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**TEMPORALITIES AND FRACTURES  
IN POST-NAPOLEONIC ITALY:  
LEOPARDI AND VICO'S LEGACY**

**by  
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A thesis submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	p. 4
<b>Declaration</b> .....	p. 5
<b>Abstract</b> .....	p. 6
<b>Abbreviations</b> .....	p. 7
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	p. 8
1. The Main Research Questions. Vico's Legacy, Vico's 'Heir'.....	p. 8
2. Existing Scholarship and Its Gaps.....	p. 11
3. Diffraction as a Methodological Framework.....	p. 18
4. Diffractive Mapping. Organization of the Material in this Work.....	p. 29
<b>Chapter 1. FROM NAPLES TO VENICE AND LOMBARDY</b>	
<b>The Oblique Paths of Vico's Interpretation(s) (1708-1815)</b> .....	p. 35
1. 1 – Naples 1708: An Italian Response to the 'Querelle Des Anciens et des Modernes'.....	p. 36
1. 2 – Venice 1763: Translating and Mediating the Ancient World.....	p. 48
1. 3 – Vico in Lombardy (1800-1815): Post-Revolutionary 'Vichismo' and the Revision of Italian Identity.....	p. 58
<b>Chapter 2. MILAN</b>	
<b>Classicism and Romanticism, Tradition and Innovation, History and Philology (1808-1827)</b> .....	p. 76
2. 1 – Was Vico 'Classicist' or 'Romantic'?.....	p. 78
2. 2 – Between Giordani and Borsieri: Rethinking Philology.....	p. 98
<b>Chapter 3. RECANATI</b>	
<b>Fallacy, Forgery, Logic and Mythology in Leopardi (1815-1822)</b> ..	p. 113

3. 1 - Mytho-logein: Vico and Leopardi as Mythologists.....	p. 115
3. 2 - Towards 'Alla Primavera': Leopardi's Itineraries in Myth (1815-1818).....	p. 122
3. 3 - 'Alla Primavera': About (Un)Poetic Logic.....	p. 139
 <b>Chapter 4. FLORENCE</b>	
<b>Studying the Ancient as the Other (1827-1828)</b> .....	p. 153
4. 1 - Florence 1827-1828: Restoration, Resurrection, Re-foundation.....	p. 154
4. 2 - <i>Zibaldone</i> 4311-4417: Leopardi Inside Homer's System.....	p. 175
 <b>Chapter 5. NAPLES</b>	
<b>Recourse, belief, and poetry among 'i nuovi credenti' (1832-1840)</b>	p. 188
5. 1 - Rereading Vico in Post-revolutionary Naples: History, Progress, Perfectibility.....	p. 190
5. 2 - 'Cantare la religione civile': Vico's Ideas in Poetry.....	p. 205
5. 3 - Regress, Disbelief and Fable in Leopardi's Last Works.....	p. 211
 <b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	 p. 223
 <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	 p. 240

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## DECLARATION

This dissertation does not include material used before or which the author has published.

This thesis is the candidate's own work.

This thesis has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation discusses whether Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) can be considered a philosophical heir of Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), as some scholars retain, despite the fact that there is no evidence that Leopardi read Vico's *New Science* or other works until late (1828); too late to demonstrate a direct influence of the philosopher's thought on the deepest nexuses of Leopardi's reflection. This dissertation clarifies how Leopardi responded to Vico-related questions characterizing the culture of his time through an innovative methodology that looks at the diffraction of Vico's ideas in Bourbon Restoration Italian culture. This work aims to paint a dynamic picture of Italian nineteenth-century polycentric culture through a geographical organization of the material; it in fact tackles the diffusion of Vico's works and ideas from Naples to Venice (Chapter 1), to Milan (Chapter 2), to Leopardi's hometown Recanati (Chapter 3), to Florence (Chapter 4), and again to Naples (Chapter 5). Not only does this work shed new light on the existence of a Vico-Leopardi philosophical lineage, but it also present an original study of perceptions of time and history and of the dichotomy ancient/modern in Post-Napoleonic Italian culture.

## ABBREVIATIONS

I quote from: Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, critical edition by Franco Gavazzeni (Florence: Accademia della Crusca, 2009); Giacomo Leopardi, *Operette morali*, critical edition by Ottavio Besomi (Milan: Mondadori, 1979), indicated as OM; Giacomo Leopardi, *Epistolario*, critical edition by Franco Brioschi and Patrizia Landi, 2 vols (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998), indicated as *Epistolario*, and from Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone* (critical edition by Giuseppe Pacella, Milan: Garzanti, 1991), indicated as *Zib.* and followed by the page number in the manuscript. Quotations from other texts by Leopardi are given from Lucio Felici and Emanuele Trevi's edition of Leopardi's *Tutte le poesie e tutte le prose* (Rome: Newton Compton, 2003, abbreviated as TPP).

As far as the *New Science* is concerned, I quote from Giambattista Vico, *La Scienza Nuova (1744)*, edited by Paolo Cristofolini and Manuela Sanna (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2013); the quotations are marked *NS* and followed by the number of paragraph.

## INTRODUCTION

Il en est des livres comme du feu dans nos foyers,  
on va prendre ce feu chez son voisin, on l'allume chez soi,  
on le communique à d'autres, et il appartient à tous.

Voltaire, *Mélanges*

### *1. The Main Research Questions: Vico's Legacy, Vico's 'Heir'*

This dissertation tackles a long-term propensity in Italian thought: the tendency to negotiate tradition and innovation, ancient and modern, continuity and fracture.<sup>1</sup> This cultural pattern is particularly evident if we take into account a fundamental vector of the Italian philosophical tradition, connecting Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) and his seminal system with the culture of Bourbon Restoration Italy, and in particular with the thought of Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837). This work therefore approaches the resurfacing of Vico's thought in Post-Revolutionary Italy and its perceived influence in the period as a prism for understanding the peculiarities of that context and its main cultural dynamics.

The resurfacing and the widespread success in the nineteenth century of Vico's *Scienza nuova* (1744) and other works,<sup>2</sup> which were conceived in a very

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<sup>1</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Pensiero vivente: origini e attualità della filosofia italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010), p. 24. See also chapter II, *Potenza dell'origine*.

<sup>2</sup> Apart from the *New Science*, nineteenth-century readers were particularly responsive to Vico's *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia* (1710); but also Vico's autobiography ('Vita scritta da sé medesimo', 1723-28) and *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (1708-09) turned out to be relevant to this research. Occasionally, I have made references to Vico's poems and letters, published posthumously.

different environment, in large part rejected and forgotten after their publication (except in some specific contexts, as explained in Chapter 1), is extremely telling of the needs and problems of the post-Revolutionary generation and of the Risorgimento. As discussed throughout this work, this resurgence of interest was due to a multiplicity of factors, but the centrality of history in Vico's work may be deemed a decisive one. Vico provided a full historical understanding of human actions, individuating precise laws in the development and decay of societies. Vico's theoretical frame helped post-revolutionary readers, who had witnessed large-scale historical change, try to make sense of the traumatic events and negotiate the opposing tensions of restoration and renovation. Mingled with the specific cultural features of that age, Vico's message acquired unpredictable shades of meaning: some found the *New Science* comforting or promising for the destiny of the nation, others found in it a model for the humanities (history, philology), whilst other groups found in it the foundations for a renewed approach to literature.

Another reason for Vico's success in the nineteenth century may lie in the fact that the revolutionary and Napoleonic period in Europe had eroded the notion itself of authority, both in political and cultural terms. Therefore, the reflection on authority and related concepts (such as the exemplarity of ancient authors, the canon, methods of study, the hierarchy of the disciplines) became extremely problematic. Vico had described his own work as a 'filosofia dell'autorità' (*NS*, § 7, 350): he had explored the historical and philosophical principles of power distribution among societies. He had also given a convincing explanation of the rise and fall of those forms of power, within his famous cyclical conceptualization of history – the theory of a 'corso' and 'ricorso delle nazioni'. It is consequently easy to infer how Vico's opinions became increasingly meaningful in a society that had seen the fall of a long-standing cultural pattern with its organization of power, its cultural codes, its literature and its rites – what we now call the *Ancien*

*Régime* – but also the rise and fall of a leader of unprecedented success, Napoleon Bonaparte.<sup>3</sup>

In this way, Vico rapidly became a shared cultural reference point for his reading community, and the interpretation of his message represented a crucial cultural matter, sometimes dividing Vico's readership in opposite factions (see Section 2. 1). Although Vico's cultural influence has attracted wide critical attention, scholars have overlooked its impact in key cultural environments such as that of the journal *Il conciliatore* and the other journals linked to the Classicist-Romantic quarrel (Section 2. 1), or the role of Vico's legacy in the Florentine Gabinetto Vieusseux (Section 4. 1). On the other hand, the debates about Vico in 1830s Naples (Section 4. 1) have been the object of some scholarly attention, but there is still need for a close analysis of their implicit inner tensions.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary scholarship acknowledges the importance of Vico's legacy in the nineteenth century;<sup>5</sup> recently, however, scholars have gone further, identifying a possible 'heir' of Vico in the Ottocento, or, in other words, a figure in which the cultural tensions shown by the impact of the *New Science* seem to find a synthesis of unprecedented acuity: Giacomo Leopardi. Indeed, Leopardi's main philosophical work, the *Zibaldone*, has recently been presented to an Anglophone readership almost as a nineteenth-century *New Science*: the editors of the English edition of the *Zibaldone* (2013) speak of Leopardi as 'the legitimate heir of Vico',<sup>6</sup> thus sketching a genealogical line connecting the two thinkers.

Paradoxically, the influence of Vico on other literary authors of the nineteenth century, such as Ugo Foscolo<sup>7</sup> and Alessandro Manzoni,<sup>8</sup> is based on

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<sup>3</sup> This seems to be the interpretation of Pietro Piovani, with specific reference to the French philosopher De Maistre. See Pietro Piovani, *La filosofia nuova di Vico* (Naples: Morano, 1990), p. 156.

<sup>4</sup> See Section 4. 1 for a complete bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> See the following section.

<sup>6</sup> Franco D'Intino, 'Metaphysic, Theology, Philosophy', in Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone: The Notebooks of Leopardi*, ed. by Franco D'Intino and Michael Caesar (London: Penguin, 2013), pp. xlii-lii (p. xlix).

<sup>7</sup> Glauco Cambon, 'Vico e Foscolo', in *Vico a Venezia*, ed. by Cesare de Michelis and Gilberto Pizzamiglio (Florence: Olschki, 1982), pp. 337-49; Christian del Vento, *Un allievo della*

evident and demonstrable links, and yet no scholar seems tempted to identify them as Vico's heirs. Instead, Leopardi's knowledge of Vico is less traceable: the only evidence of Leopardi reading Vico is a very late (1828) quotation. Too late to demonstrate a direct influence of the philosopher's thought on the deepest nexuses of Leopardi's reflection, whose cornerstones were laid years earlier.

Largely unproven, maybe indemonstrable, this connection raises crucial questions from a methodological point of view: what do we mean when we invoke such notions as 'cultural heritage', 'intellectual relationship', 'source', and 'influence'? What does it mean to identify Leopardi as the recipient of Vico's legacy, in the absence of substantial evidence of a relationship? What does the fact that Leopardi reminds us of Vico tell us in terms of our understanding of both Vico and Leopardi? What does 'Vico's heritage' mean when dealing with the revival of theoretical questions, topics, themes in Leopardi and his environment? My research tries to answer these questions.

## 2. Existing Scholarship and Its Gaps

The influence of Vico in nineteenth-century socio-political thought and philosophy has been the object of scholarly attention. It is possible to identify two main strains of research: one group of scholarly contributions focuses on the historiographical notion of 'Risorgimento' ('or pre-Risorgimento'), and a second one rotates around the concept of historicism.

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*rivoluzione. Ugo Foscolo dal "noviziato letterario" al "nuovo classicismo" (1795-1806)* (Bologna: CLUEB, 2003); Andrea Battistini, 'Temi vichiani nei *Sepolcri*', in *'A egregie cose'. Studi sui 'Sepolcri' di Ugo Foscolo*, ed. by Franco Danelon (Venice: Marsilio, 2008), pp. 31 – 52.

<sup>8</sup> Dario Faucci, 'Manzoni storico, il suo cattolicesimo liberale e l'impronta vichiana', in *Prassi e intelligenza storica: lettura di filosofi* (Naples: Giannini, 1984), pp. 281-92; Gian Franco Grechi, 'Manzoni e Vico', *Otto/Novecento*, 7: 3-4, (1983), 29-44, Fulvio Tessitore, 'Manzoni e la tradizione vichiana', *Bollettino Centro Studi Vichiani*, 17-18 (1987-1988), 115-35.

Studies centered on Vico's role in the Risorgimento<sup>9</sup> tend to read the cultural dynamics involving Vico's readership in a teleological sense, highlighting the rise of long-term cultural features leading to the Unification period. My work is rather focused on Bourbon Restoration Italy as a post-revolutionary period: as such, it centres around the notion of post-revolutionary trauma<sup>10</sup> and concentrates on the inner tensions of a culture dealing with the indelible marks of massively significant events. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars act as a watershed dividing a 'before' and an 'after' and determining new paradigms of historicity, making Italian Bourbon Restoration culture a fluid culture of transition and mediation.<sup>11</sup>

Other studies, such as those by Fulvio Tessitore,<sup>12</sup> inscribe Vico's legacy in the history of European historicism. This approach, with its focus on historical and philosophical terms, leaves little scope for other cultural dynamics, such as literary theories, philology, and poetics. My work is instead centered on the

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<sup>9</sup> Francesco Brancato, *Vico nel Risorgimento* (Palermo: Flaccovio, 1968); Sergio Moravia, 'Vichismo e *idéologie* nella cultura italiana di primo Ottocento', in *Omaggio a Vico*, ed. by Andrea Corsano (Naples: Morano, 1968), pp. 417-82; Giuseppe Cospito, *Il "gran Vico": presenza, immagini e suggestioni vichiane nei testi italiani di età pre-risorgimentale* (Genoa: Name, 2002). See also Alberto Mario Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento: parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell'Italia unita* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> On post-revolutionary trauma, see François Hartog, *Regimes d'historicité. Presentisme and experience du temps* (2003), engl. trans. by Saskia Brown, *Regimes of Historicity. Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 170-80; Deborah Jenson, *Trauma and its Representations. The Social Life of Mimesis in Post-Revolutionary France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Katherine Astbury, *Narrative Responses to the Trauma of the French Revolution* (London: Maney Publishing, 2012); Fabio Camilletti, *Classicism and Romanticism in Italian Literature* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013), p. 10. On cultural trauma, see Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma', in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. by Jeffrey C. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. J. Smelser and P. Sztompka (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 1-30; *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); and Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Fabio Camilletti (*Classicism and Romanticism*, p. 10) associates the notion of Post-Revolutionary trauma with the psycho-analytical notion of 'repression'.

<sup>12</sup> Fulvio Tessitore, *Filosofia, politica e storia in Vincenzo Cuoco*, (Cosenza: Marco, 2002); Fulvio Tessitore, *Contributi alla storia dello storicismo*; Maurizio Martirano, *Giuseppe Ferrari editore ed interprete di Vico* (Naples: Guida, 2001).

impact of Vico in these spheres of cultural production in Bourbon Restoration Italy. Tessitore's critical perspective, furthermore, does not entirely cover all the aspects of the readership of the *New Science* in the early nineteenth century. These studies have drawn attention to the figure of Vincenzo Cuoco (1770-1823), a Neapolitan intellectual who appears to have played a key role in spreading Vico's message in northern Italy. The recent wave of interest in Cuoco, as demonstrated by a new publication of his complete works,<sup>13</sup> risks drawing excessive attention to this figure, overshadowing the capillary presence of Vico in early nineteenth-century culture.<sup>14</sup> Cuoco's mediation contributed to broaden the reading community of the *New Science* and Vico's other works (see Section 1. 3). Studies of this kind tend to analyse Vico's legacy only when it is at its most explicit or evident, or ideologically oriented (as is the case with the Neapolitan expatriates); they therefore tend to overlook the areas in which the resurfacing of Vico-related issues is implicit or subterranean, as is the case for Leopardi.

As regards Leopardi, scholarship has offered an interpretation of his philosophical dimension that requires a direct comparison with Vico. The comparability of Leopardi and Vico, who is perceived as 'arguably the most significant Italian philosopher'<sup>15</sup> seems to have become a yardstick to measure the depth of Leopardi's thought. Consequently, scholars have identified a considerable number of examples, from various contexts, alluding to the possibility of an indirect influence of Vico on Leopardi. The expressions scholars have used to describe the alleged relationship between Leopardi and Vico are particularly telling: Vico may be either 'una fonte taciuta' or 'una linea d'indagine contigua per affinità',<sup>16</sup> argues Antonio Prete; the two authors bear striking

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<sup>13</sup>, *Opere di Vincenzo Cuoco. Scritti editi ed inediti*, ed. by Luigi Biscardi and Antonino De Francesco (Bari: Laterza, 2007-2012).

<sup>14</sup> Some scholars accused Tessitore's reading of Cuoco's 'vichismo' as excessive, deforming. See Guido Oldrini, *La cultura filosofica napoletana dell'Ottocento* (Bari: Laterza, 1973).

<sup>15</sup> Richard Bellamy, 'Vico, Giambattista (1668-1744)', in *Oxford Companion of Philosophy*, ed. by Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 295.

<sup>16</sup> Antonio Prete, 'Appunti su Leopardi e Vico', available on <http://www.zibaldoni.it/2013/03/27/appunti-su-vico-e-leopardi/> (last accessed 17/04/2013).

similarities ('impressionante [...] vicinanza'), in Sergio Givone's perspective;<sup>17</sup> there may be 'una zona vichiana'<sup>18</sup> in Leopardi's thought, according to Vincenzo Placella; Leopardi 'ripete la posizione vichiana' about myth, in Francesco Tateo's view;<sup>19</sup> Lucio Felici wrote that Leopardi chooses 'vichianamente' the word 'favola' in the title of the poem 'Alla Primavera, o delle Favole antiche';<sup>20</sup> an 1820 note in the *Zibaldone* is 'clamorosamente vichiana', asserts Tatiana Crivelli;<sup>21</sup> Vico is 'sotteso a moltissime sue [di Leopardi] riflessioni', in Luigi Reina's view;<sup>22</sup> in 1821, Leopardi must have already been 'un attento lettore' of Vico, posits Andrea Battistini;<sup>23</sup> 'un confronto con Vico' nourishes Leopardi's reflections, suggests Stefano Velotti;<sup>24</sup> it is therefore time for a 'processo vichiano a Leopardi', proposes Pasquale Soccio.<sup>25</sup>

Most of the quotations above are reasonable ways of describing the alleged relationship between Leopardi and Vico. However, they do not tell us very much about its nature. Rather, they indicate clearly the widespread feeling of a critical vacuum about the possible transmission of ideas from Vico to Leopardi. In other words, these quotations try to negotiate the absence of factual evidence of the Vico-Leopardi relationship.

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<sup>17</sup> Sergio Givone, 'Filosofia, poesia e mito in Vico e in Leopardi', in *Filosofia '95*, ed. by Gianni Vattimo (Bari: Laterza 1996), pp. 101-17 (p. 116).

<sup>18</sup> Vincenzo Placella, 'Leopardi e Vico', in *Leopardi e la letteratura italiana dal Due al Seicento*, ed. by Centro Nazionale Studi Leopardiani (Florence: Olschki, 1978), pp. 731-757 (p. 757).

<sup>19</sup> Francesco Tateo, "'Alla Primavera o delle Favole antiche'", in *Lecture leopardiane. I Ciclo*, ed. by Michele Dell'Aquila (Rome: Fondazione Piazzolla, 1993), pp. 29-48 (p. 32).

<sup>20</sup> TPP, p. 99.

<sup>21</sup> Tatiana Crivelli, 'I due tempi della barbarie. Per una leopardiana filosofia del linguaggio', in *Poétiques barbares / Poetiche barbare*, ed. by Carlo Caruso e Jean Rigoli (Ravenna: Longo, 1998), pp. 31-36 (p. 34).

<sup>22</sup> Luigi Reina, 'Note su Lomonaco e Leopardi', in *Francesco Lomonaco: un giacobino del Sud*, ed. by Pietro Borraro (Galatina: Congedo, 1966), pp. 109-15 (p. 112 note 3).

<sup>23</sup> Andrea Battistini, *Vico tra antichi e moderni* (Venice: Marsilio, 2006), p. 186.

<sup>24</sup> Stefano Velotti, *Storia filosofica dell'ignoranza* (Bari: Laterza, 2003), p. 212 n. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Pasquale Soccio, 'Processo vichiano a Leopardi', in *Leopardi oggi*, ed. by Giuseppe De Matteis (San Severo: Miranda, 2001), pp. 25-28. See also Pasquale Soccio, 'Sentimento e immaginazione in Leopardi e Vico', *Nuova Antologia* 130: 4 (1996), 44-66.

Furthermore, this critical vacuum raises questions regarding the limits of the purely historicist approach that is traditionally dominant in Italian academia, in that the impossibility of proving direct links forces scholars to express this connection in terms of a longing for such a connection. Many Leopardi scholars seem to be haunted by Vico, as modern society was haunted by Marx according to Derrida.<sup>26</sup> Like Marx, Vico haunts contemporary scholarship mainly without consideration of his texts. Vico's presence-absence can be evoked for the most part as a signifier: in some of the extracts above, Vico is purely a name, an adjective ('vichiano') or adverb ('vichianamente'), that is to say, a pure signifier, a flag representing a set of ideas, such as, in Tatiana Crivelli's extract, the cyclical conception of history.

It seems likely that highlighting the comparability of the two writers is a way for some scholars to demonstrate Leopardi's philosophical stature; traditionally (from Benedetto Croce to Walter Binni) Leopardi's poetry was more highly esteemed than his philosophical speculation; today the opposite tendency prevails.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, the lack of philological evidence of a reading of the *New Science* by Leopardi before 1828 has held back research on the topic. So, as explained above, scholars seem either to take for granted that a direct influence of Vico on Leopardi exists, or they appear to want to search for it in a rather pressing and 'detective-like' fashion, or, finally, they simply allude to the need to fill this gap in existing scholarship.

A purely historicist perspective, therefore, seems an unsatisfactory approach to Vico's alleged 'heritage' found in Leopardi. It is necessary, then, to go further by asking: what do scholars mean by those words, 'vichiano', 'vichianamente'? To what extent is this definition related to a *cliché* of Vico (for example the theory of 'corsi e ricorsi storici', the stock phrase that was never used

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<sup>26</sup> 'Europe, as if the latter, at a certain moment of its history, had begun to suffer from a certain evil, to let itself be inhabited in its inside, that is, haunted by a foreign guest'. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> See Gaspare Polizzi, 'Giacomo Leopardi', in *Il contributo italiano alla storia del pensiero*, ed. by Istituto Enciclopedia Italiana (Rome: Treccani, 2012), pp. 423-32, (pp. 423-24).

by the author himself), or to our contemporary, historically related conception of Vico? It is necessary to take into account our own situation, to be critical towards the vantage-point from which we look at this issue, to make this too an object of verification and observation. Ultimately, one must concede that there may be an optical illusion in the scholarly impression that Leopardi recalls in some ways Vico.

Even the optical illusion, however, has its *raison d'être*. The illusion may be due to the viewpoint from which contemporary culture now regards both thinkers. On the one hand, the acknowledgement of Leopardi as a proper philosopher is mostly due to the recent reassessment of the *Zibaldone* in critical literature; for a long time perceived as ancillary to his other works, Leopardi's private journal is now considered central to the understanding of the poet's thought.<sup>28</sup> Thanks to the study of his journal, Leopardi's philosophy of origins, his view of the ancients and his aesthetic thought have become much clearer than in the past and have been object of extensive research. Consequently, Rousseau and Vico, 'two *dilettantes* just like him, both historians of humanity' seem today 'the thinkers closest to him'.<sup>29</sup>

As far as Vico is concerned, in the wake of a long tradition of studies reading the *New Science* as the forerunner of idealistic thought,<sup>30</sup> scholars now tend to highlight the anti-modern aspects of Vico's thought. Already Isaiah Berlin framed him in a small canon of 'counter-Enlightenment' thinkers; Mark Lilla described Vico as 'anti-modern';<sup>31</sup> more recently, Paolo Cristofolini's essay on Vico describes him as 'più archeologo che architetto [...] maestro di scavo

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<sup>28</sup> See Cosetta M. Veronese, 'Leopardi and the *Zibaldone* into the New Millennium', in *Ten Steps: Critical enquiries on Leopardi*, ed. by Fabio Camilletti and Paola Cori (London: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 1-17.

<sup>29</sup> D'Intino, 'Metaphysics, Theology, Philosophy', p. xlix.

<sup>30</sup> This tradition was started by Benedetto Croce's *La filosofia di Giambattista Vico* (1911). See Hayden White, 'What is living and what is dead in Croce's Criticism of Vico', in *Giambattista Vico: an International Symposium*, ed. by Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Hayden White (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), pp. 379-89.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Lilla, *Giovanni Battista Vico: The Making of an Anti-Modern* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

piuttosto che di progetto’;<sup>32</sup> Roberto Esposito highlighted Vico’s ‘tensione verso l’origine’.<sup>33</sup> This trend in recent scholarship has therefore recognized a *regressive* tendency in Vico that mirrors the latest scholarly perspectives on Leopardi.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, some Italian and American scholars have, in the last decades, drawn attention to a set of theoretical nexuses that Vico and Leopardi have in common: myth as a specific form of imagination and knowledge, the superimposition of phylogenesis and ontogenesis, the connection between poetry and senses.<sup>35</sup> It is possible to say that all these studies have drawn an image of Vico that is much closer to our contemporary understanding of Leopardi.

These critical achievements can be seen as partially reconciling the distance that separated the two authors in crucial stages of their critical fortune, a fracture mostly due to Benedetto Croce. Croce’s influential works on both Vico and Leopardi put them in two different, separate worlds: to him, Vico represented the start of progressive and idealistic thought (‘Vico fu il secolo decimonono in germe’),<sup>36</sup> whereas Leopardi epitomized nostalgic and melancholic poetry, and his philosophical stature was unimportant (‘è stato considerato talvolta il Leopardi come un poeta filosofo, cosa che [...] si dimostra non esatta per lui come è sempre inesatta per ogni poeta’).<sup>37</sup> But it is also probable, as this work will suggest, that no contemporary of Leopardi ever observed any similarity between him and Vico (see Section 2. 2); while more recent scholarship has brought Vico and Leopardi closer.

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<sup>32</sup> Paolo Cristofolini, *Vico pagano e barbaro* (Pisa: ETS, 2001), p. 100.

<sup>33</sup> Esposito, *Pensiero vivente*, p. 85.

<sup>34</sup> D’Intino, ‘Metaphysics, Theology, Philosophy’, p. xlvii.

<sup>35</sup> See for example Donald Philip Verene, *Vico’s Science of Imagination* (Ithaca-London: Connelly University Press, 1981); Gianfranco Cantelli, *Mente corpo linguaggio. Saggio sull’interpretazione vichiana del mito* (Florence: Sansoni, 1986); Joseph Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth. Vico’s New Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Massimo Lollini, *Le Muse, le maschere e il sublime. Vico e la poesia nell’età della ‘ragione spiegata’* (Naples: Guida, 1994); Giuseppe Patella, *Senso, corpo, poesia. Giambattista Vico e l’origine dell’estetica moderna* (Milan: Guerrini Scientifica, 1995).

<sup>36</sup> Croce, *La filosofia di Giambattista Vico*, 4th edn (Bari, Laterza, 1980), p. 225.

<sup>37</sup> Benedetto Croce, *Poesia e non poesia* (Bari: Laterza, 1923), p. 109.

A comparison between Vico and Leopardi does not therefore seem problematic in terms of sources, but critically: a problem directly linked to the current understanding of both thinkers. It is necessary to go beyond a purely historicist methodology, and to explore Vico's circulation around Leopardi in a broader sense. The next section details how I seek to achieve this.

### *3. Diffraction as a Methodological Framework*

In this dissertation I wish to question the possibility of explaining analogies and similarities between Leopardi and Vico exclusively through direct transmission of ideas, by questioning the very notions of 'author' and 'text'. Barthes and Foucault's seminal works have shown that the notion of author is merely a device to maintain control of the proliferation of discourses.<sup>38</sup> But discourses can circulate and develop independently of the figures that we identify as their authors, as is the case with Vico. The idea of the death of the author may seem a bit old-fashioned nowadays, as Séan Burke has argued;<sup>39</sup> but it may still be fruitful to apply this idea to the study of sources and influences in literary and philosophical studies. There is also the tendency, especially in critical studies of Leopardi, to imagine the relationship between authors as a binary and egalitarian one (great authors communicate mainly with other great authors). This is possibly due to Harold Bloom's highly pervasive meditations on influence, whose limit is precisely to describe the relationship between writers as a binary agonistic relationship.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce que un auteur?' (1970), in *Dits et écrits. 1954-1988. Édition établie sous la direction de Daniel Defert et François Ewald; avec la collaboration de Jacques Lagrange*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), II, 789-820. Roland Barthes, 'La mort de l'auteur' (1968), in *Le bruissement de la langue. Essais critiques IV* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), pp. 63-69.

<sup>39</sup> Séan Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault, Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); Harold Bloom, *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). See Alistair Heys, *The Anatomy of Bloom: Harold Bloom and the Study of Influence and Anxiety* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

My dissertation tries to think outside this binary notion, to go beyond author-centered criticism, and to look at Vico, as Foucault invites, as a ‘fondateur de discursivité’:<sup>41</sup> Vico is undoubtedly a central figure for the development of a set of themes (the origins of civilization, anti-Cartesianism, Italian-ness, rehabilitation of myth, the connection between poetry and senses, and many more) that circulated during the Bourbon Restoration in Italy, and which may have little or no connection with the actual reading of the *New Science* as a text. It is the far-reaching remit and the intensity of the circulation of these themes that we need to take into account.

Research into this topic could not be more promising: a Derridian specter of Vico, as the following chapters will demonstrate, haunted the Italian culture of the Bourbon Restoration. Authors in the first quarter of the nineteenth century were obsessed by recurring themes, such as what it is to be Italian, what is Italian literature, what is its genealogy, what is the destiny of its tradition and so on, but also Homer’s and Ossian’s poetry. As a founder, a perceived forerunner, or merely a symbol of some of these themes, Vico’s name, presence, and texts touch most of these issues as haunting ghosts, and of course his shadow crosses also many of the *Zibaldone*’s pages. In this sense, my dissertation concerns a *hauntologie* rather than an ontology – to quote a Derridian dichotomy<sup>42</sup> – of Vico in the first third of the nineteenth century; it is the study of a ghost rather than the study of an actual presence; this includes the phantoms that our current understanding of Vico projects onto Leopardi’s pages.

Working on the alleged relationship of Leopardi with any of his many possible sources forces one to constantly challenge the concept of ‘source’, ‘influence’, and ‘relationship’ between them and authors in general. Leopardi can be very vague about the writers who inspired him, or can be exceptionally creative in building on topics that he had scarce information about, and sometimes even

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<sup>41</sup> Foucault, ‘Qu’est-ce que un auteur?’, p. 804.

<sup>42</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 10.

his notes can be misleading.<sup>43</sup> The nature itself of the *Zibaldone* is not that of a collection of references with a linear and recognizable relationship with other texts, but represents the space of construction and speculation of an extremely creative mind, in which the most pressing cultural issues of the author's time are reflected in a distorting mirror.

Giacomo Leopardi lived for the largest part of his short life in a tiny rural town near the Italian east coast, Recanati, under the sovereignty of the Papal State. It is therefore possible to say that, in the years of his formation, Leopardi's vantage point was so peripheral that it forcedly deformed the main axes of those years' reflection. Furthermore, from a necessarily restricted point of view (as Recanati was), the observer is forced to select and interpret what was perceived as the dominant culture: in other words, Leopardi (at least up to 1822, when he first travelled to Rome, where his vantage point was still limited to the Papal State) saw what he could, or wanted to see from an extremely narrow perspective.

For all the reasons explained above – lack of philological evidence of a direct influence, diffuse presence of Vico in the Bourbon Restoration culture, difficulties in connecting Vico-related themes to the actual circulation of the text – it is necessary to problematize the methodology of this work. Rather than comparing the two writers without consideration of their different historical contexts, and rather than searching for evidence of a contact, I have found it preferable to look at the circulation of Vico-related issues in Post-Revolutionary Italy, and to highlight Leopardi's participation in it. This means going beyond a matter of confrontation between two isolated great minds and extending the perspective to Bourbon Restoration culture as a whole. It also means pinpointing Post-Revolutionary 'vichismo' as a cluster of theoretical questions dealing with

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<sup>43</sup> See for example the case of Beccaria's *Trattato dello stile*, quoted in *Zib.* 109-10: scholars have doubted that this quotation is due to a direct reading of the text, because the ideas that Leopardi attributes to Beccaria are not in the original text. See Giuseppe Panizza, 'Letture di un momento: un'indagine su Leopardi e i giornali letterari', in *Gli strumenti di Leopardi: repertori, dizionari, periodici*, ed. by Maria Maddalena Lombardi (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2000), pp. 145-159.

the broader issue of temporality. Vico, in fact, provided a theoretical framework that allowed his readers to think of human societies *sub specie temporis*, individuating features that characterize the phases of origins, of decay, and of renaissance of mankind. We can see him as one of the palimpsests on which Italian readers learnt to ‘think historically’, within the broader framework of the development of historical knowledge in Europe.<sup>44</sup> The issues analysed in this dissertation, therefore, revolve around early nineteenth century conceptions of time (‘temporalities’), and specifically with the individuation of interruptions in the *continuum* of history (‘fracture’). I tackle the notion of ‘fracture’ (or ‘breach’) in the sense proposed by François Hartog in *Regimes d’historicité* (2003), with reference to the fall of the Berlin wall, as ‘foundational phenomena’, in which communities articulate their relationship with past, present and future.<sup>45</sup> As suggested above, in fact, this thesis looks at Post-Revolutionary Italian culture as a post-traumatic culture, following François Hartog’s argument that, the French Revolution and its offshoots can be regarded as a cultural trauma which determined new paradigms of historicity.<sup>46</sup> Vico’s legacy interfered with such essential notions of Bourbon Restoration Italian culture as the opposition between ancients and moderns and their non-negotiable alterity, the approach to Classic literatures, the necessity for a renovation of Italian culture, and the problematization of the notions of tradition and canon.

The most promising theoretical avenue in considering this peculiar time-span is to think of Vico’s legacy in the nineteenth century not as a linear transmission of ideas, but as a multifaceted and contradictory appropriation of the meaning of the text. In other words, to think that the nineteenth-century Italian culture did not so much replicate or reproduce Vico’s theories, but diffracted Vico. Donna Haraway and Karen Barad have recently introduced in critical theory the metaphor of diffraction. The physical phenomenon of diffraction happens

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<sup>44</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore-London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> Hartog, *Regimens of Historicity*, p. 43.

<sup>46</sup> Hartog, *Regimens of Historicity*, p. 170.

when a wave encounters an obstacle: for example, when a light wave travels through a medium. A typical phenomenon of diffraction is the vision of a rainbow when sunlight travels through the rain. Haraway and Barad introduced the physical metaphor of diffraction to cope with epistemological problems of representation. Criticizing the traditional idea of the transmission of ideas as a genealogical line in which ideas 'reflect' each other, the two writers stressed the importance of diffraction, of mapping the differences, distortions, and manipulation of ideas. As Van der Tuin explains, 'Diffraction is meant to disrupt linear and fixed casualties, and to work toward more promising interference patterns'.<sup>47</sup> Haraway states in a much-quoted passage: 'diffraction does not produce "the same" displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern [...] maps where the effects of difference appear.'<sup>48</sup>

A similar methodology has been successfully applied by Manuele Gragnolati in his book *Amor che move* (2013); as he explains in the introduction, a diffractive reading allows the interpreter not only to read the texts 'al di là di ogni legame apparente di parentela [...] non solo insieme, ma uno attraverso l'altro', but also to produce a renewed critical knowledge of the object of study.<sup>49</sup> Gragnolati in this manner uses the notion of diffraction in order to justify his analysis of texts that have no apparent direct relationship. My intention is slightly different: I intend to apply this methodological approach to the transmission of ideas through the written word; to detect and analyse a diffraction that occurred in the past.

This thesis will argue that the transmission or recurrence of ideas from Vico to Leopardi can hardly be explained through the linear 'geometries of

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<sup>47</sup> Iris Van Der Tuin, 'A Different Starting Point, a Different Metaphysics. Reading Bergson and Barad Diffractively', *Hypatia*, 26.1 (2001) 22-42.

<sup>48</sup> Donna Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan@\_Meets\_OncoMouse* (London - New York: Routledge Press, 1997), p. 273.

<sup>49</sup> Manuele Gragnolati, *Amor che move. Linguaggio del corpo e forma del desiderio in Dante, Pasolini e Morante* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2013), p. 11.

sameness'<sup>50</sup> criticized by Barad and Haraway, but must allow space for deformation, difference, variance. 'Diffraction', explains Haraway, 'is about heterogeneous history, not about originals';<sup>51</sup> accordingly, my analysis is not about the original text of the *New Science* but about the 'heterogeneous history' of Vico-related ideas. At the same time, the 'diffractive' metaphor makes more evident that my work too is set inside a diffracted field – the 'optical illusion' discussed above – and creates further diffraction by reading Vico, Leopardi, and Bourbon Restoration Italian culture through one another.

This methodological device will be used here alongside the Kristevan notion of intertextuality,<sup>52</sup> or Segre's notion of 'interdiscorsività', which defines the relationship that a text has 'con tutti gli enunciati (o discorsi) registrati nella corrispondente cultura'.<sup>53</sup> Specifically, I will look at those aspects of Bourbon Restoration culture in which it is possible to trace a direct link with the *New Science* and its interpretation, but I will also put the stress on the distortion, misinterpretation, variance, fragmentation of Vico's ideas and the interference of them with independent strains of thought characterizing early nineteenth century Italian culture. In the case of Leopardi, that is to say, in the absence of evidence of a direct reading of the *New Science*, I will look at how he responded to the diffusion of Vico-related ideas in his culture. The 'diffractive' metaphor, in fact, puts the stress on the oblique nature of relationality, which is precisely what is needed in order to reverse the issue of the alleged relationship between Vico and Leopardi into a study of the spread of 'vichismo' in the early nineteenth century. Additionally, the pattern of diffraction claims the legitimacy of deformation and difference through the transmission of ideas. Of course, in adopting this methodology, I will produce a diffraction myself, hopefully leading to a new critical perspective of the history of ideas connecting Vico to Leopardi.

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<sup>50</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007) p.72.

<sup>51</sup> Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium*, p. 273.

<sup>52</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Semeiotiké. Recherches pour une sémanalise* (Paris: Seuil, 1969).

<sup>53</sup> Cesare Segre, *Teatro e romanzo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), p.121.

That Vico's philosophy had 'diffracted' in the first years of the nineteenth century is a phenomenon to which Leopardi's contemporaries openly testified. Vincenzo Monti said that 'chi amasse di chiamar in rivista le idee generative e profonde delle quali si è fatto saccheggio al Vico tesserebbe un lungo catalogo e nuocerebbe a molte riputazioni'.<sup>54</sup> This sentence can be interpreted literally: Monti, as a *connoisseur* of Vico, could probably state this with hindsight – and his non-confessed debts to Vico's thought are also quite significant.<sup>55</sup> But Monti's words can be read also as the symptom either of the spreading of Vico-related themes in the Italian culture of the Restoration, which circulated 'without trademark', and can be related to Vico either indirectly (analogy, similarity) or directly (derivation, plagiarism); or as a semi-conscious phenomenon of appropriation connected with the reassessment of Vico in the early nineteenth century (which I explore in Section 1. 3), that led men like Monti to claim as originating from Vico (and therefore Italian) themes that had developed independently of Vico himself.

Monti was not the only one who testified to this 'diffraction of ideas'. Cuoco, who devoted himself to spreading Vico's philosophy in the first years of the nineteenth century, could not come to terms with the fact that most of Vico's ideas, including the most marginal ones (such as those concerning human physiology), were known, but this was not due to the actual circulation of the *New Science*.<sup>56</sup> And, echoing Monti, he added: 'si potrebbe fare un'interessante operetta mostrando quante verità erano state seminate da Vico, le quali poi hanno

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<sup>54</sup> Vincenzo Monti, 'Della necessità dell'eloquenza', in *Lezioni di eloquenza e prolusioni accademiche*, ed. by Duccio Tongiorgi and Luca Frassinetti (Bologna: Clueb, 2002), pp. 273-92 (p. 277).

<sup>55</sup> See Luca Frassinetti, 'Vincenzo Monti. Elogi, utopie e risorse della favola poetica', in *Il mito nella letteratura italiana*, ed. by Pietro Gibellini, 4 vols (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2003), III, 29-44.

<sup>56</sup> 'Vico [...] segnò le prime linee del sistema di Brown [John Brown, 1735-1788, Scottish medician]. [...] Quasi si direbbe che Brown sia stato plagario di Vico [...] se l'opera di Vico non fosse tanto rara, che io credo quasi impossibile che Brown l'abbia potuta conoscere'. Vincenzo Cuoco, 'La filosofia di Giovan Battista Vico. Due abbozzi d'una lettera a Giuseppe Dégerando' (1804), in *Epistolario (1790-1817)*, ed. by Maurizio Martirano e Domenico Conte (Bari: Laterza, 2007), pp. 345-71.

germogliato sotto altro nome'.<sup>57</sup> The patriot Domenico Buffa, who dedicated a play to Vico in 1835 (published in 1845), wrote that the theatrical text was not aiming to spread Vico's discoveries 'che sono noti già per altre vie',<sup>58</sup> underlining how probably already in the perception of Vico's nineteenth-century public Vico-related ideas circulated despite the disappearance of the text. Some years later (1857-1858) Ippolito Nievo recalled how, between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, Vico's theories (among others), came back to light like an underground river: 'diedero primo frutto di fecondità reale quelle speculazioni politiche che dal milletrecento al millesettecento traspirarono dalle opere di Dante, di Macchiavello, di Filicaia, di Vico'.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the quotations of Vico in the texts ascribable to the so-called Classicist-Romantic quarrel (see Section 2. 1), also show that the very text of the *New Science* lent itself to misinterpretation, appropriation, domestication: Vico was invoked on either side of the quarrel, to demonstrate contradictory arguments.

