectation" at the day's dawn ("the ship of sunrise burning / Strands upon the eastern rims" – 3-4) to his being "disillusion[ed]" by the dawn: symbol of the ephemerality of human life ("Breath's a ware that will not keep" – 22). In lyric XIII, the speaker recounts his "innocen[t]" dismissal of a "wise man['s]" advice not to love and his mature "knowledge" that one should avoid loving ("oh, 'tis true, 'tis true" – 16). And in lyric XXXIII, the speaker initially, fondly imagines a world in which his love would preserve his beloved's life ("I think the love I bear you / Should make you not to die" – 3-4), before acknowledging the harsh reality of this world where it does not (where "all is idle" – 13).

The second structure, which prevails in the second half of *ASL*, involves the now "experienced" rustic speaker recognising "the gulf which lies between innocence and experience" (*Poetic Art* 63). With reference to this second structure, Leggett comments: "[t]he mature man, in looking into the past, sees that life held a hope and a significance for the young man which he no longer finds" (*Poetic Art* 79). As an example of this, Leggett gives lyric XLI in which the speaker contrasts his youth in Shropshire with his present life in London. In

Shropshire, the speaker says, he had “[h]omely comforters” (2) in the natural acquaintances that inhabited his world, including the “woodland brown,” the “beechnut,” and the “purple crocus” (11, 12, 13), but in London, he has “[n]o such helpmates, only men” (22) – and men who are too unhappy themselves to “comfort” him. Similarly, in lyric XXXVIII, the speaker reflects on his youth in Shropshire during which his closeness to nature and to fellow Shropshire lads were inextricable, and acknowledges that he is, now, alienated from both (“My friends made words of [the wind] with tongues / That talk no more to me” – 7-8). And, in lyric L, the speaker also reflects on his separation from nature: though “bred” in a “western brookland” (3, 2), the speaker is now removed from this idyll and imagines his “soul that lingers sighing / About the glimmering weirs” (15-16). Thus, while in the first half of *ASL* the shattering of an illusion is frequently dramatized, in the second half of *ASL*, the speaker of experience consciously reflects on the “innocence” of his earlier self, and laments the loss of the early beautiful illusions that sustained him – in a technique that conforms well to the Victorian “double poem” as formulated by Isobel Armstrong. Those lyrics of Housman that enact a struggle between the viewpoints of the speaker and the poet, might be classified among Armstrong’s “double poems” in which there are “quite literally two concurrent poems in the same words” (12).

In the *Canti*, these internal structures are, generally, missing, since Leopardi does not experiment with an invented persona to voice his poetry in the same way that Housman does. However, it can be argued that the speaker of the first half of the *Canti*, who laments the loss of and subsequently strives to cultivate his cherished illusions, is retrospectively commented upon by the speaker of the second half of the *Canti*, who can only access those illusions through memory. In other words, whereas the innocent speaker of the early *Canti* attempts to experience the beautiful illusions that sustain life, the experienced speaker of the later *Canti* no longer does

so, since he does not think that it is possible to access them in an unmediated fashion. Thus, Leopardi's treatment of his speaker across the *Canti* is deeply comparable to Housman's cultivation of a dual persona within individual poems in which the poet seems to critique the ingenuousness of his speaker. Most importantly, however, the trajectory of Leopardi's speaker is also comparable to that of Housman's. Both poets' works operate on a division between innocence and experience, between a direct relationship with illusions and a mediated one, and these dynamics frame the whole of each. In *ASL*, the "rustic persona" of Terence moves from the innocence of his illusion-saturated youth in Shropshire, to the experience of his alienation in London; similarly, there is a structural movement across the *Canti* in which the poet-speaker moves from a direct, innocent relationship with illusions to a memory-mediated, experienced relationship with the same.

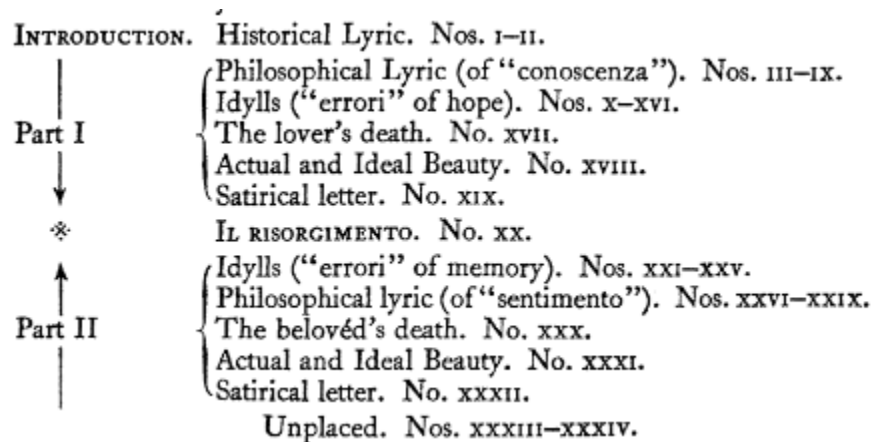
From early in the modern critical history of Leopardi's *Canti*, critics have discussed the collection as hinging on canto no. 20: "The Reawakening," so that the first half displays a very different tone to the second half. According to Geoffrey Bickersteth, the early English critic of Leopardi:

the *Canti*, regarded as a single coherent work of art, fall into two almost equal parts, the link between which is No. xx which serves the purpose of setting forth the theme of the whole [the significance of "illusions" to the life of humankind]...Both parts set forth the same philosophy, but whereas in the first part the poet rather looks forward to the future, in the second he is rather looking backward to the past. (106)

Bickersteth defines the "philosophy" of the whole of the *Canti* in his analysis of "The Reawakening": human virtue can never die, because it can always be "reawakened" by love – perhaps the greatest illusion of all (120). There is, however, a key "distinction between the

illusions of youth and the illusions of age,” which are described in “The Reawakening,” and that is that the “illusions of age” are recognised as such – as illusions (Bickersteth 120). While the illusions of youth are generated by “hope,” the illusions of age are the “illusions of youth living again in the memory” (Bickersteth 120); in other words, the illusions of youth are the ingenuous creation of hope, but those of age are the cherished memories of such hope. The first half of the *Canti*, then, is voiced by a Leopardian speaker who, in the freshness of hope, believes implicitly in the illusions that he describes, while the second half of the *Canti* is voiced by a Leopardian speaker who can only access these illusions through memories of his once unmediated relationship with them.

Bickersteth illustrates his schema with a diagram that identifies the general subject of the poems within each of his subdivisions:



As this diagram shows, Bickersteth exerted his critical powers to identify a precisely repeated structure across the two halves of the *Canti*; as he explains:

Each of the two parts is concluded by a letter in verse, satirical in tone and pitched poetically in a lower key than the rest. Each of the two parts contains a group of philosophical lyrics and a group of idylls; each concludes with two poems corresponding in subject. (106)

However, the usefulness of Bickersteth's analysis is not in these minute details but in his highlighting of key sections, including the introductory "Historical Lyric[s]" and those lyrics of "conoscenza" (or knowledge), the "Idylls" in the first half, and the "Idylls" in the second half.

For Bickersteth, the republican odes, cantos 1-2 – "To Italy" – so crucial to Eliot's exploration of cosmopolitanism and nationalism in *Daniel Deronda* – and "On the Monument to Dante Being Erected in Florence," are "introductory" in that they "present us with that arbitrary antithesis between the ancient and modern world," which, as discussed in chapter one of this thesis (see pp. 42 & ff. above), is fundamental to Leopardi's early thought. "The ancient world," Bickersteth explains, "saw the truth, but only through a veil of illusions...it therefore possessed faith in the value of life" (107), whereas the "modern world" has been perverted from such faith due to philosophy's shrivelling humankind's once fecund imagination. This section might also embrace "Ad Angelo Mai" ("To Angelo Mai"), which has much in common with the first two canzoni; "Nelle nozze della sorella Paolina" ("On the Marriage of His Sister Paolina" – canto 4), which describes how "Love," especially in ancient times, assists men in cultivating the virtue of courage; and "A un vincitore nel Pallone" ("To a Champion at Pallone" – canto 5), which praises the playing of games as helping men to develop the necessary courage to undertake virtuous, heroic acts. All these *Canti* treat the dynamic interaction of illusions and virtue that the young poet Leopardi hoped might decisively influence the "reawakening" of Italy.

For Bickersteth, the latter three and those cantos up to and including canto 9, are lyrics of "knowledge." These lyrics, which precede the "piccoli idilli" or "little idylls," describe the impact of the loss of the invigorating illusions that are the subject of successive poems. Thus, "Bruto minore" ("Brutus" – canto 6) constitutes a lament for humankind's alienation from nature and the concomitant death of the imagination; "Alla Primavera" ("To Spring" – canto 7)

eulogises, again, man's instinctive, intimate rapport with nature; "Inno ai patriarchi" ("Hymn to the Patriarchs" – canto 8) critiques the degrading quality of reason (the enemy of those beautiful illusions) as the speaker attempts to escape this retrogressive view of history; "Ultimo canto di Saffo" ("Sappho's Last Song" – canto 9) mourns the annihilation of the illusion of beauty; "Il primo amore" ("First Love" – canto 10) that of love; and "Il passero solitario" ("The Solitary Thrush" – canto 11) an instinctive connection with nature (again). Together with the "introductory" canti, then, these, on the one hand, celebrate the ancient world and its cultivation of such illusions, and, on the other hand, eulogise their loss in the modern world. These poems all imply that, if the modern world could recuperate those ancient illusions, then a new "ancient" world would be born.

The "Idylls" that follow – usually designated "piccoli idilli" by Leopardi scholars – can be seen as poetic experiments in the resurrection of these ancient illusions. These poems: "L'infinito" ("Infinity" – canto 12), "La sera del dì di festa" ("The Evening of the Holiday" – canto 13), "Alla luna" ("To the Moon" – canto 14), "Il sogno" ("The Dream" – canto 15), and "La vita solitaria" ("The Solitary Life" – canto 16), among which are many of Leopardi's most renowned lyrics, represent an attempt to capture the direct intuition of those illusions that promote virtue and a life of meaning. Bickersteth's impression that the first half of the *Canti* "looks forward" is based on the fact that the early poems, and especially these idylls, express the young poet's hope for the future – a disposition that is at the root of his more poetic treatment of illusions. According to the eminent Italian literary scholar Natalino Sapegno, these same poems, although he excludes "The Dream,"

are....like the rediscovery of a condition of intact happiness, that offers itself to the soul in rare moments in which it succeeds to withdraw itself from the break of reflection and

from the pain of adult conscience, and to return itself to that world of free and warm imagination. (794-95)

“Al Conte Carlo Pepoli” (canto 19) ends with the speaker’s declaration that, when he can no longer experience the beauty of the world, he will revert to the study of truth:

I shall choose less pleasant occupations
to turn to during the unwelcome onset
of inexorable old age. To learn
the bitter truth, and the blind fates of mortal
and eternal things. (139-43)

This statement ushers in the second half of the *Canti* that, according to Sapegno, exhibits the loss of the “directness” of the first half. In the later *Canti*, in other words, Leopardi laments, in Wordsworthian fashion (see introduction p. 16 above), the loss of an immediate experience of beautiful illusions, such as love, poetry, an intimate rapport with nature, and suggests that they can only be retrieved – to the extent that they can be retrieved at all – through the action of memory. Hence Bickersteth’s label for those poems that follow “Al Conte Carlo Pepoli” (cantos 21-25): “errori” or illusions of memory.

The group of poems that open the second half of Leopardi’s collection are often referred to as the *canti pisano-recanatesi*, after the two towns where they were composed: Pisa and Recanati. All of these poems – “The Reawakening” (canto 20), “To Silvia” (canto 21), “Le ricordanze” (“The Recollections” – canto 22), “Night Song” (canto 23), “The Calm After the Storm” (canto 24), and “Saturday in the Village” (canto 25) – record the speaker’s regeneration of feeling and susceptibility to illusions but acknowledge the impossibility of experiencing those illusions directly. Illusions, as the speaker now records, can – with the passing of youth – only be

accessed through the memory. This idea has been explored by many Leopardi's scholars. Luigi Blasucci, for example, writes that the "theme" of the *canti pisano-recanatesi* "is linked to the recuperation of an autobiographical past relived in the light of memory" ("Sul libro" 69);⁴⁸ similarly, Sapegno comments on memory's reflective qualities, which both clarify the image of illusions and underscore their insubstantiality (836). "The Reawakening," for example, as Dotti notes, describes the speaker's renewed susceptibility to remembered illusions without "deny[ing] the painful discoveries made about illusions and truth...on what the heart conceives of and what is real" (*Canti* 75);⁴⁹ in "To Silvia" the speaker (fondly) remembers the "light thoughts," "hopes," and "hearts" (28, 29, 30) that he and Silvia shared when they were young, and which have been utterly destroyed; in "The Recollections," the speaker conjures the ghosts of his old, cherished illusions in remembering the "many images" and "many fantasies" that accompanied him as a child in his father's garden, but now recognises that they are "fantasies" and not realities (7).