To stay with the 'diffractive' metaphor, it is possible to say that the *New Science*, with its characteristic obscurity and difficulty, acted as a prism, in which different groups of intellectuals could read the arguments which would reinforce their opinions or obsessions. Additionally, fragments of Vico's ideas can be found in other texts that do not explicitly refer to the *New Science*, but are clearly influenced by it.

Previous studies on the recurrence of Vico's ideas have shown the limits of a purely genealogical approach. For instance, scholars struggle to prove that the striking similarities between Vico and Rousseau's thought are due to a direct

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<sup>57</sup> Cuoco, 'La filosofia di Giovan Battista Vico', p. 369. Again, in a 1804 article he stated: Vico's principles 'fermentarono a poco a poco, ora in questo ora in quel luogo ma in Italia meno che altrove'; and 'gl'Italiani, i quali credono Vico inintelligibile, ricomprano dagli esteri "a minuto" quel che Vico aveva donato all'ingrosso'. Vincenzo Cuoco, *Pagine giornalistiche*, ed. by Fulvio Tessitore (Bari: Laterza, 2011) p. 110.

<sup>58</sup> Domenico Buffa, *Giovan Battista Vico: dramma* (Turin: Schiepatti, 1846), p. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Ippolito Nievo, *Confessioni di un Italiano*, ed. by Simone Casini (Parma: U. Guanda, 1999), p. 7.

reading;<sup>60</sup> Isaiah Berlin could not explain the similarities between Vico and Herder.<sup>61</sup> Benedetto Croce explained the spread of Vico-related theories in the nineteenth century in Vico's terms, as 'molteplici ricorsi dell'opera di un individuo nell'opera di più generazioni'.<sup>62</sup> Carlo Calcaterra complained about those who searched for 'vichianesimo quintessenziato' in late eighteenth-century studies, implying that Vico's influence in that age is more complex than it appears.<sup>63</sup> Finally Gabriele De Luca, dealing with similar problems concerning the connection between Coleridge and Vico, has attempted to work on alleged 'relationships' with Vico in the nineteenth century by distinguishing between what is realistically recognizable as the product of an 'influence' and what is due to theoretical affinity.<sup>64</sup> To conclude, the inexplicable polygenesis of Vico-related ideas in Europe has now become a critical *topos*, making it evident that a purely genetic study of Vico's legacy is pointless.<sup>65</sup>

This diffractive tendency is also due to the fact that Vico's reception has some striking peculiarities. In 1969, Enrico De Mas made a very strong statement about Vico's circulation in Italian thought; according to De Mas, from Vico's death up to Croce's first monograph about Vico (1911), 'there have been very few attempts to penetrate adequately the meaning of that work [the *New Science*] or to carry on the message of his thought'. In other words Vico was 'talked about' exclusively to 'exploit the authority of his name'<sup>66</sup> and the success of his work.

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<sup>60</sup> Eugenio Garin, 'A proposito del rapporto tra Vico e Rousseau', *Bollettino Nazionale di Studi Vichiani*, 2 (1972), 61-63 (p. 61).

<sup>61</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1980), p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> Benedetto Croce, *Bibliografia vichiana. Accresciuta e rielaborata da Fausto Nicolini*, 2 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1947), I, 405.

<sup>63</sup> Carlo Calcaterra, 'Nota calusiana', in *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*, 127 (1950), 305-315 (p. 313).

<sup>64</sup> Gabriele De Luca, 'Finzione e fruizione poetica in Vico e Coleridge', in *Il velo scolpito: dialoghi tra filosofia e letteratura*, ed. by Danilo Manca (Pisa: ETS, 2014), pp. 55-68.

<sup>65</sup> Carlo Enrico Roggia, *La lingua della poesia nell'età dell'illuminismo* (Rome: Carocci, 2013), p. 149 note 1.

<sup>66</sup> Enrico De Mas, 'Vico and Italian thought', in *Giambattista Vico: an International Symposium*, ed. by Tagliacozzo and White, pp. 147-64 (p. 147).

De Mas apparently overlooked research that was being carried out in the same years into Vico's reception in the nineteenth century; additionally, his statement is based on the problematic assumption that a 'proper interpretation' of a text, or a philosopher's reasoning exists.<sup>67</sup> This statement nevertheless underlines the fact that Vico's reception was fragmented, contradictory, multifaceted, and in most cases superficial. This is probably due to the extensiveness and interdisciplinarity of the *New Science*, but also to the obscurity of its style, both of which encourage multiple, often conflicting interpretations. Thus, Pietro Giordani complained (1826) that 'coloro che [...] si vantano d'intenderlo mirabilmente [Vico], ci sforzano a pensare o che c'ingannano o che s'ingannano'.<sup>68</sup> Multiple and contradictory readings have characterized the reception of the *New Science* from its publication onwards: as Isaiah Berlin explained, there has always been a tendency to see in the *New Science* what the interpreter wants to see. This has led to a wide variety of Vico's interpretations over time.<sup>69</sup>

All these examples show that Vico's reception is particularly uneven and many-sided; that the *New Science* was a highly meaningful book, which different, even contradictory philosophical and historical views could interact with. In turn, its interpreters have reflected a distorted image of Vico's ideas, generating a multiplicity of images of the work and its meaning. This variety of reactions to the text lends support to the argument that the *New Science* has been and continues to be an unclassifiable and sometimes disturbing book, capable of generating an element of 'crisis' in its readers.

In this work, I make no attempt to offer a 'full' or 'adequate' understanding of Vico's thought through close literary and hermeneutical analysis. Rather, I explore the reactions that nineteenth-century readers experienced in reading the *New Science*, and examine the proliferation of meaning that came from those

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<sup>67</sup> Contemporary reception studies now imply that theoretically there is no such thing: see Charles Martindale, 'Thinking through reception', in Charles Martindale and Robert P. Thomas, *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (Maldon and Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 1-13, p. 4.

<sup>68</sup> Pietro Giordani, 'Delle "Operette morali del conte Giacomo Leopardi"', in *Opere*, ed. by Antonio Gussalli, 14 vols (Milan: Borroni e Scotti, 1856-8), XI, 149-78 (p. 170).

<sup>69</sup> Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, pp. 22-23

cultural encounters. I aim to read the *New Science* mostly as a powerfully diffractive object, capable of generating different messages and to interfere with the discourses of different cultures and generations. I have the intention of maintaining a critical distance from what has been defined as 'vichiano' in the nineteenth century, trying to clarify in each instance what scholars mean with this definition. The pattern of diffraction is particularly suitable for the study of eclectic and fluid Italian culture of the nineteenth century, which had a complicated relationship with its past, and therefore with the 'sources' of discourses. Additionally, the 'diffractive' metaphor is also suitable for Leopardi's *Zibaldone*, as stated above, given the intrinsically diffractive nature of his texts.

'Vichismo' can take different forms, some of which are studied in this dissertation. First of all, there is an ideological 'vichismo': this can be found among those authors who made of Vico a symbol of Italian-ness, of typical Italian thought, or who exploited Vico's authority to support their own positions, as well as those who explicitly placed Vico among their models or forerunners. Identifying this cultural trend forces us to reverse Croce's statement that Vico was a seminal thinker for the nineteenth century (see above). His statement is no longer acceptable from a historicist point of view – the notion of 'forerunner' is now generally considered nonsensical – but it is absolutely true that a good number of nineteenth-century men thought that their own ideas reflected those of Vico and that they therefore considered him a philosophical and ideological father. Furthermore, even Vico's human and historical figure, as an *ante litteram* bourgeois struggling against a world of privileged academics, had a small but significant literary reception between Italy's wars of independence.<sup>70</sup>

Secondly, it is possible to identify an indirect, oblique 'vichismo' that inspired large parts of nineteenth-century public discussions. Putting history at the centre of collective interests, this 'vichismo' questioned several features of the

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<sup>70</sup> I analysed this aspect in my 'Constructing the myth of Vico between press and literature (1802-1846)', in *Formation of a National Audience: Readers and Spectators in Italy*, ed. by Jennyfer Burns and Gabriella Romani (Rutherford, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press), forthcoming.

culture of the past and generated a set of thematic nexuses, such as the oppositions ancient/modern, credible/incredible, familiar/stranger, illusion/delusion, poetry/philosophy. All these points relate to Vico (in any case a connection with the *New Science* can be found, at least in terms of analogy), but at times they seem to circulate independently from the text.

Finally, it is necessary to take into account what ‘Vico’ represents to the modern reader. Over time, scholars have pinpointed a number of Vico-related issues, problems, and related questions surrounding Leopardi. As stated above, sometimes this is predominantly due to how contemporary scholars now look at Vico, and has little or nothing to do with how Vico was read and perceived at that time. This does not mean that scholarly perspectives in this sense are meaningless, only that we must take into account our own vantage point to explain this alleged ‘vichismo’ and understand what it means. In this dissertation I will move between these different layers of Vico’s reception.

#### *4. Diffractive Mapping. Organization of the Material in this Work*

The diffractive pattern that forms the methodological backbone of this dissertation has a solid counterpart in its structure: this work is organized geographically, providing a map of the different approaches to Vico in Italy before and during Leopardi’s lifetime. Each city or region acts like a deforming mirror, in which Vico-related issues are diffracted in multiple and even contradictory directions.

A geographical approach is necessary when dealing with Italian culture in general, due to the peculiarities of the historical and political structure of the nation. Such an approach was already present in Giorgio Tiraboschi’s *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1772-82), and it has been reinvented again by Carlo Dionisotti’s seminal work (*Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana*, 1967), which, in opposition to Francesco De Sanctis’ unitarian view of the Italian culture, drove scholarly attention to local specificities and traditions in the Peninsula. The

*Atlante della letteratura italiana* (2012) has recently reassessed the centrality of this critical perspective, to which my work belongs.

A critical perspective taking into account the differences within the local communities and cities within what we now call 'Italy' is even more urgent when dealing with the age of the Bourbon Restoration. As the historian Marino Berengo demonstrates, the first third of the nineteenth century was an age characterized by the formation of 'cultural centres' and 'cultural capitals': some cities (Milan, Florence, Naples, and to a smaller extent Rome, Venice and Bologna) had libraries, printing houses, 'gabinetti di lettura', while other areas were almost completely absent from the cultural scene, developing peculiar peripheral perspectives. Specifically, in the Napoleonic age, Milan had acquired a state of cultural primacy over other centers, which was maintained until the Thirties. Florence blossomed in the 1820s also thanks to Gian Pietro Vieusseux's establishment of the homonymous 'gabinetto di lettura' in 1819; the foundation of *Antologia* and other journals followed shortly. Finally, in Naples, after a period of repression of freedom of print and limitations of cultural circulation, these activities were reactivated with the accession of King Ferdinand II.<sup>71</sup>

Therefore, Milan, Florence, and Naples were the main places where one could find employment as philologist, editors, or journalists (a new necessity characterizing this generation of intellectuals, the first to be forced to become professional writers)<sup>72</sup> – as well as meet people and exchange ideas between the the 1810s and the 1830s. Leopardi's biography clearly reflects this perspective: he read mainly Milanese newspapers when he lived in Recanati. He then tried to work there as a professional philologist. After that he moved to Florence in 1827, in search of professional opportunities; finally, he moved to Naples in 1833; in this case, he was probably following his friend Antonio Ranieri rather than seeking to specifically fulfill his professional expectations or desires. In any case,

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<sup>71</sup> Marino Berengo, *Cultura e istituzioni nell'Ottocento italiano*, ed. by Roberto Pertici (Venice: Il Mulino, 2004), pp. 56-65.

<sup>72</sup> Berengo, *Cultura e istituzioni*, p. 57.

the fact that Leopardi's life choices reflect almost perfectly the socio-cultural changes characterizing the cultural areas in Italy further encourages the critical perspective this study adopts. It emphasizes the need, as discussed above, to consider the *Zibaldone* and Leopardi's other works as a mirror, albeit one that distorts rather than reflecting, cultural tensions of the time, as opposed to reading Leopardi's work as the lonely musing of a genius.

I have also adopted Berengo's critical perspective, with some adaptation, for the study of the previous century, because urban spaces have become increasingly important in the scholarship on Vico's reception. Firstly, recent scholarship has pointed scholarly attention to the role of Vico's cultural environment in Naples. As Section 1. 1 explores, it is now considered the environment in which the Italian response to Descartes and to the Battle of the Books matured. Similarly, scholars have gradually rediscovered the reception of Vico in late eighteenth-century Veneto, highlighting the role of figures like Cesarotti and Foscolo for the transmission of Vico-related ideas. Finally, the role of Neapolitan expatriates in Milan after 1799 in the diffusion of Vico in northern Italy is well known among scholars – even if recently reshaped.

The dissertation is therefore organized as follows: the first chapter describes the development and the spread of Vico's thought from Naples, Vico's hometown, to Venice and Milan (1708-1815). The chapter is focused on four key figures of Vico's reception – Gian Vincenzo Gravina, Melchiorre Cesarotti, Vincenzo Cuoco, and Ugo Foscolo – who were also key in the transmission of Vico-related ideas to their contemporary and future readers, including Leopardi. Chapter 2 focuses on the Classicist-Romantic quarrel (1816-1827) as a cluster of theoretical questions involving Vico's legacy. In doing so, the chapter primarily takes into account Milanese journals (see below); but, as Marcello Ravesi has highlighted,<sup>73</sup> the writers who took part in the quarrel came from different parts of the Peninsula. Milanese print culture in these years can, therefore, also be read as

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<sup>73</sup> Marcello Ravesi, 'La polemica classico-romantica in Italia', in *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, ed. by Sergio Luzzatto e Gabriele Pedullà (Turin: Einaudi, 2012), pp. 14-25.

a space in which the Italian national community started to cement. Chapter 3 describes Leopardi's elaboration of some themes related to Vico. Since the time-span covered by the chapter is 1816-1822, it is dedicated to a selection of Leopardi's works before his first journey to Rome: it is therefore centred on his experience in Recanati and is consequently dedicated to a peripheral, but no less significant, reaction to Vico-related issues. The fourth chapter focuses on Florence, and in particular on the Florentine journal *Antologia* (1821-32): the ideas and issues characterizing that particular environment were also concerned with the reception of Vico; they will be analysed in comparison with Leopardi's research on similar topics in the same physical and temporal frame. Finally, Chapter 5 follows Leopardi's journey to Naples (1833-1837) and compares the legacy of Vico in his hometown in the 1830s with Leopardi's last works ('La ginestra', 'I nuovi credenti').

The geographical organization of the work is necessarily flexible: the dissertation also takes into account features that challenge the frame described by Berengo. It devotes significant attention, in fact, to Leopardi's peripheral perspective from his hometown Recanati. It also deals with migration, and consequently with issues in the transmission of cultural content and 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu) by examining the role of the Neapolitan expatriates in the diffusion of Vico-related ideas in northern Italy (Section 1. 3). Some consideration is also given to the 'diffractive' role of the quintessentially 'displaced' Italian author, Foscolo – born in Zante, brought up in Venice, teacher in Pavia, exile in England. In this sense, the dissertation aims to provide a dynamic picture of Italian culture during and after the Napoleonic wars.

The geographical organization of this work not only justifies the structure of the dissertation: it is fundamental in understanding the culture of the Ottocento. In the first place, it does justice to the diversity of Vico's readership in the early nineteenth century and to the different impact that Vico's ideas had in different contexts. Secondly, it mirrors the peculiarity of the construction of an Italian intellectual bourgeoisie and its strong link with local specificities, in the absence

of a capital and therefore of a central reference point for the intellectuals of that age. It is therefore a fitting critical approach to the Italian Ottocento and it is especially suitable for telling the story of Vico's 'diffractive' reception in the early nineteenth century, in a way that appreciates the different shades of meaning his message acquired in the different contexts.

The sources selected for analysis here encompass various elements of the printed press in early nineteenth-century Italy, with particular attention paid to non-fiction works of wide circulation – those characterized by a manifest will to intervene into Italy's cultural life. In particular, this dissertation considers the role of the journals as fundamental in the manipulation and the diffusion of ideas in modern society. Each chapter considers at least one journal as a space of confrontation and cultural exchange: *Giornale italiano* (Chapter 1), *Biblioteca italiana*, *Il conciliatore*, *Lo Spettatore Italiano* (Chapter 2 and 3), *Antologia* (Chapter 4), *Il progresso delle Lettere, delle Scienze e delle Arti* (Chapter 5). In addition, I have looked at pamphlets, historical and philosophical works with their introductions and reviews. Literary works, such as Leopardi's (but also Foscolo's, Monti's or Mamiani's, see Sections 1. 3, 2. 1 and 5. 2) are not analysed in themselves, but rather with specific reference to their interaction with the concurrent cultural debates. This enables a comprehensive analysis of Leopardi's *œuvre*, including unfinished works, lists of readings and literary sketches.

As far as chronology is concerned, this work is mainly focused on the Italian culture of the Napoleonic wars (1796-1815) and of the Bourbon Restoration (1816-1848). Franco Moretti's study of post-revolutionary novel is centered on works published after 1815, the year of the battle of Waterloo, making this year the symbolic start date for post-revolutionary culture.<sup>74</sup> While in this dissertation the year 1816 is central (see Section 2. 1 and 3. 2), the notion of post-revolutionary trauma can be applied also to previous events, such as reactions to

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<sup>74</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World. The Bildungroman in European Culture* (London, New York: Verso, 1987).

the treaty of Campoformio and to the failure of the 1799 Neapolitan Revolution (see Section 1. 3).

Vico's reception acts as a prism to read Bourbon Restoration culture, its problems and its needs, in particular as far as the concepts of time, modernity, progress, and history are concerned. Giacomo Leopardi was a particularly acute interpreter of the tensions of the time, and therefore deserves primary attention as a recipient of Vico-related ideas.

## CHAPTER 1

### FROM NAPLES TO VENICE AND LOMBARDY

#### The oblique paths of Vico's interpretation(s) (1708-1815)

The aim of this chapter is to trace the main channels through which reflections on the ancient world in Italy were elaborated, transmitted, but also became progressively specific, across the eighteenth to early nineteenth century. Three cities (Naples, Venice, and Milan), proved formative environments in the development of this tradition of Italian thought. Naples was the city where Vico, but also Gian Vincenzo Gravina (1664-1718), put forward an Italian response to the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*. The academies in Venice were one of the first environments to promote dedicated study of Vico's thought; Melchiorre Cesarotti (1730-1808) was a key figure in the popularization of Vico-related ideas there. Finally, in Milan, Vincenzo Cuoco (1770-1823) a Neapolitan forced to emigrate to Milan, and Ugo Foscolo (1778-1827), who in turn was an expatriate from Venice, spread Vico's theories in the early nineteenth-century Italian culture. These writers have been selected from a group of key figures in Vico's reception (such as Antonio Genovesi, for example, who pushed Vico's findings in a different direction) because they are essential to understanding what strains of 'vichismo' reached Leopardi and his contemporaries.

Two different, though interconnected, strains of thought characterize these stages of Vico's reception. First of all, reflections on the peculiarities of the ancient and primitive mind that made it intrinsically different from the modern mind affected the perception of ancient languages and literary production, making imitating them problematic. Secondly, Vico inspired in some the conviction that a remote, almost entirely forgotten ancient Italian tradition had survived, which

could be traced through a radical reconsideration of the traditional Greek and Roman cultural heritage.

The role of Gravina was that of trying to negotiate the irreconcilable opposition between poetry and the new scientific thought by creating a science of poetry; in order to do so, he contributed to the formulation of a theory of poetry on historical grounds. Subsequently, Cesarotti utilized Vico's theories to make sense of the perceived alterity of ancient poetry, and specifically that of the newly discovered poems by Ossian. Finally, Vico, through the mediation of Cuoco, provided the theoretical background to Foscolo's reassessment of the social function of poetry and the necessity of adapting it to the different stages of human development. These theoretical nexuses were to characterize public debates in the Bourbon Restoration period. Additionally, the works by Gravina, Cesarotti and Foscolo were certain and fundamental readings for Leopardi: this could help explain some shades of 'vichismo' that can be perceived in Leopardi's works.

In the first stages of Vico's reception, his ideas 'diffracted' into several fields, such as 'poetische' (Section 1. 1), literary commentary (Section 1. 2), fictional and non-fictional prose wirings (Section 1. 3). Consequently, this chapter deals with a heterogeneous cross-section of sources, seeking to map how the transmission from reader to reader and from genre to genre added new shades of meaning to Vico's ideas.

### *1. 1 - Naples 1708: An Italian Response to the 'Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes'*

To start exploring the diffraction of Vico-related ideas between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, it is necessary to put into use one of the *New Science's* principles, or axioms: 'le dottrine debbono cominciare da quando cominciano le materie che trattano' (NS, § 314). Therefore, we need to start where Vico's research originated, that is to say, from a reaction to René Descartes (1596-1650).

Descartes's works were perceived as a shock in European culture,<sup>1</sup> as later acknowledged by Hegel. In fact he declared that the history of 'modern' thought started precisely with the French thinker, and described his thought as something that should make modern readers feel 'at home'.<sup>2</sup> The impact of the Cartesian search for a new method of modern studies is of course a multifaceted phenomenon. The issues raised by the French philosopher that are most relevant to this dissertation are, firstly, the questioning of what the truth is, and the identification of it with clear and distinct ideas ('idées claires et distinctes'). Secondly, the questioning of the authority of the ancients; to Descartes the progress of science rendered modern knowledge of the world much more extensive than that of the ancients, which implies a strong dismissal of the *humanae litterae* and of poetry.

In fact, Descartes was one of the first to propose a new narrative of the relationship between ancients and moderns, as the following passage indicates:

C'est quasi le même de converser avec ceux des autres siècles, que de voyager. Il est bon de savoir quelque chose des mœurs de divers peuples, afin de juger des nôtres plus sainement [...]. Mais lorsqu'on emploie trop de temps à voyager, on devient enfin étranger en son pays; et lorsqu'on est trop curieux des choses qui se pratiquaient aux siècles passés, on demeure ordinairement fort ignorant de celles qui se pratiquent en celui-ci.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Tad M. Schmaltz, *Radical Cartesianism: the French Reception of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Schmaltz, 'Introduction' in *Receptions of Descartes: Cartesianism and anti-Cartesianism in Early Modern Europe* edited by Tad M. Schmaltz, (London-New York: Routledge 2005), pp. xi-xvii.

<sup>2</sup> 'It is not until Descartes is arrived at that we really enter upon a philosophy which is, properly speaking, independent [...]. Here, we may say, we are at home, and like the mariner after a long voyage in a tempestuous sea, we may now hail the sight of land; with Descartes the culture of modern Philosophy, really begins to appear, after a long and tedious journey on the way which has led so far'. Georg Friederich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, ed. by Frederick Beiser, 3 vols (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), III, 219.

<sup>3</sup> René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison et chercher la vérité dans les sciences; Extraits des Méditations Métaphysiques; Discours du Pere Guenard sur l'esprit philosophique*, ed. by Louis Liard (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 10.

By defining studying the ancients as something that makes one foreign (‘étranger’) to one’s homeland, Descartes was among those who inaugurated a series of discourses dismissing the ancient world as something alien and unfamiliar, eroding the concept of the exemplarity of the ancient that had inspired Renaissance culture.<sup>4</sup> It is now established that the reaction to Descartes’s highly influential thought anticipated the so-called ‘querelle des anciens et des modernes’. Descartes’s name recurs within the quarrel as the champion of the moderns: Bernard Le Boviere de Fontenelle (1657-1757) and Jean Terrasson (1670-1750) thought that Descartes was the greatest of the moderns, while William Temple wrote that no modern philosopher had equalled the ancients, even if Descartes and Hobbes ‘should pretend to it’.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Descartes was perceived as responsible for opening the ‘fissure’ between ‘scholarship and imitation, rhetoric and philology, literature and history’ that was later debated in the quarrel.<sup>6</sup>

During Vico’s lifetime, Neapolitan culture was characterized by an intense interest in Descartes’s theories, as Vico acknowledged in his autobiography: ‘ad un tratto si fa un gran rivolgimento di cose letterarie in Napoli, [...] valenti letterati, i quali due o tre anni avanti dicevano che le metafisiche dovevano star chiuse ne’ chiostri, presero essi a tutta voga a coltivarle [...] sopra le *Meditazioni di Renato Delle Carte*, delle quali è séguito il suo libro *Del metodo* [...]; onde l’elogio di gran filosofo era: – Costui intende le *Meditazioni di Renato*.’<sup>7</sup> Vico’s own research originated from an objection to Cartesian thought. In the last few decades Vico studies have been particularly devoted to tracing the connections between Vico’s work and his environment. This section of my work, therefore, addresses Vico’s hometown as the cluster of a series of tensions and

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<sup>4</sup> Bacon in the *Novum organum* (I, 84), and Pascal, in the *Pensées (Préfaction)*, expressed the same concept; see François Hartog, ‘Il confronto con gli antichi’, in *I Greci : Storia Cultura Arte Società*, ed. by Salvatore Settis, 4 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), I, 3-37.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books. History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Levine, *The Battle of the Books*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Vico, ‘Vita scritta da sé medesimo’, in *Opere*, ed. by Andrea Battistini, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1990), I, 3-83 (p. 25).

discourses that originated from *Discours sur la méthode* with specific reference to the dichotomies ancient/modern and true/false.<sup>8</sup> These were discussed in Vico's first works and then developed in the *New Science*, but also in his contemporaries' reflections: I will take Gian Vincenzo Gravina as an example. It was probably through the mediation of Gravina that these ideas reached Leopardi (see Section 2.1).<sup>9</sup>

The 'battle of the books' is widely regarded as a French and British phenomenon. Indeed, in Italy, the reactions were quite limited, although Vico's reflection can at least in part be framed within the *querelle*, as some scholars have highlighted.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Vico himself explicitly described his own research as a reaction to Descartes's fracture with humanistic tradition. For him this was dangerous because it would 'atterrare tutti gli altri studi che compiono la divina ed umana erudizione', that is to say history, poetics and rhetoric, in favour of metaphysics and mathematics.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Maurizio Torrini, 'Cartesio e l'Italia: un tentativo di bilancio', *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, 21:2 (2001), 213-30 (p. 213), and Giulia Belgiojoso, 'Images of Descartes in Italy', in *Receptions of Descartes*, pp. 171-195, which describe Naples as a 'laboratorio' discussing Descartes's topics. A similar perspective was adopted by Fabrizio Lomonaco in 'Appunti sulla fortuna delle passioni dell'anima a Napoli tra la nuova scienza e la scienza nuova', in *Natura, storia, società: Studi in onore di Mario Alcaro*, ed. by Romeo Bufalo, Giuseppe Cantarano, Pio Colonnello (Milan: Mimesis, 2010), pp. 659-75.

<sup>9</sup> For a different perspective on Leopardi and the Cartesian revolution see Franco D'Intino, 'Oralità e dialogicità nello "Zibaldone"', in *Lo "Zibaldone" come ipertesto*, ed. by Maria De Las Nives Muñiz (Florence: Olschki, 2013), pp. 221-243.

<sup>10</sup> Sergio Campailla, 'A proposito di Vico nella Querelle des anciens et des modernes', *Bollettino del Centro di Studi Vichiani*, 3 (1973), 181-92; Davide Luglio, 'Mare antiquissimum. La réponse de G. B. Vico à la Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes', *Babel: littératures plurielles*, 2 (1997) 45-55; Davide Luglio, 'Il magistero delle api e l'alternativa tra antichi e moderni: l'esempio dell'eloquenza', in *Razionalità e modernità in Vico*, ed. by Marco Vanzulli (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2012), pp. 65-77; Joseph M. Levine, 'Vico and the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 52 (1991), pp. 55-80.

<sup>11</sup> Vico, 'Vita scritta da se medesimo', p. 7. The first version of the *New Science* (1725) was dedicated to 'questa età illuminata in cui non ché le favole e le volgari tradizioni della storia gentile ma ogni qualunque autorità de' più riputati filosofi alla critica di severa ragione si sottomette' (Vico, *Opere*, II, 977).

One of the key texts in the Vico-Descartes dialectic is Vico's 1708 oration (published the following year) dedicated to the method of the studies of his time.<sup>12</sup> In it, Vico responded to Descartes and his *méthode* ('to undo the intellectual damage done by Descartes' according to Toulmin and Goodfield)<sup>13</sup> and tried to establish a new epistemology, which mingled Descartes's method with what Vico called 'topica', that is to say imaginative resources, such as common sense, imagination, poetry. In reaction to Descartes, Vico reassessed the need to take into account the features of the human mind that are not exclusively ascribable to rational thinking, especially in the education of children. As far as the ancient authorities are concerned, Vico's position is problematic and diplomatic: he stated that he was in favour of reinforcing historical memory and of the study of sources, but also of distinguishing ('dissere') between the fields of application of the ancients' method from the modern new scientific approach ('invidiam declinaverim, si me non tam nostra vel antiquorum incommoda reprehendere, quam utriusque aetatis commoda componere velle existimetis').<sup>14</sup>

Vico's objection to Descartes has now become widely known, but no explicit acknowledgement has been made of the fact that in the same year in which Vico delivered the oration *De studiorum ratione*, his friend Gian Vincenzo Gravina, writer and jurist, known for having founded in 1690 the Accademia dell'Arcadia, published (in Rome, but as a result of his long-term stay in Naples)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Vico, 'De nostri temporis studiorum ratione' (henceforth indicated as *De studiorum ratione*), in *Opere*, pp. 87-215. See *La querelle des anciens et des modernes*, ed. by Anne-Marie Lecoq (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), pp. 432-49.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Toulmin, June Goodfield, *The Discovery of Time* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 126.

<sup>14</sup> 'Do not disapprove of me if I refuse to condemn the disadvantages of either our or the ancients' method, but rather combine the advantages of both'. Vico, 'De studiorum ratione', in *Opere*, I, 87-215 (p. 94); my translation. See Henry J. Perkinson, 'Giambattista Vico and the "Method of Studies in Our Time": a Criticism of Descartes' Influence on Modern Education', *History of Education Quarterly*, 2 (1962), 30-46; Enrico De Mas, 'On The new Method of a New Science: A Study of Giambattista Vico', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 32 (1971), 85-94; Rosario Assunto, 'La prolusione "De nostri temporis studiorum ratione" di Giambattista Vico e la difesa della fantasia nella cultura di oggi', in *Studia Humanitatis. Ernesto Grassi zum 70 Geburtstag*, ed. by Eginhard Hora and Eckhard Kessler (Munich: Fink, 1973), pp. 289-307; Mario Agrimi, *Ricerche e discussioni vichiane* (Lanciano: Itinerari, 1984), pp. 87-116.

<sup>15</sup> According to Quondam, in Rome Gravina remained faithful to his Neapolitan formation and ideology. In fact, the first part of *Della ragion poetica* had already been published in 1696 with the

*Della ragion poetica* (1708), a treatise that is now regarded as another example of the Italian reaction to the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*. In fact, the treatise renegotiated the relationship between the ancients and the moderns and delineated the values of 'healthy' poetry on the model of the ancient one.<sup>16</sup>

Vico's *De studiorum ratione* and Gravina's *Della ragion poetica* also bear a significant lexical similarity in the title: the polysemic Latin word *ratio*, meaning 'method', 'manner', 'rule', 'condition' as well as 'reason of being', 'sense'.<sup>17</sup> According to Biagio De Giovanni, the philosophical problem obsessing the culture of southern Italy in this period was precisely that of 'method', in a Cartesian sense.<sup>18</sup> Reflecting on method, or 'ratio', represented an attempt to establish a series of valid rules to reach the truth. Doing so meant questioning the traditional authorities and revising established conventions. In the case of Gravina, this meant revising the entire poetic tradition from Homer to modern times.

Like Vico's, Gravina's work is therefore ascribable to Neapolitan reaction to Descartes.<sup>19</sup> Specifically, Gravina intended to reconcile the humanities with new scientific thought by attempting a 'scientific' understanding of poetry, a 'scienza della poesia'.<sup>20</sup> In addition, Gravina's treatise reassessing the value of the ancient fables and of ancient poetry was an attempt to reconcile the worlds of reason and imagination, which Descartes had irremediably separated.<sup>21</sup> This is true also for the 'poetiche' as a genre, which blossomed in this period as a defence

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title *Delle antiche favole*. Amedeo Quondam, *Cultura e ideologia di Gianvincenzo Gravina* (Milan: Mursia, 1968), p. 206.

<sup>16</sup> Giovanna Scianatico, *La questione neoclassica* (Venice: Marsilio, 2010) p. 13, Camilletti, *Classicism and Romanticism*, p. 34. See also Mariagrazia Pia, 'Gravina e Vico: la poesia *sub specie temporis et imaginationis* secondo la *metaphisica mentis* spinoziana', *Bollettino del Centro di Studi Vichiani*, 26-27 (1996-1997), 55-74 (p.71).

<sup>17</sup> See Andrea Battistini's note in Vico, *Opere*, II, 1325.

<sup>18</sup> Biagio De Giovanni, *Filosofia e diritto in Francesco d'Andrea. Contributo alla storia del previchismo* (Milan: Giuffr , 1958), p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Quondam, *Cultura e ideologia*; Nicola Badaloni, 'La cultura', in *Storia d'Italia*, 6 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1973), III, 699-981. See Mariapaola Fimiani, 'Vico nella "Storia d'Italia"', *Bollettino del Centro di studi Vichiani*, 11 (1981), 233-39.

<sup>20</sup> Gian Vincenzo Gravina, 'Della ragion poetica', in *Scritti critici e teorici* (Bari: Laterza, 1973), pp. 195-327 (p. 199).

<sup>21</sup> Badaloni, *La cultura*, p. 751.

against Descartes's dismissal of imaginative thought.<sup>22</sup> This fact has a significant counterpart in French culture: aesthetics was precisely the field in which, in France, those who favoured the ancients had found their space in the final stages of the *querelle*.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, *Della ragion poetica* is a treatise dedicated to a search for the rules ('regole') that sustained poetry, just as the rules of architecture guarantee the stability of a building, which were as valid for the construction of ancient monuments as they are for more recent ones.<sup>24</sup> The eternal rules of poetry cannot be found without looking at what poetry was in its original state: 'la ragion poetica che noi trattiamo, secondo la quale i greci poeti e le regole loro rivochiamo ad un'idea eterna di natura, può concorrere ancora alla formazion d'altre regole sopra esempi e poemi diversi'.<sup>25</sup> The principle of Gravina's theories, therefore, is similar to what would characterize the *New Science*, a few years later: going back to the origins of things to explore their nature: 'nascimento [...] si appella "natura"', Vico wrote in the final version of the *New Science* (*NS*, § 346).

Gravina's reflections start from a brief account exploring the categories of 'vero, falso, reale e finto', the point of which is to reassess the gnoseological value of the 'verosimile', namely representation, and therefore art.

La poesia con la rappresentazione del vero circonda d'ogn'intorno la fantasia nostra [...] onde ci dispone verso il finto nel modo come sogliamo essere disposti verso il vero. [...] Il poeta [...] commuove ed agita la fantasia nel modo che fanno gli oggetti reali e produce in noi gli effetti medesimi che si destano come dai veri successi.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For example, Ludovico Antonio Muratori's *Della perfetta poesia italiana* (1706). See Bruno Barillari, *Gianvincenzo Gravina come precursore di Vico* (Rome: Albrighi, Segati e C., 1941), p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Luglio, 'Il magistero delle api', p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> Gravina, 'Della ragion poetica', p. 199.

<sup>25</sup> Gravina, 'Della ragion poetica', p. 199.

<sup>26</sup> Gravina, 'Della ragion poetica', p. 201.

Ancient poetry is, to Gravina, a vehicle for the 'verisimile', leading to the truth: consequently, Homer, as well as the mythological Orpheus, were ancient wise men transmitting science in an understandable form to uncultivated people, fostering their cultural development. This meant reassessing the value of the poetic fable as a disguise for science: this is to Gravina the value of both ancient and modern poetry, or more generally, as Gravina puts it, the usefulness of poetry.<sup>27</sup> Vico too, in *De studiorum ratione*, reassessed the 'verisimile' as a stage that is 'intermedio fra vero e falso' and useful to develop a 'senso comune'.<sup>28</sup> For this reason *Della ragion poetica* and *De studiorum ratione* are considered among the first Italian reactions to Descartes' definition of 'true'.<sup>29</sup> Both Gravina and Vico were trying to expand the limits that Descartes had given to the cognizable with the theorization of clear and distinct ideas. To do so, they tried to establish a theoretical foundation and a philosophical justification for the 'verosimile'.

Gravina moved from a theoretical account of what poetry was and should be, to a historical narration of its development. This in turn led to a historical approach to poetry: an interpretation of poetry *sub specie temporis*. A historical understanding of the tradition of poetry thus prompted a drastic separation between the ancients and the moderns, and acknowledges their distinctiveness.<sup>30</sup> However, a historical approach to poetry also leads to the creation of a canon. In fact, *Della ragion poetica* also established a canon of Italian poetry on the model of the ancient one. Yet it did so not in terms of imitation, but rather through the criterion of functional analogy: good modern poetry is not that which imitates ancient poetry, but that which reproduces its original function: 'faremo addunque delle nuove favole e nuovi favoleggiatori simil governo che negli antichi abbiamo fatto, e riducendo il lor artificio ed insegnamento all'idea degli antichi'.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Gravina, 'Della ragion poetica', p. 208-10.

<sup>28</sup> Vico, 'De studiorum ratione', p. 105. See Giovanni Modica, *La filosofia del 'senso comune' in Giovan Battista Vico* (Rome: Sciascia, 1983).

<sup>29</sup> See Quondam, *Cultura e ideologia*, p. 165, about Gravina's 'Discorso sopra l'Endimione'. The note is anyway valid also for 'Della ragion poetica'. See also Pia, 'Gravina e Vico', p. 55.

<sup>30</sup> See Carena, *Critica della ragion poetica*, p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> Gravina, 'Della ragion poetica', p. 272. On this point, see Scianatico, *La questione neoclassica*, pp. 23-31.

By analysing ancient poetry, Gravina directly addressed the problem of myth, which Descartes had raised. In fact, Descartes had underestimated the value of fables by defining them as false and misleading: ‘les fables font imaginer plusieurs événements comme possibles qui ne le sont point’ (*Discours sur la methode*, I). Gravina instead goes back to the original function of the fable to reassess its usefulness:

La favola è l’esser delle cose trasformato in geni umani, ed è la verità travestita in sembianza popolare [...] [R]assomigliando con finti colori le cose naturali e civili e tutto il mondo apparente, scuopre l’invisibile e l’occulto e per ignoto sentiero conduce alla scienza, perché, come s’è detto, col mezzo dell’immagini sensibili s’introducono negli animi popolari le leggi della natura e di Dio e s’eccitano i semi della religione e dell’onesto.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, the nature of the fable is not false, as detractors of the ancient world had claimed; instead, it was disguised truth, produced by wise men for ignorant people. Vico, too, would argue that the fable is in its way true, because it was believed to be true by primitive men. However, contrary to Gravina, he argued that the fables were born from ignorance (‘da ignoranza di cagioni’), and that they were a spontaneous product of the activity of the primitive unconditioned mind (*NS*, § 375).

According to Vico, Gravina was connected to him by ‘stima ed amicizia’ while living in Naples, and they were then in ‘stretta corrispondenza infino che egli morì’.<sup>33</sup> This explains some of the similarities that I have highlighted, and it is due to this resonance that Gravina’s writings have been described as ‘pre-vichiani’ by some scholars.<sup>34</sup> This view has some limits, being exclusively centred on Vico:

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<sup>32</sup> Gravina, ‘Della ragion poetica’, pp. 213 and 215.

<sup>33</sup> Vico, ‘Vita scritta da se medesimo’, p. 44.

<sup>34</sup> Bruno Barillari, in *Gravina precursore*, and Santino Caramella, in ‘La poetica filosofica di G.L. Gravina e la logica poetica di G. B. Vico’, in *Studi graviniani* (Cosenza: MIT, 1965), pp. 281-298; Nicola Badaloni framed Gravina’s works in a general *Introduzione a Vico* (Bari: Laterza, 1984); while Quondam, in *Cultura e ideologia*, stressed the differences between the two. Finally,

it tends to see the cultural trends of that time teleologically, in terms of the formation of the 'great author'. Nevertheless I think it is worth reassessing the analogies between Gravina and Vico's research as examples of a fundamental moment in Italian reflection on poetry and imagination that would resurface later, during the Bourbon Restoration period.

Nicola Badaloni sees Gravina and Vico as part of a progressive historical line of Italian authors who dealt with the issue of the imagination and the irrational. For Badaloni, Italian culture from the Renaissance (at least from Pietro Pomponazzi's philosophical writings)<sup>35</sup> to the nineteenth century is characterized by a progressive decline in a static representation of human reasoning in favour of a dynamic scheme. In other words, Italian culture progressively negotiated the balance between reason and imagination, rational and irrational in favour of the one or the other of these elements.<sup>36</sup> Significantly, Badaloni's lineage continues in the following century with Leopardi,<sup>37</sup> drawing a line of continuity between these experiences, which are very distant from each other, both geographically and historically.

Gravina's *Della ragion poetica* was certainly read by Leopardi, and both he and many of his contemporaries (such as Breme and Foscolo, see Section 2. 1) saw Gravina as a true authority in the aesthetic. They believed that Gravina, like Vico, had anticipated some views that were typical of early nineteenth-century poetics, such as primitivism. In fact, Gravina defined Homer as the perfect example of a 'primitive' poet; for him Homer is the ideal model of a poetics of naturalness, a 'sana idea della poesia',<sup>38</sup> representing the spontaneity of the imagination, as opposed to Baroque poetics which exalted invention as a way of creating outside of the natural. While in France those writing about Homer (Longepierre, Boileau) gave up defending him on philosophical grounds and

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Mariarazia Pia ('Gravina e Vico') explained the possible connections through a common source: Baruch Spinoza.

<sup>35</sup> Badaloni, 'La cultura', p. 717.

<sup>36</sup> Badaloni, 'La cultura', p. 699.

<sup>37</sup> Badaloni, 'La cultura', pp. 915-926.