The remainder of Bickersteth's schema is contrived, as the otherwise insightful critic imposes a too-tidy, mirror-like structure on the *Canti*. Bickersteth notes that the poems following the *canti pisano-recanatesi* – *canti* 26-29 – deal with the "sentiment" of love; that *canto* 30 ("the beloved's death") is the mirror image of *canto* 17 (the "lover's death"); that *canto* 31 ("Actual and Ideal Beauty") is identical in subject to *canto* 18; and that *canto* 32, a "Satirical letter," is a structural repetition of *canto* 19, also a "Satirical letter." What seems more important than these artificially imposed structural reflections is the inexorable movement of the speaker of the *Canti* from a state of innocence to one of experience – a movement that is at the heart of more recent discussions of the structural framework of the *Canti*.

⁴⁸ All translations of Blasucci's essay are my own.

⁴⁹ All translations of Dotti's commentary are my own.

In an excellent essay on the concepts of “history” and the “pastoral” in the *Canti*, Nicola Gardini describes how the structure of the *Canti* is “shap[ed]” by these “two opposing forces.” The operation of the latter – “a negative notion of history and the pastoral” – manifests itself in a four-part structure:

1. Cantos 1-9: “Historical decline.”
2. Cantos 10-19: “The pastoral / *infinito*.”
3. Cantos 20-28: “Critique of the pastoral / *infinito*.”
4. Cantos 29-39: “Historical catastrophe.” (91)

It is important to understand that when Gardini talks of “Historical decline” he does not intend a force that is impersonal in its effects, but one that impacts, profoundly, individual identity. As he explains, “history, for Leopardi... is *de-cline*” and this historical “*de-cline*” taints the individual notion of the self: Leopardi’s “notion of the self is one with decrepitude, exhaustion, and superannuation” (Gardini 78-79). As Bickersteth did, then, Gardini describes the opening poems as being deeply concerned with Leopardi’s famous dichotomy of the ancient and the modern, and how this affects the individual. Again, as Bickersteth – and others – have done, Gardini identifies the so-called “piccoli idilli” as an attempt to erect the beautiful illusions of ancient civilization, and of modern childhood, as a bulwark against historical decline. Thus, in those poems that constitute the second section of the *Canti*, “[t]he pastoral is part of a horizontal imagination which, through temporal suspension and utopian evasion, saves the individual from despair, providing some kind of reprieve from historical decay,” as Gardini puts it (84).

This attempt is, ultimately, unsuccessful and, in the third and fourth parts of the *Canti*, “Leopardi...calls into question the validity of the pastoral and eventually parodies it” (Gardini 83). Concurring with the critical tradition represented by Bickersteth and Sapegno, Gardini

argues that the operation of memory comes to the fore in the second half of the *Canti*; the undermining of the pastoral begins with “The Recollections” (canto 22) in which “the infinite now refers to something that is happening not in a suspended present, but in the past time of remembrance” (88). Finally, “Broom” is the archetypal “anti-pastoral” in which “[w]hatever is left of the juvenile pastoral...becomes one with the historical embodiment of Nature’s destruction” (Gardini 90). Thus, Gardini elegantly identifies the key movements that dominate at different stages of Leopardi’s *Canti*, without attempting to construct too finite a schema; as Gardini notes, “clear-cut divisions are something that one would not want or expect to find in the poetic work of such a contradictory mind as Leopardi’s” (92). However, as described, there are clear parallels between Bickersteth’s and Gardini’s analyses that indicate continuity in the recognition of certain movements – movements that reflect profound developments of the fictional speaker’s soul. Ultimately, these movements – from disillusionment with macro and micro historical decline, to a retreat to illusions in a pastoral context, to a crisis in the speaker’s relationship to these and a rejection of the pastoral, to the inevitable “historical” and individual disaster that this entails – are an illuminating model for the investigation of Housman’s structuring of *ASL*.

III. Housman’s structuring of *ASL* and parallels with the *Canti*

In his seminal work *Land of Lost Content*, Leggett connected the two types of movement within Housman’s poems: the speaker’s process of disillusionment in the early poems and process of reflection in the later poems, to the overall structural unity of *ASL*. In this penetrating piece of criticism, Leggett argues that the poems of Housman’s *ASL* move from adolescent attachment to visceral pleasures and a desperate search for permanence in a world of change, away from youth (symbolised by the physical setting of the Shropshire county), and towards a resignation

regarding the inevitability of death – ultimately, to some consolation in the thought that death is the great preserver of permanence. As Leggett himself puts it, “[t]he search for an agent to arrest the decay...leads to the conceit which is central to the work, a conceit in which death paradoxically becomes the only agent of stability in a life of ceaseless change” (*Land of Lost Content* 51-52). Overall, the overarching “theme” or primary movement within *ASL*, which lends a strong sense of cohesion to the poems of Housman’s work, is, according to Leggett, that of “the transition from a view of life which sees an identity with the external world to one which is characterised by a feeling of alienation” (*Land of Lost Content* 12). Within this overall movement, Leggett describes three divisions in *ASL*: the framing devices, lyrics I, LXII, and LXIII; those of “innocence” that are set in Shropshire, lyrics II-XXXVII; and those of “experience,” in which the speaker is exiled from his home, lyrics XXXVIII-LXI (*Land of Lost Content* 77-8).

Leggett was the first modern critic to attempt to identify a cohesive framework within *ASL* and this chapter is, as a necessary consequence, indebted to his work. I borrow – to an extent – Leggett’s structural divisions as a framework for my own description of the movement in *ASL*, but I enlist these to serve my own purpose of illuminating the nature of the movement in *ASL* through a comparison with that of Leopardi’s *Canti*. There are striking similarities between Housman’s and Leopardi’s introductory poems. Moreover, the series of poems that follow these, in *ASL*, vacillate in their resemblance to either Leopardi’s poems of “Historical decline” or his “pastoral” *piccoli idilli*. Next, those Shropshire lyrics that move beyond the subjective lyric speaker – while recording his profound disillusionment – strongly resemble Leopardi’s “To Count Carlo Pepoli” (canto 19); similarly, those lyrics that document the speaker’s shift away from Shropshire and the annihilation of youthful illusions, are highly reminiscent of Leopardi’s

“Critique of the pastoral.” Finally, the concluding poems’ assertion of a stoical pessimistic attitude resembles Leopardi’s presentation of a similar attitude in some of the most renowned *Canti* in the “Historical catastrophe” section. Broadly, then, both the *Canti* and *ASL* treat the story of the speaker’s soul, and its evolution from a state of intimacy with those illusions that Leopardi and Housman saw as crucial to human existence, to a crisis in the speaker’s relationship to these, to a (resigned) rejection of the pastoral as a context in which such illusions can be cultivated, to the adoption of a new philosophical attitude in order to confront the inevitable “historical” and individual disaster that this entails.