<sup>38</sup> Gravina, 'Discorso sopra l'Endimione', p. 56.

started reassessing the poetic value of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*,<sup>39</sup> Gravina also reassessed the gnoseological value of Homeric poetry, representing Homer as a wise man who spread knowledge to the people ('il mago più potente e l'incantatore più sagace').<sup>40</sup> In the *Scienza nuova prima* (1725) Vico seemed to share Gravina's opinions on Homer and Dante. But from the 1730 edition on, Vico went even further, describing Homer as the collective voice of the ancient Greek people, and the Homeric poems as depositories of historical memory of the ancient world (*NS*, § 780-904).<sup>41</sup>

According to Gravina, the modern counterpart of Homer is Dante. The *Comedy* was therefore the symbol of 'healthy' poetry in the vernacular, because it expressed poetically divine and human truth, popularizing it.<sup>42</sup> In *Della ragion poetica*, Dante appears already as 'il toscano Omero', as Vico would later define him (*NS*, § 786): the epic poet speaking for an entire people in times of barbarism. Vico would later develop the parallel between Dante and Homer, going beyond the limits of purely aesthetical reflections, and making of Dante the historian and the epic poet of Italian 'barbarie ritornata'.<sup>43</sup> For these reasons, Gravina and Vico would later become popular when, between 1807 and 1808, Simonde de Sismondi spread the myth of the Italian medieval period as a quintessentially poetic age.<sup>44</sup>

However, there are also important differences between Vico and Gravina.<sup>45</sup> While Vico conceived an entirely new epistemology, Gravina's musings on poetry were limited to the field of aesthetics: in fact, he wrote against the excesses of Baroque poetry by reassessing the value and limits of imitating the ancients, thereby reinvigorating Italian literature.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, Gravina seems to

<sup>39</sup> Luglio, 'Il magistero delle api', p. 67.

<sup>40</sup> Gravina, 'Della ragion poetica', p. 203.

<sup>41</sup> See Paolo Cristofolini, 'Prefazione', in Giambattista Vico, *Scoperta del vero Omero e Giudizio sopra Dante*, ed. by Paolo Cristofolini (Pisa: ETS, 2006), pp. 5-19.

<sup>42</sup> Gravina, 'Della ragion poetica', p. 273-74.

<sup>43</sup> Beyond the *New Science*, see Vico, 'Giudizio sopra Dante', in *Scoperta del vero Omero*, 137-140.

<sup>44</sup> Simonde de Sismondi, *Histoire des républiques italiennes au moyen age* (Zurich: Gessner, 1807-1818).

<sup>45</sup> Quondam, *Cultura e ideologia*; Pia, 'Gravina e Vico'.

<sup>46</sup> Quondam, *Cultura e ideologia*, p. 235.

mainly reassess the gnoseological value of poetry, that is to say its role in the dissemination of the truth to ignorant people. On the other hand, Vico highlighted the moral value of poetry, and its role in the construction of religious feeling that cemented ancient communities.

Overall, despite their differences, both Vico and Gravina represent a turning point in Italian thought: they both epitomize the reaction of Italian culture to the shock of Descartes's revolution. They both resorted to the authority of ancient writers in their reassessment of the universe of origins; this seems to be a recurring feature of the Italian frame of mind, as highlighted by Roberto Esposito: while 'modern' philosophy epitomized by Descartes describes itself as a break with what came before (Descartes questioned the *auctoritas* of traditional culture), Italian culture tends to feed itself on the knowledge of the ancients.<sup>47</sup> Specifically, Gravina found the *ratio* of poetry by going back to the original, historical meaning of what poetry was and meant, while Vico moved even further beyond this by searching for the root of almost every aspect of human behaviour. Going back to the principle was the way to reassess the value of poetry as a creative act for Gravina, whilst for Vico it was the most satisfactory criterion to explore human nature. Furthermore, they contributed to highlighting an issue that would resurface in post-Napoleonic Italy: the difficulty of reconciling modern, rationalist thought with poetry in its original function.

Some of the questions arising in the battle of the books would resurface many decades later, within the polemic that we now call the Classicist-Romantic quarrel. Between 1816 and 1827, the years in which Leopardi was starting his poetic career, some Italian intellectuals pointed to a tension that in France and England had already been perceived and debated, and began to question their own relationship to their ancient and classical legacy. Consequently, they started to ask what the *ratio* of modern poetry was, and if moderns could really understand and make use of the poetic legacy of the Greek and Roman tradition. Of course this literary quarrel hid a deeper conflict, that of a nation that was starting to shape its own identity. In this time span, Vico and Gravina's books started to circulate

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<sup>47</sup> Esposito, *Pensiero vivente*, p. 24.

again, and were subject to multiple interpretations and appropriations: their historical exploration of what poetry had been in the past was one of the keys to elaborating the need for a new, different, modern Italian poetry (see Section 2. 1). The next section moves from Naples to Venice to explore a new moment in Vico's 'diffractive' reception.

### *1. 2 - Venice 1763: Translating and Mediating the Ancient World*

The story of Vico's reception is, in its own way, also a story of migration. In fact, beyond Naples, the *New Science* was immediately successful in Venice.<sup>48</sup> This was probably due to the fact that Vico's early works had attracted the attention of Venetian writers such as Apostolo Zeno (1669-1750); additionally, it was a Venetian intellectual, Giovanartico di Porcì (1682-1743), who asked Vico to write his autobiography. This work was destined to be published in a volume composed of autobiographical profiles of Italian philosophers, which was never completed.

Vico's reception in the Veneto is well known among scholars, but existing scholarship tends to stress the lines of continuity between Vico's thought and its reception. However, in the cases of both Venice and Milan, the story of this reception is a story of manipulation and appropriation: in a word, a story of diffraction.

Melchiorre Cesarotti (1730-1808) was an abbot and professor of Ancient Languages in Padua. He played a fundamental role in Italian culture between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, and had a significant influence on Alfieri, Foscolo, Leopardi, and Manzoni. The most influential works by Cesarotti, which are also relevant to his reception and use of Vico, are his translation of Homer and Ossian's poems, which 'provoked a revolution in Italian taste'.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, Cesarotti's Vico, and his work on the two types of archaic (or allegedly archaic) poetry, need to be studied together. Cesarotti's activity is a telling example of how

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<sup>48</sup> *Vico a Venezia*, ed. by De Michelis and Pizzamiglio.

<sup>49</sup> Gustavo Costa, 'Cesarotti, Vico and the sublime', *Italica*, 58 (1981), 3-15 (p. 8).

Vico's message was received, fragmented, and applied to the field of poetics and literary criticism. In fact, Cesarotti's role in receiving and diffracting Vico's message was already evident to his contemporaries: Vincenzo Cuoco wrote that Cesarotti was the one who applied Vico's principles to 'bella letteratura'.<sup>50</sup> As discussed below, these apparently neutral words hide a whole process of interpretation, selection, and deviation from Vico's message. Cuoco's statement already signals a change in the field of application: Vico-related ideas were individuated by Cuoco not only in philosophy and history but also in the field of arts. In other words, Cesarotti turned Vico's historical exploration of ancient poetry into a matter of *taste*.

Cesarotti was a key figure in the diffusion of Vico-related ideas;<sup>51</sup> Gustavo Costa describes him as a 'staunch Vichian'.<sup>52</sup> Yet for a long time, research on Cesarotti's 'vichismo' was limited: Benedetto Croce denied any receptiveness to Vico in the Veneto – in which the dominant philosophical doctrine was sensism, inspired by Condillac – and the 'Vico genuino' was to Croce the idealistic thinker he himself had identified. For Croce, Vico's book remained therefore 'libro chiuso' to 'condillachiani italiani' like Cesarotti.<sup>53</sup> This theoretical framework remained uncontested for a long time: still in 1978 (26 years after Croce's death), Giovanni Santinello felt it necessary to defend his theories about the integration between Venetian culture and Vico, arguing that it was necessary to get rid of the Crocean stereotype of the idealist Vico, and of the lack of communication between the sensistic Venetian environment and the *New Science*.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Vincenzo Cuoco, *Scritti vari*, ed. by Nino Cortese and Fausto Nicolini, 2 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1924), II, 312.

<sup>51</sup> See *Momenti vichiani del primo settecento*, ed. by Gilberto Pizzamiglio and Manuela Sanna (Naples: Guida, 2001).

<sup>52</sup> Costa, 'Cesarotti, Vico and the sublime', p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> Croce, *Bibliografia vichiana*, I, 203.

<sup>54</sup> Giovanni Santinello, 'Vico e Padova nel secondo settecento', in *Vico a Venezia*, ed. by De Michelis and Pizzamiglio, pp. 77-89 (pp. 78 and 87). Similarly, Giulio Marzot, in *Il gran Cesarotti* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1949), wrote that 'gli spiriti non erano maturi a riceverlo [Vico] ed a iniziarne il metodico sviluppo', p. 39. See also Costa, 'Cesarotti, Vico and the sublime', p. 3 and 8.

In fact, as Santinello adds, a Vico who was not perceived as an extraneous thinker was welcomed in Venice as ‘qualcosa di familiare’.<sup>55</sup> Exploring the reasons for this cultural affinity would be extremely interesting, but it falls outside the aims of this dissertation. Here, I merely emphasize, as Luigi Rosiello has affirmed, that Vico and Condillac’s reflections are now seen by contemporary scholarship as compatible, because they both originated in reaction to Descartes’s rationalism.<sup>56</sup> Rosiello also argued that both the *New Science* and Condillac’s *Essai sur l’origine des connoissances humaines* (1746) are characterized by the need to explore the origins of human language; in other words, they started as a historical study of languages.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the role of the body and the senses in the *New Science* is now considered central by recent studies:<sup>58</sup> this is one of the strains of research that have contributed to bringing Vico closer to an Italian sensistic and materialistic tradition, and to figures like Cesarotti and Leopardi.

As a teacher and a translator, Cesarotti was a figure of mediation, as he himself stated by describing his position towards Ossian as ‘un personaggio di mezzo tra il Traduttore e l’Autore’, more faithful ‘allo spirito che alla lettera del mio Originale’.<sup>59</sup> As mentioned earlier, Cesarotti’s works proves to be relevant

<sup>55</sup> Santinello, ‘Vico e Padova’, p. 83.

<sup>56</sup> Luigi Rosiello, ‘Le teorie linguistiche di Vico e Condillac’, *Forum Italicum* 2: 4 (1968), 386-393 (p. 387). See also Antonio Pagliaro, ‘Lingua e poesia secondo G. B. Vico’, in *Altri saggi di critica semantica* (Messina-Florence: D’Anna, 1961), pp. 299-444.

<sup>57</sup> Rosiello, ‘Le teorie linguistiche di Vico e Condillac’, p. 387.

<sup>58</sup> Cantelli, *Mente corpo linguaggio*; Patella, *Senso, corpo, poesia..*

<sup>59</sup> Melchiorre Cesarotti, ‘Discorso premesso alla seconda edizione di Padova del 1772’, in *Critici e storici della poesia e delle arti del secondo Settecento*, ed. by Emilio Bigi (Milan-Naples: Ricciardi, 1960), p. 90. Scholarship has correctly highlighted this point: Luigi Blasucci wrote that the abbot was not only the translator, or the ‘rifacitore’ of Ossian, but a true ‘demiurgo’, the one who made it ‘accettabile a mentalità e a orecchie tanto diversamente educate’: Blasucci, ‘Sull’ossianismo leopardiano’, in *Lo stormire del vento fra le piante. Temi e percorsi leopardiani* (Venice: Marsilio, 2003), pp. 199-236 (p. 201). Francesca Broggi stressed the manipulation of Macpherson’s text, both on the textual and metatextual dimension, highlighting the issue of the cultural transfer between the original and the translation (Francesca Broggi, *The rise of the Italian canto: Macpherson, Cesarotti and Leopardi: from the Ossianic poems to the Canti* (Ravenna: Longo, 2006), pp. 13 and 15. See also Sergio Maria Gilardino, *La scuola romantica. La tradizione ossianica nella poesia dell’Alfieri, di Foscolo e di Leopardi* (Ravenna: Longo, 1982) on pp. 57-94). As far as Cesarotti’s ‘vichismo’ is concerned, Andrea Battistini labelled the abbot’s attitude towards the ancient as something between ‘sensismo e vichismo’, because the historicist approach to primitive poetry recalls both the ‘interessi genetici di Vico’ and the disenchanting representation

from our perspective because he introduced Vico's name into the comments of his translations of Homer and Ossian. Surprisingly, the references to Vico have a significantly different role in the two works. In fact, in the *Iliad*, published in 1798, Vico is mentioned only as the one who first raised the Homeric question, and to explain the figures of Achilles and Hector as imaginative universals ('universali fantastici'). Modern scholars then recognized other Vico-related ideas, such as an interpretation of the Homeric poems as 'la prima enciclopedia della Grecia',<sup>60</sup> a document of accumulated memories, and historical, social, and geographical data.<sup>61</sup> However, Cesarotti maintained quite an ambiguous attitude towards both the Homeric question and the aesthetical evaluation of the *Iliad*. Cesarotti did not appreciate Homer's style and found the Homeric poems too harsh and excessive; and Vico's theoretical framework was, for him, a way of leading the reader to appreciate the primitive poem.<sup>62</sup>

While he dismissed Homer, Cesarotti was impressed by Ossian. For him, Ossian was like a more refined Homer; in fact, he 'ne sommeille ni ne babille, qui n'est jamais ni grossier, ni trainant, toujours grand, toujours simple, rapide, précis, egal et varié'.<sup>63</sup> Possibly perceiving the 'modern' Macpherson behind the mask of the Gaelic poet, he found Ossian delicate and measured as a modern writer, and, therefore, to his taste. This is why he presented Ossian as the model poet, precisely on the basis of Vico's principles. In fact, when commenting on a passage

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of the ancient world by Condillac (Battistini, *Vico tra antichi e moderni*, p. 307). Furthermore, Gustavo Costa stressed Cesarotti's responsibility in mingling Vico's and Burke's views on primitive poetry, contextualizing Vico's reflection in an European context; to Costa, Vico's fortune is in part responsible for eighteenth-century primitivism (Rousseau, Blackwell), while in turn 'Cesarotti found in Vico the equation of the sublime with the primitive' (Costa, 'Cesarotti, Vico and the sublime', p. 8).

<sup>60</sup> Cesarotti, 'Ragionamento storico-critico', in *L'Iliade d'Omero volgarizzata letteralmente in prosa e recata poeticamente in verso sciolto italiano dall'ab. Melchior Cesarotti ampiamente illustrata* (Padua: a spese di Pietro Brandolese, 1798-1802), p. 94. See Luigi Lehnus, 'Cesarotti e la questione omerica', in *Aspetti della cultura e dell'opera di Melchiorre Cesarotti*, ed. by Gennaro Barbarisi and Giovanni Carnazzi, 2 vols (Milan: Cisalpino, 2002), I, 115-32 (p. 120).

<sup>61</sup> Battistini, *Vico tra antichi e moderni*, pp. 335-36.

<sup>62</sup> Leopardi owned and quoted a 1786 copy of Cesarotti's *Iliad*, and could therefore have access to this information about Vico.

<sup>63</sup> Letter to Macpherson (no date), in Cesarotti, *Epistolario*, I [*Opere*, XXXV], ed. by Gennaro Barbarisi (Florence: Molini, Landi e Comp., 1811), p. 11.

from Fingal, Cesarotti added that, while philosophers and thinkers express themselves through abstract ideas,

gli uomini rozzi ed appassionati singolarizzano, e parlano per sentimenti. Se questa è la qualità più essenziale del vero linguaggio poetico, come vuole il Vico, Ossian è 'l più gran poeta d'ogni altro.<sup>64</sup>

A second example of a direct quotation of Vico also becomes a matter of appreciation: Cesarotti drew a comparison between the Ossianic character of Svarano (Swaran) and Vico's interpretation of the mythical giant Polyphemus as one of the 'primi padri nello stato delle famiglie' (see *NS*, § 338),<sup>65</sup> adding that 'il Vico riconoscerebbe con piacere' his description of the Cyclops in Ossian's character.

Modern editions report only those two explicit references to Vico, but, thanks to Andrea Battistini,<sup>66</sup> we now know that originally there were three, and that the most relevant one was erased on the occasion of the revision of the 1801 edition. This passage deserves to be read in full:

Lo strepitar dei torrenti secondo gli antichi Scozzesi proveniva dagli spiriti, che si diguazzavano per entro le loro onde. Queste immaginazioni, benché sembrino assai strane ai tempi nostri, sono convenientissime alla natura dello spirito umano nello stato primitivo e selvaggio. Vediamo, che i fanciulli parlano alle cose inanimate come avessero senso; danno a tutti gli oggetti simili lo stesso nome, e credono che ogni romore straordinario proceda da qualche fantasma. Gli uomini nello stato primitivo erano i fanciulli del genere umano: perciò dovevano aver idee e sentimenti analoghi a quei de' fanciulli. Stimolati dalla curiosità, ed immersi nell'ignoranza non potevano che far se stessi regola, e norma della natura. Quindi per ispiegarne

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<sup>64</sup> Melchiorre Cesarotti, *Poesie di Ossian figlio di Fingal, antico poeta celtico ultimamente scoperte, e tradotte in prosa inglese da Jacopo Macpherson, e da quella trasportate in verso sciolto italiano*, 2 vols (Padua: Comino, 1763), I, p. cxxix. See Battistini, *Vico tra antichi e moderni*, p. 314.

<sup>65</sup> Cesarotti, *Poesie di Ossian* (1763), 1, p. ll. See Battistini, *Vico tra antichi e moderni*, p. 314.

<sup>66</sup> Battistini, *Vico tra antichi e moderni*, p. 311.

il fenomeno, non avevano altro mezzo, che o di trasformar in uomini tutti gli oggetti che li colpivano gagliardamente, e specialmente gli oggetti in moto; o di supporre che varj enti simili all'uomo, e dotati delle stesse affezioni, popolassero tutte le parti dell'universo; e producessero quelle meraviglie, ond'erano colpiti. Così, secondo il Vico, il Cielo divenne un vasto corpo animato, e il tuono fu la sua voce. Così i selvaggi dell'America credono che gli alberi piangano quando sudano, che parlino quando fischiano. Così gli Scandinavi popolavano tutte le parti della natura di Dei similissimi ad uomini, e così finalmente gli Scozzesi le riempierono d'ombre, e di spiriti. L'immaginazione fu la prima filosofia delle nazioni. Questa fu la vera origine delle favole, e questa è la ragione per cui disse il Vico sensatamente, che gli uomini nello stato selvaggio nascono poeti. Vedi *Princ. di Scienza nuova*. Fonten. *Orig. Delle favole*.<sup>67</sup>

As Battistini argues, this passage is a 'collage di degnità vichiane': for example, the description of ancient people as 'fanciulli del genere umano' is a famous principle of the *New Science* (*NS*, § 209).<sup>68</sup> However, and especially pertinent here is the fact that seems likely that Leopardi read directly this fundamental passage inspired by Vico. In fact, the 1789 edition of *Poesie di Ossian* still held in Leopardi's library, from which this quotation is taken, is identical to the 1763 *editio princeps*. Modern readers instead normally use the revised 1801 text of Cesarotti's translation.<sup>69</sup> Seen from this perspective, Leopardi's case might have been very similar to that of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), who, may have encountered fragments of Vico's theories through the 'important channel' of Cesarotti.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Cesarotti, *Poesie di Ossian* (1763), 1, pp. lxxxvii-lxxxviii.

<sup>68</sup> For all the textual references to the *New Science*, see Battistini, *Vico tra antichi e moderni*, p. 312-13.

<sup>69</sup> Leopardi could read it in Melchiorre Cesarotti, *Poesie di Ossian figlio di Fingal, antico poeta celtico, ultimamente scoperte e tradotte in prosa inglese da Jacopo Macpherson, e da quella trasportate in verso italiano dall'ab. Melchior Cesarotti*, 2 vols (Bassano: Remondini, 1789), I, 63-64.

<sup>70</sup> Robert T. Clark, 'Herder, Cesarotti and Vico', *Studies in Philology*, 44 (1947), 645-671 (p. 670).

The passage by Cesarotti quoted above includes numerous features that Leopardi would later develop: namely, the analogy between children and ancients; and the role of ignorance in the development of poetic feelings. Furthermore, Cesarotti mediated the differences of taste between the text and the modern reader by explaining, with the same historic determinism used by Vico, that what seemed ‘strano’ (or ‘gonfio’)<sup>71</sup> in Ossian’s text (hyperboles, similes, imagination) is instead ‘meraviglioso’<sup>72</sup> and ‘convenientissimo’ in that specific stage of human development (see *NS*, § 783).<sup>73</sup> By doing so, he made an important contribution to the development of the sense of foreignness and separation between the ancient and the modern world that characterized Italian culture in the first part of the nineteenth century, and in particular Leopardi’s ideas, as the following chapters will explain.

The passages above are some examples of Cesarotti’s manipulation of Vico. This complex process might be described as composed of three parts: first of all, a selection of the features of Vico’s thought that were useful to Cesarotti, whose intention was to guarantee his readers’ access to Ossian’s poems. An example of this selection is the statement about the anthropomorphic imagination of the ancients, which is extracted and isolated from Vico’s systematic argumentation about the features of the primitive mind. Secondly, a reduction of Vico’s methodical and extensive thought to a series of concentrated points (for example, that ancient people were like children). Reduced to short *sententiae*, Vico’s theories become portable: it is in fact possible to regard those points almost as aphorisms, as fertile seeds (the seeds evoked by Cuoco: see the Introduction), which circulated and germinated in diverse ways in different authors, including Leopardi. Finally, Cesarotti used Vico’s exploration and rationalization of the ancients as the known and familiar cultural framework in which to convey and take control of Ossian’s foreignness and exoticism. Furthermore, applying Vico’s exaltation of ‘l’inarrivabile facultà poetica eroica’

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<sup>71</sup> Cesarotti, *Poesie di Ossian* (1763), I, p. ccl.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> See Battistini, *Vico tra antichi e moderni*, p. 315.

of the ancients for Ossian helped market Cesarotti's translation. This last point is in accordance with Cesarotti's tendency to domesticate Ossian in his translation.

In Cesarotti the use of Vico-related notes is intertwined with an enthusiasm for the restoration, appreciation, and dissemination of this newly-rescued 'ancient' text. The ambiguous status of MacPherson's text (as 'ancient' and 'new' at the same time), offered Cesarotti the possibility of rediscovering ancient poetry from a new perspective.

Cesarotti's translation of Ossian was one of the best-selling books of its time, and reached Leopardi too. While Leopardi's 'Ossianism' has been widely studied, with all due attention to Cesarotti's intermediation,<sup>74</sup> scholars have generally overlooked the potential connection of Cesarotti's Vico-related notes with Leopardi. In fact, the passages quoted above may have been highly influential in Leopardi's thought. For example, Cesarotti described Ossian's language as an example of primitive poetic language, and, in turn, 'the true' poetic language; therefore, he implied that it was 'poetry' in the strictest sense of the word. In this, he was appropriating a typical concept of the *New Science*: that poetry *strictu sensu* – that is to say, in the etymological sense: *poiein*, to create – was something that belonged to a precise stage in human development, and that it was nonsensical to try to reproduce it in modernity. Leopardi would make of this point the cornerstone of the poetics of an 1822 lyric, 'Alla Primavera' (see Section 3. 1). Furthermore, Leopardi completed the analogy ancient/children with the corresponding analogy modern men/maturity-old age; this would become the key representation of the irreparable loss of infancy/antiquity.

Another axis of Cesarotti's diffraction of Vico's message is the separation of its principles from Homer and their application to Ossian.<sup>75</sup> By doing so, Cesarotti partly separated Vico's name from the key figure of the *New Science*, and linked it to a figure – Ossian – towards whom Leopardi had fluctuating and ambivalent opinions: he described him as very extraneous and strange.<sup>76</sup> On the

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<sup>74</sup> See notes above.

<sup>75</sup> Stephan N. Cristea, 'Ossian l. Homer', *Italian Studies*, 24 (1969), 93-111.

<sup>76</sup> Leopardi wrote that he felt totally fascinated by 'i fatti cantati da Omero e Virgilio e le tragedie', because of 'ricordanze della fanciullezza, abitudine presa, fama universale di quelle nazioni e di

other hand, he appreciated Homer, as demonstrated by Leopardi's juvenile translations from the *Odyssey* to the late *Paralipomeni alla batracomiomachia* (see Section 4. 2). This might help to explain, at least in part, Leopardi's silence about Vico as far as Homeric poetry is concerned.

An additional aspect of Cesarotti's diffraction of Vico is that he made significant omissions from the *New Science*, or, in other words, he selected just what was necessary to him. For example, Vico subdivided human history in three stages (the ages of gods, heroes and men), to which three different types ('spezie') of languages, literature and customs belong. This concept disappeared in Cesarotti's interpretation, as the heroic times are his prevailing interest.<sup>77</sup> In fact, according to Vico, the Homeric poems collect the fables and histories elaborated during the heroic times ('Già dimostrammo sopra tre essere state l'età de'poeti innanzi d'Omero: la prima de'poeti teologi, ch'i medesimi furon eroi, i quali cantarono favole vere e severe: la seconda de'poeti eroici, che l'alterarono e le corrupero; la terza d'Omero, ch'alterate e corrotte le ricevete'; *NS*, § 905). Leopardi is coherent however with Cesarotti's interpretation, and, like Herder, always preferred to represent the human development through the dichotomy ancient/modern.

Furthermore, Cesarotti omits Vico's view of mankind's original beastly stage, since he finds this aspect of Vico's theorization far too extreme.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, in Leopardi's interpretation, the ancients are viewed as having a strong imagination, generous illusions and a straightforward, non-mediated relationship with bodily sensations, but they bear no trace of a 'erramento ferino' as described by Vico. Yet Leopardi autonomously developed interesting musings about

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quei poeti, affezionato ancorchè involontario, continuo uso di sentirne parlare, rispetto venerazione ammirazione amore per quelli che ne hanno parlato, tutte ragioni la mancanza delle quali rende difficilissimo, e forse impossibile il fare ugualmente interessante un soggetto nuovo, massime in poesia'; in fact, 'quell'interesse non ci possa esser suscitato da nessun'altra storia, o poema sopra altri fatti ancorchè benissimo cantati, come dall'Ossian' (*Zib.* 192). See Blasucci, 'Sull'ossianesimo leopardiano'.

<sup>77</sup> The tripartition of the ages and languages recurs instead in Cesarotti's translation of Homer's *Iliad*, 4 vols (Padua: Pietro Brandolese, 1798), II (1798), 99, with specific reference to the *New Science*.

<sup>78</sup> About Cesarotti's soft primitivism see Battistini, *Vico tra antichi e moderni*, pp. 321-22.

original sensual pleasure and the attention towards the body in primitive and ancient times.

It has been argued that Cesarotti's work may derive from an anti-classicistic position, and from the will to renew Italy's tired poetical scene;<sup>79</sup> others, however, define his poetic conception as 'ancora Classicistica' because it tends to obliterate original roughness and irrational abstractions.<sup>80</sup> This confusion as to how to define Cesarotti's positions is due to the fact that the abbot epitomized a phase of transition and mediation between opposite forces: his rationalistic and classicistic education made him disregard the primitive, unrefined poetry by Homer, in line with the current opinions in eighteenth-century aesthetics (in fact, his translation of the *Iliad* was an attempted conciliation of that text with modern taste; authors who developed a more mature historicist sense disregarded Cesarotti's translation and preferred Monti's).<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, his fascination for Ossian betrays an interest in poetry as a genuine and spontaneous product of primitive minds. His translation transmitted this taste to a whole generation of readers, accompanied by some Vico-related suggestions that were to spread in the Classicist-Romantic quarrel (see Section 2. 1).

### *1. 3 – Vico in Lombardy (1800-1815): Post-Revolutionary 'Vichismo' and the Revision of Italian Identity*

In this section I will propose a new critical perspective on two well-known readers of Vico in the early nineteenth century – Vincenzo Cuoco and Ugo Foscolo. In extremely different but parallel ways, these two writers were key to the *New Science's* resurfacing in early nineteenth century Lombardy, to the

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<sup>79</sup> Walter Binni, *Preromanticismo italiano*, (Florence: Sansoni, 1985). pp. 141-156. Marzot, p. 42-5.

<sup>80</sup> Battistini, *Vico tra antichi e moderni*, p. 309.

<sup>81</sup> Bigi, *Critici e storici della poesia*, p. 13.

attribution of a new sphere of meanings to Vico's message, and to the dissemination of these meanings.

In both cases, reading Vico helped make sense of the traumatic events of the Jacobin Triennium – specifically, the controversial conclusion of Napoleon's *campagna d'Italia* for Foscolo with the treaty of Campoformio (1797), and the failure of the 1799 Neapolitan Revolution for Cuoco. Indeed, for both Cuoco and Foscolo reading Vico had a double effect: firstly, it led them to a reconsideration, possibly a rationalization of the events they witnessed, and to recognize areas for intervention; secondly, it led them to look backwards, to explore and to question the world of origins – the pre-Roman past of Italy for Cuoco, the classical and Homeric legacy for Foscolo – and consequently to revise Italian identity.

This second stream of reflection should not be interpreted as a form of escape from the contemporary world, but, on the contrary, as the search for a *principium* – in both its senses – of civilization, which could inspire the future foundation of a renewed Italian identity, new Italian institutions, and a new Italian literature.<sup>82</sup> The *New Science* (whose complete title is *Principj di Scienza nuova d'intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni*) and Vico's other works (*De antiquissima Italorum sapientia, De uno universi iuris principio et fine uno*), reflect Vico's attention to the ambiguity of the term *principio*. Indeed, as Vico explained in the 106<sup>th</sup> axiom (*NS*, § 314), the *New Science* itself 'began from the beginning', and speculated on the beginning itself (on this point, see the Conclusion of this work).

In short, Foscolo and Cuoco are meaningful examples of the strains of thought that characterized the reception of Vico in the Napoleonic Republics (1801-1805) and in the Regno d'Italia (1805-1814). In both cases, reflecting on these themes resulted in forms of public engagement, or in attempts to take part in the transformation of the society. Foscolo's and Cuoco's respective engagement lasted throughout the Napoleonic sovereignty; but after 1813 Foscolo moved to Switzerland and then to London, a fact that limited his intervention in Italian cultural life. Cuoco, meanwhile, after Waterloo suffered from mental illness,

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<sup>82</sup> See Battistini, "Temi vichiani nei "Sepolcri"", p. 36.

possibly because of his disenchantment following Napoleon's defeat.<sup>83</sup> The cultural impact ascribable to Foscolo and Cuoco, as far as 'vichismo' is concerned, was limited to Napoleonic Italy. Nonetheless, as the following chapters will demonstrate, Italian culture in the Bourbon Restoration remained extremely receptive to Vico's message, thanks to the mediation of such influential figures as Foscolo and Cuoco.

When Edoardo Sanguineti fictionally addressed Ugo Foscolo, in a 1979 article, he used an unusual adjective to define him: 'Ugo mio vichiano'.<sup>84</sup> Sanguineti's word choice reveals how there remains a strongly perceived influence of Vico on Foscolo. Foscolo's 'vichismo' has in fact been object of significant critical attention. The same is valid for Cuoco, whose reception of Vico has been extensively studied especially within the framework of European historicism.<sup>85</sup> Yet, while scholars have extensively explored Vico's legacy within Foscolo's and Cuoco's texts, it is worth discussing their role as figures of mediation, as filters responsible for the manipulation of Vico's message and its diffraction in early nineteenth-century culture. In other words, we know – at least for the most part – what Vico meant to Cuoco and Foscolo, but it is necessary to explore how Foscolo's and Cuoco's reading of Vico had an impact on nineteenth-century 'vichismo'. Secondly, scholars have not sufficiently highlighted a point that is crucial to this work: periodization. When did Vico's legacy become relevant to these writers and their audience? Cuoco and Foscolo both contributed to making of Vico a collective post-revolutionary cultural reference.

In the first years of the nineteenth century, Cuoco and Foscolo shared the same cultural environment. Both were forced to move from their native communities (Naples and Venice) due to political events. They both found a welcoming environment in Milan, which, in those days, was the most important

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<sup>83</sup> Mariano Ayala, 'Su la vita di Vincenzo Coco', in Vincenzo Cuoco, *Saggio storico sulla rivoluzione di Napoli del 1799 di Vincenzo Coco* (Naples: Mariano Lombardi, 1861), pp. vii-xxi (p. xix); Gregoire Orloff, *Memoires historiques politiques et litteraires sur le Royaume de Naples*, 5 vols (Paris: Chausseriau et Hecart, 1819-1821), V, 83. See Antonino De Francesco, *Vincenzo Cuoco. Una vita politica* (Bari: Laterza, 1997), pp. 58-91.

<sup>84</sup> Edoardo Sanguineti, 'E invece no! è nazional-popolare', *L'Espresso*, 22, 3 June 1979.

<sup>85</sup> See the Introduction to this work.

cultural centre in Italy.<sup>86</sup> They had both believed in Napoleon's political project; but while Foscolo, after Campoformio, become increasingly disenchanted, Cuoco continued to collaborate with the new ruler.<sup>87</sup>

During his stay in Milan, Cuoco, among other expatriates from the Kingdom of Naples,<sup>88</sup> started disseminating Vico's works in northern Italy, as Manzoni remembered: 'quella emigrazione concorse alla coltura in Lombardia. Non conoscevamo quasi il Vico, e furono gli emigrati napoletani che ce lo hanno fatto conoscere'.<sup>89</sup> One of the initial results of this cultural activity was the commissioning of a new edition of the *New Science* from the Tipografia de' Classici Italiani; this edition was printed in 1801 and started to circulate widely among the intellectuals of the time.

In the same year (1801), Cuoco published his *Saggio storico sulla rivoluzione di Napoli*, an essay dedicated to the reasons for the failure of the Jacobin revolts in Naples. This book marks the rise of a historicist tradition in Italy, and it represents one of the first statements of Vico's transfer to northern Italy.<sup>90</sup> In fact, Cuoco built on Vico's principle that 'i governi debbon essere conformi alla natura de' popoli governati' (*NS*, § 246), and blamed Neapolitan intellectuals for having tried to 'import' the model of the French Revolution in a completely different context. Therefore, according to Cuoco, they had forced the providential development of history. 'Chiunque avea ripiena la sua mente delle idee di Macchiavelli, di Gravina, di Vico, non poteva né prestar fede alle promesse né applaudire alle operazioni de' rivoluzionarj di Francia'.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> See Berengo, *Intellettuali e librai nella Milano della Restaurazione*.

<sup>87</sup> De Francesco, *Vincenzo Cuoco. una vita politica*, pp. 58-91.

<sup>88</sup> See my 'Constructing the myth of Vico between press and literature (1802-1846)' for details and previous bibliography.

<sup>89</sup> From an interview published posthumously in *Corriere della Sera*, 12-13 October 1876.

<sup>90</sup> Moravia, *Vichismo e idéologie*.

<sup>91</sup> Vincenzo Cuoco, *Saggio storico sulla rivoluzione di Napoli*, ed. by Antonino De Francesco (Bari: Laterza, 2014), p. 37n. In the *Saggio*, Cuoco formulated the theory of the 'passive revolution', which was destined to have large critical attention. Maria Antonietta Visceglia, 'Genesi e fortuna di una interpretazione storiografica: la rivoluzione del 1799 come "rivoluzione passiva"', *Annali della Facoltà di Magistero dell'Università di Lecce*, 1 (1970-71), 172-88.

Cuoco's essay probably represents an attempt to rationalize and make sense of the violent outcome of the Neapolitan Revolution. Additionally, it gives a sense of how Vico's historical determinism could contribute to explaining and attributing to certain and immutable laws an event that he described as uncontrollable: 'ruina', 'catastrofe politica', so violent that it resembled a natural disaster.<sup>92</sup>

However, the revolution did not exclusively cause destruction and despair. The following quotation is a good example of how Cuoco turned the revolutionary events into an opportunity to discover the inner nature of his fellow citizens:

[U]n avvenimento straordinario sembra darci una nuova vita, nuovi oggetti si presentano ai nostri sguardi; ed in mezzo a quel disordine generale, che sembra voler distruggere una nazione, si travedono il suo carattere, i suoi costumi, e le leggi di quell'ordine del quale prima si vedevano solo gli effetti.<sup>93</sup>

This representation of the effects of the revolution shares Vico's theorization of the 'recourse of the nations', the idea that a phase of violence and barbarism ('disordine generale') can bring the inner nature of the nation to the surface, making the structure of the former civilization visible and highlighting social bonds. Vico's theorization, however, does not include the idea that this resurfacing can be caused by a sudden, extraordinary and unprecedented event, but it is rather a progressive and inevitable regress of civilizations.

As Jeffrey K. Alexander argues, a cultural trauma (as the Neapolitan Revolution indubitably was), can lead to a revision of the collective identity: 'there will be a searching re-remembering of the collective past, for memory is not only social and fluid, but deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self'.<sup>94</sup> Cuoco was one of the interpreters of this identity revision: in fact, between 1804 and 1805 he published a novel, *Platone in Italia*, which features a fictional

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<sup>92</sup> Cuoco, *Saggio storico*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Alexander, *Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma*, p. 22.

journey to the origins of the nation. The novel was largely inspired by Vico's *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia*, as the author himself admitted: its philosophical content 'non è che lo sviluppo delle idee di Vico'.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, Vico, in this work, had explored a lost pre-Roman Italian civilization in the traces left in the Latin language. The novel takes inspiration from this, narrating a fictitious journey made by Plato to Magna Graecia (southern Italy): this narrative device allowed the author to explore and praise the myth of the ancestral wisdom of the ancient Italians, antecedents to the rise of Rome and destroyed by it. As Paolo Casini has explained, this bizarre text was an attempt to search for, but also to provide, a common, subterranean and forgotten unitarian principle of the nation.<sup>96</sup> The novel also attempts to rethink the philosophical and literary tradition that describes Latin culture as dependent on that of ancient Greece (what the Latin poet Horace epitomized as 'Graecia capta' which 'ferum victorem cepit'<sup>97</sup> - *Epistles*, II, 1, 156), by hypothesizing an Italian 'primacy' in the development of an extraordinary, but lost, civilization.<sup>98</sup> In the adventurous search for an ancient national epos, Cuoco even hypothesized that Homer had composed his poems in Italy.<sup>99</sup>

*Platone in Italia* had a precise educational purpose; it aimed to 'rammentar oggi agl'Italiani che essi furono una volta virtuosi, potenti, felici, [...] gli inventori di quasi tutte le cognizioni che adornano lo spirito umano'.<sup>100</sup> In the

<sup>95</sup> Letter to Giuseppe Dégerando (1804), Cuoco, *Epistolario*, pp. 345-371. The novel combines Vico's philosophical themes with the genre of the archeological travel novel, epitomized by the highly successful *Voyage du Jeune Anacharsis en Grèce* by Jean-Jacques Barthelemy (1790). Apart from Vico, the novel is rich in cultural references: see Paolo Casini, *L'antica sapienza italica. Cronistoria di un mito* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998), pp. 238-62.

<sup>96</sup> Casini, *L'antica sapienza italica*, p. 251-2. See also De Francesco, *Cuoco. Una vita politica*, pp. 78-82.

<sup>97</sup> 'Captive Greece captured her uncivilised conquerors', my translation.

<sup>98</sup> Despite the exiguous success of this book, research on the Italic peoples was fostered in the following years. Giuseppe Micali, in 1810, published *L'Italia avanti il dominio dei Romani*, inaugurating a stream of Italian thought that overcame the century up to the so-called 'meridionalismo'. See 'Meridionalismo', in *Il contributo italiano alla storia del pensiero*, a. 1.

<sup>99</sup> Vincenzo Cuoco, *Platone in Italia*, ed. by Antonino De Francesco and Annalisa Andreoni (Bari: Laterza, 2006), pp. 160-172. See Annalisa Andreoni, *Omero italico. Favole antiche e identità nazionale da Vico a Cuoco* (Rome: Jouvence, 2003), pp. 137-48 and 211-44.

<sup>100</sup> Cuoco, *Platone in Italia*, p. 6.

same years, Cuoco established a journal, *Giornale italiano*, whose aims are expressed almost in the same words: to educate the 'spirito pubblico' of 'la classe più sensata' (the bourgeoisie) in order to foster a culturally unified nation.<sup>101</sup>

In Cuoco's articles too, Vico acquired a specific function: not just because of the content of his works, but also for his role in the history of Italian thought. Large parts of Cuoco's journalistic activity were dedicated to disseminating the myth of Vico as a symbol of Italian-ness: indeed, his legacy constitutes the forgotten supremacy with which the very image of Italy competed on the European stage. 'È pur graziosa cosa veder altri popoli disputarsi la gloria di ciò che è italiano',<sup>102</sup> wrote Cuoco ironically, speaking of the discovery of the magnet (which was foreseen by one of Vico's hypotheses); 'gl'Italiani, i quali credono Vico inintelligibile, ricomprano dagli esteri "a minuto" quel che Vico aveva donato all'ingrosso'.<sup>103</sup>

Cuoco recognized in Vico a perennial Italian speciality: 'scrivere la storia dell'Umanità è un'invenzione in cui l'ingegno italiano – something he was trying to identify and promote – non ha veruno rivale'. He then made a claim of Vico and Italy's supremacy: 'a Vico si deve la base del nuovo sistema di eloquenza di Blaire', and he was the precursor of the theories 'promosse da Condillac, Du Marsais e da Beccaria. [...] Chiunque conosce a fondo la scienza dell'uomo comprende che essa è fondata sopra i principi di Vico';<sup>104</sup> 'Vico è il primo in Europa il quale dalle parole di un popolo abbia saputo scoprire le sue idee. Vico fu il primo inventore di questa scienza nuova. [...] Vico ha il primo dubitato dell'esistenza di Omero, ed oggi ne dubitano moltissimi'; 'il primo vide che tutti le leggi dovevano avere una ragione'.<sup>105</sup>

Cuoco attempted to insert Vico into the debate on the importance of Italian philosophy, combating a persistent sense of inferiority about national intellectual

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<sup>101</sup> Cuoco, 'Programma [del *Giornale italiano*, 5 October 1803]', in *Pagine giornalistiche*, p. 5-6.

<sup>102</sup> Cuoco, [from *Giornale italiano* n. 120, 6 October 1804] *Pagine giornalistiche*, p. 217.

<sup>103</sup> Cuoco, [from *Giornale italiano* n. 154, 24 December 1804], in *Pagine giornalistiche*, p. 250. See my 'Constructing the myth of Vico' for a complete analysis.

<sup>104</sup> Cuoco, [From *Redattore Cisalpino* n. 9, 16 March 1801], *Scritti giornalistici*, ed. by Domenico Conte and Maurizio Martirano, 2 vols (Naples: Fredericiana, 1999), I, 690.

<sup>105</sup> Cuoco, [From *Giornale italiano* n. 24, 25 February 1804], *Pagine giornalistiche*, p. 110.

culture. He even identified a recognizable ‘school of Italian legislation’,<sup>106</sup> whose trailblazers were Machiavelli and Vico. By doing so, he perhaps aimed to prepare not only an Italian readership but also an Italian philosophical tradition, inviting productivity and the imitation of these illustrious models, in order to bring forward and reinforce this illustrious tradition. Additionally, Cuoco tried to suggest specific initiatives, such as writing a history of universal law,<sup>107</sup> that would restore to the forgotten philosopher his role in the development of theories on legislation. Later, while he was engaged in political activities in Naples, he promoted the introduction of a position of Universal Philology at the local university; this initiative was designed to start an Italian academic tradition that could be traced back to Vico, the Italian genius (see also Section 4. 1).<sup>108</sup>

In short, Cuoco’s reading of Vico was responsible for spreading narratives that would recur in the following years. In the first place, with *Platone in Italia*, he directed the attention of his audience towards a pre-Roman, pre-classical, ancestral, mysterious and typically Italian antiquity. This would reappear, later, as an anti-Classicistic argument, after Madame De Staël’s influential encouragement of Italians to loosen their bonds with the Graeco-Roman world (see Section 2. 1). Secondly, he identified Vico as the symbol of a forgotten Italian excellence, scarcely recognized by foreigners, or in some cases stolen by them.

Collections of Italian works, ideal narrations of a unified national canon, spread quickly in Napoleonic Lombardy. They had a precursor in Francesco Lomonaco’s biographical collections: Lomonaco (1772-1810), another Neapolitan expatriate, contributed to the construction of an Italian pantheon with his *Vite degli eccellenti italiani* (1802) and *Vite degli illustri capitani d’Italia* (1804-5). These works aimed to ‘mostrare a’ miei concittadini, come in un quadro, la gloria

<sup>106</sup> Cuoco, [From *Giornale italiano* n. 66, 3 June 1805], in *Pagine giornalistiche*, p. 307.

<sup>107</sup> In the *Giornale italiano* n. 124, of 24 December 1804, he wished ‘che qualcheduno amante della gloria italiana, imprenda a scrivere una storia della scienza della legislazione in Italia [...] questa storia scritta in tal modo sarebbe il più utile trattato di legislazione, perché ardisco dire che nessun’altra nazione ha tanti scrittori, tanto vari, e tanto eccellenti in questo genere’; this would even represent an ‘carattere eterno degl’ingegni italiani’ (*Pagine giornalistiche*, pp. 250-51).

<sup>108</sup> Vincenzo Cuoco, ‘Rapporto a Gioacchino Murat e progetto di decreto per l’organizzazione della pubblica istruzione’ (1809), in *Scritti sulla pubblica istruzione*, ed. by Luigi Biscardi e Rossella Folino Gallo (Bari: Laterza 2012), p. 59.

de' comuni egregi avoli'.<sup>109</sup> These initiatives were reflected in other projects of the time, such as the publication of the *Scrittori classici italiani di economia politica* by Pietro Custodi (Milan: G. G. De Stefani, 1803-1816);<sup>110</sup> or a collection of portraits of Italian by Ludovico Valeriani (Milan: 1805-6, Pirotta e Maspero editori e librai), or the *Biblioteca di giurisprudenza italiana di varj autori* (20 volumes, Milan, Francesco Sonzogno, 1806), the collection of classic works in Italian printed by Francesco Fusi (*Società tipografica dei classici italiani*) between 1803 and 1814. These publishing initiatives aimed at valorizing, canonizing and institutionalizing an Italian literary and academic genealogy, fostering the construction of the nation as a 'comunità di discendenza',<sup>111</sup> linked by blood ties. All this editorial activity was based in Milan, which hosted, in that period, a true creative factory of *italianità*.

In the same period, Foscolo lived and worked in Milan. With the largely autobiographical novel *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (1802) he had provided one of the most powerful insights into the political disenchantment of his generation. Foscolo had believed, at least in part, in Napoleon's political project and his likely role in liberating Italy from the domination of foreign rulers. However, the treaty of Campoformio in 1797, with its assignment of Venice, Istria, and Dalmatia to the Austrian Emperor, destroyed this illusion, as the incipit of *Jacopo Ortis* recalls:

Il sacrificio della patria nostra è consumato: tutto è perduto; e la vita, seppure ne verrà concessa, non ci resterà che per piangere le nostre sciagure, e la nostra infamia.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Francesco Lomonaco, *Vite degli eccellenti italiani*, (Italia, 1802-3), p. 2.

<sup>110</sup> This publication was highly praised by Cuoco in his newspaper: see Martirano, *Giuseppe Ferrari*, p. 20.

<sup>111</sup> Alberto Mario Banti, *Sublime madre nostra. La nazione italiana dal Risorgimento al fascismo* (Bari: Laterza, 2011), p. 15.

<sup>112</sup> Ugo Foscolo, *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis (1802)*, critical edition ed. by Giovanni Gambarin (Florence: Le Monnier, 1970), p. 137.

Napoleon's traumatic betrayal led the disenchanted Ortis to conceptualize history as a violent struggle among men to survive:

[C]iascun individuo è nemico nato della Società, perché la Società è necessaria nemica degli individui. [...] Ah! que' filosofi che hanno evangelizzato le umane virtù, la probità naturale, la reciproca benevolenza — sono inavvedutamente apostoli degli astuti, ed adescano quelle poche anime ingenuie e bollenti le quali amando schiettamente gli uomini per l'ardore di essere riamate, saranno sempre vittime tardi pentite della loro leale credulità.<sup>113</sup>

Foscolo recalls here the thought of Machiavelli and Hobbes, theorists of men's innate tendency toward violence and abuse of power. Italy's political humiliation was such that Foscolo refused here the entire tradition of thought about natural law ('filosofi che hanno evangelizzato le umane virtù') and the related description of man as a naturally social being, as well as the Rousseauian myth of the natural goodness of man. Immediately after the betrayal of Napoleon, history seemed to him a chaotic fight of opposing violent forces.

This was probably the moment when Foscolo read Vico for the first time, probably through the mediation of Neapolitan expatriates. In particular, Foscolo was an intimate friend of Lomonaco, who is believed to have introduced Foscolo to Vico's works.<sup>114</sup> Glauco Cambon has suggested that reading Vico represented for the disenchanted Foscolo, at this point, a way of escaping from this extremely pessimistic viewpoint and a possibility for constructive action.<sup>115</sup>

Cambon's point is reinforced by the fact that in the same year (1802), Lomonaco published his *Vite degli eccellenti italiani*, a work whose opening reflects the same perspective. Lomonaco, too, seems to read a message of hope for the nation in Vico's theory of cyclical recourse: history is oriented towards a cyclical restoration of 'ordine' against chaos ('disordine'):

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<sup>113</sup> Foscolo, *Jacopo Ortis*, p. 257.

<sup>114</sup> Mario Fubini, *Ortis e Didimo. Ricerche e interpretazioni foscoliane* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1963), p. 99.

<sup>115</sup> Cambon, *Vico e Foscolo*, p. 340.

Gran tempo è che noi [Italiani] siamo scaduti dall'antico splendore [...].  
Ma per eterna legge della natura, le cose tutte di questo mondo  
dall'ordine inabissano nel disordine, e dal disordine all'ordine  
risalgono...<sup>116</sup>

According to Cambon's interpretation, Vico's theoretical framework was, for Foscolo, the necessary mediation between optimistic naturalism, which the writer rejected as misleading, and pessimistic naturalism. However, Vico did not provide a mere consolatory framework: in fact, Foscolo could also find in Vico that man has an original feral nature, which tends to resurface cyclically in what Vico calls 'barbarie ritornata'. Yet, according to Vico, it is also possible to overcome our animal instincts and to sublimate them; religion, *pietas* and respect for institutions are key to the reconstruction of civilization, and literature and poetry are the means through which civilization should be fostered.<sup>117</sup>

It is therefore possible to identify Vico as the backbone of Foscolo's subsequent production, which is characterized by a reflection on the sphere of origins: *Dell'origine e dell'ufficio della letteratura* (1809), *Sull'origine e i limiti della giustizia* (1809), *Origini e vicissitudini della lingua italiana* (1823), not to mention the works on Dante and Homer (*Intorno alla traduzione dei primi due canti dell'Odissea* and *Discorso on the Divine Comedy*, 1825). For Foscolo, as for Vico, a return to the origins of things meant questioning their significance: 'stimo che le origini delle cose [...] palesino a quali uffici ogni cosa fu a principio ordinata nella economia dell'universo',<sup>118</sup> he wrote in 1809, paraphrasing the fourteenth axiom ('degnità') of the *New Science*: 'natura di cose altro non è che nascimento di esse in certi tempi e con certe guise' (*NS*, § 147).

The *New Science* played an important role in the conception of Foscolo's *Dei sepolcri* (1807), a poem dedicated to the civil role of tombs as clusters of

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<sup>116</sup> Lomonaco, *Vite*, p. 2.

<sup>117</sup> Battistini, 'Temi vichiani nei "Sepolcri"', p. 41.

<sup>118</sup> Ugo Foscolo, *Dell'origine e dell'ufficio della letteratura*, ed. by Enzo Neppi (Florence: Olschki, 2005), p. 5.

collective memories. Foscolo's elaboration of this theme owes much to Vico's theorization (*NS*, § 12 and *passim*), connecting the practice of burial, and then of marriage, justice and religion, with the origins of civilization. Indeed, Vico explained that, after marriage, which was designed by divine Providence to channel the bodily and sexual instincts of primitive men, burial is the second human behaviour to be institutionalized ('la seconda delle cose umane', *NS*; § 12); that is to say, the action that characterizes men as being human, and having developed respect and religious feelings.

This concept is easily recognizable in Foscolo's text:

Dal dì che nozze, tribunali ed are  
dier alle umane belve esser pietose  
di sé stesse e d'altrui, toglieano i vivi  
all'etere maligno ed alle fere  
I miserandi avanzi che Natura  
con veci eterne a sensi altri destina.  
Testimonianza a'fasti eran le tombe,  
ed are a'figli; e uscian quindi i responsi  
de'domestici Lari, e fu temuto  
su la polve degli avi il giuramento:  
religion che con diversi riti  
le virtù patrie e la pietà congiunta  
tradussero per lungo ordine d'anni.

*Dei sepolcri*, ll. 91-103

While Cuoco's 'vichismo' consists mainly in his peculiar approach to history and tradition, Foscolo's is strongly philosophical. He builds on the argument that the word *humanitas*, according to Vico, comes from the Latin *humare*, to bury (*NS*, §§ 12, 537): this etymology implies that the care of the dead is what distinguishes human in the first stages of civilization from beasts (*NS*, § 337). It is hence possible to say that Vico taught Foscolo that civilization and

commemorating the dead are intrinsically connected; memory and respect for the past are key to protecting societies against violence and disaggregation.<sup>119</sup> *Dei sepolcri* thus makes it clear that Vico was a source for Foscolo in the individuation of features guaranteeing the resistance of communities, in reaction to the political events which had shattered them. As Joseph Luzzi states, the 'memory of the dead is a socially conditioned ethos designed to strengthen the ties that bind'.<sup>120</sup>

*Dei sepolcri* is also a crucial text for the dissemination of a *pantheon* of national heroes. The poem (ll. 151-212) praises the 'itale glorie' whose tombs are preserved in the Florentine church of Santa Croce: Michelangelo, Galilei, Machiavelli, Alfieri, as well as Dante and Petrarch. As Anne O'Connor has argued,<sup>121</sup> through Foscolo's lyrical celebration Santa Croce became a *lieu de mémoire*:<sup>122</sup> a collective reference point for reflecting on national identity and Italian-ness. *I sepolcri* shared, at least in part, Cuoco and Lomonaco's aforementioned aims: it delineated and fostered a collective national identity through the recollection of exemplary figures ('gli eccellenti italiani', 'i capitani d'Italia') and a search for the roots of Italian-ness. Additionally, sepulchres had a political function: that of encouraging emulation ('animare l'emulazione politica degli italiani con gli esempi delle nazioni che onorano la memoria e i sepolcri degli uomini grandi').<sup>123</sup> It is likely that these cultural tensions had a common root in the shared reading of Vico: specifically, in those passages of the *New Science* in which Vico examines the role of devotion to heroes (*NS*, § 774-78) in the

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<sup>119</sup> See Battistini, 'Temi vichiani nei "Sepolcri"', for an accurate analysis of the textual references to Vico in the poem.

<sup>120</sup> Joseph Luzzi, *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 7.

<sup>121</sup> Anne O'Connor, *Firenze. La città e la memoria nell'Ottocento* (Florence: Città di Vita, 2008), pp. 23-39.

<sup>122</sup> O'Connor borrows the definition of *lieu de mémoire* from the works of the historian Pierre Nora. As Nora explains, in fact, 'un objet devient lieu de mémoire quand il échappe à l'oubli [...] et quand une collectivité le réinvestit de son affect et de ses émotions'. Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992), II, 7.

<sup>123</sup> Ugo Foscolo, 'Lettera a Monsieur Guill... su la sua incompetenza a giudicare i poeti italiani', in *Scritti letterari e politici dal 1706 al 1808*, ed. by Giovanni Gambarin (Florence: Le Monnier, 1972), p. 518.

construction of local identities in the ancient world, and the foundational role of ‘eroi politici’, like Heracles (on this point, see also the Conclusion of this work).

Foscolo’s ‘vichismo’ took yet another turn: his theories about literature also have traces of series of Vico-related ideas. This may have been due to the mediation of Foscolo’s Venetian tutor, Cesarotti. In 1803, just one year after the novel *Jacopo Ortis*, Foscolo published a translation and commentary of Callimachus’ elegy known as ‘La chioma di Berenice’. He accompanied his translation with a series of introductory notes, the fourth of which – *Discorso quarto. Della ragion poetica di Callimaco* – developed Vico’s ideas on ancient poetry. In fact, Foscolo described it as absolutely different from modern poetry and not imitable in its inner nature. Ancient poetry depended directly on religion:

Fortunati dunque que’ popoli a’ quali toccava in sorte una religione che a tutte le umane necessità, a tutti gli eventi naturali assegnava un Iddio. Così il sapere, il coraggio, l’amore, l’aere, la terra, le cose insomma tutte quante erano in tutela di un nume lor proprio che avea propria storia e proprie forme. Così i benefattori degli uomini venivano coll’andare degli anni ascritti al coro de’ celesti. Così i poeti traeano da tutti i più astratti pensieri allegorie e pitture sensibili più de’ sillogismi e de’ numeri preste a persuadere: quello più doma e vince le menti che più percuote i sensi.<sup>124</sup>

Compared to ancient poetry, modern poetry is ‘vòto sono e lusso letterario’:

(pur troppo!) la nostra poesia non può avere nè lo scopo nè i mezzi de’ greci e delle nazioni magnanime; perocchè non potendole conferire le moderne religioni, nè il sistema algebraico de’ presenti governi, poco può ella conferire alla politica.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ugo Foscolo, ‘La chioma di Berenice. Poema di Callimaco tradotto da Valerio Catullo, volgarizzato ed illustrato da Ugo Foscolo’, in *Scritti letterari e politici*, 267- 447 (p. 303).

<sup>125</sup> Foscolo, ‘La chioma di Berenice’, p. 306.

The text is largely inspired by Foscolo's reading of the *New Science*, both in its conceptual framework and its lexicon: the theorization of the 'poeti teologi', and the idea that divination and poetical production are interconnected, depend entirely on Vico's theorization. In particular, Foscolo probably remembered paragraph 381 of the *New Science*, in which Vico explains that ancient poets ("poeti teologi", ovvero sapienti che s'intendevano del parlar degli dèi) were called 'divine' in the sense of the Latin word *divinari* (to interpret, to foresee): 'la quale scienza [i.e. divination] fu detta "musa", diffinitaci [...] da Omero la scienza del bene e del male'. Other ideas borrowed from Vico include the peculiarity of ancient religion, which bestowed the cause of natural events to the action of a god ('a tutti gli eventi naturali assegnava un dio', *NS*, § 402), and Foscolo's characterization of ancient men as 'magnanimi': strength, vigour and magnanimity are the 'virtù dell'età dell'oro' (*NS*, § 516 and *passim*).

In the *Discorso quarto*, Foscolo also identified a problem that would obsess subsequent generations: the issue of the social function of poetry. This function was guaranteed by poetry's original religious nature, and consequently by its connection with belief.<sup>126</sup> As Vico argued: 'tale generazione della poesia ci è finalmente confermata da questa sua eterna proprietà: che la di lei propria materia è l'impossibile credibile' (*NS*, § 383). Additionally, Foscolo highlighted the loss of the social value of poetry: according to Foscolo, this development would be due to abstract reasoning and 'il sistema algebrico dei governi'.<sup>127</sup> Similarly, Vico had blamed abstract reasoning for causing the loss of imaginative resources (*NS* § 388).<sup>128</sup> Finally, Foscolo emphasized the lack of proper poetry in contemporary Italian society: modern poetry lacked scope and a means to acquire the function it had in ancient societies.<sup>129</sup> *La chioma di Berenice* is therefore a key

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<sup>126</sup> See also Renata Cotrone, 'Ugo Foscolo: "immanenza" e "rappresentazione" del "sacro" nel commento alla *Chioma di Berenice*', *Critica letteraria*, 2: 4 (2001), 761-74.

<sup>127</sup> Foscolo, 'La chioma di Berenice', p. 306.

<sup>128</sup> See Section 3. 1 of this dissertation.

<sup>129</sup> In the essay on Lucretius, Foscolo wrote that true poets are 'que' pochi primitivi di tutte le nazioni che la teologia, e la politica, e la storia dettavano co'lor poemi alle nazioni; onde Omeri, e i Profeti Ebrei, e Dante Allighieri, e Shakespeare sono da locarsi ne' primi seggi'. While Italians 'ove si guardi allo scopo vero e primo della poesia, non solo non hanno (ove pochissimi ne traggi)

text because it extracts from the *New Science* a problematic nexus concerning the meaning of literature and the opposition between ancient and modern poetry, and proposed it to Foscolo's audience.<sup>130</sup> The 'open' nature of this text, which emphasizes a cluster of problems but does not offer a clear and evident solution, contributed to starting the debate on these topics.

The introductory notes to the translation also pose a new problem that would recur later in Bourbon Restoration Italy: the problematization of the traditional notion of philology. In the *Discorso primo: editori, interpreti e traduttori*, Foscolo complains that previous editors of the poem had lingered over pedantic annotations: 'tutti sono filologi [...], niuno filosofo'.<sup>131</sup> Instead, Foscolo aimed to be both philosopher and philologist in his commentary, following Vico's example. Vico himself had explained that his method filled gaps in previous scholarship: up to the *New Science*, in fact, philosophers 'non accertarono le loro ragioni con l'autorità de' filologi', and philologists 'non curarono d'avverare le loro autorità con la ragion de' filosofi; lo che se avessero fatto, sarebbero stati più utili' (*NS*, § 140). By applying Vico's method, Foscolo aimed to introduce a new way of approaching the Classic texts as an alternative to the established approach of learned men: 'non intendo parlare a' dotti, bensì a que' che tentassero nuova strada di studiare i Classici.'<sup>132</sup>

Rethinking the scholarly approach to ancient literature leads to questioning the pattern of imitation of the ancients based on their exemplarity and reproducibility, what it is now called Classicism.<sup>133</sup> Vico represented for Foscolo a model for understanding the ancient world going beyond the concept of

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né la storia, né la morale, né la politica descritta dalla nazione; ma nè adombrato il genio ed i costumi del tempo'. Ugo Foscolo, 'Della poesia, dei tempi e della religione di Lucrezio', in *Scritti letterari e politici*, pp. 237-250, on pp. 240-241.

<sup>130</sup> See Del Vento, *Un allievo della rivoluzione*, pp. 212-17.

<sup>131</sup> Foscolo, 'La chioma di Berenice', p. 281.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> See Del Vento, *Un allievo della rivoluzione*, p. 178.

'Classic': Foscolo called it 'vedere il midollo'<sup>134</sup> of ancient literature and history.<sup>135</sup>

All these tensions find a synthesis in the *Orazione sopra l'origine e l'ufficio della letteratura*, a public oration that Foscolo delivered at the opening of the academic year at the University of Pavia in 1809. In this text, again, the original *principium* ('origine') and the scope ('ufficio') of creative production are superimposed. Foscolo explores the remote origins of language to conclude that literature has an intrinsic civic role; its absence would cause civilization to regress into a feral state: 'senza la facoltà della parola le potenze mentali dell'uomo giacerebbero inerti e mortificate, ed egli, privo di mezzi di comunicazione necessari allo stato progressivo di guerra e di società, confonderebbersi con le fiere'.<sup>136</sup> With subtle references to the *New Science*, Foscolo describes ancient literature and mythology as an instrument of education and social control: 'Lino and Orfeo' (figures of the 'poeti teologi' described by Vico), with their songs, taught the principles of religion and law, admonished and terrified the listeners, but also fostered heroism and military valour.<sup>137</sup>

The historical account of the origins of literature immediately resulted in a project: in the conclusion of the oration, Foscolo heartily encouraged his fellow citizens to nurture national literature, in particular the 'storie', that is to say historical narration. This discipline, he thought, ought to have the same role in aggregating communities that once belonged to rhetoric ('volgetevi alle vostre biblioteche [...]. Io vi esorto alle storie, perché angusta è l'arena degli oratori').<sup>138</sup> In this final exhortation it is impossible not to notice Foscolo's nostalgia for ancient epic narration, and its original function of maintaining and transmitting a people's cultural heritage. Foscolo projected onto contemporary Italians the image of the ancient listeners of Homeric songs, who cultivated their identity and their sense of belonging through the transmission of memory. Foscolo's insistence on

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<sup>134</sup> Foscolo, 'La chioma di Berenice', p. 420.

<sup>135</sup> Del Vento, *Un allievo della rivoluzione*, p. 195. See also Roberto Cardini, 'A proposito del commento foscoliano alla "Chioma di Berenice"', *Lettere italiane*, 33:3 (1981), 329-50.

<sup>136</sup> Foscolo, *Dell'origine e dell'ufficio della letteratura*, p. 118.

<sup>137</sup> Foscolo, *Dell'origine e dell'ufficio della letteratura*, pp. 121-22.

<sup>138</sup> Foscolo, *Dell'origine e dell'ufficio della letteratura*, pp. 142 and 144.

Italy and his frequent references to his fellow citizens (the words ‘Italia’ and ‘Italiani’ are repeated more than twenty times), characterize this text as a project for future Italian literature, with a strong sense of political and ethical commitment.<sup>139</sup>

Foscolo is thus a key figure in individuating a series of key conceptual nexuses from Vico’s text concerning the nature and the function of poetry in Napoleonic Italy, and in transmitting these issues in the following decades. Foscolo’s mediation of Vico’s message generated a series of Vico-related myths that would have a long afterlife in Bourbon Restoration Italy. First of all, he drew the attention of his audience to the notions of philology, of poetry and of rhetoric, identifying a fracture between the world of the ‘dotti’ and the ‘retori’ and the existence of a new audience, that needed an updated approach to classical literature. Secondly, he affirmed the need to adapt literature to the history of nations,<sup>140</sup> undermining the concept itself of imitation that had characterized Classicist poetics. Moreover, Foscolo was attracted by Vico’s theorization of poetry as *poiesis*, creation: his etymology is certainly not new, but in Vico this idea is linked to that of a literature capable of (re)establishing civilization (“poeti”[...] che lo stesso in greco suona che “creatori””, *NS*, § 376). Therefore, it has a political and social role: poet-theologians, in fact, like Orpheus, Anfione, Linus, Musaeus, and others, were at the same time poets and interpreters of the divine will (‘col cantare alle plebi greche la forza degli dèi negli auspici [...] tennero esse plebi in ossequio dei loro ordini eroici’, *NS*, § 661). In accordance with this principle Foscolo highlighted the need to revive literature to ensure its constructive role, and the consequent need for a stronger link between literature and the sphere of morality. This strain of thought would find an echo among Vico’s readers for a long time.

To sum up, Cuoco and Foscolo epitomize a significant reaction to reading Vico during the Napoleonic years. Unexpected changes in the organization of

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<sup>139</sup> See Claudio Marchiori, *Sulle fonti dell’“Orazione inaugurale” del Foscolo* (Genoa: Tilgher, 1992), 59-90, and Enzo Neppi’s notes to Foscolo, *Dell’origine e dell’ufficio della letteratura*, for a detailed analysis of the references to Vico in this text.

<sup>140</sup> See Del Vento, p. 185-6.

power generated confusion and displacement, to which both of them reacted by resorting to Vico's example. On the one hand, Vico's historical account helped Cuoco put the revolutionary events into perspective, and find a possible reason for their failure. On the other hand, both Cuoco and Foscolo looked back to the sphere of origins – of the national community for Cuoco, of literature, poetry and civilization for Foscolo – as they sought an original, fundamental principle. Both of them conveyed their efforts in writings that have a strong educational and patriotic dimension. Finally, they both searched for a new audience, namely the bourgeoisie ('la classe più sensata' for Cuoco, 'que'cittadini collocati dalla fortuna tra l'idiota e il letterato' for Foscolo).

In this way, we can define the nucleus of post-revolutionary 'vichismo' in Lombardy, as the focus on the principles that originally established societies and that could potentially re-establish the Italian community after major political controversies, that I have highlighted in Cuoco, Lomonaco and Foscolo's works. As the following chapters will make clear, the obsession with the sphere of principles would characterize several areas of Bourbon Restoration Italian culture.

## CHAPTER 2

### MILAN

#### **Classicism and Romanticism, Tradition and Innovation, History and Philology (1808-1827)**

The first third of the nineteenth century was an age of conflict within the Italian cultural scene. In fact, polemics about Italian identity, the country's national canon, and its political destiny were interconnected with and complicated by ideological issues. Conflicts over the sphere of literature, the national canon, and the relationship with tradition climaxed during the so-called Classicist-Romantic quarrel, but implied controversies on similar topics can also be found elsewhere, in private as well as public writings. Polemics about these topics testify to the power of Vico's writings, which were present either implicitly or explicitly.

Examples taken from the texts that have been ascribed to the Classicist-Romantic quarrel show how Vico's ideas could take on different and even opposite meanings as they travelled along the oblique paths of interpretation. In fact, Vico's ideas were fragmented into a variety of sub-themes, which rotated around three different points: firstly, an opposition between ancient and modern that sometimes took the shape of an opposition between belief and incredulity, sometimes that of a dichotomy ignorance/knowledge; secondly, a contrast between naturalness and historicity; finally, the ambiguity of the notion of 'philology' and its function in the exploration of the past.

After considering the general frame of the quarrel (Section 2. 1), this chapter will focus on the debate between the 'Classicist', conservative Pietro Giordani and the modern 'Romantic' Pietro Borsieri (Section 2. 2). This will allow us to go beyond the limits of the quarrel, exploring conflicts involving Vico

that affected personal, ethical, and ideological issues. Most of the texts analysed have an interdiscursive relationship with Leopardi's. In fact, the Classicist-Romantic quarrel was one of the most relevant cultural references for the young poet: in most cases, Leopardi took a clear stance in these controversies in his private writings. The analysis carried out in this chapter sheds new light on Leopardi's positions and opinions, showing how Vico-related conflicts could not fail to affect Leopardi in his isolated Recanati. I will explain how Vico's readers in the Classicist-Romantic quarrel manipulated his message and adapted it to the current debates. By so doing, they produced a diffraction of Vico-related themes. Therefore, Leopardi's works of this period, which are analysed in both this and the subsequent chapter, responded indirectly to Vico-related tensions, even if the poet might not have read Vico's works. Specifically, Vico's legacy was claimed with equal energy from both sides of the quarrel, to demonstrate opposite arguments – the everlasting validity of Classicist poetry and its old-fashionness. Leopardi, by taking a stance in favour of the Classicist faction, inadvertently used Vico-related arguments to sustain his positions (see Section 2. 1).

The texts analysed in this chapter have been selected from material related directly to the Classicist-Romantic quarrel; they are consequently for the most part composed between 1816 and 1827, and comprise both published and unpublished writings (except for the isolated episode of the Piedmontese Jacopo Durandi, which anticipated the main themes of the quarrel: see Section 2. 1). Although they were written in different Italian cities, most of them were published, or prepared for publication, in a series of Milanese journals – such as *Il conciliatore* and the *Biblioteca italiana* – which became a reference point for the Italian intellectuals of that age.<sup>1</sup> In different ways, these texts tried to define the guidelines for an Italian modern literature, to negotiate a national canon and to individuate a model of the ideal Italian writer.

This chapter is only apparently author-centered. In fact, the 'Vico legacy' it explores has little to do with the author of the *New Science*; 'Vico' stands rather for a highly problematic nexus of ideas and tensions which were connected to

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<sup>1</sup> Ravesi, 'La polemica Classico-Romantica in Italia', p. 14.

Vico only obliquely; this presence, as anticipated in the Introduction, was among the obsessions which crossed the culture of the Bourbon Restoration in Italy. Vico's name, ideas, and keywords were vehicles for ideologies which attributed value and authority to certain discourses, and denied it to others. In this frame, the *New Science* appears then as a highly ambiguous textual object, inspiring new literary myths.

### 2. 1. Was Vico 'Classicist' or 'Romantic'?

Scholars have stressed that Vico's work did not come as a shock to his new readers in northern Italy during the Napoleonic sovereignty; but rather was smoothly inserted into contemporary cultural and philosophical trends.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, a detailed analysis of the recurrence of Vico's name and Vico-related keywords in the cultural debates of those years, particularly the Classicist-Romantic quarrel, suggests a different picture. Fabio Camilletti has demonstrated that this debate was much more than a quarrel about aesthetics, a struggle of the post-revolutionary generation to find a renewed approach to literature.<sup>3</sup> The analysis provided in this chapter demonstrates that there is no doubt that the figure of Vico, through the mediation of his nineteenth-century readers, was placed on the side of modernity, of renovation. Therefore, he rapidly became a symbol of progress, possibly arousing suspicion in more conservative thinkers such as Monti, Zajotti, Giordani, who felt that Italian culture had no need to be renewed, preferring instead restoration and recovery of tradition.

Undoubtedly, Vico's thought contributed to a redefinition of poetry; in fact, the *New Science* eroded the notion of literary authority, which was the constant point of reference of traditional 'classicist' poetry. The role of the author was reshaped and relativized by Vico's reflections, that examine poetical language first of all as a spontaneous phenomenon emerging out of specific historical and cultural contexts. In *NS* 780-914, Vico demonstrated that the ancient author par

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<sup>2</sup> Cospito, *Il gran Vico*, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Camilletti, *Classicism and Romanticism*.

excellence, Homer, was not an individual, but a symbolic feature standing for an entire tradition of poetic production.<sup>4</sup>

Vico was probably aware from the beginning that his arguments had the effect of conveying a completely new idea of what poetry was and how it had developed and changed over time. This was already evident in his lyric ‘Origini, progresso e caduta della poesia’ (1723), written immediately before the publication of the first version of the *New Science*. This text is a narration of the history of poetry that follows the principles of the philosophical explanation that Vico would later provide in his philosophical writings. As is evident from the title, Vico viewed the problem of poetry as a historical one: for Vico, the act of producing poetry originated in a precise moment, progressed and finally came to an end.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, ancient poetry had a divine origin (‘fresca origin diva’): as he would explain as early as the first version of the *New Science* (published 1725; he would reassess this in the 1730 and 1744 versions), poetry had in fact its roots in theology.<sup>6</sup> The function of poetry was to inspire and celebrate the deeds of heroes, inspiring sublime and magnanimous thoughts: ‘destò nè’ lor ben generosi petti [i.e., in those of primitive men] pensier tutti magnanimi e sublimi’ (ll. 11-12). Replicating this kind of phenomenon in modern times (‘tai divine imagini e sì vaste’), however, was presented as extremely difficult (‘imitarle dispera umano stile’, ll. 15-16).

Or le somme laudi, onde si ornaro  
a’ prischi tempi giusti i sommi numi,  
le magnanime donne e i forti eroi,

<sup>4</sup> Franco Musarra, ‘Tra l’assioma e il frammento: alcune modalità romantiche nella “Scienza Nuova” di G. Vico’, in *Giambattista Vico e l’enciclopedia dei saperi*, ed. by Andrea Battistini, and Pasquale Guaragnella (Lecce: Pensa Multimedia, 2007), pp. 105-40 (p. 139).

<sup>5</sup> Croce and Niccolini had an interesting lapsus in the editing of this text, by entitling it ‘Origine, progresso e caduta della poesia italiana’. Although it is likely that the poem was inspired by the debates about poetry among Neapolitan academies, the poem seems to refer in general to poetry as an historical and transnational phenomenon. Giambattista Vico, *Opere*, ed. by Benedetto Croce and Fausto Nicolini, 8 vols (Bari, Laterza, 1929), V, 346. See Amedeo Quondam, ‘Il “lavorar canzoni” di Vico: la poesia nell’età della “ragione spiegata”’, *La rassegna della letteratura italiana*, 74:2-3 (1970), 298-332.

<sup>6</sup> Giambattista Vico, ‘Principij di Scienza nuova’ (1725), in *Opere*, II, 975-1222 (p. 1040).

or son maniere di laudar volgari,  
 quai maschere talor senza subbietto  
 di Diane, di Veneri e di Alcidi [...].

‘Origine, progresso e caduta della poesia’, ll. 190-95<sup>7</sup>

When writing these words, Vico had already devised his philosophical system: the first edition of the *New Science* would be published two years later. Already at this stage, for Vico, the history of poetry was, as his title suggests, the history of a decline: a fall from the sublime to the ordinary, from the authentic to the conventional. In particular, mythological symbols such as that of Diana or Venus or Hercules are now empty ‘maschere talor senza subbietto’, vague symbolic forms enchained in the repetitive model of the courtly ‘laude’ (l. 13). Vico seems to suggest here that the use of mythological images in poetry is improper and sadly repetitive out of the context in which they were born – an argument which he would later explore historically and philosophically. This is a consequence of what Eric Auerbach has called Vico’s ‘aesthetic historicism’, that is to say, the tendency to conceive the forms of expression within their original historical context.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the paradigm of historicity that Vico had conceptualized opened a fracture between the ancient and the modern, making the imitation of ancient models problematic, at the very least.

After its publication, the *New Science* sparked controversy;<sup>9</sup> but this specific aspect of Vico’s theories did not dominate early readers’ discussions. It would take time for these themes to resurface, which they did in a completely different context: in the first years of the nineteenth century, in what we now call the Classicist-Romantic quarrel.

This debate is normally described as starting with Madame de Staël’s letter to the *Biblioteca italiana* (January 1816). However, already in 1808 a writer from

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<sup>7</sup> Vico, *Opere*, I, 275. On this point, see Lollini, *Le muse, le maschere e il sublime*.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Auerbach, ‘Vico and Aesthetic Historicism’, in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), pp. 183-98.

<sup>9</sup> See Paolo Rossi, ‘Vico’, in *I classici italiani nella storia della critica*, ed. by Walter Binni, 2 vols (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1970), II., 3-39.

Piedmont, Jacopo Durandi, published his *Discorso intorno a' Geni della poesia e del canto*,<sup>10</sup> a text in which he expressed intolerance for the established poetical models. In fact, Durandi writes, 'dappoiché ammutoli quell'oracolo [di Delfi]', it is nonsensical to repeat the ancients' poetical style. Therefore,

[S]trana cosa dee parere che solamente i poeti di ogni nazione abbian voluto continuar a vivere in que'lontani secoli e paesi, e con vane illusioni e frasi ripetute a sazieta, e per una steril moda e servile imitazione, mantener vive delle idee, de'nomi e de'simboli per altro del tutto estranei al loro intendimento e ridicoli, e i quali nella sostanza non significavan quello ch'essi intendono farli significare.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, eight years before the recognized start of the Classicist-Romantic quarrel, Durandi expressed exasperation at the repetitiveness of academic Classicism. 'Lontani', 'non ben noti', 'estranei', are keywords that characterized the discourses about the progressive skepticism towards poetry as it was traditionally intended (just 'servile imitazione' to Durandi) and that circulated in Italy in the first years of the nineteenth century. Significantly, this semantic field reproduced a metaphor Descartes had used to define the otherness of ancient literature (Section 1. 1).

To the 'steril moda' of academic Classicism Durandi preferred the songs of Ossian:

un bell'esempio di quello dovettero essere a un di presso i poemi de' nostri e degli antichi barbari d'Europa [...]. Di fatto la fantasia viemmeglio commossa da tutto ciò ch'è più strano, salvatico, maraviglioso, è tanto più colpita dall'orrore e dalla solitudine e bizzarria de' luoghi stessi'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jacopo Durandi, *Idilj e Discorso intorno a' Geni della poesia e del canto venerati dai nostri antichi come dai greci Apollo e le Muse* (Turin: Saverio Fontana, 1808). On the poetical theories of Jacopo Durandi see Francesco Lucioli, 'Scrittura e riscrittura nella poesia di Jacopo Durandi', in *Atti e memorie dell'Arcadia*, 1 (2012), pp. 187-217.

<sup>11</sup> Durandi, *Discorso*, p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> Durandi, *Discorso*, p. 51..

It is likely that this reading of Ossian was probably inspired by Cesarotti's widespread translation and commentary: as mentioned above (Section 1. 2), in fact, Cesarotti had used Vico's principles to make sense of the specific features of this ancient and unrefined poetry. Nonetheless, Durandi did not propose that Italian poets imitate Ossian, but that they find an Italian way of writing poetry: 'se restassero ancora a scegliersi il monte su cui stabilir la reggia di Apollo e delle Muse', he would have chosen 'le nostre e tante altre montagne d'Italia', or at the very least the mountains of 'altre province d'Europa'.<sup>13</sup>

The presence of Vico-related ideas in this text is evident.<sup>14</sup> Durandi reassessed Vico's idea that it is impossible to reconstruct completely the mind of the ancients (*NS*, § 378); that the first men produced poetry thanks to their fertile imagination: for Vico, they felt in fact strong feelings ('con animo perturbato e commosso', *NS*, § 218), due to the fear and marvel that they experienced when observing natural phenomena (*NS*, § 377 and *passim*). Additionally, Durandi's image of the mountains inhabited by the gods, an original of belief of primitive men, may have its origins in the *New Science* (*NS*, § 4); lastly, Durandi's opinions about the ancient Italian peoples and their mythologies may have come from Vico's *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia*, the theories of which were used a few years before by Vincenzo Cuoco in his *Platone in Italia* to rediscover a remote Italy whose culture had been forgotten (Section 1. 3).<sup>15</sup>

Durandi may have read Vico thanks to the mediation of the Piedmontese abbot Tommaso Valperga di Caluso (1737-1815), who was believed to have introduced Vico's philosophy in Piedmont after a journey to Naples. Scholars have debated whether Caluso's arguments about poetry, expressed in the treatise *Della poesia libri tre* (1806), can be interpreted as an example of Vico's

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<sup>13</sup> Durandi, *Discorso*, p. 55.

<sup>14</sup> See Carlo Calcaterra, *Le adunanze della "Patria società letteraria"* (Turin: SEI, 1943), p. 161-62 nota 2, and Luciola, *Scrittura e riscrittura*, p. 190.

<sup>15</sup> About the myth of ancient Italics and the fashion of 'Etruscheria' see Pietro Treves, 'Introduzione' to *Lo studio dell'antichità Classica nell'Ottocento* (Milan: Ricciardi, 1962), pp. VII-XL.

reception.<sup>16</sup> While a direct influence of Vico is still unclear, it is possible to say that Caluso's treatise is another example of a reflection on poetry that acknowledged a radical difference between ancient and modern: for Caluso, the fundamental difference between the two is the self-consciousness of the modern artist, compared to the spontaneity of the ancient one.<sup>17</sup> In addition, he started a discussion on the 'consuetudini' of poetry, and the necessity to adapt them to one's times.<sup>18</sup> Some of his pupils, like the 'Romantic' Ludovico Breme, would later remember Caluso's considerations.<sup>19</sup>

Durandi's *Discorso* is a good example of how reading Vico, already in the first years of the nineteenth century, could result in contesting aesthetical theories that had been dominant up to that moment, searching for new poetics. It is also an example of an acquisition of critical views towards the ancient world, which is no longer considered a repertoire of lyrical images and themes characterised by an obvious symbolic nature. A few years later, the interpretation of this particular aspect of Vico's thought would become crucial in the Classicist-Romantic quarrel.

Vico's thought spread in Italy precisely during the quarrel. After the 1801 edition sponsored by the Neapolitan expatriates (Section 1. 3) the *New Science* was reprinted a second time in Milan in 1816.<sup>20</sup> One year later, for the first time Vico's *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia* was published in Italian,<sup>21</sup> and the Neapolitan philosopher Cataldo Jannelli (1781-1848: see also Section 4. 1) printed his *Cenni sulla necessità e la natura della scienza delle cose umane*. Largely inspired by Vico, this work was greeted with an enthusiastic review in the

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<sup>16</sup> Carlo Calcaterra, 'Il Caluso e i Romantici', in *Il Barocco in Arcadia e altri scritti sul Settecento* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1950), pp. 435-62; Carlo Calcaterra, 'Nota calusiana', in *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*, 127 (1950), 305-315; Mario Fubini, 'L'abate di Caluso e il Vico', in *Stile e umanità di Giambattista Vico*, second edition (Milan-Naples: Ricciardi, 1965), pp. 214-18; Marco Cerruti, *La ragione felice e altri miti del Settecento* (Florence: Olschki, 1973), pp. 13-120.

<sup>17</sup> Tommaso Valperga di Caluso, *Della poesia libri tre* (Turin: Giovanni Giossi, 1806), p. 73.

<sup>18</sup> The last volume of the book is dedicated to lyrical 'consuetudini' (pp. 166-248).

<sup>19</sup> See Ludovico Breme, *Lettere*, ed. by Piero Camporesi (Turin: Einaudi, 1966), p. VII.

<sup>20</sup> Giambattista Vico, *Principj di scienza nuova d'intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni colla vita dell'autore scritta da lui medesimo*, 3 vols (Milan: Giovanni Silvestri, 1816).

<sup>21</sup> Giambattista Vico, *Della antichissima sapienza degli'italiani tratta da'latini parlari* (Naples: Nunzio Pasca, 1817).