It is striking, first of all, that both Housman and Leopardi open their collections with poems that treat young soldiers’ sacrifices, thus initiating their major poetic cycles with celebrations of what might be described as the illusion of patriotism. In Leopardi’s *Canti*, as described above, the first two *Canti* – “To Italy” and “On the Monument to Dante” (as well as the following three) – celebrate those illusions that inspire such sacrifice from a nation’s youth. Thus, in “To Italy,” Leopardi describes the Spartans’ legendary effort to prevent a Persian invasion, presenting an ideal of youthful patriotism to catalyse the rejuvenation of “decaden[t]” and “obscur[e]” Italy. Similarly, Housman’s “1887” glorifies young men’s dying to protect the sovereign nation. It is true that critics have often read this poem as bitterly ironic, but it is more plausible to read the poem as, instead, embracing both the speaker’s glorying in the military sacrifice undertaken by the “Lads” of the poem and the poet’s more nuanced awareness of its significance. While the poem does contain a piquant critique of the costly maintenance of the monarch, which depends as much on men “[g]et[ting]...the sons [their] fathers got” as it does on God, it also sincerely praises the courage of those who offer their lives in final acts of patriotic

love – as many in the earlier part of *ASL* do.⁵⁰ This laudatory element is perhaps most evident in stanza four:

To skies that knit their heartstrings right,
To fields that bred them brave,
The saviours come not home to-night:
Themselves they could not save. (13-16)

Here, the allusion is to Mark 15:31 in which the chief priests “mock[...]” Christ: ““He saved others; himself he could not save,”” and it illuminates the selfless, almost divine, heroism of these young soldiers. The main difference between Housman’s and Leopardi’s introductory poems lies not in their celebration of patriotic self-sacrifice, but in the relationships they construct between present and past. Whereas Housman’s introductory poem describes England’s history of youthful patriotic sacrifice as continuous, Leopardi describes a disjunction between contemporary and historic Italy (see chapter four, p. 177 & ff. above) for a more detailed discussion of this dichotomy in Leopardi’s *Canti*). Nevertheless, there is a celebration of heroic virtue in both, which is lauded for its preservation of the nation – represented in Housman by the figure of the Queen and in Leopardi by the weeping, maternal figure who personifies Italy.

On the one hand, in Leopardi the opening celebration of patriotic action precedes a series of poems – Gardini’s cantos of “Historical decline” – that eulogise those critically endangered illusions and a second series of poems – the “pastoral” *piccoli idilli* – that attempt to retrieve a direct experience of those illusions. On the other hand, in Housman, it is perhaps natural – in the absence of a disjunction between the ancient and modern worlds – that his speaker continues, at first, to revel in the illusions that both Housman and Leopardi saw as fundamental to the

⁵⁰ See also, for example: lyric III (“The Recruit”); lyric XXII (“The street sounds to the soldier’s tread”); and lyric XXIII (“The lads in the hundreds to Ludlow come in for the fair”).

experience of youth. In Leggett's analysis, the first 36 lyrics of *ASL*, which are set in Shropshire, generally exhibit the "optimism of youth" in their presentation of the speaker's being engrossed by the illusions that are the product of his youthful hope (*Land of Lost Content* 93, 102-03). In my own analysis, this is an over-simplification. The sense of the "optimism of youth" is not sustained beyond the first five lyrics, although a note of faith does return, in short bursts, throughout the first half of the collection – for example in lyrics X-XI, XVII-XVIII, and XXXII that celebrate love's power, youthful mirth, and intimacy with nature. To return to the opening lyrics, however, in lyric II, the speaker argues that human life should be spent in contemplating wild blooms:

...since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow. (9-12)

The final word "snow" can be read both as a metaphor for the white bloom that covers the boughs of the cherry tree and also as a subconscious recalling of death as encapsulated in a wintry image. Irrespective of this, the speaker celebrates the absorbed contemplation of natural beauty, suggesting that the best life is one in which humans cultivate a bond with their natural environment. In lyric III, Housman returns to the illusion of patriotism, again celebrating youthful courage as the preserver of the nation of England, and as immortalising:

Come you home a hero,
Or come not home at all,
The lads you leave will mind you
Till Ludlow tower shall fall. (13-16)

While there may be a hint of scepticism on the poet's part in ll. 13-14 ("either come home a hero, or don't bother to come home"), the speaker clearly intends that, whether he comes home or not, the heroic Shropshire youth will be remembered by the "lads" that he left behind. In lyric IV, the speaker, as in lyric II, proposes that the shortness of human life should be a spur to action in a world that teems with rich experiences: "Never lad that trod on leather / Lived to feast his heart with all" (15-16). And in lyric V, the speaker argues that life's transience justifies embracing the illusion of love: "Ah, life, what is it but a flower? / Why must true lovers sigh?" (29-30). Lyric VII begins with a similarly buoyant tone; here, the speaker is vigorously attending to the duties of his work: "blithe afield to ploughing / Against the morning beam, I strode beside my team" (3-5). In contrast to the opening, however, the second half of this same poem presages the disillusionment that is soon to usurp the buoyant atmosphere of *ASL*. In the fourth of six stanzas, the speaker, replicating the thoughtless action of Coleridge's ancient mariner, kills a blackbird whose song, which penetrates the vanity of his work, has deeply disturbed him:

'Lie down, lie down, young yeoman;
What use to rise and rise?
Rise man a thousand mornings
Yet down at last he lies,
And then the man is wise.' (11-15)

However, once the bird is dead, the speaker's "soul" absorbs the blackbird's song – seemingly converted to (or possessed by) the philosophy of this avian exponent of Ecclesiastes – by his cruel act of destruction.

Following this first series of piccolo idilli-like lyrics, *ASL* continues with a group that might be compared to that section of Leopardi's *Canti* that Gardini termed "Historical decline"

and Bickersteth the cantos of “knowledge” since both series explore the vulnerability of illusions in modern life. In *ASL*, this section begins with the commission of murder. Lyric VIII is spoken by a voice other than the eponymous Shropshire lad; in fact, this is the first lyric in which we learn the name of the Shropshire lad, when the speaker addresses Terence (“Terence, look your last at me” – 3). Here, the speaker indicates that he is about to leave Shropshire (“Farewell to barn and stack and tree, / Farewell to Severn shore” – 1-2), before informing his addressee of the motive: he has fatally stabbed his brother. “Maurice amongst the hay lies still / And my knife is in his side,” he bluntly admits (7-8). Lyric IX also focuses on crime and death; here, the speaker visits the old site of the village gallows in order to pay his respects to a friend who will soon be executed nearby in Shrewsbury jail:

naked to the hangman’s noose
The morning clocks will ring
A neck God made for other use
Than strangling in a string. (17-20)

Curiously, despite the extremity of crime and punishment in these two short poems, there is a notable lack of drama. In both lyrics, the impression is of a “criminal” who was an ordinary fellow who made an ordinary error, for which he will pay an extraordinary price: exile in the first poem, execution in the second. This sense of the everyday nature of crime, in lyric VIII, is evident in the murderer’s parting words to Terence in which, as well as wishing him “strength” (17) and “love” (18), he also “wish[es] [him] luck, come Lammastide, / At racing on the green” (19-20). This farewell, with its best wishes for a village horse race, reads as though it were spoken by one friend to another under commonplace circumstances, and implies that the speaker is not an anomalously bad person. In lyric IX, this impression is made more explicit when the

speaker, Terence, describes his friend as “[a] better lad, if things went right, / Than most that sleep outside” (11-12). Ultimately, this unexceptional treatment of crime and its consequences reflects the speaker’s burgeoning intuition of the weary inevitability of suffering, tragedy, and death in human life. The speaker’s new, world-weary attitude marks a turning point in *ASL*; a degree of disillusionment enters the narrative at this point, which presages the profound, inexorable changes occurring within the speaker’s psyche. While these poems are not the manifestly elegiac treatments of illusions that Leopardi’s *Canti* of knowledge are, they do obliquely recognise, in a similar way, the vulnerability of illusions in modern life, and, in particular, in the life of a young man as he grows up.