*Biblioteca italiana*.<sup>22</sup> Between 1817 and 1818, in Naples, new editions of Vico's main works were published.<sup>23</sup> Thanks to this resurgence of interest, Vico's name circulated again after what had been perceived as a long oblivion.<sup>24</sup> Foreign readers applauded these initiatives:

Depuis cette époque [the period 1811-1816], les œuvres, les idées et les hypothèses de Vico, semblent renaître et se répandre de plus en plus. [...] Ne dirait-on pas que les Italiens [...] cherchent, quoiqu'un peu tard, à réparer le tort que la plupart de leurs prédécesseurs avaient fait à Vico qu'ils avaient presque entièrement oublié?<sup>25</sup>

It would appear that these years were recognized even at the time as key in the rediscovery of Vico in Italy. In fact, in that period Vico's figure transformed itself into a symbol of Italian cultural superiority. Not only had the Neapolitan expatriates (see Section 1. 3) disseminated Vico's theories in northern Italy, but they had also inserted Vico into the whole nation's collective memory. Therefore, Vico was finally part of the Italian 'comunità di discendenza'<sup>26</sup> as a representative of the national philosophical tradition; he had become a symbol of Italian identity and a figure of a modern Italy, admired and imitated abroad. The 'novelty' of

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<sup>22</sup> Tomo XI, September 1818, pp. 239-306; tomo XII, October 1818, pp. 3-19. On Jannelli see Section 4. 1. See also Rossella Abbaticchio, "Non v'è nano che non sia amico di un gigante". Presenza di Vico tra "Il Caffè" e la "Biblioteca italiana", in *Giambattista Vico e l'enciclopedia dei saperi*, ed. by Battistini and Guaragnella, pp. 575-600.

<sup>23</sup> Giambattista Vico, *Principj di una scienza nuova di Gio. Battista Vico, prima edizione pubblicata dall'autore il 1725, ed ora riprodotta ed annotata da Salvatore Gallotti G.C., della Società Pontaniana, e del Reale Istituto d'Incoraggiamento* (Naples: Tipografia Masi, 1817); Giambattista Vico, *Opuscoli di Giovanni Battista Vico, raccolti e pubblicati da Carlantonio de Rosa marchese di Villanova* (Naples: Porcelli, 1818).

<sup>24</sup> Benedetto Croce (*Bibliografia vichiana*, 1, p. 224) attributed most of the responsibility of the diffusion of Vico's texts in northern Italy to the Neapolitan expatriates. Recent studies, as mentioned in Section 1. 3, have demonstrated that Vico's philosophy was more widespread in northern Italy than previously believed. The text quoted shows that, even if it was not true, the perception of contemporaries was that Vico had resurfaced after a long while.

<sup>25</sup> 'Nouvelles littéraires et scientifiques. Italie', *Revue encyclopédique, ou Analyse raisonnée des productions les plus remarquables dans la littérature*, n. 2 (April 1819), 540-42 (p. 540). See the translated version in *Il conciliatore* n. 102, 22 agosto 1819, now in *Il conciliatore. Foglio scientifico-letterario*, ed. by Vittore Branca, 3 vols (Florence: Le Monnier, 1953-65), III, 229-30.

<sup>26</sup> Banti, *Sublime madre nostra*, p. 15.

Vico was interpreted in different ways, as the examples provided over the following pages evidence: either in the sense of continuity (Vico guaranteed the validity of Italy's tradition, so Italians needed only to follow the path he had indicated), or in the sense of renovation (now that Vico had been rediscovered, the Italian tradition needed to be completely rethought). The difference is subtle but fundamental, and it explains why Vico's authority was claimed by both the warring factions of both the Classicists and the Romantics.<sup>27</sup>

This was the general frame of ideas into which Madame de Staël's article, 'Della maniera e utilità delle traduzioni' (*Biblioteca Italiana*, I, January 1816), erupted. Staël encouraged Italians to 'tradurre assai delle recenti poesie francesi e tedesche', that is to say, to get to know the new Romantic poetry, and to abandon the practice of writing poetry inspired by Graeco-Roman models. To soften her argument, she praised the value of translations from ancient languages. In particular, she paid tribute to the recent Monti and Voss's translations of Homer, which, for Staël, made the ancient poet a 'concittadino' of modern readers.<sup>28</sup> As she developed her argument, Staël briefly mentioned Friedrich August Wolf's studies on the Homeric question. This section is no more than a digression, but it was to this point that 'Classicist' writer Carlo Giuseppe Londonio (1780- 1845) objected:

madama, spacciandoci con un'aria di novità [Wolf's opinions] [...] ignora o mostra d'ignorare che una tale opinione fu già [...] sostenuta dal nostro Vico in que' suoi dottissimi e profondissimi *Principj di scienza nuova*. Ed ecco come gli stranieri accusan poi di sterilità la nostra letteratura!<sup>29</sup>

The *New Science* is presented by Londonio as a proof of the fact that Italian culture had already been renovated by Vico; that Italy not only took part in the

<sup>27</sup> On this ambiguity, see also Giovanna Scianatico, *La questione neoclassica*, p. 38-39.

<sup>28</sup> Anne Louise Germaine Necker De Stael, 'Della maniera e l'utilità delle traduzioni', in *Discussioni e polemiche sul Romanticismo*, ed. by Egidio Bellorini, 2 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1943) I, 3-9 (p. 6; henceforth DPR, followed by volume and page number, so DPR I, 6).

<sup>29</sup> Carlo Giuseppe Londonio, 'Risposta ai due discorsi di madama di Staël', DPR, I, 68-74 (p. 70 note 1).

renovation of the European cultural scene, but that Italian authors also anticipated it.<sup>30</sup> Londonio echoed one of the many articles by Cuoco which turned Vico into a forerunner of some issues that characterized European thinking of the time (see Section 1. 3). The Homeric question, first raised by Vico but divulged by Wolf is one of the most important examples of this. For Londonio, mentioning Vico as an example of a glorious Italian philosophical tradition fueled the Classicists' arguments. In fact, on the Classicistic side, Staël's opinions were mainly perceived as anti-Italian.

Another writer from the Classicistic side, Paride Zajotti (1793-1843), argued that Vico's legacy encouraged both renovation and continuity: in fact, he argued, it is not necessary to abandon the Classicist tradition, but to examine it in depth, and to make it easily accessible to the wider public. Italy, since it is Vico's homeland, is the nation destined to make this miracle happen: Vico was in fact 'un grande filosofo', who 'aperse la via a una nuova interpretazione delle parole greche'.<sup>31</sup> To Zajotti, then, Vico is the symbol of the Italian attitude towards antiquity, but also the *auctoritas* who can renew the outdated tradition in continuity with the past.

Vico's name was constantly evoked throughout the quarrel, as became evident in the nuanced position of Gian Domenico Romagnosi (1791-1835), a philosopher and jurist and a passionate reader of Vico.<sup>32</sup> In Romagnosi's article 'Della poesia considerata rispetto alle diverse età delle nazioni', Vico is not named, but we can be certain that Romagnosi's position is inspired by his texts. Romagnosi insisted that he rejected the labels 'Classic' and 'Romantic', definitions he declared to be misleading; he preferred to invent a new word and define himself to be 'ilichastico', that is to say 'adattato alle età':

io non sono né voglio essere né Romantico né Classico, ma adattato ai tempi e ai bisogno della ragione, del gusto e della morale. Quando piacesse

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<sup>30</sup> On this point see Camilletti, *Classicism and Romanticism*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Carla De Pascale, "Romagnosi, Gian Domenico", in *Il contributo italiano alla storia del Pensiero – Filosofia*, a.l.

di contrassegnare la poesia coi caratteri delle diverse età, parmi che dividere si potrebbe in teocratica, eroica e civile.<sup>33</sup>

Romagnosi slightly adapted the terminology used by Vico ('età degli dei, degli eroi e degli uomini', *NS* § 915). Given that each stage of human development has its own poetical expression, Romagnosi longs for the birth of a new genre of poetry, a 'terzo genere' that is 'un frutto naturale dell'età'.<sup>34</sup> In fact,

volere che un italiano sia tutto Classico, egli è lo stesso che volere taluno occupato esclusivamente a copiare diplomi, a tessere alberi genealogici, a vestire all'antica [...] trascurando la coltura attuale delle sue terre, l'abbellimento moderno della sua casa, l'educazione odierna della sua figliolanza.<sup>35</sup>

For Romagnosi, then, as for Vico, modernity had made Classicist poetry irremediably outdated; it was therefore necessary to adapt to the *Zeitgeist* and to the development of history. In addition, the writer found the sterile importation of foreign models unacceptable. In fact, Romagnosi stated that poetry should respect the 'genio nazionale': while the 'meraviglioso magico' of Ossian's poems suited northern Europeans, Italians should rather sing 'i primordi dell'italiana civiltà, coi tempj, colle are e colle piazze latine, coi costumi politici, e col meraviglioso mitologico'.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, he suggested that an Italian memory should take the place of Greek and Roman memory: those were the 'tempi eroici' that should inspire modern poetry. It is likely that behind these lines, which echoed Durandi's 1808 *Discorso* and Cuoco's *Platone in Italia*, we find Vico's exploration of the ancient Italian peoples. In Romagnosi's case, then, the *New Science* may be the

<sup>33</sup> Gian Domenico Romagnosi, 'Della poesia considerata rispetto alle diverse età delle nazioni', DPR, I, 416-421 (p. 418). See also Ruggiero Stefanelli, 'G. B. Vico e i "conciliatori"', in, *Giambattista Vico e l'enciclopedia dei saperi*, ed. by Battistini and Guaragnella, pp. 561-73.

<sup>34</sup> Romagnosi, 'Della poesia considerata rispetto alle diverse età delle nazioni', DPR, I, 419.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Romagnosi, 'Della poesia considerata rispetto alle diverse età delle nazioni', DPR, I, 420.

theoretical background for a 'third' conciliatory way of renovating the Italian literary tradition.

However, on the Romantic side, a more radical appropriation of Vico was taking place. An important example of this is *Lettera semiseria di Grisostomo al suo figliuolo* (1816), by the writer and translator Giovanni Berchet (1783-1851), now regarded as a manifesto of the Italian Romantic movement. In this satirical work, Berchet distinguishes between three kinds of people: the 'Ottentoti', that is to say, rough and uncultivated savages; the Parisians, that is to say hypercivilized citizens who have lost any connection with their interiority; and 'il popolo', which is composed of 'tutti gli individui leggenti ed ascoltanti' who 'ritengono attitudine alle emozioni'. According to Berchet, modern poetry should address this third kind of people.

When describing the 'Parigini', Berchet writes:

[U]n Parigino agiato e ingentilito da tutto il lusso di quella gran capitale [...] è passato attraverso una folla immensa di oggetti [...]. Quindi la fantasia in lui è stracca, il cuore allentato per troppo esercizio. Le apparenze esterne delle cose non lo lusingano (per così dire); gli effetti di esse non lo commuovono più, perché ripetuti le tante volte. E per togliersi di dosso la noia, bisogna a lui investigare le cagioni, giovandosi della mente. [...] E il Parigino di cui io parlo, anche senza avvedersene, viene assuefacendosi a perpetui raziocini, o per dirla al modo del Vico, diventa filosofo.<sup>37</sup>

Vico acts here as an authority – *the* authority – that reinforces Berchet's argument. The writer found in Vico the philosophical justification that something had happened to separate the men of the city from 'fantasia' and 'cuore' and therefore had weakened the natural tendency towards poetry and reinforced that towards reflection. This event is, of course, the advent of civilization, with its habit-

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<sup>37</sup> Giovanni Berchet, 'Sul "Cacciatore feroce" e sulla "Eleonora" di Goffredo Augusto Burger. Lettera semiseria di Grisostomo al suo figliuolo', in *I Manifesti romantici del 1816 e gli scritti principali del Conciliatore sul Romanticismo*, ed. by Carlo Calcaterra (Turin: UTET, 1951), pp. 267–331 (p. 298).

forming process. Appearances and the effects of things are no longer objects of interest; because they are known, they cause ‘noia’. The reference, although very vague, is probably to the section of the *New Science* (*NS*, § 1101-02) dedicated to the progressive development of abstract thought and its corruptive effects among civic communities.

A profound reflection on Vico’s themes inspired also Lodovico Breme’s Romantic manifestos, as noticed by his friend Ermes Visconti: ‘Breme [ha] applicato felicemente alle indagini sulla facoltà poetica alcuni principi della filosofia di Vico’.<sup>38</sup> Breme radically attacked the Classicist aesthetic system. Ancient myths in poetry, in his view, were ‘inefficaci, triviali e pedanti oltre ogni dire’. ‘La mitologia è, al più, un corredo di formole, una lingua tecnica, ecco tutto; ma non è più poesia’<sup>39</sup> In fact, ancient poetry was

un legittimo e semplicissimo effetto dell’avita stupidità umana. Ignorantissimi su di ogni cagione, e sui principi dei fenomeni, gli uomini, d’ogni accidente fecero poesia.<sup>40</sup>

In this passage Breme might have remembered a passage from the *New Science* which bears some striking lexical similarities with the quotation above:

La loro propria poesia [of first men], nata da ignoranza di cagioni, la qual fu loro madre di meraviglia di tutte le cose, che quelli, ignoranti di tutte le cose, fortemente ammiravano. (*NS*, § 375)

Breme echoed Vico once more when writing that primitive man ‘vedeva dappertutto portenti e macchine soprannaturali’, which generated in him ‘balorda ammirazione’; mythological fantasies were ‘le basi e il materiale di questo

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<sup>38</sup> Ermes Visconti, ‘Notizia sul Romanticismo in Italia’, ed. by Dante Isella, in *Strumenti critici*, 1 (1986), pp. 93-100 (p. 94).

<sup>39</sup> Breme, ‘Il giaurro’, *DPR*, I, 254-313 (p. 262).

<sup>40</sup> Breme, ‘Il giaurro’, *DPR*, I, 260.

arsenale poetico nei secoli che seguirono'.<sup>41</sup> To Breme, modern imagination is free from this kind of mistakes ('smagata è dunque di questa immaginazione la mente dell'uomo'), due to 'troppe riflessioni' and 'troppi convincimenti': poetry must find a new language and take into consideration the new knowledge and the spiritual progress of modern men. Breme stressed the necessity of a 'Cartesio poetico' who would get rid of traditional literary forms ('tutti quanti i canoni accademici [...] inciampi [...] alle umane forze').<sup>42</sup> Descartes is evoked here as the paradigm of the philosopher who stressed the alterity of the modern mind as opposed to the ancient one (see Section 1. 1) and as a symbol of a figure capable of radically rethinking the entire literary and cultural tradition.

Vico's legacy, but also Gravina's, is perceivable also in Breme's musings on the peculiarities of ancient imagination. Breme stated that 'nelle mitologie, la natura veniva piuttosto convertita in individui, che immediatamente avvivata [...] infrapponendo sempre persone fra noi e i fenomeni naturali, e fra noi e noi stessi'.<sup>43</sup> Gravina, similarly, had written that 'la favola è l'esser delle cose trasformato in geni umani'.<sup>44</sup> Vico, moreover, had affirmed that man tends to make himself 'regola dell'universo' (*NS*, §120); and that in the natural state men fill the gaps in their knowledge by inferring 'dalle cose loro conosciute e presenti' (*NS*, § 120); that is why men tend to project themselves into things ('dare alle cose la propria natura', *NS*, § 180) and to describe natural things 'con trasporti del genere umano' (*NS*, § 405). In Vico, the anthropomorphization of imagination is a basic principle, that explains the form and the rationale of the ancient fables.

Contrarily, Breme stated that this imaginative form needed to be overcome. Instead of it, a 'sistema vitale', which 'riconosce la vita sotto tutte le sue possibili forme, e non esclusivamente sotto le umane', should be adopted.<sup>45</sup> As an example of this, he proposed a passage from Pellegrino Rossi's translation of Byron's *Giaour* (*Il Giaurro*) which told the story of the love between a rose

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<sup>41</sup> Breme, 'Il giaurro', DPR, I, 261. See also Ezio Raimondi, *Romanticismo italiano e Romanticismo europeo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1997), p. 60.

<sup>42</sup> Breme, 'Il giaurro', DPR, I, 255.

<sup>43</sup> Breme, 'Il giaurro', DPR, I, 269.

<sup>44</sup> Gravina, 'Della ragion poetica', p. 213.

<sup>45</sup> Breme, 'Il giaurro', DPR, I, 269.

and a nightingale. In this poem, the rose sighs for love ('Oh quanta i suoi sospir spargon fragranza!').<sup>46</sup> Breme highlighted that the rose comes to live immediately, without evoking an intermediary figure like a nymph or a goddess.

Leopardi, who read Breme's article, objected vigorously to this point. In his notes in *Zib.* 14-18, sketching his arguments in favour of the Classicist faction, Leopardi replied to Breme's argument by saying that since poets, who are supposed to 'avvivar la natura', are human beings, they cannot but imagine human life in natural objects:

non possono naturalmente e per intimo impulso concepir vita nelle cose, se non umana, e che questo dare agli oggetti inanimati, agli Dei, e fino ai propri affetti, pensieri e forme e affetti umani, è così naturale all'uomo che per levargli questo vizio bisognerebbe rifarlo; [...] il suppor vita nelle cose per esempio inanimate diversa dalla nostra, ripugna [...] al nostro istinto e alla nostra natura, [...] se la rosa sospira ed è innamorata, la rosa nella mente del poeta non è mica altro che una donna; e che voler supporre che questa rosa viva, e non viva come noi, se è possibile al metafisico, è impossibilissimo al poeta e agli uditori del poeta, che non sono mica i metafisici ma il volgo; e non si avvede che lo stesso lord Byron non ha saputo alla sua rosa e tutti i Romantici non sapranno in eterno a nessunissima cosa dare altri affetti o sensi che umani. (*Zib.* 17, no date)<sup>47</sup>

Leopardi turned Breme's argument up-side-down; in doing so, he clearly echoed Vico. The poet had probably learnt the principle of anthropomorphism of the imagination in Gravina (see above), whose *Della ragion poetica* he had read. In effect, Leopardi appeals to the inner naturalness and inevitability of this phenomenon, which recalls Vico's principles: the human mind cannot but attribute 'la propria natura' to the things which it does not understand. It is therefore possible to say that some shades of Leopardi's 'vichismo', at this stage,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> On this passage see also Raimondi, *Romanticismo italiano*, pp. 72-73.

appear in his texts by reversing Breme's arguments, rather than through a direct reading of the *New Science*.

However, on this crucial point exists a degree of disagreement between Leopardi and Vico: for Leopardi, at least at this stage, this principle is atemporal – regardless of temporal context – like it was for Gravina. Instead, for Vico the anthropomorphism of imagination is natural and instinctual, but also linked to a precise and circumscribed stage of human development, primitive times. So, we find in Leopardi's text another Vico-related dichotomy, that of naturalness *versus* historicity. This also reflects a generalized problem of interpretation of the *New Science*. In fact, it is evident that the Romantics found in Vico the theorizer of a historicization of mythical imagination; in Romagnosi and Breme, the issue of what modern poetry should be is posed as a historical one. Consequently, the creative act is approached as a historical issue: in modernity, it is no longer possible to write poetry as the ancients did; moderns must adapt to the age. To the young Leopardi, though, the connection between poetry and nature is indissoluble. At this stage, Leopardi assumed that poetic imagination must have eternal rules – just like architecture, as Gravina had stated (see section 1. 1).

However, Leopardi did not stick to this idea for long. After all, he had found Breme's ideas 'pericolose', as they inspired 'dubbio' to him (*Zib.* 14). So, possibly reconsidering his position, in the 1818 *Discourse on Romantic poetry*, which grew out of these notes (see Section 3. 2), Leopardi evoked the figure of the child, capable of reproducing some features of the ancient imaginative mind. The child had also been an intermediate figure between the ancient and the civilized man for Vico, and an object of study and observation (*NS* § 186, 206 and *passim*). For both Leopardi and Vico, childhood is a space of negotiation between the boundaries of nature and that of history; for both, ontogenesis and phylogenesis are superimposed (on this see Section 3. 2).

We can say that Leopardi used some Vico-related arguments to sustain his anti-Romantic positions. Later on, Vico's legacy would resurface in a text written by the very symbol of Italian Classicism, Vincenzo Monti. As mentioned in the Introduction, Monti argued that his generation had significant debts towards Vico;

he believed that Vico's ideas had been the object of a true 'saccheggio'.<sup>48</sup> Significantly, though, Monti participated in this. In fact, recent scholarship has suggested that some attitudes by Monti towards myth may have been inspired by Vico.<sup>49</sup> A clear example of this is Monti's 1825 *Sermone sulla mitologia*. Monti's poem declared the ancient fables completely old-fashioned: it acknowledged a definitive crisis of traditional Classicism, in which ideas attributed to Vico played a highly controversial role:

Ov'è l'aureo tuo carro, o maestoso  
portator della luce, occhio del Mondo?  
Ove l'Ore danzanti? ove i destrieri  
fiamme spiranti dalle nari? Ahi misero!  
In un immenso, inanimato, immobile  
globo di foco ti cangiâr le nuove  
poetiche dottrine, alto gridando:  
- Fine ai sogni e alle fole, e regni il Vero.

'Sermone sulla mitologia', ll. 75-83<sup>50</sup>

Monti describes the mythical heritage as 'fola' (l. 85), and 'delfica favella' (l. 143); not only was he probably playing with Vico's explanation of the etymology of *favola* from the Latin verb *for, faris* (*NS*, § 44, 401), which connected the ancient fable with the need to make oneself understood ('necessità di spiegarsi', *NS*, § 471), therefore with speech itself; he was also alluding to oracles as a formerly meaningful, powerful, foundational word, whose sense, as Durandi suggested, had been lost. As explained in Section 1. 3, Vico connected the first stages of poetical production with the activity of the oracles (*NS*, § 381) on which Foscolo had built his idea of the original religious nature of poetry.

<sup>48</sup> Vincenzo Monti, 'Della necessità dell'eloquenza', p. 277.

<sup>49</sup> Pietro Gibellini, 'La mitologia classica nella letteratura dell'Ottocento', in *Il mito nella letteratura italiana*, 4 vols (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2003), III, 11-28 (p. 22).

<sup>50</sup> Vincenzo Monti, *Poesie*, ed. by Guido Bezzola (Turin: UTET, 1969), p. 290.

All this is reflected in the following lines by Monti: 'tutto avea vita allor, tutto animava / la bell'arte de'vati' (ll. 53-54); beyond the animation of nature already asserted by Breme, Monti echoed Vico's teaching about the role of the 'poeti teologi' ('vati', 'prischi [...] archimandriti') in the invention of myth (*NS*, § 37 and *passim*). The image of the natural world inhabited by nymphs and dryads may stem too from the *New Science* (*NS*, § 437). Finally, poetry for Monti does not exist 'senza portento, senza maraviglia'; similarly, Vico had written that 'le vere sentenze poetiche' are 'piene di sublimità e risveglianti la maraviglia' (*NS*, § 34),<sup>51</sup> probably implying that, compared with the 'true' poetry, modern poetic formulas are false and impoverished. Monti claimed that the true, which should legitimately be the object of scientific and philosophical speculation, should not be the object of poetry: le 'irte dottrine' should follow 'l'arido vero'.<sup>52</sup> The memory of Vico here acts as the philosophical backbone of a Classicistic poetic which has lost its effectiveness. Therefore, Monti's *Sermone* does not express a desirable renovation, but nostalgia for the traditional language of Classicist poetry.

Paradoxically, Zajotti, reviewing Monti's poem in the *Biblioteca italiana*, argued that this composition demonstrated that mythological material was necessary to poetry, and therefore claimed the eternal validity of Classicistic models. By doing so, he referred directly to Vico:

chiunque abbia letto [Vico], non vorrà certamente negare che anche senza la fede che gli antichi avevano in Giove, in Giunone e in tutta la numerosa famiglia degli altri iddii, donno essere ancora utilissimi alla poesia, siccome simboli, sotto i quali rappresentare i concetti più acconci ai bisogni delle presenti generazioni.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. It looks unlikely to me that the marvel that Monti evoked here, was the Baroque one, based on artifice and ingenuity, as the editors of Vincenzo Monti, *Opere*, ed. by Manara Varmigli and Carlo Muscetta (Milan-Naples: Ricciardi, 1953) suggest on p. 111.

<sup>52</sup> Matteo Palumbo, 'Punti di vista sulla mitologia. Il "Sermone" di Monti e le riflessioni di Foscolo', in *Vincenzo Monti nella cultura italiana*, ed. by Gennaro Barbarisi and William Spaggiari, 3 vols (Milan: Cisalpino-Goliardica, 2006), I, 361-77 (p. 364).

<sup>53</sup> Paride Zajotti, 'Intorno al "Sermone sulla mitologia" di V. Monti', in *DPR*, II, 327-44 (p. 334).

The key word of Zajotti's argument is 'fede': moderns can still use mythical symbols, he writes, even if they no longer believe in them. Zajotti, Vico's theories argued for the persisting tendency of humans to metaphorize and symbolize, and therefore, for the everlasting validity of mythological poetry. It is doubtful that Vico would have agreed with this point, since, for him, only children can reproduce the creative imagination of the ancients (*NS*, § 186, 206-09).

The conflict between belief and disbelief is a point that others had contested referring to Vico and Gravina as the authorities who justified their objection. As Durandi wrote, myths 'non significavan quello ch'essi intendono farli significare'; or Breme: 'smagata è da questa immaginazione la mente dell'uomo'. Similarly, the poet Giovanni Torti (1774-1854), who was on the 'Romantic' side of the quarrel, in his *Sermone sulla poesia* (1818) had argued that ancient fables were 'credute' or 'credibili' among the ancients, but now listeners perceived them as lies (Chapter 2, ll. 16-17); in fact, argued Torti, Greek and Roman Gods have become as foreign to the modern mind as Oriental divinities: 'forse tra noi più fede / hanno che il Dio Visnù, Cerere e Pale?' (ll. 41-42).<sup>54</sup> Torti narrativized the strangeness of the ancient world as a form of exoticism: the mythical imagination is as far away in time as India is in space. Leopardi too would take a strong stance on this point: in the 1818 *Discourse* he argued that Romantic poetry had introduced so many exotic materials into Italian literature so as to render it foreign and not credible to the Italian reader: 'quasi che l'intuizione logica che col prestigio favoloso della Grecia non può stare, con quello dell'oriente e del settentrione potesse stare'.<sup>55</sup> He therefore reversed the issue of the strangeness in poetry, by accusing the exotic taste and the geographical origin of Romantic poetry as being incompatible with Italian literature.

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<sup>54</sup> Giovanni Torti, 'Sermone sulla poesia' (1818), DPR, I, 387-98 (p. 386). See also the review by the Milanese writer Giovan Battista De Cristoforis (1785-1830), on *Conciliatore* n. 6, 20 September 1818; he claimed that it is necessary to give up 'le immagini per noi sempre fredde, e sovente ridicole, della spenta mitologia'; on the other hand, it is necessary to introduce in poetry 'il nostro modo di sentire e di credere assai diverso dall'antico'.

<sup>55</sup> TPP, p. 970.

Niccolò Tommaseo (1802-1874), linguist and writer who sympathized with the 'Romantic' faction, referred to Vico when arguing that the poetic function of mythology was irreparably compromised by the accumulation of philosophical knowledge about it:

poiché di mitologia vuoi far pompa, io chieggo almen che tu sappia la scienza tua bene addentro [...] ecco ingombro de' triboli della tua erudizione il Parnaso; ecco la sacra fonte seccata per cogliere, ad agio, i granchi delle etimologie.<sup>56</sup>

Mythology has become redundant, a frill, now only accessible through science, erudition, and etymology. This fact irremediably compromises the poetic function of these elements. In fact, as Tommaseo explains referring to Vico as an obvious authority, '[s]vanì la credenza che di quest'ombre fea corpo [...] un sartor de'sdrusciti mitologici veli non vorrà, spero, chiamarsi fattore di favole nel vero senso di questa sublime parola'.

In short, Tommaseo's argument revolves around the conflict between ancient belief and modern knowledge: progress in the knowledge of the ancient world has undermined the possibility of suspending skepticism even within the space of a poem. This makes it impossible, for Tommaseo, to take *poiein* in the etymological sense of the word when using mythological material. And, similarly to Breme, he proposed to create poetry, by writing about 'l'uomo e l'amore, l'anima e Dio',<sup>57</sup> that is to say, to choose subjects in which modern men had faith, with which a complete identification was still possible. Mythological poetry, he wrote,

tanto durò quanto gli uomini si ostinarono a voler conoscere negli oggetti sparsi della natura una potenza indipendente, una coscienza. Or se è svanita fin l'ombra di tale persuasione, ciò significa che lo spirito umano è salito un po' più alto, che la verità universale e' vuol ritrovarla in [...] oggetti

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<sup>56</sup> Niccolò Tommaseo, 'Sulla mitologia', DPR, II, 390-410 (p.402).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

spirituali. Né si creda perciò, che, salita all'immagine degli oggetti spirituali, la poesia, confondendosi colla filosofia, perda l'essenza sua e la sua splendida veste: non fa che ampliare la propria regione, e il proprio abito variare. [...] Guardiamoci dalla poesia che non crea. [...] non si paventi di lasciar nel suo nulla il mondo mitologico, quando il genio può crearne mille a sua posta.<sup>58</sup>

The topic of belief was not new within the Classic-Romantic quarrel. A few years earlier, Berchet had already argued that Homer was in his own way a Romantic, because he sang about the gods he believed in; as was the British poet John Milton because, as a Christian, he composed a poem about the Christian God (*Paradise Lost*, 1667).<sup>59</sup> Leopardi might have been responding polemically to Berchet on this point in *Zib.* 18, stating that when imagination is willing to be seduced, it believes in any kind of fable: 'tanto crede al Milton quanto a Omero, tanto agli spettri del Bürger quanto all'inferno dell'Odissea e dell'Eneide'.<sup>60</sup>

Mythical symbols are, for Tommaseo, characteristic of the infancy of the world, and should therefore be abandoned: 'i poeti [...] seguiteranno a bamboleggiare fra i sogni di un mondo adolescente?'. Complaining about the death of mythology, as Monti did, 'è come il lagrimare che un vecchio facesse al vedere logorato dagli anni un giocolin di fanciulli'.<sup>61</sup> Children need to be taught so as to become adults. Here Vico's connection between human life and historical development resurfaces (the idea that the ancients are 'come fanciulli del genere umano', *NS*, § 209: see Section 1. 2): but it is evoked only to argue for a necessary abandonment of childish fantasies and for embracing the new poetry of an adult civilization. Tommaseo's argument demonstrated that nineteenth-century intellectuals perceived that a loss of innocence has occurred, which had separated ancient and modern men as adults are separated from children.

<sup>58</sup> Tommaseo, *Dizionario estetico*, p. 535.

<sup>59</sup> Berchet, 'Lettera semiseria', p. 298.

<sup>60</sup> The point is re-stated in the Discourse on Romantic poetry (TPP, p. 970). On this see Givone, 'Filosofia, poesia e mito', p. 113-14.

<sup>61</sup> Tommaseo, 'Sulla mitologia', DPR, II, 398-99. See also Fubini, *Romanticismo italiano*, p. 50-51.

The analysis provided above displays that the conflict which informs the so-called Classicist-Romantic quarrel is intertwined with a conflict of interpretation of Vico (and in part, the legacy of Gravina; although it is evident, thanks to the propaganda of the Neapolitan expatriates, that Vico's cultural capital was perceived as larger than that of Gravina). The recurrence of Vico's name in the debate about mythological imagination is also due to some fundamental ambiguities of the *New Science*, reflected further in the conflicting interpretation of modern scholarship: in fact, myth is an essential notion in Vico's *œuvre*, explored, described, and given dignity more than any previous work. This is why some have spoken of Vico as a rehabilitator of myth,<sup>62</sup> and why he was perceived among Classicists as a masterful philologist, capable of giving new life to the mythological material of Classicist poetry. On the other hand, Vico had thought of myth analytically, so much that he had contributed to a reduction in the fascination of fables.<sup>63</sup> In fact, Vico is among those who accumulated knowledge about myth, and historicized it, thus relegating it to an unattainable past. This is why he inspired those who believed in the necessity of a huge renewal of poetical praxis (see Section 3. 1). Now, was Vico demolishing and rationalizing myth or instigating its rehabilitation? Both Classicists and Romantics were convinced they had the answer to this question.

## 2. 2. *Between Giordani and Borsieri: Rethinking Philology*

The previous section has explored the general frame in which Vico was discussed in the first third of the nineteenth century. I will now tackle the case study of the private quarrel between Pietro Giordani and Pietro Borsieri; in fact, this polemic helps us move beyond the aesthetic field, showing how Vico's reception and interpretation could become a matter of conflict in other contexts.

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<sup>62</sup> Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth*. See also Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, p. 22.

<sup>63</sup> See Glauco Cambon, 'Vico e Dante', in *Giambattista Vico. An International Symposium*, ed. by Tagliacozzo and White, pp. 17-28 (p. 24).

When the young writer Pietro Borsieri (1788-1852) read De Staël's 'Della maniera e dell'utilità delle traduzioni', he fully agreed with her that Italian literature needed to be updated. In 1816, Borsieri published a pamphlet aimed to disseminate his opinions on this: the *Avventure letterarie di un giorno*. In the chapter 'La compera di un buon libro', the character of the Galantuomo (an alter ego of the author) buys a copy of the *New Science* in a bookshop, not casually named 'Libreria del Genio': 'Originalissimo libro [...], una storia ideale del vivere civile, degli uffici e della riposta indole della poesia, e del perpetuo e inviolabile corso delle nazioni'.<sup>64</sup> The shopkeeper gives a review of the book to the buyer. It is, apparently, so superficial that the Galantuomo shouts:

'Ah, sciagurati, guastamestieri, questa è la *Scienza nuova*? Questa sarebbe una scienza vecchissima. [...] Non avrò io ragione di adirarmi con que'tanti che si lagnano degli ingiusti giudizi degli stranieri delle opere nostre, quando non sappiamo noi stessi giudicarle, né farle conoscere come si conviene?'.<sup>65</sup>

Borsieri implies that the greatness of Vico's *New Science* was overlooked by a majority of its readers, while the writer himself had fully appreciated it; consequently, Borsieri may have intended to reclaim the 'correct' interpretation of the book and to use Vico, his ideas, and his cultural capital, for his own purposes. To do so, Borsieri reversed the argument used by Londonio in the above quotation: Italians, not foreigners, are to blame for the lack of appreciation of Italian literature.

After that, Borsieri delineated a canon of recommended Italian books, energetically requesting that they be brought to the readers' attention:

perché non riaccendere in tutti il desiderio di alcune opere che si leggono da pochi, analizzando, per esempio, l'*Uomo morale* di Longano, allievo del

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<sup>64</sup> Pietro Borsieri, *Avventure letterarie di un giorno e altri scritti editi ed inediti*, ed. by Giorgio Alessandrini (Rome: Edizioni Dell'Ateneo, 1967), p. 21.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

Genovesi ed autore di una *Logica* eccellente, o i *Saggi politici* di Mario Pagano, [...] o il *Platone in Italia* di Vincenzo Cuoco?<sup>66</sup>

The books in this short list have little to do with each other, apart from the fact that they are directly linked to Vico: Antonio Genovesi (1713-1769) had been a pupil of the philosopher, and Mario Pagano (1748-1799) and Vincenzo Cuoco (see Section 1. 3) were among his most fervent admirers and imitators. This canon of 'new' philosophical works, to be immediately inserted into the national canon, includes mainly works belonging to the Neapolitan Enlightenment, and echoes a list of texts Cuoco himself had praised, a few years before, in the *Giornale italiano* (see Section 1. 3). Borsieri's text is thus evidence of the influence of Cuoco's opinions on Vico. Additionally, mentioning Cuoco's *Platone in Italia* probably had an anti-Classicist valence: as explained in Section 1. 3, this book had attempted to give a narrative of Italian culture that went beyond the dominant Greek and Roman heritage. Mentioning it here probably also means backing De Staël's argument on the same point.

*Le Avventure*, although written in a light, ironical style, propounded controversial arguments. In fact, the chapter 'La compera di un buon libro' also explicitly argued against the journal *Biblioteca italiana* (its subtitle was 'La censura della *Biblioteca italiana*'), accusing it of giving space only to philological and sterile considerations in literature reviews, 'cose che son pure da avvertirsi, ma non le sole, né le prime: e che non eccedono la capacità di ogni Quintilianuzzo da liceo'.<sup>67</sup> Borsieri's polemic was written with specific reference to the positions about traditional philology expressed by the *Biblioteca italiana*; in particular, he may have had in mind Giordani's response to De Staël, published five months before,<sup>68</sup> and including a eulogy of the philologist Angelo Mai. In fact, after praising Mai's latest findings, he wrote: 'chi riderà delle fatiche del Mai o le

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<sup>66</sup> Borsieri, *Avventure*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>67</sup> Borsieri, *Avventure*, p. 25.

<sup>68</sup> See William Spaggiari, 'Giordani e Borsieri', in *Pietro Giordani nel secondo centenario della nascita* (Piacenza: Cassa di risparmio, 1974), p. 73-91: pp. 75-77.

giudicherà sterili?'.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, in the same issue of the journal, the anonymous compiler of the article 'Ritratti di illustri italiani' (*Biblioteca italiana*, n. 1, pp. 163-168) argued that Mai should be included among the most brilliant Italians of that age. Borsieri disagreed with both and replied 'perché il sig. Mai sa di latino e di greco, ed ha la fortuna di frugare in una biblioteca in cui tutti non frugano [...], sarà egli per questo un grand'uomo da far trasecolare l'Europa o insuperbire l'Italia?'.<sup>70</sup>

According to Carlo Dionisotti, 'Classicist' Pietro Giordani, director of the *Biblioteca italiana* and great admirer of Mai, was irritated by those 'bestiole vichiane che egli si vedeva intorno, insofferenti a quel poco che rimaneva di erudizione',<sup>71</sup> hostile to Giordani's old-fashioned conception of philology. Borsieri's position about literature and philology may have been influenced by Vico as concerns the meaning he attributed to the word 'philology' and to the approach to Classic texts. In fact, Vico was perceived to have lent new dignity to philology as a tool for the exploration of the ancient (on this point, see Section 4.1): the study of the words and of their etymologies, of ancient poetry is not an end in itself; contrarily, it may lead to understand antiquity in a philosophical perspective (*NS* § 22). Coherently, in the *Avventure*, Borsieri proposed that the analysis of texts should lead to 'entrar ben addentro nella ragione poetica ed oratoria', 'addurre i precetti degli antichi', therefore appreciating the philosophical content of the ancient works.<sup>72</sup> This position recalls Foscolo's enthusiastic encouragement to his fellow citizens to find a new way to study the ancient world,

<sup>69</sup> Pietro Giordani, 'Un "italiano" risponde al discorso della Staël', in *DPR*, I, 16-24 (p. 19).

<sup>70</sup> Borsieri, *Avventure*, p. 31.

<sup>71</sup> Carlo Dionisotti, 'Pietro Giordani', in *Appunti sui moderni* (Venice: Il Mulino, 1988) pp.-79-101 (p. 95).

<sup>72</sup> Cuoco had polemicised some years before with philological pedantries in the field of linguistics, 'amara, cavillosa e misera negligenza, e che non oltrepassa giammai né i confini di un secolo né quelli di una nazione'. Cuoco praised a linguistic science 'che serve alla filosofia ed alla storia del genere umano'; needless to say, Vico was an example of this. Cuoco, *Scritti vari*, ed. by Nino Cortese and Fausto Nicolini, 2 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1924), I, 78-80. See Domenico Santamaria, 'Interessi linguistici in storici ed eruditi del primo Ottocento italiano', in Leandro Polverini, ed., *Lo studio storico del mondo antico nella cultura italiana dell'Ottocento* (Perugia: ESI, 1993), pp. 79-127 (pp. 87-89).

going beyond the traditional methods of pedantic philologists and seeking 'il midollo della storia' (see Section 1. 3).

There appears, thus, an opposition between conservative thinkers who recognized themselves in the figure of Mai, and modernist ones who chose Vico as one of their heroes. In other words, there was a conflict between conservatism and innovation in which Vico was perceived to be on the side of innovation.

Leopardi, later on, took part in this quarrel too, although in his own way. After having been in direct contact with Mai since 1816, the poet dedicated a poem to him in 1820. In it, Leopardi exalted Mai as a national hero ('Italo ardito', 'bennato ingegno', ll. 1 and 46) who had taken Italy to a new peak of excellence. Even if the author claimed that the poem's dedication to the philologist was no more than a pretext,<sup>73</sup> the connection between Mai and national pride may stem from Leopardi's memories of the debates about philology, sparked off once again by Mai's 1819 rediscovery of Cicero's *De re publica*. Leopardi dedicated his poem to the vanity of illusions, including that of giving new life to the ancients through philological restoration of texts. In Leopardi's lyric, then, Giordani's exaltation for Mai's discoveries and Borsieri's disregard for their relevance are blended in a philosophical synthesis: Leopardi doubts that Mai's findings could be of any help to his 'secol morto' (l. 4) or that the philologist would get the glory he deserves. In other words, the controversy surrounding Angelo Mai, involving Giordani and Borsieri, may have been reflected in Leopardi's 1820 poem.

This is a significant example of Leopardi's often implicit and unexpected reactions to public debates, and of how the structure of his philosophical system acted as a deforming mirror, making them assume new meanings. Both Leopardi and Borsieri's texts talk about the loss of communication between the ancients and the moderns. While for Borsieri the 'clamor de' sepolti' should fall silent and let the living speak, Leopardi's poem blames the moderns for their refusal to listen to the voice of the ancients. It is therefore possible to argue, as Luigi Derla has

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<sup>73</sup> Letter to Pietro Brighenti, 28 April 1828, *Epistolario*, II, 1033. On Leopardi and Mai see also Pietro Treves, 'Angelo Mai', in *Lo studio dell'antichità classica*, pp. 347-50.

suggested,<sup>74</sup> that Leopardi and Borsieri's positions are opposite but nevertheless complementary reactions to a problem that haunted the culture of the Bourbon Restoration: the problematic relationship with the ancients.

The opposition between Giordani and Borsieri was also caused by the fact that both writers had written an introduction for the new journal *Biblioteca italiana*, first published in 1816. Due to the prestige of its author, the director Giuseppe Acerbi chose Giordani's introduction for the first issue of the journal, while Borsieri's one remained unpublished until 1967.<sup>75</sup> Consequently, the choice of Giordani's work over Borsieri's determined a supremacy of the 'Classicist', older, more conservative generation over the young 'Romantics', who in fact a few months later would migrate to modernist journals, such as *Il conciliatore* and *Spettatore italiano*. Furthermore, while Giordani's *Proemio* is quite generic,<sup>76</sup> Borsieri had some radical ideas about the new journal and argued for a profound renewal of the Italian cultural scene, anticipating some of Staël's views.<sup>77</sup> In fact, he questioned the outworn established disciplines of the Italian tradition, such as philology:<sup>78</sup> for example, he wonders 'quale [sia] la strada a cui noi dobbiamo indirizzarci per accompagnare lo naturale andamento dello spirito umano'.<sup>79</sup> In the *Avventure*, like his mentor Romagnosi (see above) Borsieri argued for updating Italian culture as an adaptation to the new era. For him literature was, in fact, 'l'espressione elegante del maggior grado di civilizzazione di un popolo in un dato periodo di tempo',<sup>80</sup> a definition that can be seen as determinist and

<sup>74</sup> See Luigi Derla, 'Pietro Borsieri moralista', *Italianistica*, 2:3 (1973), 455-80 (p. 466).

<sup>75</sup> Pietro Borsieri, 'Introduzione', in *Avventure*, pp. 125-45.

<sup>76</sup> *Biblioteca italiana*, 1 (January 1816), 3-8.

<sup>77</sup> For Carlo Muscetta, that introduction is 'il programma di una rivista di opposizione', which was not what the *Biblioteca italiana* intended to be; while Giordani's article is 'più docile'. Carlo Muscetta, 'Introduzione', in Borsieri, *Avventure*, pp. IX and X. According to Cardini ('Tracollo napoleonico e fine dell'età neoclassica', pp. 46-47) this writing proves that the Classicist-Romantic quarrel was not 'started' by Staël, but was already in the running in those years within the Italian context.

<sup>78</sup> Borsieri, 'Introduzione', p. 140.

<sup>79</sup> Borsieri, 'Introduzione', p. 129.

<sup>80</sup> Borsieri, *Avventure*, p. 24. See Pino Fasano, *L'europa romantica* (Florence: Le Monnier, 2004), p. 246.

historicistic, and which has been said to have been inspired by Vico.<sup>81</sup> He denied that human nature is eternal and universal; on the contrary, the nature of men is determined by where, when and how they were born (*NS*, § 147). Again, Vico's legacy takes a 'modernistic' and 'historicistic' sense.

Let us try to unpack Borsieri's 'vichismo'. Although there is no systematic study of his philosophical sources,<sup>82</sup> as a pupil of Romagnosi and an admirer of Foscolo it is very likely that Borsieri had come into contact with Vico early on in his intellectual trajectory. Additionally, he would later (1837) write a poem inspired by Vico: '*Le Origini dell'Umanità* [...]': il soggetto è il sistema di Vico sui primordii e sul corso della vita civile delle nazioni, modificato come ho creduto meglio per la poesia e per la verità'.<sup>83</sup> This piece, now lost, shows how Vico's system was, for readers such as Borsieri, an incredibly suggestive text, which could not only nurture philosophical reflection, but also directly inspire creative works.

Borsieri frequently echoes the *New Science*. For example, mixing ideas from Vico and Sismondi, he identifies the medieval period as quintessentially mythopoeitic:

Nel medio evo nota il filosofo i passi dello spirito umano, ne' varj stadj del suo passaggio dalla *seconda barbarie* alla nuova coltura; e il poeta, non più sognatore, ma seguace fedele de'lumi di costoro, cerca e trova nel medioevo le memorie solenni di famiglie d'uomini, di virtù, di delitti, di cui sentiamo le conseguenze, e che sono atti a percuotere fieramente l'intelletto ed il cuore de'suoi contemporanei. I secoli adunque che il lettore vedrà schierarsi innanzi a lui sono come *i tempi eroici* della storia moderna. Dante è in qualche modo il loro Omero, l'Italia la loro Grecia; e tutti noi potremmo intitolarci una seconda volta la discendenza degli eroi, il

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<sup>81</sup> Derla, *Pietro Borsieri moralista*, p. 470.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Letter to Camillo Ugoni, 16 giugno 1837, in Borsieri, *Avventure*, pp. 282-94 (p. 289).

popolo nobile dell'Europa, se il primato fra le nazioni si decretasse ancora più col voto dell'immaginazione che con quello della filosofia.<sup>84</sup>

The words in italics (my emphasis) are keywords of the *New Science*: even though this passage does not name any sources, it is likely to be alluding to Vico. Borsieri's contemporary reader would probably have noted the reference immediately. If we read this passage alongside Durandi's and Romagnosi's, quoted above, we can infer that Vico's references are hidden with keywords such as 'tempi eroici' acting as signals to the reader. This may be an indirect way, then, of justifying one's position through an implicit reference to the philosophical authority.

Here, Borsieri is probably referring to the *New Science*'s fifth book, *Del ricorso che fanno le nazioni*, in which Vico stated that the Middle Ages were a 'barbarie seconda' or 'barbarie ritornata', in which some features of the remote 'tempi eroici' recurred. This made it possible for Dante, despite the fact that he was a highly civilized and cultivated man, 'il toscano Omero', to write a 'poetic' work like the *Divine Comedy*. Therefore, Borsieri's solution to the Classicist-Romantic quarrel is to find poetic material in the age of Dante. Years later, he would sketch a 'romanzo poetico' (*Palla D'Altavilla*) about a modern descendant of the Norman family of Altavilla.<sup>85</sup> This solution is an alternative to the proposal of turning the ancient Italian roots described by Vico and Cuoco into new material of poetry, as suggested by Durandi and Romagnosi. Paradoxically, this is probably inspired by Vico as well – not by the memories of the pre-Roman peoples spread found in Vico's *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia*, but by the description of the medieval times in *New Science*.

The last part of Borsieri's passage quoted above recalls Leopardi's arguments: both portray Italy as the land of imagination (see Section 3. 2), but for

<sup>84</sup> Pietro Borsieri, 'Notizia sullo storico Giovanni Muller. Articolo II', *Il conciliatore* n. 73, 13 maggio 1819 (*Il conciliatore* ed. by Branca, II, 577- 578). To Sismondi Borsieri had dedicated and unpublished article, now lost: see Muscetta, 'Introduzione', in *Il conciliatore* ed. by Branca, I, p. XII. See also Fubini, *Romanticismo italiano*, p. 16.

<sup>85</sup> Letter to Camillo Ugioni, 16 giugno 1837, in Borsieri, *Avventure*, pp. 282-94 (p. 289, Borsieri's emphasis). See also *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, a.l.

Borsieri this is due to the history of the 'heroic' medieval period, while, for Leopardi, Italians are the direct descendants of the Romans, through the presence of the poetic values of Greek and Latin in the Italian language. Despite this analogy, Borsieri's medievalism is totally incompatible with Leopardi's ideas, who considered the medieval period as a time of superstition and barbarism ('la barbarie de' tempi bassi', *Zib.*, *passim*).

Another example of diffraction of Vico's legacy is present in Borsieri's unpublished Introduction to the *Biblioteca italiana*. Borsieri argued:

I fiori e le foglie perpetue, e le grotte d'Arcadia ci sono venute a noja, dacché abbiamo conosciuto quanta sapienza si asconda nell'arcana spelonca d'Egira [sic] o nei penetrali d'Apollo che Licurgo visitava per impararvi le leggi.<sup>86</sup>

Borsieri's recognizes the moment of an acquisition of a new type of knowledge of antiquity ('dacché abbiamo conosciuto'). This 'new science' of the ancient is probably due to Vico's work and its philosophical exploration of myths and ancient tradition. This is another example of how Vico's legacy takes part in the rhetoric of 'fracture' between ancient and modern explored in the paragraph above. The reference to Arcadia is also key to understanding how Romantics reacted to the atemporal and repetitive model of academic poetry ('i fiori e le foglie eterne d'Arcadia'). Borsieri was fascinated instead by 'l'arcana sapienza' and 'i penetrali' of the ancient world. In other words, Borsieri declared himself fascinated by the alterity and mysterious nature of the ancient world, rather than the conventional established language of Classicist poetry. Evidencing a loss of innocence with regard to the ancient world, which rendered Classicist poetry meaningless to the modern reader, Borsieri encouraged the study of the ancient world rather than its imitation.

Borsieri possibly derived his mistrust of the social function of poetry from Vico's work too: 'ai tempi nostri la poesia ha cessato affatto di essere una potenza

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<sup>86</sup> Pietro Borsieri, 'Introduzione', p. 127.

sociale come a quelli d'Orfeo', he wrote, echoing Foscolo. Consequently, it is ridiculous that modern versifiers claim 'di essere rapiti dal delfico furore [...] davvero che nell'udirlo io perdono al volgo se ride schernevolmente sul viso a questi profeti del passato'.<sup>87</sup> In fact, Orpheus represents in the *New Science* the symbolic figure of the theological poets, who played a crucial role to in the foundation of the first societies (*NS*, § 79).

National character, poetry, heroic times: as we can see, Borsieri's interpretation of all these themes has a relationship of interdiscursivity both with Vico and with a network of contemporary theories. Furthermore, his writings echo a series of conflicts between an old and a new conception of Italian-ness, poetry, and paradigms of historicity. Evidently, some thinkers perceived Vico to be a model for a renovation of Italian culture.

However, this new model was not unanimously accepted. Carlo Dionisotti stated that Borsieri's 1816 attack on Mai's followers in the *Avventure* remained unanswered;<sup>88</sup> but this does not hold true upon closer inspection. A few years later, in fact, Giordani had the opportunity to express his views on Vico:

che il pensiero sia il tutto, e sia niente la forma dell'esprimerlo [...] io stimo [...] falsissimo. [...] Consideriamone esempio illustre, o Colletta, il tuo napolitano Giambattista Vico: di cui tanti concetti, forse veri e belli nel suo capo, intenebrati da quella sua dicitura selvaggia e stranissima, forse chiara a lui che se la fabricò, sono mero e inutile enigma a tutti gli altri: e coloro, che deridendo e commiserando la nostra corta veduta, si vantano d'intenderlo mirabilmente, ci sforzano a pensare o che c'ingannano o che s'ingannano. Di oracoli e misteri viventi, vogliamo tacere. [...] Il parlare oscuro, ambiguo, intricato fu ed è conveniente agli impostori antichi e moderni; per i quali fa l'essere creduti, e non gioverebbe l'essere intesi.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Pietro Borsieri, 'Sullo spirito profetico dei poeti', *Il conciliatore* n. 8, 27 settembre 1818 (*Il conciliatore*, ed. by Branca, I, 140-41).

<sup>88</sup> Dionisotti, *Appunti sui moderni*, p. 92n.

<sup>89</sup> Pietro Giordani, 'Delle Operette morali' p. 170 and 176. Similarly, a reviewer had written, some years before: 'Molti parlano della *Scienza nuova* del Vico, e molti l'encomiano, ma se a ciaschedun si chedesse se l'abbia letta, e se leggendola l'abbia intesa, pochi, volendo essere sinceri, assarirebbero la prima proposizione, pochissimi invero la seconda'. 'Opuscoli di Giovanni

This severe judgement of Vico and, most importantly, of his followers and interpreters, can be read as a late reply to Borsieri: the reference to those who were convinced of understanding Vico directly recalls the statement of Borsieri's Galantuomo ('sarebbe questa la *Scienza nuova*? [...] il Corniani ha scambiato lo scopo della *Scienza Nuova* con una sola fra le mille idee ingegnose del Vico').<sup>90</sup> Giordani's radical position is therefore possibly related to the quarrel with Borsieri, and to the fact that, over time, Vico was more and more connected to the Romantic group.

Furthermore, Giordani's judgement about Vico's style significantly echoes Monti's, expressed some years before:

La Scienza nuova è come la montagna di Golconda, irta di scogli e gravida di diamanti. [...] Se questi ardui pensamenti sparsi della più sublime filosofia e di peregrina incredibile erudizione venissero raccomandati da una lingua più liberale, più tersa, più fluida, il poeta, l'oratore, l'artista, il legislatore, il filosofo non avrebbero per avventure né più utile né più caro.<sup>91</sup>

The condemnation of Vico's difficult style was (and remains) common among his readers: for example, Giovanni Scola wrote in the *Giornale enciclopedico* that Vico 'ha voluto o dovuto parlare da oracolo';<sup>92</sup> in the *Biblioteca italiana* a reviewer defined him as 'il nuovo Eraclito, l'oscuro'.<sup>93</sup>

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Battista Vico, raccolti e pubblicati da Carlantonio Rosa, marchese di Villarosa', *Biblioteca italiana* 13 (January 1819), 27-33 (p. 28).

<sup>90</sup> Borsieri, *Avventure*, p. 31.

<sup>91</sup> Monti, *Lezioni*, pp. 276-277.

<sup>92</sup> *Giornale enciclopedico*, January 1778, in *Giornali veneziani del Settecento*, ed. by Martino Berengo (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962), p. 411.

<sup>93</sup> *Biblioteca italiana* 12 (September 1818), p. 297. Additionally, as early as 1819, an anonymous reviewer balked at the obscurity of Vico's prose: he wrote that Vico's style is 'sottilmente metafisico, simbolico, figurato, ridondante di vocaboli comuni bensì, ma usurpati in senso dal comune affatto diverso [...]. La prima cura di chi scrive è quella di farsi intendere, e ciò si può ottimamente ottenere usando i vocaboli italiani secondo il valore che hanno'. 'Opuscoli di Giovanni Battista Vico, raccolti e pubblicati da Carlantonio Rosa, marchese di Villarosa', p. 28 and 32.

As Duccio Tongiorgi suggests,<sup>94</sup> Monti's judgement of Vico's prose may have served as a cover for a polemic with Lomonaco, who, in his *Vite degl'eccellenti italiani* (1802-3) had glorified Vico's style by defining it as a river 'in cui i soli forti tragittan con sicurezza'. He had also rather sarcastically attacked those 'cervelli frivoli'<sup>95</sup> that refined Vico's style. Lomonaco's eulogy suggested Vico as an example for Italian philosophy (Vico as an 'eccellente italiano') as well as a universal model (Vico was 'il più filosofale di tutti i filosofi').<sup>96</sup> According to Duccio Tongiorgi, Monti's disagreement towards those who admired Vico despite his unusual style (Lomonaco among others), carried ideological implications: it is an example of the relevance that the category of comprehensibility had for 'Classicists' like Giordani and Monti. Clarity of style, according to Monti, guaranteed the legitimacy of the rulers, as opposed to the fraudulent rhetoric of the revolutionary tribunes: 'Senza un linguaggio a tutti palese, a tutti limpido, evidentissimo, le leggi diventano non regola di doveri, ma semenzajo di fraudolenze e d'errori e di liti e di dispute scandalose', he wrote in the same oration in which he expressed his view on Vico's style.<sup>97</sup> So, building on Tongiorgi's suggestion, Monti criticized Lomonaco's exaltation of Vico's style because obscurity of style automatically was connected, for him, with the demagogy of revolutionary orators.

Giordani, in turn, was obsessed throughout his life with the search for the perfect Italian writer, which for him meant perfect language and style. In fact, he was scarcely interested in the content of literary and philosophical works, provided that they were well written. This influenced his canon of writers, which is built according to the quality of the prose.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Tongiorgi, 'Nulla si compie senza la parola', in Monti, *Lezioni*, p. 31.

<sup>95</sup> Lomonaco, *Vite degl'eccellenti italiani*, p. 127.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Lomonaco, *Vite degl'eccellenti italiani*, p. 278.

<sup>98</sup> Giordani, 'Scelta di prosatori italiani', in *Opere*, XI, 93-117. See also Dionisotti, *Appunti sui moderni*, p. 92.

In 1807,<sup>99</sup> Giordani sketched a canon of Italian eighteenth-century philosophers, which he never completed. In his plan, an entire chapter was dedicated to Jacopo Stellini, a writer nowadays considered an imitator of Vico.<sup>100</sup> Several thinkers representative of the southern Italian Enlightenment were listed in Giordani's sketch, such as Gravina, Maffei, Giannone, and Muratori, while Vico is not even mentioned. Therefore, we might logically deduce that Giordani was not against Vico-related issues from the theoretical point of view, and had no prejudices against what we now call the southern Enlightenment tradition; rather, it was probably his interest in style and language that seems to have determined his disregard for Vico. In fact, as the quotation above evidences, for him obscure style and wording were suspect: he considered Vico, and Vico's readers, to be imposters or false oracles. Therefore, it is highly probable that Giordani, in this text, is referring to his opponent Borsieri, who, in turn, mocked those who did not understand Vico (see above).

Evidently, there was a latent conflict revolving around the idea of Vico as a model for Italian philosophical prose. Style, in fact, was a crucial matter for thinkers of the time. This judgement reflects, then, an opposition between different groups of Vico's readers, which carries also ethical and ideological implications. These reactions can be read as a response to the trauma of the French Revolution.

Moreover, in the letter to Colletta and Nicolini quoted above, Giordani proposed Leopardi's *Operette morali* as an example of perfect Italian philosophical prose.<sup>101</sup> As the quotation from Giordani's text about Leopardi's 'Operette morali' shows, Leopardi is presented as such also in contrast to the obscure and strange Vico. By addressing this note to Pietro Colletta, who was an

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<sup>99</sup> Giordani, 'Degli studi degl'Italiani nel secolo XVIII' (1817), in *Opere*, VIII, 183-89. The text is dated by the editor Antonio Gussalli.

<sup>100</sup> Jacopo (or Giacomo or Giacopo) Stellini (Cividale del Friuli 1699 - Padua 1770) was a professor of Moral Philosophy in Padua. His works are now considered largely inspired by Vico, if not a plagiarism of the *New Science*. See Paola Zambelli, 'Un episodio della fortuna settecentesca di Vico: Giacomo Stellini', in *Omaggio a Vico*, ed. by Corsano, pp. 362-415 (p. 394). See also Moravia, 'Vichismo e "idéologie"', pp. 450-52.

<sup>101</sup> See Giordani, 'Sulle *Operette morali*', p. 158 (but also throughout the text).

admirer of Vico as well as a fellow Neapolitan citizen ('il tuo napoletano Giambattista Vico'),<sup>102</sup> Giordani implicitly rejected discourses that presented Vico as an 'excellent Italian', relegating him instead to the context of his hometown. He proposed (without success, as explored in Section 4. 2) Leopardi as an alternate model for philosophical prose.

It is unlikely, due to the intensity of contacts between Leopardi and Giordani, that the poet was unaware of this dynamic. Consequently, Giordani's judgement may be an important reason for Leopardi's silence about Vico. In fact, although there is apparently no passage in the *Zibaldone* explicitly condemning Vico's, or any other philosopher's, obscurity, Leopardi may have agreed with Giordani's statement that thought and form of expression are intrinsically interconnected. First of all, because 'noi pensiamo parlando' (*Zib.* 95, no date). Secondly, the 'chiarezza di idee' (*Zib.* 808, 19 March 1821) and the 'necessità di essere intesi' (*Zib.* 708, 1 March 1821) are object of many of the reflections of the *Zibaldone*, as well as an objective of Leopardi's writing: 'non so che strada troverò [...] in tanta necessità d'esser chiaro'.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, Leopardi's clarity of prose was praised later by Giuseppe Chiarini (1833-1908), a pupil and admirer of Giordani.<sup>104</sup>

This conflicting frame forces us also to reread Leopardi's project of building an Italian 'lingua filosofica', which he expressed already in 1821 in a letter to Giordani: 'Chiunque vorrà far bene all'Italia, prima di tutto dovrà mostrarle una lingua filosofica, senza la quale io credo ch'ella non avrà mai letteratura moderna sua propria, e non avendo letteratura moderna propria, non sarà mai più nazione'.<sup>105</sup> Leopardi's claim that there was something missing in the Italian philosophical language recalls Giordani's complete refusal to take Vico as a model, as Borsieri's *Avventure* suggest. In an indirect way, maybe even

<sup>102</sup> Later, Colletta would celebrate Vico's findings in his *Storia del reame di Napoli, dal 1734 al 1825*, 4 vols (Capolago: Tipografia Elvetica, 1834), I, 61.

<sup>103</sup> TPP, p. 969; on Leopardi's approach to 'chiarezza' see Franco D'Intino, 'Oralità e dialogicità nello "Zibaldone"', pp. 225, 233-34.

<sup>104</sup> Giuseppe Chiarini, 'Degli scritti editi e postumi di P. Giordani', in *Poliziano*, 1 (1859), 101-08 (p. 106).

<sup>105</sup> Letter to Pietro Giordani, 13 July 1821, *Epistolario*, I, 515.

unconsciously, Leopardi might have constructed his philosophical identity against the backdrop of Vico's problematic model.

As discussed in the Introduction, so far a mainly genetic approach has characterized the few attempts to study the Vico-Leopardi philosophical lineage. This last example clearly highlights the need to further question such an approach. Not only does Leopardi seem uninterested in discussing Vico's legacy directly, but he was perceived, at least among a small group of admirers, as a possible response to the lack of an Italian philosophical language, a role which Vico could not fulfill. We can therefore argue that Leopardi rejected Vico's symbolic legacy, and that he tried to present himself as an alternative to Vico. Additionally, we must be aware that the recent perception of Leopardi as a possible 'heir' of Vico (as mentioned in the Introduction) strongly differs from the perception of Leopardi's contemporaries.

Both the general frame of the Classicist-Romantic quarrel, and the focus on the debate between Giordani and Borsieri show that the figure of Vico aroused complex polemics, and that Leopardi, from his isolated viewpoint, took part in these debates. He read the *Biblioteca italiana*, and he chose Pietro Giordani as his mentor; read the *Spettatore Italiano* and identified Breme as an enemy; attacked him on his ideas about poetry and the interpretation of a Vico-related idea was part of this conflict; he took position in favour of Mai, possibly re-elaborating Borsieri's negative judgement of him and incorporating Giordani's exaltation of Mai; he chose a side, that of the Classicists, and stuck to it; he was presented as an alternative to the obscure Vico and his fanatical followers; and he developed many of the ideas that circulated in the conflict revolving around Vico. The next chapter moves from the context of the Classicist-Romantic quarrel to tackle one of the possible itineraries of Leopardi's ideas as they enter into a dialogue with Vico's.

## CHAPTER 3

### RECANATI

#### **Fallacy, Forgery, Logic, and Mythology in Leopardi (1815-1822)**

After having considered the general context and the main axes of the reflection on poetry and myth in Bourbon Restoration Italy, I will now examine Leopardi's peripheral and oblique reaction to it, with specific reference to the theme of myth. This is in fact one of the areas of Leopardi's reflections in which scholars have hypothesized Vico's direct or indirect influence. Indeed, as this chapter will explore, Leopardi pondered extensively the concept of myth, its historical dimension and its connection with illusion and happiness, producing a theory of the ancient that is in many ways comparable to Vico's.

As demonstrated in Section 2. 1, one of the most intensely discussed topics of the Classicist-Romantic quarrel was the issue of whether or not, and how to use mythological images in poetry. Already Madame de Staël stated, in her article 'Della maniera e dell'utilità delle traduzioni', that mythological images in poetry were old-fashioned: 'le favole antiche sono da un pezzo anticate, e il resto d'Europa le ha già abbandonate e dimentiche'.<sup>1</sup> In her opinion, Italian poets should instead seek innovative themes, appropriate for the modern era. A few years later, Tommaseo declared that ancient fables were 'oggetto di una poesia rimbambita':<sup>2</sup> Tommaseo's choice of the word 'rimbambita' is particularly telling, in that it means both 'silly', 'odd', 'old-fashioned', and consequently 'reactionary', as well as 'infantile'. Through the use of this word, Tommaseo testifies to the fact that, as mentioned in Section 2. 1, the present as perceived in the Bourbon Restoration corresponded to an age of adulthood, as an age of critical

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<sup>1</sup> De Staël, 'Della maniera e l'utilità delle traduzioni', DPR, I, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Niccolò Tommaseo, 'La *Biblioteca di Apollodoro*, tradotta dal Cal. Compagnoni. Nella collana degli storici greci di F. Sonzognò', *Antologia*, 25: 73 (January 1827), 53-63 (p. 53).

and philosophical thinking. The use of myth in poetry was considered childish and thus retrograde, precisely because it looked back to the ancient world in an attempt to update it. Such attempts were, in turn, impossible due to the loss of faith in the symbolic universe of myth.

Leopardi, in his isolated hometown Recanati, tackled the issue from a very personal point of view: his reflection was not centered on the legitimacy of the modern usage of myth in poetry, but rather on an interpretation of mythical imagination as a necessary precondition for poetry. Leopardi produced extensive reflections on the historical and natural occurrences that made it possible for poetry to exist in the past, and for the foundations of ancient civilization to be laid. He had also observed the loss of these conditions in the passage from antiquity to modernity, and the incompatibility of poetry with modern times. A fundamental result of these reflections is the 1822 poem 'Alla Primavera', the only poem by Leopardi to explicitly tackle the theme of myth. This theoretical nexus will be the object of analysis in this chapter.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first section discusses the possibility that Leopardi, like Vico, belongs to the wider sphere of European modern mythology. Section 2 reconstructs the background to 'Alla Primavera', via reference to Leopardi's early works, focusing in particular on the poem 'Inno a Nettuno' the essay *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* (1815), the *Discourse on Romantic poetry* (spring 1818) and the related notes from the *Zibaldone*. In fact, although 'Alla Primavera' appears unique in relation to Leopardi's other work, it is also the acme of a long-term reflection about myth that intersects the genres of pastiche (the 'Inno a Nettuno'), of erudite investigation (the *Saggio*), of aesthetic speculation (the *Discourse*), and of philosophical analysis (the *Zibaldone*). I will contextualize the poem within the contemporary debate about the use of mythology in poetry and about the relationship between ancient and modern poetry. Section 3 of this chapter will analyse the philosophical structure of 'Alla Primavera', discussing the possible relationship between the ideas expressed in the poem and Vico's thought.

I have chosen to focus my analysis on Leopardi's texts up to 1822 for two reasons: firstly because they form a coherent corpus from a thematic point of view; secondly, because Leopardi was isolated in Recanati during this period (he started travelling at the end of 1822), and therefore had a very peculiar, oblique perspective on the culture of his time. The subsequent chapters (Chapter 4 and 5) will instead focus on Leopardi's reaction to the specific contexts of Florence and Naples.

### 3. 1 - *Mytho-logein: Vico and Leopardi as Mythologists*

Myth, and in particular the connection between myth, language, imagination and poetry is central in Vico's thought. His work, in particular *New Science*, belongs to a wider European phenomenon present between the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century: the rise of modern mythology. Bernard de Fontenelle's influential essay, *L'origine des fables* (1724) had catalysed part of European thought to consider myth no longer as a mere literary feature, but as a historical and anthropological phenomenon belonging to a specific stage of human development, as well as a philosophical issue. In other words, European thinkers<sup>3</sup> started to discuss the logic of myth, to think logically of myth, to try to make a science out of it, to 'mytho-logein': to rationalize, to historicize, and to contextualize myth in a precise spatial-temporal location.<sup>4</sup> This contributed to enlarging the fracture between ancient and modern opened by the so-called *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*.

Modern mythologists had a propensity to look at ancient fables in the light of modern reason, or from a religious perspective, and therefore to dismiss them as archaic, silly tales, having neither logical nor spiritual meaning.<sup>5</sup> This is particularly evident in the French tradition: for example, Isaac-Mathieu

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<sup>3</sup> An extensive anthology of thinkers dealing with the theme of myth is in *The rise of modern mythology*, ed. by Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson jr, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> See Marcel Detienne, *L'invention de la mythologie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), pp. 14-20.

<sup>5</sup> See Robert D. Richardson, 'Introduction' to *The rise of modern mythology*, ed. by Feldman and Richardson jr, pp. 3-6.

Crommelin's 1775 *Encyclopédie élémentaire* stated: '[La fable] c'est un assemblage de contes puérils destitués de vraisemblance, et qui mériterait du mépris, si ces chimères n'étaient pas absolument nécessaires pour entendre les Auteurs'.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Fontenelle wrote: 'il ne se peut qu'on ne soit épouvanté de voir toute l'ancienne histoire d'un peuple, qui n'est qu'un amas de chimères, de rêveries et d'absurdités. Serait-il possible qu'on eût donné tout cela pour vrai?'<sup>7</sup>

In this context, Vico's approach to myth was revolutionary: it bestowed a new dignity upon the fable as an articulate form of knowledge. As Isaiah Berlin has remarked, Vico demonstrated that mythical fables were 'ways of conveying a coherent view of the world as it was seen and interpreted by primitive men'.<sup>8</sup> Vico was thus defined as the 'rehabilitator' of myth by the scholar Joseph Mali. Vico's approach to myth, explains Mali, is unique 'because he takes *mythology* which had previously been considered as essentially *false* – because its *poetic narrations* of facts seemed to be opposed to either the *rational theories* of philosophy and science, or to the *revealed gospels* of religion, or to the *critical reports* of history – to be *true* in itself'.<sup>9</sup> Vico believed that myth was a true narrative ('vera narratio', *NS*, § 403) for primitive men. This statement leads to a complete reformulation of the perception of ancient peoples' thought; it conveys the idea that their views on the world were not deficient or incomplete relative to those of modern man. On the other hand, the ancients were completely different from the moderns, and their minds worked according to different rules.

The traditional approach to myth was reiterated by the popularity of mythical fables in literature and figurative *Ancien Régime* art. As Jean Starobinski has explained, the fable had been framed as erudite memory; it was used either to embellish or to disguise other contents, or to magnify or to celebrate recent events

<sup>6</sup> Isaac-Mathieu Crommelin, 'De la mythologie' in *Encyclopédie élémentaire, ou rudiments des sciences et des art* (Amsterdam: Magerus, 1775), pp. 230-71 (p. 256). See Jean Starobinski, *Le remède dans le mal. Critique et légitimation de l'artefice à l'âge des Lumières* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 236.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Boviére de Fontenelle, 'De l'origine des fables' (1724), in *Oeuvres de Monsieur de Fontenelle*, 2 vols (Amsterdam: Au dépens de la Compagnie, 1742), III, 270-96.

<sup>8</sup> Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth*, p. 3, emphases in the original.

or modern feelings.<sup>10</sup> Vico, however, as discussed in Section 2. 1, approached the symbolic heritage of the ancient fable as a typical feature of ancient forms of expression, and doubted that its use in modern poetry had any sense ('imitarle dispera umano stile'). The first to raise the issue of the historicity of men in the Enlightenment, the age of 'ragione tutta spiegata' (*NS*, § 326), Vico was unconsciously undermining the system of what we now call Classicism, which is based on the principle of the a-temporality of myth. In European *Ancien Régime* literature, the fable was completely atemporal: it referred to a fictional past, but it was used as a vocabulary of indefinitely repeatable symbols.<sup>11</sup>

Existing scholarship on the topic overlooks Italy's participation in the rise of modern mythology, acknowledging only Vico's *New Science*. On the contrary, noteworthy mythological studies in Italian were produced alongside Vico's work, such as Gravina's *Della ragion poetica* (1708), which included a previous work entitled *Delle antiche favole* (1696: on this, see Section 1. 1). As Andrea Battistini explains, Gravina attempted to understand the ancient fables by seeking out those rational and logical features that would match the rational criteria of modern interpreters. By contrast, Vico provided a philosophical and historical contextualization of fables, setting them in a remote, unattainable dimension.<sup>12</sup> Years later, Leopardi seems to have joined the tradition dating back to Gravina and Vico, by participating both in the wider European debate on poetry and myth in the early nineteenth century, as well as the Classicist-Romantic quarrel at a local level. In particular, Leopardi seems to have significantly interpreted the feeling of nostalgia for the ancient function of poetry, which spread in post-revolutionary Italy, as seen in Foscolo (Section 1. 3), Monti (Section 2. 1), and more broadly in the ideological background of the Classicist-Romantic quarrel. It is therefore possible to identify a modern Italian mythological tradition, characterized by a particularly positive attitude towards myth, that takes the shape of rehabilitation (Vico), of actualization (Gravina), of nostalgia (Leopardi).

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<sup>10</sup> Starobinski, *Le remède dans le mal*, pp. 238 and 241-42.

<sup>11</sup> Starobinski, *Le remède dans le mal*, pp. 237 and 250.

<sup>12</sup> Battistini, 'Introduzione' to Vico, *Opere*, I, p. XII.

Leopardi's observations on myth and poetry frequently paralleled Vico's. In particular, both writers consider central the inner otherness of the ancients: in Vico and Leopardi's views, ancient people lived and thought differently from modern people, and a remarkable effort is necessary to understand their minds. Although the study of languages and etymologies can give us an idea of their life and their beliefs, there is no way of reconstructing, recreating or completely understanding the ancient world. As Vico wrote, the moderns have always projected themselves onto the ancients: 'ove gli uomini delle cose lontane e non conosciute non possono fare niuna idea, le stimano dalle cose loro conosciute e presenti'. However, from Vico's perspective this is a mistake, prompted by the erroneous assumption that modern men know more than primitive men ('boria de' dotti'). Modern historians 'da' loro tempi illuminati, colti e magnifici, ne' quali cominciarono [...] a ragionarle, hanno stimato l'origini dell'umanità, le quali dovettero per natura essere picciole, rozze, oscurissime' (*NS*, § 122-3). On the contrary, Vico goes on to argue, 'appena *intender* si può, affatto *immaginar* non si può come pensassero i primi uomini che fondarono l'umanità gentilesca' (*NS*, § 700, my emphasis; see also *NS*, § 378).<sup>13</sup>

Like Vico, Leopardi thought that the study of languages was key to understanding the history of the human mind ('la storia delle lingue è poco meno [...] che la storia della mente umana', *Zib.* 1134, 29 May-5 June 1821). Moreover, Leopardi also, again here in harmony with Vico's ideas, thought that human origins could be understood, but could not be reproduced. This is evident in Leopardi's musings on archaisms. For Leopardi it is in these words of Italian language that antiquity is preserved: they in fact are depicted as 'quelle frutta che intonacate di cera si conservano per mangiarle fuor di stagione' that can be kept 'vivide e fresche e belle e colorite, come si cogliessero dalla pianta'. Like preserved fruit, when read in the original context those words can be fully enjoyed: 'non paiono dimenticati, ma come riposti in disparte, e custoditi, per poi ripigliarli'. However, Leopardi also set a limit to the experience of antiquity

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<sup>13</sup> On the impossibility of representing the world of origins see Esposito, *Pensiero vivente*, pp. 75-76.

through archaisms: they are 'parole e modi, dove l'antichità si può *conoscere*, ma per nessun conto *sentire*' (*Zib.* 1099, 28 May 1821, my emphases).

In both Leopardi and Vico the ancient/modern dichotomy is constructed around the conflict between reasoning and feeling: while Leopardi wrote that knowledge of the ancient is possible ('conoscere'), he added that it is impossible to feel it ('sentire'). By contrast, modern men can fully 'sentire' only 'l'infelicità certa del mondo', rather than acknowledging it (*Zib.* 144, 1 July 1820). Similarly, Vico had argued that it is possible to understand ('intendere') the 'vasta immaginativa di que'primi uomini', but not to imagine ('immaginar') from this perspective. By imagination Vico means a form of intuitive understanding based on the senses, which resembles the primitive form of reasoning (see *NS*, § 375); therefore, Vico's dichotomy between 'intender' and 'immaginar' mirrors Leopardi's distinction between 'conoscere' and 'sentire'. In turn, this principle, common to Vico and Leopardi, evidences how modern mytho-logos made it possible to reflect on myth, to historicize it, while contemporarily highlighting its non-negotiable difference from modern reasoning. In other words, Leopardi and Vico express - in similar ways - the rift between the ancient world of μύθος and the modern world of λόγος.

As Vico explains, the words *mythos* and *logos* once coincided in meaning, and *mythos* meant '*vera narratio*', that is to say 'parlar vero'. Only with Plato and Aristotle did the word start to indicate a primitive 'parlar naturale', that is to say, a natural language, one derived from nature. This language was once spoken in the primitive world ('dissero esser parlato una volta nel mondo') and 'non fu un parlare secondo la natura di esse cose'. This means that it was not a logical speech, capable of identifying the true nature of things, but a 'parlare fantastico' (*NS*, § 401). As Lucio Felici has highlighted,<sup>14</sup> Leopardi wrote something very similar to this:

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<sup>14</sup> Lucio Felici, *L'Olimpo abbandonato. Leopardi tra 'favole antiche' e 'disperati affetti'* (Venice: Marsilio, 2003), pp. 70-71.

L'antico e primitivo significato di *fabula*, non era *favola*, ma *discorso*, da *for faris*, quasi *piccolo discorso*, onde poi si trasferì al significato di *ciancia*, *nugae*, e finalmente di *finzione* e *racconto falso*. Appunto come il greco  $\mu\acute{\upsilon}\theta\omicron\varsigma$  nel suo significato proprio, valeva lo stesso che  $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ , *verbum dictum oratio sermo colloquium*, e da Omero non si trova, cred'io, adoperato se non in questa o simili significazioni, così esso come i suoi derivati. Poi fu trasferito alla significazione di favola. Il detto senso di *fabula*, *fabulator*, *fabulo*, *fabulor*, *confabulor* etc. è evidente negli scrittori latini di tutti i buoni secoli, massime però ne' più antichi e più puri. Vedi il Forcellini in tutte queste voci. Ma dopo, e massimamente ne' bassi tempi il significato usuale e comune di *fabula* nelle scritture non era altro che *favola*.' (*Zib.* 497-99, 13 January 1821, Leopardi's emphases).

The fact that there was originally no distinction between true discourse and false discourse – that they were both identified as  $\mu\acute{\upsilon}\theta\omicron\iota$  or *fabulae* – means that ancient fables were absolutely true according to primitive minds, and were recognized as false with the rise of rational thinking. For Vico, understanding ancient mythical fables as 'true' nature means reading them as documents of the ancients' divinization of natural objects, such as the sky, the earth, the sea: 'così Giove, Cibele, o Berecintia, Nettunno, per cagione d'esempi, intesero, e [...] spiegarono essere esse sostanze del cielo, della terra, del mare, ch'essi immaginarono animate divinità' (*NS*, § 401). For Leopardi, by contrast, the correspondence of myth with belief is fundamental to connecting the mythical narration with the sphere of illusion; additionally, this theoretical nexus also helped him further elaborate on the ancients' knowledge as a complete and coherent form of knowledge. In fact, despite the fact that the ancients were more ignorant than moderns, their knowledge was sufficient to understand the natural world and to make sense of their role in that world (see *Zib.* 2709-11, 21 May 1823).

In both Leopardi and Vico's view, myth and man's capacity to create, narrate, and believe in myth, are relative to a precise historical dimension. As

Vico explains 'i primi uomini, come fanciulli del gener umano, non essendo capaci di formar i generi intelligibili delle cose, ebbero naturale necessità di fingersi i caratteri poetici'; and 'i caratteri poetici [...] costituiscono l'essenza delle favole' (*NS* § 209). This ability is lost: 'col più spiegarsi la mente umana, si ritrovarono le voci che significano forme astratte, o generi comprendenti le loro spezie, o componenti le parti co'loro intieri, tai parlari delle prime nazioni sono divenuti trasporti' (*NS*, § 409). Nowadays, the only relationship that modern men can establish with mythical narration is an artificial, unnatural one, obtained through reflection and science (albeit a '*New Science*', 'una nuova arte critica', *NS* § 10). With the progressive acknowledgement of cause and reason, modern men cannot believe ancient myths as their ancestors did, because modern rationality, has come between them: the modern mind is 'assottigliata', 'spiritualezzata', while the ancient one was 'immersa ne'sensi', 'rintuzzata nelle passioni', 'seppellita ne'corpi' (*NS*, § 378).

Similarly, Leopardi blamed 'la misera spiritualizzazione delle cose umane' (*Zib.* 1006, 1 May 1821), for separating men from Nature, 'sola madre della vita, e del fare' through the expansion of knowledge and reasoning. The deepening of modern knowledge made evident, for Leopardi, the intrinsic unhappiness of the human condition. Consequently, modern poets can hardly create images, but rather muse on affection, melancholy, and pain (*Zib.* 726-27, 8 March 1821). Creative imagination is typical only of the ancients, children, and premodern societies.

Leopardi centered his reflection on ancient myth and poetry around the notions of nostalgia and unhappiness; this implies that he believed that ancient civilizations, with their propensity to foster illusions, were incomparably happier, healthier and more solid than their modern counterparts because they were closer to nature. This idea is absent in Vico, who does not seem to express nostalgia for the ancient world.<sup>15</sup> The idea that ancient poetry was inspired by happy feelings was present in Italian mythological reflection – consider, for example Monti's 'Sermone sulla mitologia' (which characterizes ancient poetry with 'allegra idea'

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<sup>15</sup> On this point see Andrea Battistini, 'Introduzione', to Lollini, *Le maschere e il sublime*, p. ix.

and ‘riso’, ll. 19-20: see Section 2. 1), and Caluso’s *Della poesia* (which states that ‘il primo e più natural estro [della poesia antica] dovette provenire dall’allegria’: see Section 2. 1).<sup>16</sup> However, Leopardi gives a much deeper sense of the ancients’ happiness, which is not mere joy, but a concrete existential dimension: ‘correvano sempre dritto alla felicità, non come a un fantasma, ma cosa reale’ (*Zib.* 88, no date).

It is possible to consider Leopardi as one of the most profound Italian modern mythologists, and, at least in this specific area, a recipient of Vico’s legacy. In the following sections we will take a closer look at Leopardi’s exploration of the universe of myth, and at his attempt to negotiate the rift between ancients and moderns. Leopardi’s reflection on myth intersects his musings on the value of the ‘true’ and the ‘false’. This theoretical nexus is also profoundly linked to Leopardi’s personal experiences, his own poetic career and his life: the progressive changes of attitude towards ‘il vero’ are indeed the measure of Leopardi’s *Bildungsroman*, as suggested by Arturo Mazzarella.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. 2 - Towards ‘Alla Primavera’: Leopardi’s Itineraries in Myth (1815-1818)

Although ancient myth is one of the most important poles of Leopardi’s thought, it is not easy to identify a proper corpus of the poet’s writings on this topic. Especially in the *Zibaldone*, myth is normally considered among Leopardi’s musings about the macro-theme of imagination, and the two elements cannot be easily separated. In fact a capacity for myth-making is characteristic solely of the ancient imagination. However, it is possible to follow a hidden *fil rouge* from Leopardi’s early writings to ‘Alla Primavera’. Leopardi dealt with the topic of the intrinsic otherness of the ancients in different ways and through different genres, culminating in a variety of approaches to the task of relating to the ancient world

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<sup>16</sup> Valperga di Caluso, *Della poesia libri tre*, I, 72.

<sup>17</sup> Arturo Mazzarella *I dolci inganni: Leopardi, gli errori e le illusioni* (Naples: Liguori, 1996), p. 7.

from the perspective of the modern. Leopardi's reflection on myth is primarily dedicated to negotiating the value of the false/mythical/illogical speech and that of the true/philosophical/rational discourse.