The following lyrics (X-XVI) treat the nature of love, and its potency: the speaker explores the idea that love endures, that it destroys the individual, and that it is intimately associated with death, by turns. In doing so, these poems forge a parallel with those cantos in the first half of Leopardi’s *Canti* that also explore the relationship between love, the individual, and death: “The Dream,” “Consalvo,” and “To His Lady.” In Housman’s lyric XI, for instance, the speaker requests that his lover should take him to her bed just once before he dies, and suggests, ambiguously, that “[n]ight should ease a lover’s sorrow” (5), where “[n]ight” could signify either literally the night of sexual consummation or death itself. But the speaker’s very insistence that he might remember, and be comforted by, his lover’s embrace in death, suggests the power that love has “[i]n the land to which [we] travel” (8). In a similar vein, in one of Leopardi’s least successful poems, “Consalvo,” the dying speaker declares that the kiss he receives from his beloved comforts him in his death: “Now I’ll die happy with my destiny, / and won’t complain again my eyes saw daylight” (95-96). Conversely, in lyric XII of *ASL*, the speaker neutrally describes the indifference that is the fate of all dead lovers: “Lovers lying two and two / Ask not

whom they sleep beside” (13-14). This conclusion – on the annihilation of love and death – is similar to that presented in Leopardi’s lyric “The Dream,” in which the speaker has a vision of his dead beloved who bluntly tells him: “Our unhappy minds and bodies / are separated for eternity. You’re not alive for me, / nor will you ever come to life again” (91-93). Finally, in Housman’s lyric XIV, the speaker describes the “giv[ing]” of “[h]is heart and soul away” in love (11-12) as a kind of death – “[s]ea-deep, till doomsday morning / Lie lost my heart and soul” (19-20) – as he does in lyric XV, in which the experience of love is treated as one that that causes the speaker to “be lost,” to “[p]erish” (4, 8). The idea that humankind’s power to love is destructive is a similarly vital aspect of the last of Leopardi’s three, early love cantos, “To His Lady,” in which the speaker connects his realisation that his (vision of) woman does not exist and his “mourn[ing] / [his] youth’s illusions” (36-37). Thus, Housman’s speaker’s encounters with death in the earlier poems (8 and 9), and his vivid realisation of its inevitability, appear to taint his conception of love, so that love and death become inextricably entwined in his mind. In this way, these lyrics also bear strong resemblances to the short series on love in the first half of Leopardi’s collection.

In the poems that follow these three distinct groups – Housman’s equivalent to the *piccoli idilli*, the cantos of “Historical decline,” and the early love lyrics – the speaker vacillates between two distinct notions of death that emerge from the early experiences contained in these divergent sequences of poems. On the one hand, the speaker approaches death with some relief as exerting the power to sustain or preserve illusions from the change inherent to being alive; on the other hand, the speaker is pained by the crude blankness of death that annihilates the rich illusions of life. Thus, for example, in lyric XXIII (as in lyrics XIX-XXI), the speaker treats death as “an escape from the inevitability of his transient existence” (Leggett, *Land of Lost Content* 104).

Here, the speaker celebrates the way in which those few, fortunate young men who will die young will “carry their looks” and “their truth to the grave” (8). However, in other poems, such as XXV (and XXIV, XXVII, and XXXII), the speaker focuses on the richness of being alive in comparison to the nothingness of being dead, in which state illusions such as love cannot be preserved. For example, in lyric XXV, the speaker celebrates his triumph over Fred in attaining Rose’s love, a triumph that rests on the fact that “[a] lad that lives and has his will / Is worth a dozen dead” (11-12). In all the lyrics in *ASL* up until this point, the central concerns are – much like Leopardi’s – the importance of illusions, such as “patriotism,” “beauty,” an intimate rapport with nature, and “love,” and whether and how they might be preserved. The speaker expresses paradoxical views on life and death: the idea that living entails a richness of experience that makes it far more valuable than being dead and, conversely, the idea that death is valuable as a preserver of those illusions that made life substantial. This paradox is typical of the speaker’s state of innocence, in which he has not yet acknowledged the blankness inherent to *both* living and dying – a state that is highly comparable to that of Leopardi’s speaker in the first half of the *Canti*.

The sense of a transition between the first and second half of *ASL* is first signalled by a movement beyond the solipsistic contemplation of the speaker’s own suffering and by those lyrics that tentatively approach the idea that youth’s engrossing illusions are, ultimately, meaningless. This transition begins with a few lyrics that, unlike previous ones, describe the ubiquity of suffering – rather than the individual’s absorption in his own suffering. Thus, in lyric XXVIII, “The Welsh Marches,” the speaker imagines the pain of an ancient compatriot who, though long dead, claims that his “ill” “has not died” in his heart; in lyric XXX, the speaker acknowledges that man’s individual suffering is but a small aspect of a much greater story of

universal suffering: “[i]f in the breathless night I too / Shiver now, ’tis nothing new” (3-4); and, similarly, in lyric XXXI, he recognises that “[t]he tree of man was never quiet: / Then ’twas the Roman, now ’tis I” (15-16).⁵¹ In other words, in lyrics XXIII-XXXI, the speaker’s “view is extended beyond himself” (Leggett, *Land of Lost Content* 104). The suggestion that the speaker of *ASL* is undergoing a significant shift is confirmed by those poems in which he manifests a new philosophical disposition, one in which he accepts that illusions, like love, are meaningless. Thus in lyric XXXII, while the speaker wishes that his love could immortalise its object, he acknowledges that such wishing is vain: “all is idle” (13); in lyric XXXIV, “The New Mistress,” the speaker decides to join the British army as a rebuke to his girlfriend who no longer desires his presence, thus tainting previous celebrations of youthful patriotism with petulant selfishness. Finally, in lyric XXXV, the speaker persists in his idea of joining the long line of “[s]oldiers marching, all to die” (8), but he exhibits a striking new tone in describing the mission of these young men who are “[d]ear to friends and food for powder, / Soldiers marching, all to die” (7-8). In the final line of this poem: “[w]oman bore me, I will rise” (16), the impression that a new element of ontological courage enters the tone of this narrative is confirmed. The speaker prepares to discard his youthful illusions, preparing himself, instead, to “rise” to confront the truth of existence – as Leopardi’s speaker declares his intention to do in the conclusion to the pivotal canto 19, “To Count Carlo Pepoli” (see p. 219 above). This parallel – the way in which the speakers of both Housman’s lyric XXXV and Leopardi’s canto 19 declare their intention to dedicate themselves to truth – is especially fascinating since both poems occupy a pivotal