In 1815, aged 17, Leopardi composed his *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* (henceforth, *Saggio*), the young scholar's first attempt to take part in the European debate on antiquity. Within Leopardi's *œuvre*, this is the text that is most easily ascribable to the sphere of modern mythology, because of the form – the erudite essay – and of the historical and anthropological perspective it takes. This essay is dedicated to exploring the causes of the ancients' beliefs, superstitions, myths, which Leopardi called 'mistakes'. It reflects a precise ideological position: it belongs to Catholic apologetics, combined with Enlightenment rationalism.<sup>18</sup> The *Saggio* testifies to Leopardi's forays into philology, ethnology, and mythology: like some of his possible French models – such as Fontenelle's *L'origine des fables*,<sup>19</sup> he was interested in the survival of ancient peoples' customs and in how to prevent the endurance of 'mistakes'. However, it is also an exploration of ancient peoples' irrationality and shows a precocious fascination for the myth-making capacities of the human mind.

Leopardi regarded the ancients as people who were not yet enlightened by Christian revelation. He in fact writes: 'il solo patibolo del Redentore, la sola voce dei pescatori giudei' could 'sciogliere l'incanto' of the 'errori'.<sup>20</sup> Leopardi therefore took a teleological approach, which identified the coming of Christ as the end of 'mistakes' and the rise of sacred 'truth'. Similarly, in the *New Science*, Vico separates the 'storia sacra' of the Chosen People, which is free from barbarism, regression, and mistakes, from the 'storia gentilesca' of the pagans; his work aims to recognize the role of Providence in the development of the gentiles.

Leopardi contrasted the ancient 'errori' with the unquestionable truth of reasoning combined with religion: 'Religione amabilissima! [...] comparando

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<sup>18</sup> See Sebastiano Timpanaro, *La filologia di Giacomo Leopardi*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Bari: Laterza, 1977), pp. 9 and 10.

<sup>19</sup> Leopardi could read Fontenelle's work as a complete edition of Fontenelle's *Oeuvres* was conserved in Leopardi's library. See *Catalogo della biblioteca Leopardi in Recanati (1847-1899)*, ed. by Andrea Campana (Florence: Olschki, 2011), p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> TPP, p. 873.

nella notte dell'ignoranza, tu hai fulminato l'errore, tu hai assicurata alla ragione e alla verità una sede che non perderanno giammai'.<sup>21</sup> In Leopardi's view, the ancients were not necessarily ignorant, but 'semplici', like children: 'la natura generalmente nasconde delle verità, ma non insegna degli errori; forma dei semplici, ma non dei pregiudicati'.<sup>22</sup> The comparison between the ancients and children, which is also a topos in the *New Science*, would later become very important for Leopardi.

Like Vico, Leopardi also considers the lasting legacy of erroneous beliefs among the lower classes in modern times ('il volgo') as proof of the natural and inevitable nature of mistakes. Similarly, Vico compared the ancients' imagination to that of modern peasants ('i nostri contadini', *NS*, § 693), or to pre-Colombian peoples ('gli americani', *NS*, § 376).<sup>23</sup> Peasants, children and the uneducated are characterized by a form of knowledge alternative to reasoning. As pointed out by Antonio Prete,<sup>24</sup> Leopardi's *Saggio* referred to mythical narrations as archeological documents of the ancients' understanding, beyond the mediation of classical poetry. For example, Leopardi explains the mythical description of Zeus being the father of all other gods as a vague premonition of monotheism: 'sembra evidente che i più saggi uomini del paganesimo abbiano considerato Giove come il Supremo Essere, e gli altri Dei soltanto come suoi ministri'.<sup>25</sup>

The essay established a correspondence between ancient myth, illusion, superstition, and error, that would stand without contradiction in all of Leopardi's later works. In 1815, Leopardi apparently still regarded myth from the 'enlightened' perspective of the modern philosopher and took the side of reason. He would later change his perspective on the concept of 'errore' itself, as he came to believe that acquiring rational truth consists mainly in depriving mistakes of meaning: 'ogni passo della sapienza moderna svelle un errore; non pianta nessuna

<sup>21</sup> TPP, p. 933.

<sup>22</sup> TPP, p. 873.

<sup>23</sup> Also Leopardi will reflect on Pre-Colombian peoples ('i Californii') as examples of primitive customs, but later (from *Zib.* 2712, 32 May 1823). See Barbara Foresti, 'Leopardi e gli indiani d'America', *Studi e problemi di critica testuale*, 76 (2008), 153-86.

<sup>24</sup> Antonio Prete, 'Leopardi e il mito', *Aut aut*, s. i., (1991), pp. 243-44, (p. 244).

<sup>25</sup> TPP, p. 873.

verità' (*Zib.* 2712, 21 May 1823). The advancement of reasoning, therefore, has a rather negative function; it deprives men of truth ('verità'), leading them to disenchantment and cynicism. The *Saggio* also anticipates two of Leopardi's fundamental beliefs: in the first instance, that a gulf consisting of different forms of knowledge separates modern from ancient men; and secondly, that mythical knowledge constitutes an alternative to reasoning.

Just one year after writing the *Saggio*, Leopardi tackled the theme of myth in a completely different way. He mingled erudite research and creativity by composing his 'Inno a Nettuno', in 1816, aged 18. This text was published as a translation from the Greek of a (fictional) poem 'd'incerto autore nuovamente scoperto', but it is instead an original creation by Leopardi, as is the poem's long introduction.<sup>26</sup> The hymn describes the ancient gods forming an alliance to protect the newborn Neptune from Saturn. It is an allegorical representation of ancestral violence and cruelty being defeated by *pietas* and harmony, which alludes to the start of civil history. In the poem, deities are identified with natural elements and phenomena (such as Sky, Earth, Night) and are represented in an ancestral struggle between Good and Evil. This representation of the gods means that Leopardi still considered myth beyond its traditional literary dimension, but as a form of representation of natural forces from the perspective of an unconditioned primitive mind: as it was for Vico, "parlare fantastico per sostanze animate" (*NS*, § 401).<sup>27</sup>

This is true, especially as far as the first part of the poem is concerned. Although the hymn still belongs to a world of fine erudition and shows a stunningly broad range of references, its attitude towards myth is neither a sterile exhibition of knowledge, nor a disguise for 'other' contents. It provides a deep insight into a world of fantastic creatures inhabiting an original world upset by primordial struggles. A telling example is the passage that follows the Goddess

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<sup>26</sup> TPP, p. 279.

<sup>27</sup> Lucio Felici, *L'Olimpo abbandonato: Leopardi tra «favole antiche» e «disperati affetti»* (Venice: Marsilio, 2005), p. 19.

Rea's prayer to her parents, 'Terra veneranda' and 'Cielo padre' for the sake of her son, Neptune:

Così pregava Rea di belle chiome,  
[...] e per gli eccelsi monti  
ed il profondo mare errando già  
l'eco romoreggiante. Udirla il Cielo  
e la feconda Terra, e nera Notte  
venne sul bosco, e si sedè sul monte.  
Ammutarono a un tratto e sbigottiro  
i volatori de la selva, e intorno  
co l'ali stese s'aggirar vicino  
al basso suol. Ma t'accogliea ben tosto  
la Diva Terra fra sue grandi braccia,  
nè Saturno il sapea, chè nera Notte  
era su la montagna.

'Inno a Nettuno', ll. 35-48<sup>28</sup>

Rea, a goddess, asks the other gods for help, and the echo of her cry reaches the Sky, the Earth, and the Night. The night brings darkness and hides Neptune, who is welcomed and fed by the Earth. In the representation of the mythical world Leopardi imagines that natural objects are inhabited, animated by divine creatures who are listening to each other, and who are sensitive to requests for help. This view recurs again in 'Alla Primavera', although in a radicalized fashion.

The hymn and its attitude towards myth are particularly important. In fact, the poem was written in a year which the young poet will retrospectively regard as very special. Before 1816, Leopardi himself later identifies he had been dedicated to philological works, translation and erudition: 'le circostanze mi avevan dato allo studio delle lingue, e della filologia antica. Ciò formava tutto il mio gusto: io

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<sup>28</sup> TPP, p. 281.

disprezzava quindi la poesia' (*Zib.* 1741, 19 September 1821). In 1816 he became interested in poetry and literature: 'nel cominciare dell'anno passato' wrote Leopardi in 1817 to Pietro Giordani 'la mia conversione [...] era appunto sul cominciare'.<sup>29</sup> He would later call it 'il mio passaggio [...] dall'erudizione al bello' (*Zib.* 1741, 19 September 1821).<sup>30</sup>

The hymn can consequently be considered a crucial text in Leopardi's career, a lyrical experiment that only an experienced philologist could write: protected by his disguise as a translator, Leopardi was starting his research into poetry. Hidden behind the translator's mask, he was testing his creative skills and submitting his first results to the judgement of the audience. The hymn was published in the *Spettatore Italiano* in May 1817 as if it were a translation, and as far as we know nobody recognized that this was not the case. This peculiar mixture of erudition and poetry was Leopardi's first published poetical production.

The poem is accompanied by an Introduction musing on the identity of the poet: the uncertain author of the 'Inno a Nettuno', writes the presumed translator, 'pare antichissimo' and seems to hail from Athens, 'o perlomeno dell'Attica'.<sup>31</sup> He could possibly be 'Simonide e Mirone o Merone, poetessa di Bisanzio', or 'Panfo ateniese', or even Homer,<sup>32</sup> who wrote other hymns to Neptune. The author ironically eludes the issue of the poet's identity, wanting to be lost among the ancient poets' voices.

Producing false pieces of poetry or prose disguised as ancient texts was a long-term habit for humanists and scholars working on antiquity from the Renaissance onwards.<sup>33</sup> However, this practice had acquired a peculiar meaning between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With the development of a

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<sup>29</sup> Letter to Pietro Giordani, 30 May 1817, *Epistolario*, I, 93-94.

<sup>30</sup> About the 'conversione letteraria' see Cristian Genetelli, *Incursioni leopardiane: Nei dintorni della 'conversione letteraria'* (Rome-Padua: Antenore, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> TPP, p. 279.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> See Ian Haywood, *Faking it. Art and The Politics of Forgery* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987); *Fake? The Art of Deception*, ed. by Mark Jones with Paul Craddock and Nicolas Barker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); *Contrafactum: copia, imitazione, falso*, ed. by Gianfelice Peron and Alvise Andreose (Padua: Esedra, 2008).

historicist approach to ancient literature, and the progressive distancing of the past, producing ancient forgeries became a way to deal with the detachment from it. The most famous examples of eighteenth century forgery are probably the poems of Ossian, known to have been counterfeited by the Scottish philologist James Macpherson. In 1761, the first volume of the poems, *Fingal*, was published; it was destined to become one of the best-selling books of its age. Macpherson published the poems of Ossian as a translation from the ancient Gaelic, but he was immediately accused of having falsified the text. Consequently, in the second edition of *Fingal*, Macpherson addressed the issue of the poems' authenticity:

Poetry, like virtue, receives its rewards after death. [...] This consideration might induce a man, diffident of his abilities, to ascribe his own compositions to a person, whose remote antiquity and whose situation, when alive, might well answer for faults which would be inexcusable in a writer of this age. An ingenious gentleman made this observation [...]. When he read it, his sentiments were changed. He found it abounded too much with those ideas, that only belong to the most early state of society, to be the work of a modern poet. Of this, I am persuaded, the public will be as thoroughly convinced, as this gentleman was, when they shall see the poems; [...] it would be a very uncommon instance of self-denial in me to disown them, were they really of my composition.<sup>34</sup>

Macpherson was laconic about his role in the composition / recuperation of the ancient text; he did not completely reject the accusation of falsification, but rather alluded to it. The author effaced himself, hid himself beside the mask of the translator. Additionally, the quotation shows how ancient poetry had acquired, from the writer's perspective, a cultural value: the 'reward' that is due to the later acknowledgement of the value of the text as a document of an ancient and lost

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<sup>34</sup> *Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem, in Six Books: Together with Several Other Poems, Composed by Ossian the Son of Fingal, Translated from the Poetic Language by James Macpherson* (London: T. Becket, 1762), p. ii.

civilization. Moreover, as Fiona Stafford highlighted, Macpherson's construction of his forgery was concerned with an irreparable break with the past. The text was in fact presented as remnants of a glorious tradition that was irrecoverably lost, and while Macpherson's translation was aimed at restoring their original purity, 'his own text betrays the sense of the past's ultimate irrecoverability at every turn'.<sup>35</sup>

The *Poems of Ossian* were incredibly successful. As explained in Section 1. 2 of this work, it was Melchiorre Cesarotti who ensured to the text's success by immediately producing a translation and commentary in Italian. Cesarotti used Vico's reflections on original poetry to make sense of the peculiarities of Ossian's language, but he also welcomed the newly rescued 'ancient' text as an example of 'il vero linguaggio poetico'. The beauty of Ossian's 'true' poetical language would make of him 'il più grande poeta di ogni altro' according to Vico's principles ('come vuole il Vico').<sup>36</sup> I would argue, then, that the alleged discovery of Ossian's poems partially compensated, for Cesarotti, the difficulty if not the impossibility, of producing 'true' poetry in modernity. And, as Cesarotti knew, it was Vico, alongside the general mythologist tradition, who raised the issue of the reproducibility of ancient poetry in modernity.

For Foscolo too reading Vico meant acknowledging the deficiencies of modern poetry relative to ancient poetry (Section 1. 3). Foscolo made this clear in the introductory *Discorsi* to his translation from Callimachus' *La chioma di Berenice*, as examined. What I did not mention earlier is that in the comments on the translation itself Foscolo inserted four fragments of an anonymous Greek hymn to the Graces 'da me un tempo tradotti'.<sup>37</sup> These were not, in fact, original Greek verses, but they were written by Foscolo and hidden in *La chioma di Berenice*'s paratext. They represent the first fragments of Foscolo's poem *Le Grazie*, which he would complete in 1812. Foscolo, like Macpherson, was ironic about the identity of the poet and the quality of the fictional 'ancient' text:

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<sup>35</sup> Fiona Stafford, 'Romantic Macpherson', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*, ed. by Murray Pittock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 45-80 (p. 51).

<sup>36</sup> Melchiorre Cesarotti, *Poesie di Ossian* (1763), I, p. cxxix.

<sup>37</sup> Foscolo, *La chioma di Berenice*, pp. 114-15. The other fragments are at pp. 209-12.

‘quantunque questa poesia non abbia i caratteri della nobile semplicità Omerica [...] vengonsi nondimeno *disjecta membra poetae*, ed un ardire felice’.<sup>38</sup> By faking ancient verses, Foscolo was testing his own ability to write like an ancient poet, and was also verifying his audience’s ability to unmask the forgery. The author would again muse ironically on the authorship of the fragments hidden in *La chioma di Berenice* in the 1822 ‘Dissertation on an Ancient Hymn to the Graces’.<sup>39</sup> This text is also the preface to the publication of Foscolo’s own hymn to the Graces (*Le Grazie*, 1812), a text that, as Matteo Palumbo explains, aimed to reassess the possibility of writing mythological poetry in modernity.<sup>40</sup>

Leopardi, like Macpherson and Foscolo, may also have chosen the false identity of the translator to guarantee himself the opportunity of freely reproducing ancient poetry as he imagined it, to write like an ancient poet with his own voice. Leopardi’s conversion to creative writing and the identification of his own creative capabilities is based in fact on multiple readings of Greek poets: ‘non credetti d’esser poeta, se non dopo letti parecchi poeti greci’ (*Zib.* 1741, 19 September 1821). Among the voices of many Greek poets, Leopardi may have found his own, and wanted to express it in the hymn.

The fictional value of ‘Inno a Nettuno’ was recognized by Pietro Giordani, in the posthumous edition of Leopardi’s *Scritti filologici*. As Giordani wrote in the *Proemio*, Leopardi composed the hymn as a result of an in-depth study of the ancient Greek imagination: ‘tutto quanto ebbero di più speciale ne’ costumi, di più intimo nei pensieri e nelle affezioni’; it would have been impossible ‘farsi cosa più greca, più antica [...] Tanto egli era dentro alla teologia di quel popolo!’ When writing the hymn, Leopardi aimed to embody an ancient Greek: ‘prendere persona di greco’, ‘incarnarsi in Grecia sotto i tempi di Pericle e di Anassagora’; ‘ingrecarsi’.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Foscolo, *La chioma di Berenice*, p. 211.

<sup>39</sup> Ugo Foscolo, ‘Dissertation on an Ancient Hymn to the Graces by Ugo Foscolo’, in *Opere*, ed. by Franco Gavazzeni, 2 vols (Turin: Einaudi-Gallimard, 1994), I, 142-68 (pp.142-144).

<sup>40</sup> See Matteo Palumbo, ‘Il racconto del mito e la fondazione della comunità : Le Grazie di Ugo Foscolo’, *Italies* 6 (2002), 527-42.

<sup>41</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *Scritti filologici raccolti e ordinati da Pietro Pellegrini e Pietro Giordani* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1845), pp. 15-16.

Franco D'Intino has noted that Leopardi's first production was 'tutta sbilanciata sul versante dell'imitazione e della metaletteratura, in una sorta di deriva "centrifuga" verso la "maschera".<sup>42</sup> However, no critic has yet connected Leopardi's disguise as a translator to its precise function of allowing the poet to recreate an ancient text. From our perspective, it is significant that, under the false identity of an anonymous Greek poet, Leopardi tackled the theme of myth and developed it in the way we have previously considered; as Giordani observes, myth is regarded as a form of theology, of representation of the ancients' respect for the divine.<sup>43</sup> It means that maybe he was trying to reproduce the original, theological role of ancient poetry, as Foscolo proposed in *La chioma di Berenice*; and that he imagined ancient fables as perceptible representations of the natural forces imagined as divine. Thus, Leopardi may have wanted to exploit his erudition to recreate the voice of an ancient Greek poet, and his deep knowledge of ancient languages, to actually think in Greek.

There is a scarce presence of humans in the hymn – they are prevalently mentioned collectively: see for example 'i pastori', 'gli arcieri', 'i fabbri', 'gli eroi gagliardi in guerra' (ll. 86-88), those who are protected by the gods. In this sense, the poem is also disguised as an ancestral, collective poem – there is no space for introspection, and there is no authorial conscience in a modern sense. A subject considering natural objects and actually inventing myth, the human interpreting the world surrounding him through the fables – that is to say, the subject described in the *New Science* – is apparently absent: there is nobody except the poet himself. The poet, who is Leopardi disguised as an ancient ἀοιδός (cantor), is possessed by the divine Muses, imagining divine creatures everywhere. The subject who is 'mythically' interpreting the world, who is myth-making, is the author, that is to say Leopardi himself.

The young poet seems to position himself, at least fictionally, in a situation that Vico had described theoretically: that of primitive man, who, 'non potendo

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<sup>42</sup> Franco D'Intino, 'Introduzione' to Giacomo Leopardi, *Scritti e frammenti autobiografici* (Rome: Salerno, 1995), p. XIX).

<sup>43</sup> On this point see Felici, *L'Olimpo abbandonato*, p. 19.

fare uso dell'intendimento', idolised things, 'in forza di una corpolentissima fantasia' (*NS*, § 402) and 'giudicava per certo' (*Zib.* 63) that natural objects were occupied, inhabited by divine beings. The ancients were certain that 'gli dèi praticavano in terra con gli uomini' (*NS*, § 69) and that it was possible for men to address them and communicate with them through poetry. In other words, the forgery of the ancient text may have been, for Leopardi, a way to project himself into a sphere in which mythical beliefs were perceived as *true*: it may have been a way of overcoming the rift between the ancient and the modern. As he explained to Giordani, he was so 'innamorato della poesia greca' that he wanted to 'fare come Michel Angelo che sotterrò il suo Cupido, e a chi dissotterrato lo credea d'antico, portò il braccio mancante'.<sup>44</sup> In other words, he was animated by a profound, even erotic affection for ancient poetry, lost and unattainable. Therefore, he planned to give this missing capacity ('il braccio mancante') back to his audience.

Leopardi felt dissatisfied with the experiment of the hymn. In fact, he blushed remembering the precocious composition in the letter to Giordani quoted above, one year later. He admitted: 'io sono andato un pezzo in traccia della erudizione più pellegrina e recondita [...] senza dubbio io ho fatto tutt'altro che poesia'.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, in a note on the hymn's manuscript he wrote that the work was 'un'opera più tosto dell'ingegno che della fantasia e della facoltà poetica'.<sup>46</sup> Leopardi may have felt, during 1816, that experimental year, that approaching ancient poetry through erudite imitation did not work: philology and erudition had prevailed. In his view, poetry became something more than a mere accumulation of erudite references.

In the years of composition and publication of the hymn, the Classicist-Romantic quarrel was in progress. The traditional use of mythological heritage in poetry was being questioned, as mentioned above. After De Staël, 'Romantic' Lodovico Breme wrote that the figures deriving from ancient myths were

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<sup>44</sup> Letter to Pietro Giordani, 30 May 1817, *Epistolario*, I, 104.

<sup>45</sup> Letter to Pietro Giordani, 30 May 1817, *Epistolario*, I, 106.

<sup>46</sup> TPP, p. 287.

‘inefficaci, triviali e pedanti oltre ogni dire’, ‘una lingua tecnica’, ‘un corredo di formole’.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, ‘Classicist’ Londonio replied that ancient myths are part of normal language, so that ‘per escluderle bisognerebbe mandar sossopra il nostro vocabolario’.<sup>48</sup> The debate about the legitimacy of using myth in poetry raised again themes that had been crucial in Vico’s thought: in particular those relating the relationship between poetic and creative skills and the age of the nations, the peculiarities of Italian genius, and the nature of myth. Some writers involved in the debate referred explicitly to Vico’s works, or were clearly inspired by him: Vico was alternatively the rehabilitator of the poetical values of the fables and the one who made their foreignness evident (see Section 2. 1).

Leopardi was involved in the Classicist-Romantic quarrel from its very early stages. Like several other writers, in the summer of 1816 he wrote a letter to the *Biblioteca italiana* in response to De Staël, but it remained unpublished.<sup>49</sup> The young poet, who had recently discovered his talent, supported the Classicists’ argument; while totally refusing the model of the Romantic poets (‘scrittori del Nord’), he also questioned the erudite classicism in which he had been educated. He was particularly concerned about the theme of imitation. Imitating French and German poets, as De Staël suggests, is pointless, wrote Leopardi, but so is imitating classical authors: Italian literature did not lack models, but originality (‘non poca lettura, ma scarsa vaghezza di mettere a frutto l’ingegno proprio ne fa poveri di grandi poeti’).<sup>50</sup> What is necessary is to emulate the ancient poet, going back to the original spontaneity of the ancients - who were ‘senza modelli’ - to revive modern poetry. As suggested above, this is perhaps what Leopardi had tried, without success, through the experiment of the ‘Inno a Nettuno’. He possibly became confident that erudition could not substitute the sparkle of originality (‘scintilla celeste, e impulso sopraumano’)<sup>51</sup> that he believed necessary for writing poetry. Additionally spontaneity appeared to him to be as the most

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<sup>47</sup> Breme, *Il Giaurro*, p. 262.

<sup>48</sup> Giuseppe Londonio, ‘Cenni critici sulla poesia romantica’, in DPR, I, 220.

<sup>49</sup> On the letter see Mario Fubini, ‘Giordani, Madame De Staël, Leopardi’, in *Romanticismo italiano: saggi di storia della critica e della letteratura* (Bari: Laterza, 1953), p. 68.

<sup>50</sup> TPP, p. 943.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

important aesthetic concern.<sup>52</sup> Vico expressed similar views in his *De studiorum ratione*: for him the value of an artistic product is originality ('id maximum est commodum, inventionum praerogativa'). Therefore, paradoxically, the production of good authors requires all models to be destroyed ('optima artium exemplaria prorsus deleri necesse esset, ut optimos autores haberemus').<sup>53</sup>

In 1818, Leopardi read Lodovico Breme's review of Byron's *Jaour*, one of the most radical apologies of the Romantic system and the most severe condemnation of the backwardness of Classicist poetry. Leopardi found Breme's opinion alarming, as he himself admitted: 'ci ho veduto una serie di ragionamenti che può imbrogliare e inquietare' (*Zib.* 15, no date). Probably, as Fabio Camilletti has pointed out, he was unconsciously seduced by Breme's opinions, though he could not admit it, and therefore found his opinions dangerous.<sup>54</sup>

Breme (as seen in Section 2. 1), had argued that modern poetry should take into account the increased propensity for abstract thinking that characterized modern men as opposed to the ancients, and should therefore provide the reader with images that struck their different imagination. In other words, he suggested writing poetry capable of being credible to rational, modern men. Leopardi found Breme's opinions dangerous, as they directly attacked the aesthetic system he was used to, that of Classicism, by invoking a lyrical Descartes (a 'Cartesio poetico') who would revolutionise the Italian approach to literature just as Descartes had revolutionised modern thought years previously.

Similarly, Vico had objected to Descartes as the one that would destroy ('atterrare') the humanities, and to his *Discours sur la méthode*, a text that 'disapprova gli studi delle lingue, degli oratori, degli storici e de' poeti, e pone su solamente la sua metafisica, fisica e matematica, riduce la letteratura al sapere degli arabi'.<sup>55</sup> Also in the case of the Vico-Descartes polemic, therefore, a text –

<sup>52</sup> Sebastiano Timpanaro, *Classicismo e illuminismo nell'Ottocento italiano*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Florence: Le Lettere, 2011), p. 229.

<sup>53</sup> 'The maximum privilege is to be the first to invent something. [...] It is necessary to destroy excellent models to have excellent authors'. Vico, 'De studiorum ratione', in *Opere*, pp. 196 and 198, my translation.

<sup>54</sup> Camilletti, *Classicism and Romanticism*, p. 48.

<sup>55</sup> Vico, 'Vita scritta da se medesimo', p. 29.

Descartes's *Discours sur la méthode* – coming from northern Europe and presented to the audience as modern and revolutionary, because it put large parts of previous culture in question, found strong resistance in Italian culture, a culture rooted in tradition and in the authority of the ancients. Leopardi's polemics with the Romantics reproduces the same dynamic: a rift with traditional culture is tackled with diffidence and with a tendency towards negotiation.

Vico replied to the 'modern' Descartes with his *De studiorum ratione*, as discussed in Section 1. 1. Leopardi, instead, reacted to 'modern' Romantics by writing his *Discorso di un italiano sulla poesia romantica*, designed to be a public reply to Breme's article. In the *Discorso*, Leopardi argued against the abstractness of Romantic poetry by radicalising his reflections about the anthropomorphism of imagination. He argued that the naturalness of this species of imagination is proved by the example, visible to everyone, of children:

Quanto sia comune e trita usanza delle immaginative puerili il vivificare oggetti insensati, non c'è quasi chi l'ignori [...] i fanciulli non attribuiscono alle cose inanimate altri affetti altri pensieri altri sensi altra vita che umana, e quindi procurano altresì di vestirle, ed effettivamente le vestono di forme umane il meglio che possono [...] o Lettori, spontaneamente avvertirete in primo luogo la naturalezza e bellezza delle Favole greche, le quali compiacendo a questo desiderio poetichissimo che è in noi, popolarono il mondo di persone umane.<sup>56</sup>

The analogy with Vico is reinforced by some lexical coincidences: 'cose inanimate', 'oggetti insensati'. This choice of words stresses the nature of life imagined inside natural objects: animation, movement, senses; that is to say, a human-like life (although eternal), not the spiritual life suggested by Breme. This was Vico's opinion, too: men are naturally inclined to imagine natural objects to be inhabited by human-like beings. This principle is the key to understanding

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<sup>56</sup> TPP, p. 991. On the affinity of this passage with Vico's theories see also Raffaele Pinto, 'L'archeologia delle emozioni: le pulsioni di morte nello Zibaldone', in *Lo 'Zibaldone' come ipertesto*, pp. 245-56.

Vico's science of myth: mythical imagination was for primitive men the only possible and most natural way of coherently interpreting the world. What is more, this principle is based on the observation of an eternal operating principle of the human mind. Something similar is noticeable in children: 'è proprietà de' fanciulli di prender cose inanimate tra mani e, trastullandosi, favellarvi come se fussero, quelle, persone vive' (*NS*, § 86). This principle proves, writes Vico, that 'gli uomini del mondo fanciullo' (i.e., 'primitivo'), were 'sublimi poeti', that is to say 'criatori'.<sup>57</sup>

In the *Discorso*, Leopardi recalls the time when 'ogni cosa ci appariva amica o nemica nostra',<sup>58</sup> which is antiquity but also childhood, the only moment when modern men can revive the ancient imagination. At that time, Leopardi writes, nature expressed itself with a language, composed of elements, like thunder, that 'in certo modo accennando, quasi mostrasse di volerci favellare'. Similarly, Vico had explained that ancient men, 'che parlavan per cenni' believed that thunder and lightning were Zeus' signals, and consequently that also Zeus 'comandasse co' cenni, e tali cenni fussero parole reali, e che la natura fusse la lingua di Giove' (*NS*, § 379). 'Cenno' is an important word in Vico's *œuvre*: it is the key to understanding of the first languages, which were mute, articulated in gestures. As Gianfranco Cantelli writes, nature for ancient people had a precise meaning, an explicit meaning: its language is the same as the language of men.<sup>59</sup> This is valid also for Leopardi's early ideas on nature and language.

As Camilletti points out, Leopardi's *Discourse* is not about Classicist poetry, but about poetry in general: it exceeds 'the mere literary dimension, inasmuch as its polemical object is modernity as a whole'.<sup>60</sup> His aim is to defend strenuously what remains of the sphere of innocence, naturalness, ignorance, spontaneity against modernity. Modernity was represented also by Romanticism, which looked dangerous to Leopardi because it opposed tradition and

<sup>57</sup> On the centrality of the metaphor children/ancients in Vico see Daniel Canaris, 'Children and Myth in the Thought of Giambattista Vico', *Intellectual History Review*, 25: 2 (2015), 191-208 (pp. 191-92).

<sup>58</sup> TPP, p. 995.

<sup>59</sup> Cantelli, *Mente, corpo, linguaggio*, p. 34.

<sup>60</sup> Camilletti, *Classicism and Romanticism*, p. 48

atemporality, of which the endurance of myth as a psychic repository of human eternal memory is the most veritable proof. For this reason, although modern men are no longer 'poetical' creatures like the children, 'il poeta deve illudere, e illudendo imitar la natura',<sup>61</sup> nurturing human illusions. In 1818, Leopardi was still adamant about this position, and about the possibility of the re-establishment of Classicist poetry, at least in Italy, thanks to the direct link between the Italian language and the naturalness of the poetic ancient languages, Latin and Greek ('lingue poetichissime').<sup>62</sup>

However, something was about to change. In the following year, 1819, he felt forced to embark on a sudden change of career: 'la mutazione totale in me [...] avvenne si può dire dentro un anno, cioè nel 1819., quando [...] divenni insensibile alla natura, e tutto dedito alla ragione e al vero, insomma filosofo' (*Zib.* 144, 1 July 1820). Since then, until at least 1828, Leopardi considered himself mainly as a philosopher. Later on, he would call this turning point a 'passaggio dalla facoltà immaginativa alla sensitiva' (*Zib.* 703, 28 February 1821). From this moment on, Leopardi was completely sure that it was impossible to recreate ancient poetry. In a text that Colaiacomo has convincingly connected to *Zib.* 144,<sup>63</sup> Leopardi wrote:

Che smania è questa dunque di voler fare quello stesso che facevano i nostri avoli, quando noi siamo così mutati? di ripugnare alla natura delle cose? di voler fingere una facoltà che non abbiamo, o abbiamo perduta, cioè l'andamento delle cose ce l'ha renduta infruttuosa e sterile, e inabile a creare? di voler essere Omeri, in tanta diversità di tempi? Facciamo dunque quello che si faceva ai tempi di Omero, viviamo in quello stesso modo, ignoriamo quello che allora s'ignorava, proviamoci a quelle fatiche, a quegli esercizi corporali che si usavano in quei tempi. (*Zib.* 727-28, 8 March 1821)

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<sup>61</sup> TPP, p. 973.

<sup>62</sup> TPP, p. 944.

<sup>63</sup> Claudio Colaiacomo, 'Zibaldone di pensieri di Giacomo Leopardi', in *Letteratura Italiana. Le opere*, ed. by Alberto Asor Rosa, 3 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1995), III, 217-301 (p. 233).

The difference between ancients and moderns in habits, ways of life, in caring for the body, and in forms of knowledge is therefore unbridgeable.<sup>64</sup> This brings as a consequence the impossible imitation of the ancients' form of expression: a modern Homer is therefore impossible. Surprising as it may be, Vico would have completely agreed with this statement. In fact, he seems not to accept any kind of poetry except the divine and heroic poetry he theorized in the *New Science*. In 1726, he wrote to his friend Gherardo degli Angioli, who had sent him some poems:

[I vostri versi] mi han dato forte motivo di osservarli con l'aspetto de' principi della poesia da noi ultimamente scoperti col lume della Scienza nuova d'intorno alla natura delle nazioni [...]. Ella è venuta a tempi troppo assottigliati da' metodi analitici, troppo irrigiditi dalla severità de' criteri, e sì di una filosofia che professa ammortire tutte le facoltà dell'animo che li provengono dal corpo, e sopra tutte quella d'immaginare, che oggi si detesta come madre di tutti gli errori umani; ed, in una parola, Ella è venuta a' tempi di una sapienza che assidera tutto il generoso della miglior poesia, la quale non sa spiegarsi che per trasporti, fa sua regola il giudizio dei sensi ed imita e pigne al vivo le cose, i costumi, gli affetti con un fortemente immaginarli e quindi vivamente sentirli.<sup>65</sup>

This passage directly correlates Leopardi's musings on the fracture between the ancient and the moderns: in fact, like Leopardi, Vico stresses the role of the body in the production of ancient poetry, that is regulated by 'il giudizio dei sensi', while the moderns' bodies are weakened by abstract thought ('filosofia che professa ammortire le facoltà [...] che provengono dal corpo'). Additionally, Vico accuses modern philosophy of being too analytical, subtle and rigid; similarly,

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<sup>64</sup> On this, see my 'Mutazione', in *Lessico leopardiano 2014*, ed. by Novella Bellucci and Franco D'Intino (Rome: Sapienza Università Editrice, 2014), pp. 101-06.

<sup>65</sup> Vico, *Opere*, p. 315. The editor entitles the letter 'Su Dante e sulla natura della vera poesia'. As Jacobelli Isoldi notes (*Il mito nel pensiero di Vico*, p. 67), Vico thought that the more reflection is developed, the more the 'poetic' skills of imagination weaken. For this reason he was, at first, unenthusiastic of Dante's poetry, which is a reflective poetry belonging to 'tempi barbari ritornati'.

Leopardi blamed the moderns' propensity to analyse ('analizzare, cioè risolvere e disfar la natura [...] nei suoi ultimi e menomi elementi', *Zib.* 3238, 22 August 1823) as responsible of suffocating nature's 'effetto poetico': 'nulla di poetico si scorge nelle sue parti, separandole l'una dall'altra, ed esaminandole a una a una col semplice lume della ragione esatta e geometrica' (*Zib.* 3241, 22 August 1823). Finally, for Vico, as for Leopardi, reproducing ancient poetry, which he defines here as the best poetry ('la miglior poesia'), is impossible in modern times.

From 1819 onwards myth and ancient imagination in the *Zibaldone* would no longer be features of Leopardi's theory of poetry, but objects of speculation, themes of Leopardi's philosophical system that was taking shape. Page after page, the *Zibaldone* indicates some key concerns: 'incivilimento', 'cognizione del vero', and 'uso smodato della ragione' have caused 'infelicità', destruction of the 'illusioni' in modern times. Myth and ancient fables are now observed from a wider perspective: they are considered, for example, in comparison with modernity (*Zib.* 106, 2115), when speculating on persuasion, illusion, and experience (*Zib.* 286, 418), or in relationship to religion and popular opinions (*Zib.* 3461). In other words, myth became a theme of Leopardi's anthropological research. The perception of a new, irremediable rift stands out in these dense notes: fables are now part of an irrecoverable past, and can only be regarded as an object of study, reasoning, and speculation; there is no way of reviving them. This is something Leopardi acknowledged when he dedicated himself to the truth ('il vero') and would never question again.

### 3. 3 - 'Alla Primavera': About (Un)Poetic Logic

From 1815 to 1822 myth was, for Leopardi, many different things. It was at first a human phenomenon connected to the sphere of error, beliefs, and superstition. It was a 'dark side' of the human mind, in contrast with the 'enlightened' sphere of reason and revelation. The *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* was dedicated to this aspect of myth. Later on, with the 1816 'conversione letteraria', mythological erudition became part of the primary

material for writing verses, but this view would not last for long. In 1817 Leopardi had already elaborated a different idea of poetry, directly connected with spontaneity and unawareness: the fable is the very symbol of this idea, which was expounded in the letter to the *Biblioteca italiana* and in the 1818 *Discourse*. From 1819 on, with the ‘mutazione totale’ and dedication to philosophy, myth was merged within the *Zibaldone*’s totalising reflection (which, in 1821 alone, grew from 463 to 2316 pages).

In January 1822, Leopardi’s meditation on myth collapsed into a complex synthesis that took the shape of a poem: ‘Alla Primavera, o delle Favole Antiche’. All the aspects of myth that he had been interested in during his life contributed to its composition: the connection between fable and illusion, the loss of a pre-rational world in which every phenomenon provoked marvel and stimulated imagination, giving birth to the fables.

Vico has been evoked by some scholars as a possible analogue or even a source of ‘Alla Primavera’. For example, in his edition of the *Canti*, Lucio Felici states that Leopardi, in the poem’s title, consciously chooses not to write ‘antichi miti’ but ‘favole antiche’, as he had already done in the 1818 *Discourse* on Romantic poetry. This is why he wants to recall the etymology of the word *favola* from the Latin verb *for, faris*: ‘vichianamente’,<sup>66</sup> writes Felici. This adverb is (deliberately?) ambiguous: it is true that Leopardi’s choice of the word *favola* rather than *myth* makes one think of Vico. It is also true that this word choice corresponds to a precise interpretation, due to its etymology, which immediately focuses on the fables as a form of primordial language and connects the theme of the poem with the sphere of a pre-logical and pre-rational primitive mind. However, the use of *fable* instead of *myth* was widespread in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century mythology (as mentioned in Section 3. 1): some examples are *De l’origine des fables* by Fontenelle, *Delle antiche favole* by Gravina, or the entry *Fable* of Diderot and D’Alembert’s *Encyclopedie*, or the *Dictionnaire de la fable* by Noel. It is not a straightforward case, then, of connecting ‘Alla Primavera’ with Vico simply by this lexical choice.

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<sup>66</sup> TPP, p. 99.

For another reader of 'Alla Primavera', Francesco Tateo, the acknowledgement of Vico's interpretation of the fable may have been necessary for Leopardi to recall the human condition of the ancient people, their sense of nature, their idea of human relationships, their sensibility, the nature of their psychology. Tateo can state, then, that Leopardi, in 'Alla Primavera', 'ideologicamente, ripete la posizione del Vico'.<sup>67</sup> In my view, saying that Leopardi follows Vico ideologically amounts to placing them in the same general framework, including, for example, their religious beliefs or their conception of what philosophy is, which were, in fact, irreducibly different. On the other hand, Leopardi seems to share with Vico some specific ideas. Consequently, Leopardi does not 'repeat' any of Vico's positions: he grounds them on similar postulations, but he introduces elements that are completely extraneous to Vico's thought, such as his intransigent materialism.

'Alla Primavera' was composed in 1822; it was published, together with nine other compositions in 1824 in Bologna, under the title *Canzoni*. This edition was accompanied by an author's introduction, which gives important information about his works. His ten poems are totally extravagant, Leopardi wrote, because their titles are misleading: 'nessuno potrebbe indovinare i soggetti delle Canzoni dai titoli'. In particular, he explains, the theme of 'Alla Primavera' is not spring: 'non descrive né prati né arboscelli né fiori né erbe, né foglie'.<sup>68</sup> So what is the theme of 'Alla Primavera'?

The poem is based on a macro-metaphor: the spring in question is at once the season of spring, the spring of life (i. e., youth), and the spring of mankind (i. e., the pre-logical and pre-metaphysical age). The difficulty of the poem is based on a constant shift between these three different levels: what is said about one of these springs concerns also the others. The expression 'la bella età' (l. 13), for example, exploits the ambivalent meaning of the Latin word *aetas* and alludes to both youth and antiquity. For this reason Ungaretti described 'Alla Primavera' as

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<sup>67</sup> Tateo 'Alla Primavera', p. 32.

<sup>68</sup> TPP, p. 221.

a hermetic poem, referring to its hidden meanings.<sup>69</sup> Rather than hermeticism, however, one can here identify the principle of coincidence between phylogenesis and ontogenesis: Vico was responsible for its modern reformulation, although in Leopardi's age the same principle inspired many Romantic poets, such as Schiller and Hölderlin. Micro and macrocosm, individual and collective coincide, as Leopardi theorized in the *Discourse* on Romantic poetry.

Secondly, these verses should be read as an attempt to trace the ancestral meaning of the idea of spring based on a principle similar to Vico's understanding of metaphor. Vico considered metaphor the most sublime and necessary feature of mythical language:

I primi poeti dieder' a corpi l'essere di sostanze animate, sol di tanto capaci di quanto essi potevano, cioè di senso e passione, e sì ne fecero le favole; talché ogni metafora viene ad essere una picciola favoletta. (*NS*, § 404).

The human mind, in its natural state, tends to think metaphorically, that is to say to transfer its own peculiarities ('senso e passione') to natural objects. This kind of metaphor is not, as Cantelli explains, the Baroque metaphor, the rhetorical figure traditionally linked to 'acutezza d'ingegno', the most powerful intellectual device applied to the imagination, but rather it is a natural and unconscious operation of the imagination. In this perspective, metaphor is not an external ornament, it is the substance of ancient language: 'fonda le cose stesse che si dicono'.<sup>70</sup> The human capacity to *methaphorein* is the key to mythical thought, the key feature of the 'poetic logic' that binds man and nature together.

Something similar happens at the beginning of Leopardi's 'Alla Primavera': the poet's objective is to rebuild the mythical appearance of the happy and auspicious season of spring through poetry, by feeling it in himself, in his

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<sup>69</sup> Giuseppe Ungaretti, 'Secondo discorso su Leopardi', in *Vita di un uomo. Saggi e interventi* (Milan: Mondadori, 1974), p. 487.

<sup>70</sup> Cantelli, *Mente, corpo, linguaggio*, p. 44 and 47.

spring (his youth). Thus he tries to evoke and bring back to life the spring of mankind.

forse alle stanche e nel dolor sepolte  
 umane menti riede  
 la bella età, cui la sciagura e l'atra  
 face del ver consunse  
 innanzi tempo?  
 [...]
   
 ed anco,  
 Primavera odorata, ispiri e tenti  
 questo gelido cor, questo ch' amara  
 nel fior degli anni suoi vecchiezza impara?