⁵¹ Although both Housman and Leopardi were renowned classicists, there do not seem to be strong parallels in their treatment of or reference to classical subjects or history in their poetry. In fact, these seem quite antithetical. While Housman sees a continuity – as in this poem, lyric XXXI – between ancient and contemporary culture, Leopardi, as described in the introduction, sees a sharp distinction between ancient or Roman Italy and his contemporary Italian society.

position in the collections in which they appear between the lyrics of “innocence” and those of “experience.”

The motif of a physical journey away from Shropshire, which concretises this transition, occurs in the following lyrics: here, in lyrics XXXVI (“White in the moon the long road lies / That leads me from my love” – 3-4) and XXXVII (“As through the wild green hills of Wyre / The train ran, changing sky and shire...” – 1-2), the Shropshire lad describes abandoning his native county for London. By the time we arrive at lyric XXXVIII, the Shropshire lad has been removed from Shropshire: “Now through the friendless world we fare / And sigh upon the road” (19-20). The poems that exhibit this journey motif comprise an easily discernible and distinct phase in *ASL*. If there were any doubts regarding whether the delineation of such a phase was intended by Housman, Leggett has shown that “changes made in the printer’s copy of *A Shropshire Lad* immediately before its publication tend to emphasize the shift in setting” (*Land of Lost Content* 93). This fact leaves little doubt that these poems (XXXIV-XXXVII) indicate a significant transition – a transition that will prove to be one from a youth dedicated to the cult of illusions to an adulthood in which the speaker recognises their vanity. This transition is presaged in the first of the “journey” lyrics, XXXVI, in which the speaker recognises that the “long road” is “lead[ing him] from [his] love” (1, 4), in which “love” might be interpreted as a synecdoche for all the other illusions that he is losing, including patriotism, beauty, and intimacy with nature.

The first poems that follow those alluding to a journey, lyrics XXXIV-XLII, express a strong sense of exile from Shropshire, nature, and its attendant illusions, and – as already indicated (see p. 223 above) – reflect the parallel series in Leopardi’s *Canti*: the *canti pisano-recanatesi*. According to Leggett’s evidence, Housman’s lyrics were highly intentionally grouped as a series. As Leggett explains, “[t]he theme of estrangement is established in the first four

poems of the exile group, three of which were shifted to their present position in the final ordering, the fourth...added to the printer's copy immediately before publication" (*Land of Lost Content* 108). In lyrics XXXIX-XLII, the speaker expresses nostalgia for the county in which he spent his youth, and his sense of longing embraces not only the physical landscape and his old friends, but also an attitude that the speaker assumed when he lived in Shropshire – an attitude that he cannot re-assume. Thus, in lyric XL, the speaker concludes:

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again. (5-8)

Here the "land" where the speaker lived and the "highways" upon which he walked are as much metaphorical as they are literal – much as the phrase "lost content" has a double meaning here. The speaker cannot return to the Edenic state of innocence – the "land of lost content" – that Shropshire represents for him, nor can he tread the same (anti-)philosophical path that he once did as a blithe youth. In this way, the poem is strikingly similar to Leopardi's "To Silvia," which occurs in a very similar structural position in the *Canti* i.e. as the second poem of the second half of that collection. Fascinatingly, in his much shorter lyric, Housman has combined two of the most distinctive poetic devices of "To Silvia": the edenic images of the external world ("the cloudless sky," "the golden streets," and the "mountains" – 23, 24, 25) and the persistent rhetorical questions ("do you remember still...?" "why don't you deliver later...?" "Why do you lead on / your children so?" – 1, 37, 38-39). Both of these devices are evident in the Shropshire lad's asking: "What are those blue remembered hills, / What spires, what farms are those?" (3-4). As in "To Silvia," these images represent the idyll of a lost youth teeming with the illusions that

gave life its “content” (in both senses) and the speaker implies the question, as does the speaker of “To Silvia,” why nature would allow humankind to be abandoned, in its maturity, by the illusions that, paradoxically, instil life with its substance.

In lyric XLI, Housman’s speaker persists in his self-diagnosis regarding the loss of vital illusions; in this poem, the speaker remembers how, in Shropshire, he enjoyed the illusion of a close connection with his natural environment:

In my own shire, if I was sad,
Homely comforters I had:
The earth, because my heart was sore,
Sorrowed for the son she bore;
And standing hills, long to remain,
Shared their short-lived comrade’s pain. (1-6)

In other words, the speaker never felt alone because the anthropomorphised “earth” and the “standing hills,” as well as the “beautiful and death-struck year” (10) he mentions later, actively sympathised with him. Thus, this poem suggests that the loss of the illusion of intimacy with nature is central to the speaker’s exile from Shropshire and from a state of hopeful innocence that was compatible with the maintenance of such illusions. This series then, as indicated by the comparison with “To Silvia,” is very close in subject matter to Leopardi’s *canti* pisano-recanatesi in which the speaker, similarly, acknowledges that he can no longer experience illusions directly for himself. In both cases, the speaker has only the *memory* of illusions to sustain him.

Terence’s ultimate conclusion, much like Leopardi’s speaker’s in the *Canti*, is that death will finally and utterly destroy those illusions most directly enjoyed in youth when it destroys life, and that life, therefore, is meaningless. An anomaly in the dreary progress towards these

conclusions is lyric XLII, “The Merry Guide,” in which the speaker seems to imply that a naïve trust in nature’s companionship might be recovered in death, but the general trend is to declare the annihilating power of death – as in lyrics XLIII–XLV and lyric XLVIII – and the meaninglessness of life – as in lyrics XLVII and XLVIII. In the first series of lyrics mentioned here – XLIII–XLV – death is no longer presented as the preserver of illusions, which the innocent speaker had hoped it might prove to be, but as their final annihilator. In lyric XLIII “The Immortal Part” – the ironic title of which suggests man’s bones seem immortal when compared to the ephemerality of his flesh – the speaker listens to his “bones” who tell him that when the man dies, so does the “brain that fills the skull with schemes, / And its humming hive of dreams” (11-12). The same point is also made in lyrics XLIV and XLV. In lyric XLIV, instead of preserving the dead man’s self and his “ill” that had no “mending” (3), death mercifully destroys all, including both his “dreams” and his “waking” life (25). And in lyric XLV, the speaker similarly celebrates death as a way to permanently put an “end” to the self (7). As Leggett puts it, the Shropshire lad’s “emotional response” in these poems is that which is “inevitable” given his pessimistic materialism: whereas “[t]he young man rebels against the injustice of it all,” “the mature man accepts the inevitable” (*Land of Lost Content* 124).

Significantly, Leggett’s comment on the “rebellion” of the youthful speaker and the “resignation” of the mature speaker applies equally as well to the general spiritual and philosophical evolution of the speaker of Leopardi’s *Canti*. More specifically, Housman’s lyrics on the annihilating power of death and the vanity of life might best be compared to those of Leopardi’s *Canti* that follow the *canti pisano-recanatesi* and precede “Broom,” and which represent the bleakest point in the Italian poet’s collection – cantos such as “To Himself” and the “sepulchral cantos.” The most impressive point of connection between Housman’s and

Leopardi's collections is represented by Leopardi's "To Himself." In this poem, the end of the speaker's love prompts him to conclude that: "[l]ife is merely / bitterness and boredom, and the world is filth" (10-11), and he exhorts his heart to "rest" (1, 6). As mentioned in the first part of this chapter, Singh and others have seen a linguistic parallel between this poem and Housman's lyric XLVIII, in which the speaker enjoins his "soul" – rather than his "heart" – to "be still" (1). This striking similarity strongly reinforces the structural parallel I am identifying: the way Housman's lyrics XLIII-XLVIII and those cantos of Leopardi's that succeed the *canti pisano-recanatesi* both represent the most philosophically bleak points in the collection, in which the speakers explore a conception of life as nothingness.

In response to this philosophical nadir, in the final, local movement of *ASL*, Housman explores different ways of responding to the pessimistic convictions to which his speaker has arrived, eventually settling – like Leopardi – on a form of solidarist stoic pessimism. To begin with, in a jollier tone, in lyric XLIX, the speaker claims that "the feather pate of folly / Bears the falling sky" (5-6) – that, in other words, a hedonistic approach to life distracts us from the inevitable fact of destruction. This, however, is the sole expression of Housman's declared Cyrenaism that is easily discovered in this collection. Instead, subsequent to a series that repeat earlier themes such as the connection of love and death (lyrics LIII and LIV), the ubiquity of suffering (lyric LV), and the indifference of nature (lyrics LVIII and LIX), the speaker ends the collection on a note of solidarist stoic pessimism that is very similar to that struck in Leopardi's "Broom." While not the first time it has been struck, this note reverberates more strongly here due to its prominent position at the conclusion.

In lyric LV, the first of three concluding lyrics that manifest the new stoically pessimistic attitude, the speaker advises the reader to remain detached from his or her environment and to persevere:

Oh never fear, man, nought's to dread,

Look not left nor right:

In all the endless road you tread

There's nothing but the night. (5-8)

Such sentiments presage those which we encounter in lyrics LXII and LXIII, rendering the latter less abrupt in tone than they might otherwise have been. In lyric LXII, the speaker imagines being rebuked for the way his verses seem designed to render the reader “[m]oping melancholy mad” (13). Terence famously retorts that “malt does more than Milton can / To justify God’s ways to man” (21-22), noting, however, that the effect of strong beer is only temporary (28). With that in mind, Terence argues – as Housman does in his introductory lecture to University College London – that it is best to confront “trouble,” learning how to endure it, rather than refusing its presence: since “[l]uck’s a chance, but trouble’s sure, / I’d face it as a wise man would, / And train for ill and not for good (43-48). In the very final poem, Housman even suggests that his poems might, somehow, assist the young man to confront that which is “ill” in the world, writing that those “solitary stars” of his verse that survive (12) will be worn by “luckless lads” when he is “dead and gone” (15-16). A sentiment that echoes what he wrote to a young male reader in June 1903: “[m]y chief object in publishing my verses was to give pleasure to a few young men here and there, and I am glad if they have given pleasure to you” (letter to Witter Bynner; Housman, *Letters* 65). Just as in Leopardi’s “Broom” the speaker recognises the ubiquity of human suffering and calls upon people to unite in confronting its source – nature – so

in Housman's final lyrics his speaker recognises his lyrical effort as a small action in a larger battle being fought by people against an indifferent, if not openly hostile, nature – a battle in which the only hope is to confront the truth of existence and to assist each other.

Ultimately, then, both Housman's and Leopardi's collections of poetry exhibit a strong structural unity in which the speakers move from a state of innocence, in which he can readily access the illusions that instil life with substance, to a state of experience, in which they are denied him, to a stoically pessimistic attitude that acknowledges the necessity of uniting humankind. While, it is important to acknowledge that the structural coherence of each is not wholly uniform, both works might be read as histories of the progress of a soul. As Leggett puts it with reference to Housman's *ASL*, "[t]he thematic and structural unity of *A Shropshire Lad* has its basis in the emotional and imaginative response of man to the elementary facts of his existence. Its order is not logical...but archetypal" (*Land of Lost Content* 130). Similarly, with reference to Leopardi's *Canti*, Blasucci writes that "the ambition of recounting the 'history of a soul', that accompanies Leopardi for many years...was realised in the *Canti* in the way that was most congenial to him" ("Sul libro" 73). The main difference between each poet's structuring of their work is, perhaps, that Housman's shift from innocence to experience is so clearly rooted in a geographical shift beyond the Shropshire county to London, whereas Leopardi's speaker's evolution is not. In Leopardi, such a shift is not so clear since many of the later poems remain centred on scenes from Recanati – Leopardi's actual home – rather than his speaker's imagined one. However, perhaps the difference is, after all, not so strong since in Housman the Shropshire county remains a vital presence, despite the speaker's removal from it. More important, however, is the fact that the speaker's shift from innocence to experience is an elemental part of both Housman's *ASL* and Leopardi's *Canti*. In the first half of each collection, the speaker impresses

the reader with his desperate belief in illusions as an essential part of man's living; however, in the second half of each collection, the adult speaker acknowledges that such phantasms cannot be maintained, although they can – to a degree – be accessed through the vivid memories of youth. At this point in the speaker's soul's "history," it becomes necessary to discover an approach to living that can provide some compensation for the lost illusions, and both poets, fascinatingly, turn to a solidarist stoic pessimism that seeks meaning in humankind's recognition of its oppression at the hands of nature and of the imperative of uniting in an honest confrontation of this hostile entity.

Many critics – such as J. B. Priestley ("The Poetry" 24), George Watson (*A. E. Housman* 158), and Tom Haber (*The Making* 22-23) – deny that *ASL* manifests a strong structural coherence or order, often pointing to the way in which the poems collected in this book were composed "haphazardly." In other words, they were written sporadically across a long period of time and, if Housman's description of his method of composition is to be believed, as a result of the mystical action of beer on the man that resulted in the "bubbl[ing] up" of "sometimes a line or two of verse, sometimes a whole stanza, accompanied, not preceded, by a vague notion of the poem which they were destined to form a part of" (*Shropshire Lad* 255). However, as I rebutted earlier in this chapter, such a criticism ignores the important evidence of Housman's testimony regarding the integrity of the collection: his refusal of (almost) anyone's request to anthologise the pieces in *ASL* (see pp. 200-01 above). Presumably, this refusal was indicative of the fact that Housman saw *ASL* as a single coherent work, with definite structural integrity, that should not be corrupted in the way that editors and publishers wished to gain permission to do. (It bears repeating here that Housman did not treat *Last Poems* with the same scruples.) This coherence,

however, has been neglected and a comparison with the structural coherence of the *Canti* of Leopardi – a poet whom, as has been demonstrated, Housman greatly admired and with whom he shared profound philosophical affinities – is very useful to an illumination of such. The structure of Leopardi's *Canti* has received much more scholarly attention, and the analysis and comparison of this alongside the basic movement of Housman's *ASL* reveals strong underlying affinities: the use of an introductory poem to establish the passionate subscription of the speaker in each to patriotic ideals, the attempt to replicate the youthful experience of illusions in verse, the greater awareness of subjective experience beyond the lyric self, the destruction of illusions in adulthood, and the predominance of a solidarist stoic pessimistic attitude in the conclusion that, together, comprise the progress of the speaker's soul.

Chapter seven: Conclusion

In writing these chapters, I had two abiding aims. One was to draw what attention I could to the legacy of a great Italian poet in nineteenth-century England, one who has been much neglected by anglophone literary critics in general, but especially by scholars of Giacomo Leopardi's English contemporaries. The other was to explore what would be the interpretive effect of re-reading some of the canonical works of English Victorian literature in the light of their authors' interest in Leopardi. While precedents for this kind of work were scarce, I felt certain that it must result in some interesting and fruitful readings of the poetry and prose I selected for study, given the fascinating and unusual character of Leopardi's poetry and prose. I hope that my work has proven this to be the case. In any consideration of the English Victorian reception of Leopardi, Matthew Arnold's own admiration for the poet-philosopher will probably be prominent. As several previous scholars have pointed out before me, Arnold's introduction to his selection of Byron's poetry, and its discussion of the comparative merits of Byron, Wordsworth, and Leopardi, probably did more than any other single piece of criticism to draw literary attention to the Italian Romantic. But what is so poignant (and fascinating) about this piece of criticism, is how Arnold's criticism of Leopardi in this piece reflects the criticism he made of his own work in the 1853 "Preface." Arnold seems to have been in the tragic situation of being compelled to write and admire a kind of poetry (and philosophy) that he could not, in his more objective-analytical mood, approve of, and a comparison of his and Leopardi's work highlights, I believe, precisely what he could not admire, but what was, actually, most intellectually courageous and most admirably artistic in Arnold's work. Re-reading "Dover Beach" alongside Leopardi's *Canti* clarifies the poetic innovation of that poem, and its specifically philosophic purpose – the expression of the solidarist pessimism that seems to be at the heart of both Arnold's and

Leopardi's best work. And re-reading "The Scholar-Gipsy" and "Empedocles on Etna" alongside Vico, contemporary criticism of Leopardi, and the poem of Leopardi's that Arnold, perhaps, most admired, facilitates a less dichotomous interpretation of these two poems, one which places the protagonists' relationship to their age at the forefront (rather than their much debated "idealism") and, as with "Dover Beach," connects this intellectual component of Arnold's poetry to its composition.

The case of George Eliot and Leopardi is a very different one. What initially fascinated me about Eliot's response to Leopardi is what has, perhaps, been least well understood about her interest in the Italian Romantic – the fact that she chose to re-present Leopardi's energetic, republican patriotism at a time when (and in a country where) this was so little appreciated. While most nineteenth-century critics focused on the pessimism of Leopardi that proved such an obstruction to his appreciation – and, I would argue, still does – Eliot responded to the resounding youthful zeal of Leopardi's early ode "To Italy," and decided to use lines from this poem to inspire one of her last great protagonists, Daniel Deronda, with a similar sentiment. While little of the actual ode is quoted in *Daniel Deronda*, "To Italy" does, I argue, a lot of conceptual work in the novel, both in terms of the ethical evolution of Deronda and in terms of the coalescing of ideas on cosmopolitanism, nationalism, and culture for the reader. As I have suggested, Deronda's embracing of his Jewish vocation is catalysed by his connection of such a role to great Italian precedents, the examples of Giuseppe Mazzini and Leopardi in particular. Such examples enable him to cultivate the kind of impartial preference for his own nation that finally allows him to cease his aimless vacillations between potential futures. "To Italy" signals, at crucial moments, the progress of this evolution, but its incorporation into the novel also beautifully condenses Eliot's complex ideas on the proper balance of cosmopolitan and

nationalist tendencies, and, importantly, the role that art has to play in both providing nations with a cohesive identity that allows for the very existence of nations, and, at the same time, fostering a future “Holy Alliance of Nations” through fruitful, even inspiring, cultural exchanges.

The third case I consider, that of A. E. Housman and Leopardi is, again, quite different to the other two. Although Housman and Leopardi were both poets, like Arnold and Leopardi, they did not share, as Arnold and Leopardi did, much in terms of their formal approach. While both were, perhaps, equally scrupulous about their versification, the effects of Housman’s often colloquial, balladic short lyrics and Leopardi’s aurally exquisite but more rambling odes could not be very much more different. However, unlike Arnold, Housman found in Leopardi a scholar and poet that he could openly and *un*-conflictedly acknowledge admiring, and it was Housman’s expression of admiration in a letter to a young French scholar that first caught my attention. By the time I came across this letter, I was fully immersed in Housman’s usually restrained and sometimes acerbic tone in his correspondence, so I was surprised by the unconditional warmth with which he expressed his admiration for the Italian Romantic poet. However, little reflection on the characters of these two poets suffices to comprehend – to some degree – the affinity between their intellects, and between their spirits. Ultimately, it is their shared conception of the tragic fate of all people to lose those illusions that instil life with joy and substance, and their common response to this tragedy, that informs the narrative progression of each poet’s principal collections. And, I argue, it is a comparison of this that, I believe, firmly establishes the coherent nature of *A Shropshire Lad* as a collection of lyrics.

There is still a lot of work to be done on the ways in which nineteenth-century writers responded to Leopardi’s work, and I hope that we are witnessing a definitive change in

Leopardi's fortunes in the anglophone world, and that there will be many more scholars to undertake such work in the near future.

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