'Alla Primavera', ll. 10-19

The poet is doubtful, but also hopeful. He tries to revive that ancient 'poetical logic' that spontaneously held together the idea of springtime and the meanings attributed to it by men, who imagined it had anthropomorphic sense and feelings. The failure of this attempt structures the rest of the poem, which is, precisely, a 'sentimental' and not a 'naïve' poem, to use Schiller's terms.<sup>71</sup>

When Leopardi elaborated the poem, the problem with myth was precisely that it could no longer act as a universal alphabet, as a code. Readers could not any longer understand that immediate antonomasia, such as writing 'Phyllis' for 'nymph' or 'Venus' for 'beautiful woman'.<sup>72</sup> For Vico, as recalled by Donald Philip Verene, antonomasia is the linguistic counterpart of the relationship of

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<sup>71</sup> Friederich Schiller, *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*, English transl., *On the Naive and Sentimental in Literature*, by Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly (Manchester: Carcanet, 1981). On Leopardi and Schiller see Riccardo Bonavita, 'Descrizione di una battaglia. Leopardi e la querelle classica-romantica', *Antichi e moderni* 1 (1998), 30-44.

<sup>72</sup> Umberto Carpi, "'Alla Primavera, o delle Favole antiche" di Giacomo Leopardi', *Per leggere*, 8 (2005), 23-85 (p. 26). See Camilletti, *Classicism and Romanticism*, pp. 36-37.

*individuum pro specie*, the basic principle of the mythical imagination.<sup>73</sup> In fact, among Vico's most relevant 'discoverte' there is the discovery that human minds naturally perform those transfers of meaning (*meta-phorein*) that moderns retrospectively define as rhetorical figures: 'tutti i tropi [...] i quali si sono finora creduti ingegnosi ritruovati degli scrittori, sono stati necessari modi di spiegarsi <di> tutte le prime nazioni poetiche' (NS § 409).

The nucleus of 'Alla Primavera' seems to be based on this principle. By superimposing these three springs onto each other, Leopardi actually demonstrated that the transfer of meaning among the three images no longer worked. The ancient poetical logic was destroyed by rational thinking: as Vico theorized, in modern times 'ci è naturalmente negato di poter formare la vasta immagine di cotal donna che dicono "Natura simpatetica"' (NS, § 378).

So 'Alla Primavera' is about the interruption of a natural, spontaneous communication between men and Nature, men and gods - a communication that Leopardi still imagined possible in his youth, when starting his career in poetry, and that he may have tried to reproduce through erudition in the juvenile 'Inno a Nettuno'. This composition, in fact, is structured according to a similar model, that of the hymn, which is intrinsically allocutive ('Alati prieghi / a te, Nettuno re', ll. 1-2), and based on the communicative guarantee of the ancient 'favole/favelle'. On the contrary, 'Alla Primavera' tells about an un-poetic logic, compared to the lost ancient poetical logic theorized in the *New Science*. Vico had described a world where natural phenomena and nature itself were a system of signs, a completely mature language, based on the fables, 'favelle vere', that modern men cannot understand.<sup>74</sup>

Leopardi frequently used allocutive structures and addressed his poems to a 'you' – ancient or modern, imaginative or real – who normally acted as more of a silent listener than a participant (in addition to the 'Inno a Nettuno', see, for

<sup>73</sup> Donald Philip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>74</sup> Cantelli (*Mente, corpo, linguaggio*, p. 47) explains clearly that the rethorical figures are, in Vico's views, abstract structures used by modern intellect to abstract and express in impoetic language by modern interpreters. On the other hand, in the first language of humanity, imagination is completely free from intellect.

instance, 'Ad Angelo Mai', 'A Silvia').<sup>75</sup> This incomplete/interrupted communication is therefore a recurrent structure in his poetry. However, only once did the poet address again another deity, like the Spring (Flora):<sup>76</sup> and it was the arcane and evil Iranian god Ariman, 'arcana / malvagità [...], eterno / dator de'mali'.<sup>77</sup> Leopardi dedicated an unfinished lyrical sketch to him, 'Ad Arimane' (possibly composed in 1833), which would have perhaps been the perfect companion piece to 'Alla Primavera'. That god of modernity, of 'produzione e distruzione' and of the 'sistema del mondo, tutto patimento' would probably have been in opposition to the Spring, goddess of happiness and youth, lost goddess of antiquity. In a world deprived of meaning, the only deity a poet could reasonably address was an evil one. The reason why Leopardi related the Iranian god to modernity is probably to be found in one of the arguments against Breme, written in the *Zibaldone* in 1818. The poet argued that introducing foreign mythologies in Italian poetry, as Breme suggested, was totally unnatural.

As Salvatore Settis recalls, moderns tend to think of Greece as a world without doubts: 'una classicità rotonda, di γυνῶμαι pronunciate una volta per tutte [...] un paesaggio popolato di modelli e di archetipi, di pietre di fondazione e di cifre universali'.<sup>78</sup> This is a typically modern abstraction of the ancient Greek world, that automatically stigmatises modernity itself as the time of uncertainty and doubt. Leopardi is probably among those who promoted the diffusion of this idea, as we will now see.

Towards the end of 'Alla Primavera', Leopardi again remembers the time when natural objects were animated by human imagination, recalling the principle of anthropomorphisation that grounded the *Discourse* on Romantic poetry, a

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<sup>75</sup> See the analysis provided by Luigi Blasucci in *I titoli dei 'Canti' e altri studi leopardiani* (Venice: Marsilio, 2011), pp. 154-55.

<sup>76</sup> Unless we want to attribute the characteristics of a mythical deity to the Moon, recurrent enigmatic figure to whom Leopardi addresses some of his poems, such as *Alla luna*, *Canto notturno di un pastore errante nell'Asia*.

<sup>77</sup> TPP, p. 472.

<sup>78</sup> Salvatore Settis, 'Introduzione', in Settis, ed., *I Greci. Storia cultura arte società* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), I, p. xxix.

principle that, as seen above, bears strong similarities to Vico's opinions. However, here he goes one step further:

Vissero i fiori e l'erbe,  
vissero i boschi un dì. Conscie le molli  
aure, le nubi e la titania lampa  
fur dell'umana gente, allor che ignuda  
te per le piagge e i colli,  
ciprigna luce, alla deserta notte  
con gli occhi intenti il viator seguendo,  
te compagna alla via, te de' mortali  
pensosa immaginò.

'Alla Primavera', ll. 39-47

Leopardi imagines that objects, in ancient times, had not only 'senso e passione', but also felt interest in and compassion towards human beings. By doing so, his 'anthropomorphization' of nature therefore goes beyond Vico's: he attributes to those figures imagined by ancient people, not only a biological life consisting of the perception and interaction with human beings, but also the faculty of thinking, feeling, and caring, in order to answer, at least partially, Leopardi's obsessive quest for the meaning of life.<sup>79</sup>

In *Zib.* 1823 and the following pages, written a few months before 'Alla Primavera', Leopardi highlighted that man naturally inclines towards 'i suoi simili', and tends towards himself. He comes even closer to Vico's axiom: man makes himself the measure of all things (*NS*, § 120). Only the 'snaturamento prodotto dalla filosofia' in modernity is the cause of the inclination of man towards what is different from him. Leopardi subtly invokes his own response to Breme's opinions about imagining that things were alive:

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<sup>79</sup> For Cantelli (*Mente, corpo, linguaggio*, p. 64), Vico thought that gods imagined by primitive minds were near men, they guided and assisted and punished them, giving a sense to what they did. However, in Vico there is nothing comparable to Leopardi's sense of assistance and reciprocal understanding between humans and deities, as described in 'Alla Primavera'.

Non vi vuole che un intero snaturamento prodotto dalla filosofia perché i poeti, (massime stranieri) de' nostri giorni pretendano d'interessarci per una bestia, un fiore, un sasso, un ente ideale, un'allegoria (*Zib.* 1823, 1 October 1821)

Modern philosophy, wrote Leopardi, causes indifference, because 'non mette differenza fra'simili e dissimili'. By contrast, ancient mythology could metamorphose 'in uomini tutti gli oggetti della natura' because of 'soprabbondanza di vita, di passione, di attività nell'animo umano' (*Zib.* 1830, 3 October 1821), which is, Leopardi explained, the opposite of indifference. Many years earlier, Leopardi wrote in the *Discourse* on Romantic poetry that in ancient times 'ogni cosa appariva amica o nemica nostra, indifferente nessuna, insensata nessuna'. These examples explain that Leopardi now regarded ancient mythology as the expression of the interaction and supposed similarity of men, things and gods, a view that is close to Vico's. Leopardi had anticipated a similar conception of ancient imagination several years earlier, on pages 63-4 of the *Zibaldone*. The page is undated, but it is likely to have been written between 1818 and 1819, at the same time as the composition of the *Discourse* on Romantic poetry. In this passage Leopardi nostalgically recalls the time when 'ogni cosa era viva secondo l'immaginazione umana e viva umanamente cioè abitata o formata di esseri uguali a noi'. Critics always place emphasis on this passage's nostalgic commemoration of the lost paradise of ancient times; however, Leopardi offers here also a precise description of how he imagines that time. When he writes that in ancient times things (that is to say anything connected to the natural world - Leopardi himself, a few lines below, specified that he was speaking of 'boschi', 'fonti', 'alberi', 'fiori'), are *alive according to the human imagination*, this implies a deep reflection on the properties of ancient people's imaginative skills.

Leopardi could have written that in ancient times 'ogni cosa era viva', without any further clarification, but he did not: he specified that 'ogni cosa era viva secondo l'immaginazione umana'. There is no comma between 'viva' and 'secondo'. The human faculty of imagining is not mentioned in an aside, as if

Leopardi wished to say: ‘Men’s imagination felt that everything was alive, but it was not so, that belief was a mistake.’ The phrase needs to be read with reference to what precedes it: ‘ogni cosa era viva’. The meaning of the word ‘viva’, here, is, in my opinion, closer to ‘revived’ than to ‘alive’: that is to say, the correct paraphrase of this sentence would then be ‘Everything was revived *by* men’s imagination.’ Therefore the role of the imagination is considered as strongly active in the revival of nature, and its action consists in a creative interpretation of the data conveyed by the senses.

This is much closer to Vico. Those men who revived nature through imagination recall Vico’s first men interpreting and imagining the surrounding world ‘facendo di sé regola dell’universo’ (*NS*, § 120). The philosopher explains this principle in several passages of the *New Science*; it is one of the main axes of his thought and one of his most important ‘discoveries’: primitive men, who could not make use of rational thinking, ‘con uno sublime lavoro tutto contrario, diedero sensi e passioni [...] a’ corpi, e vastissimi corpi quanti sono cielo, terra, mare’ (*NS*, § 402). Ancient imagination, in other words, is ‘tutta contraria’ to rational thinking, which is capable of understanding rationally how the forces of Nature work, but is incapable of personifying trees and rivers and thunder, of imagining fantastic stories about nymphs and satyrs inhabiting nature, and of relating everything to a protecting and loving divinity: ‘tutti i fiori a Flora, tutte le frutta a Pomona’ (*NS*, § 402).

This is how the primitive ‘metafisica poetica’ worked, according to Vico: in other words, how primitive men imagined the forces they could not abstractly rationalize. However, this metaphysics completely depends on the world of nature, of φύσις: this is how, for Vico, the primitive mind worked. Furthermore, it is directed to objects of nature, such as trees or fruits. Similarly, Leopardi recalls a time in which natural things were alive and either ‘amica’ or ‘nemica’: a world in which there was no abstract thinking, no immanent deities. One can therefore say that, in both Vico and Leopardi’s theories, poetical metaphysics and the natural world merge. There is apparently no nostalgia in Vico, who is not interested in judging whether the ancients were happier than the moderns. In Leopardi, instead,

the point is precisely happiness, and the sense of its irreparable loss – the loss of a faculty, ancient imagination; the loss of historical conditions that allowed men to communicate with the gods.

The *Zib.* 63-64 passage also contains an interesting clue that anticipates 'Alla Primavera'. In the first line, Leopardi wrote that 'ogni cosa era viva'; he later changed the subject. At first he chose the impersonal 'nei boschi desertissimi si giudicava per certo che abitassero le belle Amadriadi'; then, the second person 'credevi tutto abitato'. This change of person is quite telling: in the first line, Leopardi lets imagination prevail over rationality: it was a beautiful time when everything was effectively alive. It was not a mistake, an 'errore popolare degli antichi': from an ancient's point of view, nature was really, not symbolically, alive. Then, Leopardi introduces human judgement, that is to say the activity of the unconditioned mind that interprets reality without any doubts: at that time, 'si giudicava per certo' that Hamadryades lived in woods. Finally, he addresses himself to a hypothetical interlocutor, who, is likely the author himself: 'credevi tutto abitato', 'you would have thought that everything was inhabited'.

It is very clear from the theorization of the *New Science* that primitive men had no doubts in believing the fables their imagination created: 'Nelle loro favole, fedelmente ci tramandarono il Cielo avere in terra regnato sopra degli uomini' (*NS*, § 4, my emphasis); 'gli dèi praticavano in terra con gli uomini' (*NS*, § 69). Gods 'consorted with men', truly, really. As Vico explains, the ancients were as sincere as children: 'i primi uomini della gentilità essendo stati semplicissimi quanto i fanciulli, i quali per natura son veritieri, le prime favole non poterono fingere nulla di falso; per lo che dovettero necessariamente essere [...] vere narrazioni' (*NS* § 408).

In 'Alla Primavera' doubt plays a key role, expressed through rhetorical questions: 'forse alle stanche e nel dolor sepolte / umane menti riede / la bella età [...]?' (ll. 10-12); 'vivi tu, vivi o santa/ Natura?' (ll. 20-21). Doubt is a symbol of modern philosophy: 'il vero consiste essenzialmente nel dubbio, e chi dubita, sa, e sa il più che si possa sapere' (*Zib.* 1655, 8 September 1821). Instead, once upon a time there was no space for doubt: '*vissero* i fiori e l'erbe / *vissero* i boschi un dì'

(ll. 39-40), effectively and really. As in the first line of the passage from *Zibaldone* 63-64, imagination prevailed over logical thinking.

The painful doubt that structures 'Alla Primavera' is the same one that assailed Leopardi in 1818, one moment after reading Breme's article: 'io per mia natura non sono lontano dal dubbio anche sopra le cose credute indubitabili', he wrote in *Zib.* 15, before hanging onto his certainties and responding furiously to Breme's *Osservazioni*. That was the moment when the poet started *doubting*, undermining his certain ideas about ancient and modern poetry. That is why Breme's ideas were 'pericolose': because they led to doubt, which is the starting point of disillusionment and unhappiness.

After 'Alla Primavera', Leopardi radically changed his attitude towards myth, as if the composition of the poem had consumed all the possible poetical life of this theme. After 1822, fantastic and mythical creatures returned to Leopardi's pages in the satirical prose of the *Operette morali*, where they are depicted as funny, clumsy shadows – such as Hercules, Atlas, and Prometheus in the dialogues dedicated to them, Zeus in 'Storia del genere umano', and the Sun in 'Copernico'. Totally humanised and modernized in a sort of modern Hellenism,<sup>80</sup> those figures are subject to disenchantment, error, powerlessness; they witness the corruption of mankind without being able to do anything about it - and maybe are themselves destined to the same corruption.

Myth also obscurely and implicitly influenced and informed some of Leopardi's later poems, such as 'Le ricordanze' and 'A Silvia'. Through memory Silvia, Nerina, and other figures and places of Leopardi's youth come to a sort of posthumous mythization, recalling the Heleusi mysteries<sup>81</sup> or the symbolic figures of nymphs.<sup>82</sup>

Unlike most of his contemporaries, Leopardi never expressed a firm trust in the teleological orientation of human development, as will be discussed in

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<sup>80</sup> See Franco D'Intino, *L'immagine della voce : Leopardi, Platone e il libro morale* (Venice: Marsilio, 2009), on pp. 227-31.

<sup>81</sup> See Franco D'Intino, 'I misteri di Silvia. Motivo persefoneo e mistica eleusina in Leopardi', *Filologia e critica*, 19:2, (1994), pp. 211-71.

<sup>82</sup> See Fabio Camilletti, *Leopardi's Nymphs. Grace, Melancholy, and the Uncanny* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013).

further detail in the following chapters. However, he assumed the principle of historicity of man: it is precisely the acknowledgement of the necessity of considering man in his historical dimension that gives birth to his research. In a passage quoted above, Leopardi described precisely the manifestation of this new knowledge: 'Nella carriera poetica il mio spirito ha percorso lo stesso stadio che lo spirito umano in generale. Da principio' - that is to say around the 'Inno a Nettuno' and his first compositions - 'il mio stato era in tutto e per tutto come quello degli antichi': the imaginative skills of his youth made him able to reproduce the state of the ancients. But later he wrote:

La mutazione totale in me, e il passaggio dallo stato antico al moderno [...] tanto più mi allontanava dagli antichi e mi avvicinava ai moderni. [...] Così si può ben dire che in rigor di termini, poeti non erano se non gli antichi, e non sono ora se non i fanciulli o giovanetti, e i moderni che hanno questo nome, non sono altro che filosofi. [...] Divenni [...] tutto dedito alla ragione e al vero, in somma filosofo (*Zib.* 143-44, 1 July 1820).

This passage implies the acknowledgement of a new paradigm of historicity: man is a historical creature, and the stages of civilization are incompatible one with another. And Leopardi himself, who feels this fracture within himself, is forced into a painful admission:

La forza creatrice dell'animo appartenente alla immaginazione, è esclusivamente propria degli antichi. Dopo che l'uomo è divenuto stabilmente infelice, e, che peggio è, l'ha conosciuto, e così ha realizzata e confermata la sua infelicità; inoltre dopo ch'egli ha conosciuto se stesso e le cose, tanto più addentro che non doveva, e dopo che il mondo è divenuto filosofo, l'immaginazione veramente forte, verde, feconda, creatrice, fruttuosa, non è più propria se non de' fanciulli. (*Zib.* 725-26)

'Stato antico' versus 'stato moderno'; 'poeti' versus 'filosofi'. This is a matter of historicity: as Colaiacomo writes 'Leopardi ha trasformato qui

l'esperienza della "mutazione" in una periodizzazione storico-antropologica'.<sup>83</sup> The poetry of the ancients was unique because it existed in a past, lost historical dimension. Consequently, the happy condition in which the ancients lived is also lost. Leopardi assumed the historicity of man, but he demystified the myth of history, mocking the optimists who thought that human development is governed by a wise providential intelligence and has a teleological orientation, and who believe in 'la perfettibilità propria dell'uomo'.<sup>84</sup> Leopardi broke with the old, exhausted canon of classicism and its basic principle of atemporality, to observe man in his progressive development and decay. The poet will never completely stop yearning for a natural, unconscious, and poetic bygone phase of human history, and he will always criticise, radically and even sardonically, those who proclaim a faith in history, in man, and in destiny. In the following chapter we will see how he reacted to his contemporaries' progressivist engagement by dedicating himself to an anthropological explorations of human origins.

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<sup>83</sup> Colaiacomo, *Lo 'Zibaldone'*, p. 233.

<sup>84</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, 'Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico' (1832), in OM, p.417.

## CHAPTER 4

### FLORENCE

#### Studying the Ancient as the Other (1827-1828)

As highlighted in the Introduction, Milan was the main cultural centre in post-Napoleonic Italy. However, after the closure of *Il conciliatore*, the main Milanese journal of its time, the cultural dynamics in Italy started to change. As we will see in the following section, the establishment of new cultural institutions in Florence prompted the migration of intellectuals and of cultural enterprises from Milan to Florence, which would rapidly become the new Italian cultural capital.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter identifies the experience of the Florentine Gabinetto Vieusseux and its journal *Antologia*, particularly in the years 1827-28 as a key point in the reception of Vico, and in the discussion of Vico-related topics. The first section describes general tendencies in the reassessment of Vico's message; the second section addresses Leopardi's philological work and study of the *New Science* (and other sources) in a particularly intense phase of his studies on Homer by highlighting similarities and differences with the work of other intellectuals in the same environment. While Vico-related discussions among the intellectuals of the Vieusseux's group reveal a tendency towards engagement and optimism, Leopardi goes in the opposite direction by looking back to the prehistory of man, in search of a common principle. The analysis provided in this chapter suggests that the two tendencies can of course be read as opposing, but also as complementary.

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<sup>1</sup> See Berengo, *Cultura e istituzioni*, p. 61.

#### 4. 1 - Florence 1827-1828: Restoration, Resurrection, Re-foundation

In September 1827 Leopardi noted down in the *Zibaldone*:

Ci resta ancora molto a *ricuperare* della civiltà antica, dico di quella de' greci e de' romani. Vedesi appunto da quel tanto d'instituzioni e di usi antichi che recentissimamente si son *rinnovati*: le scuole e l'uso della ginnastica, l'uso dei bagni e simili. [...] La tendenza di questi ultimi anni, più decisa che mai, al miglioramento sociale, ha cagionato e cagiona il *rinnovamento* di moltissime cose antiche, sì fisiche, sì politiche e morali, abbandonate e dimenticate per la barbarie, da cui *non siamo ancora del tutto risorti*. Il presente *progresso* della civiltà, è ancora un *risorgimento*; consiste ancora, in gran parte, in *ricuperare il perduto*. (*Zib.* 4289, my emphases)

When Leopardi wrote these words he had recently arrived in Florence. He had left Recanati in 1825, and had been living in Bologna and Milan before arriving in Tuscany. This period of his life had been characterized by a series of closures: in 1822 he had acknowledged the rift between the ancients and the moderns described in 'Alla Primavera', as discussed in Section 3. 1. In 1823, he celebrated the end of the illusion of love in 'Alla Sua Donna'. In 1826, he declared the abandonment of his previous commitments to the 'dolci inganni' and 'dilette immagini' of poetry, in a public reading of the poem 'Al Conte Carlo Pepoli'. This last text marked a watershed in Leopardi's self-representation: from this moment on, he declared, he would give up composing poetry, which could only be inspired by the illusions of his youth. Instead, he would dedicate himself to philosophical speculation, 'l'acerbo vero' ('Al Conte Carlo Pepoli', l. 140).

Leopardi's pessimism sharpened in this period. In 1825 he wrote the 'Frammento apocrifo di Stratone di Lampsaco' (later published in the 1845 edition of the *Operette morali*), a prose work that expresses a radical, desperate materialism. Secondly, Leopardi developed an interest in stoic indifference by

translating Epictetus's Ἐγχειρίδιον (*Manuale di Epitteto*).<sup>2</sup> Finally, in 1826 he denied any teleological sense to both human and non-human life in the *Zibaldone*, explicitly reversing the optimistic formula, 'tutto è bene', which he attributed to Pope and Leibniz.

Tutto è male. Cioè tutto quello che è, è male; che ciascuna cosa esista è un male; ciascuna cosa esiste per fin di male; l'esistenza è un male e ordinata al male; il fine dell'universo è il male... (*Zib.* 4174, 16 April 1826)

Therefore, the Leopardi that arrived in Florence in 1827 was – at least from a philosophical point of view – an extremely disillusioned man: he would probably have defined himself as 'dissipé' or 'disapplicato' as he jotted down in an enigmatic annotation on page 4282 of the *Zibaldone*. Domenico De Robertis spoke, in this case, of Leopardi's Florence as 'una città di crisi'.<sup>3</sup> This is why it is particularly surprising that, after a few weeks, this apparently cynical man noted down the words quoted at the beginning of this section, which seem to look at the present with some optimism. Not only was a 'risorgimento' possible, but it was actually happening, even if it was not complete. Additionally, the passage shows a shade of engagement – 'ci resta' – which seems to imply that the poet felt involved in this process to a certain extent.

Significantly, Leopardi described progress in terms of recovering the past: the present is a 'risorgimento' only if it 'recupera il perduto', and, therefore, if features of ancient civilizations, such as the use of the *gymnasium* and of public schools, are repropounded in order to improve the quality of life in the modern world. This note would develop, later on, into the project of writing a 'parallelo

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<sup>2</sup> See Franco D'Intino, "'Moralisti greci': Leopardi, Bruto, Teofrasto, Epitteto", in Giacomo Leopardi, *Volgarizzamenti in prosa* ed. by Franco D'Intino (Venice: Marsilio, 2012), pp. 158-76.

<sup>3</sup> Domenico De Robertis, 'Leopardi e Firenze', in *Le città di Giacomo Leopardi*, pp. 133-58 (p. 133).

della civiltà degli antichi (cioè Greci e Romani) e di quella dei moderni’, a work that Leopardi would never write.<sup>4</sup>

The word ‘risorgimento’, which here refers ambiguously both to the renewal of the present and to the recovery of the past, is the same word Leopardi used in 1821 in reference to Angelo Mai’s philological achievements, which revive the ancient past: in the poem ‘Ad Angelo Mai’, Leopardi had celebrated their glory but also their uselessness (‘perché tanti / risorgimenti?’ ll. 8-9; see Section 2. 1). In 1828, when still in Florence, Leopardi would experience (or fake, as D’Intino has suggested)<sup>5</sup> a personal ‘resurrection’, consisting of a new wave of poetic inspiration, and he would write a poem on this, significantly entitled ‘Il risorgimento’ (1828). Therefore, all these ‘risorgimenti’ have in common an ambiguous resurrection of the origins: the ancient that, through the work of the philologist, finds a new voice (‘voce antica de’ nostri, / muta sì lunga etade’, ‘Ad Angelo Mai’, ll. 7-8), features of the ancient society that find a new place in modernity (*Zib.* 4289, 27 September 1827), and, finally, the poet that, after a period of silence, finds a way to keep in contact with his own anteriority, and manages to write poetry ‘all’antica [...] con quel mio cuore di una volta’.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the word ‘risorgimento’ seems to be for Leopardi a keyword linking the general (the human spirit, social progress) with the particular (the self and his childhood), phylogenesis with ontogenesis.

‘Risorgimento’ is also, of course, the word we currently use to refer to the historical process leading to Italian Unification.<sup>7</sup> Almost a century before, Vico had spoken of a ‘ricorso che fanno le nazioni’: according to Vico’s principles, peoples cyclically undergo phases of barbarism and progress, glory and misery. As discussed in Section 1. 3, within post-revolutionary generations Vico’s account of historical Providence, and the theory of cyclical recourse in particular, fostered confidence and hope that Italy would necessarily resurrect from the current social, political and cultural crisis. A good example of this is the opening of the *Vite degli*

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<sup>4</sup> TPP, p. 1112.

<sup>5</sup> D’Intino, “‘Moralisti greci’: Leopardi, Bruto, Teofrasto, Epitteto”, p. 176.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Paolina Leopardi, *Epistolario*, II, 1480. See Camilletti, *Leopardi’s Nymphs*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Carlo Calcaterra, ‘Sull’origine della parola “Risorgimento”’, *Convivium* 1 (1947), 5-32.

*eccellenti italiani*, by Francesco Lomonaco (1802). Lomonaco read in Vico's system an eternal natural rule that promised that phases of disorder and chaos must necessarily be followed by phases re-establishing civilization: 'per eterna legge della natura, le cose tutte di questo mondo dall'ordine inabissano nel disordine, e dal disordine all'ordine risalgono...'.<sup>8</sup>

Understanding the difference between Leopardi's use of the semantic field of resurgence/renaissance and the meaning it acquired during the nineteenth century means not only grasping Leopardi's 'difference' in his cultural framework, but also the different uses of Vico's memory in post-revolutionary Italy: the following pages are dedicated to this. Page 4289 of the *Zibaldone* marks the opening of a season of Leopardi's life that deals in various ways with the concept of progress and recuperation. The fact that this happened in Florence, at the Gabinetto Vieusseux, where readers of Vico such as Niccolò Tommaseo, Gabriele Pepe and Alessandro Manzoni gathered, is probably not a coincidence. I will in fact argue that Leopardi's reflection on the origins in the years 1827-28 developed in a Vico-inspired environment.

This section addresses the cultural environment of 1820s Florence exploring different approaches to the ideas of social progress with specific reference to the use of the memory of the ancient. As discussed subsequently, there were cases in which knowledge of the past and intervention in the present were intertwined. Similarly, the study of Vico, which led to further interpretations and manipulations of his message, was also a key feature of this cultural context. An analysis of Leopardi's nonconformist reactions to this environment, and his peculiar use of the *New Science*, will shed new light on the cultural dynamics that characterized this phase of Italian history.

The Gabinetto Vieusseux was established in 1819 by Giovan Pietro Vieusseux, a Swiss merchant.<sup>9</sup> It consisted of a public space equipped with a library; its function was to foster reading, but also meetings of intellectuals and

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<sup>8</sup> Lomonaco, *Vite*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> 'Cronologia del Gabinetto Vieusseux, 1819-1995', ed. by Laura Desideri, *Antologia Vieusseux*, 3-4 (1995-1996), 17-155.

cultural exchanges. The idea of the Gabinetto was conceived in analogy with French models,<sup>10</sup> according to a new conceptualization of the public space: as highlighted by Daniel Roche (drawing on Habermas), a public space aimed at ‘l’acculturation des sociabilités’ characterized French society in the years before the Revolution. Indeed, it is typical of a society in which intellectuals are excluded from power, and therefore create a space dedicated to promoting public engagement and the formation of public opinion. Through this kind of space, intellectuals tried to have an impact on contemporary society and to mediate between audience and institutions.<sup>11</sup> In Italy, during the Bourbon Restoration, some features of pre-revolutionary French society resurfaced: the emergence of the bourgeoisie as a potential ruling class, and the spread of the necessity to have an impact on society.

Vieusseux conceived his idea noticing that Florence lacked a public space dedicated to reading, the act that he saw as the engine of cultural and scientific progress.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, not only did he provide the city with a state-of-the-art library, but he also mainly selected books and journals that he perceived as useful for exploring contemporary culture: he selected a huge number of Italian and European literary, political, and scientific journals, and dictionaries, biographies, atlases and other reference books. He neglected, instead, novels and fiction, works that, for him, had limited impact on public life.<sup>13</sup> It rapidly became the space in which a large number of prominent writers and intellectuals gathered: Gino Capponi, Pietro Giordani, Niccolò Tommaseo, Giuseppe Montani, Giuseppe Niccolini, Giuseppe Micali, Stendhal and many others, including Manzoni and Leopardi. Additionally, the project of the journal *Antologia*, conceived by Foscolo

<sup>10</sup> Similar spaces of meeting and exchange were not new in Tuscany: see Fabia Borroni Salvadori, ‘Riunirsi in crocchio, anche per leggere: le origini del gabinetto di lettura a Firenze’, *Rassegna storica toscana*, 27:1 (1981), 11-33.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Roche, ‘Sociabilité et espace public, XVII-XVIII siècles’, *Antologia Vieusseux*, 49-50 (2011), 9-32.

<sup>12</sup> See the letter to Sismondi, 1814, in André Frènes, *Jean Pierre Vieusseux d’après sa correspondance avec J.C.L. Sismondi* (Rome: Forzani, 1888), pp. 22-23.

<sup>13</sup> See Vieusseux’s notes in Laura Desideri, ‘La biblioteca del Gabinetto di Giovan Pietro Vieusseux negli anni dell’“Antologia”’, *Antologia Vieusseux*, 22 (2002), 3-33. The complete list of periodicals hosted in Vieusseux’s library is reproduced at pp. 8-9.

and Capponi, regularly published by Vieusseux from 1821 to 1832 and modelled on the French *Revue Encyclopedique*, was also conceived as an anthology of the outcomes of contemporary research and cultural trends.<sup>14</sup> It was dedicated mainly to social and economic topics, but did not overlook philology, literature and geographical explorations.

The exchanges fostered by the Gabinetto Vieusseux were a key element in the formation of an Italian intellectual ruling class. In particular, the journal *Antologia* was, according to Umberto Carpi, a journal 'dal chiaro disegno egemonico'.<sup>15</sup> Vieusseux's circle and its journal can be described as 'progressive' in all respects: politically, the participants were in fact ascribable to the area of socialism, they were engaged in a project of social progress and education of the people, and fostered the idea of Italian cultural unification. This aura of optimism and engagement is partly and obliquely reflected in Leopardi's private pages: but for him, progress is basically a process of partial, fragmented recuperation; it does not consist in reacquiring the status of glory and international recognition that the Peninsula had experienced only during the Roman Empire and the Renaissance.

Despite the fact that most of the space in *Antologia* was dedicated to subjects such as the economy, statistics, and politics, it gave considerable attention to the ancient world.<sup>16</sup> Within the multiplicity of voices from Vieusseux's group, there were a few that encouraged a renewed understanding of the ancients, conceived as the engine for reflecting on and taking action in the modern world, and specifically in the delicate Italian situation.

This was clear from the early conception of the journal. A few years before, the self-defined Romantics had harshly criticised the pedantries of traditional philology, creating a fracture in Italian culture's relationship with Classic and ancient texts (Section 2. 2). By doing so, they seemed to have been receptive to Foscolo's message. In fact, they tried to find a new way to approach

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<sup>14</sup> Desideri, 'La biblioteca del Gabinetto di Giovan Pietro Vieusseux negli anni dell'"Antologia"', pp. 12-13.

<sup>15</sup> Umberto Carpi, *Letteratura e società nella Toscana del Risorgimento* (Bari: De Donato, 1974), p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Antonio La Penna, 'Lo studio del mondo antico nell'"Antologia" del Vieusseux', in *Leopardi a Firenze*, ed. by Laura Melosi (Florence: Olschki, 2002), pp. 339-79.

the Greek and Roman legacy, which would overcome both the sterile imitation of classic models in the production of new literature and the traditional pedantic approach to studying antiquity (Section 1. 3). It was precisely from the acknowledgement of this necessity that in 1819 Gino Capponi, while staying in London with Foscolo, started elaborating the project of a new journal: the planned journal would consider ancient literature ‘in grande e in opposizione eterna alla pedanteria’, and would tackle ‘lo spirito, e non la grammatica’ of it, ‘il che i filologi non hanno mai sognato di fare’.<sup>17</sup> It is clear that these words recalled both Foscolo’s hypothesis of a ‘nuova strada di studiare i Classici’, invoked in the *La chioma di Berenice*, and Borsieri’s project for the *Biblioteca italiana* of 1816 (see Section 2. 1), later conveyed in the journal *Il conciliatore* (1819-1820).

It is not productive here to reproduce a complete account of the study of antiquity among the Vieusseux group. For the purposes of this dissertation, it will be sufficient to analyse a small series of relevant examples. The period 1827-1828 will serve as a sample time-span, not only because in those years Leopardi travelled between Florence and Pisa and engaged in febrile research on the ancient world (and also on the *New Science*, together with other sources: see Section 4. 2), but also because they are key years for the formation of Italian national identity. 1827 is the year – as mentioned in Section 2. 1 – that witnessed a short reactivation of the Classicist-Romantic quarrel, and therefore renewed the debate about the relationship between the ancients and the moderns. Moreover, it is the year of the first publication of Alessandro Manzoni’s *I promessi sposi*, which would rapidly become a strong point of identification for the Italian bourgeoisie; and it is also the year of the publication and – indeed – the rejection of Leopardi’s *Operette morali*, which was also meant to be an educational book, aimed at giving to Italy her ‘lingua filosofica’. It is therefore a year in which different authors and communities who were aiming to create a project for the future nation saw significant developments.

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<sup>17</sup> *Lettere di Gino Capponi e di altri a lui*, ed. by Alessandro Carraresi, 5 vols (Florence: Le Monnier, 1882) V, 109, 96. Paolo Prunas, *L’Antologia di Gian Pietro Vieusseux. Storia di una rivista italiana* (Rome-Milan: Società editrice Dante Alighieri, 1906), pp. 34-36.

A good example of the new attitude to the ancient world and its study proposed by the journal *Antologia* is a long letter-essay, published by an anonymous writer in July 1827.<sup>18</sup> In fact, this text mingled progressive ideals, the desire to educate the masses, and a new conception of philology; in other words, it participates in the same Vico-related inspiration that can be found in the texts by Foscolo and Borsieri. The anonymous writer summed up his reflections on ‘i principii sui quali mostrate doversi appoggiare l’educazione italiana rispetto alla storia, al popolo e alla letteratura’,<sup>19</sup> therefore showing an interest in the formation of an educated Italian middle class. To achieve this aim, he advocated going beyond imitation and philology as it was done in schools, to understand the ancients

non come scrittori, ma come uomini [...] studiando gli antichi come scrittori non accozziamo che frammenti, che mai non potremo ordinare in un tutto, senza il soccorso della storia, della critica e della filosofia.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, the anonymous writer stressed the importance of an anthropological and historical understanding of the ancient world: this was, according to him, ‘il vero studio degli antichi nel secolo nostro’. The distinction between approaching the ancients ‘come scrittori’ and ‘come uomini’ marks the rise of a historicistic sensibility in the Italian approach to Greek and Roman tradition. Therefore, the author was reassessing the fracture between a past attitude towards antiquity, which looked at the ancients as exemplary authorities (‘il vero studio degli antichi’, in fact, ‘deve trattenerci dal servilmente imitarli’)<sup>21</sup> and a renewed one, that would look at the past in a way that would be ‘utile’ to the new Italian nation. The letter insisted on the utility of this new perspective for

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<sup>18</sup> [Anonymous], ‘Lettera intorno allo studio degli antichi’, *Antologia*, 27: 79 (July 1827), 41-54.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Lettera intorno allo studio degli antichi’, p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Lettera intorno allo studio degli antichi’, p. 48.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

reviving Italian culture: ‘il nostro risorgimento’ otherwise, would be ‘impossibile’.<sup>22</sup>

The author of the anonymous letter also wished for the rise of an Italian Homer; in fact, according to the writer, Italians needed to revive their ‘sentimento patriottico’ through works that would encourage emulation and noble feeling, as Homer and Herodotus’s works did in their time. Again, the author insisted on imitating ‘gli autori, non le opere’:<sup>23</sup> in short, to make any possible effort to give literature back the role that it played in ancient civilizations. This was not possible through direct imitation, but only through the study of the original function of literature. Clearly, this letter reiterates the narratives that Foscolo had started to write years before, in the commentary to Callimachus’s *La chioma di Berenice*: it thus expressed the need for a renewed *epos* in Italian culture.

Many other intellectuals shared an interest in ancient epic: in 1827-1830 the Gabinetto Vieusseux saw a wave of interest in Homeric studies. This was probably a consequence of the excitement about the current Greek struggle for national freedom, which, in turn, reflected a wish for the independence of Italy, recently revived by the unsuccessful 1820-1821 riots.<sup>24</sup> However, already in the first issues of the journal the philologist Cesare Lucchesini (1753-1832) had published consistently about the Homeric question, with specific interest in the works by Richard Payne Knight (1750-1824).<sup>25</sup> Later, debates about this topic would be fostered by Giuseppe Montani (1789-1833).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> ‘Lettera intorno allo studio degli antichi’, p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Lettera intorno allo studio degli antichi’, p. 48.

<sup>24</sup> Giovanni Spadolini, *La Firenze di Gino Capponi fra Restaurazione e Romanticismo. Gli anni dell’“Antologia”* (Florence: Edizioni Cassa di Risparmio, 1985), pp. 71-82.

<sup>25</sup> Cesare Lucchesini, ‘Lettera del signor marchese Cesare Lucchesini al signor Giuseppe Micali sopra alcuni luoghi dell’Odissea d’Omero, che si credono spurj’, *Antologia* 8: 22 (October 1822), 153-67; Cesare Lucchesini, ‘Carmina Homerica Ilias et Odyssea a rhapsodorum interpolationibus repurgata, et in pristinam formam, quatenus recuperanda esset tam e veterum monumentorum fide et auctoritate, quam ex antiqui sermonis indole et ratione, redacta; cum notis ac prolegomenis, in quibus de eorum origine, auctore, et aetate itemque de priscae linguae progressu, et praecoci maturitate, diligenter inquiritur opera et studio Richardi Payne Knight. In aedibus Valpianis, Londini ec. 1820. in 4°’, *Antologia* 11: 31 (July 1823), 10-29.

<sup>26</sup> See in particular Giuseppe Montani, ‘Omero, l’Iliade originale e tradotta nelle lingue più colte’, *Antologia* 41:121 (January 1831), pp. 43-57, continued in *Antologia* 41: 122 (February 1831), 65-87, and in *Antologia* 41:123 (March 1831), 72-102.

The most striking example of the link between political reflection on the one hand and historical and philological research on the other is the series of lectures delivered by Gino Capponi between 1827 and 1829 at the Accademia della Crusca. These lectures were dedicated to the problem of the unification of the Italian language, and aimed to foster 'il rinnovamento delle lettere d'Italia'.<sup>27</sup> The second of these lessons (delivered in 1828) focused on the formation of the ancient Greek language and national identity through the texts of Homer and Hesiod; it also argued that Italy needed to overcome the variety of its dialects and develop a unified language:

[D]i quell'esempio che davano i dialetti greci era da tener conto nel dar ragione de'nostri, ed io mi propongo di farne oggi poche parole [...] le quali poi mi saranno strada a discorrere intorno alle condizioni della lingua nostra, sempre pigliando a guida le condizioni de' popoli.<sup>28</sup>

Capponi's text is particularly interesting because the dissertation on the ancient dialects was intertwined with reflections on the story of Italy and its present necessities. In fact, Capponi was determined to go beyond 'la furia de'grammatici', who, according to him, studied the relationship between the Italian and ancient Greek dialects in depth, but missed the point: 'il fervor delle dispute distolse dal vero oggetto queste investigazioni'.<sup>29</sup> This therefore represents another example of how, among the Vieusseux circle members, the study of the ancients had taken on a new meaning, and aspired to a new role in Italian culture. In this case, the study of the ancients serves as a paradigm for the current debate – obsessively recurring among the intellectuals of that time – of the creation of a

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<sup>27</sup> Gino Capponi, 'Se sia alcuna specie di vero nella opinione di quelli che vogliono, doversi ammettere in Italia una lingua illustre distinta dal dialetto della Toscana', in *Scritti editi e inediti di Gino Capponi* ed. by Marco Tabarrini, 2 vols (Florence: Barbera, 1877), I, 234-271. Parts of the dissertation were published as a 'Discorso sulla lingua' in the *Antologia* 29: 85 (January 1828), 147-155, and *Antologia* 30: 89 (May 1828), 85-98.

<sup>28</sup> Capponi, 'Discorso sulla lingua', p. 93.

<sup>29</sup> Capponi, 'Discorso sulla lingua', p. 92.

unified Italian language. A national language would be the first step towards a unified Italian epic narration, just as it was for ancient Greece.

The example of Capponi and of the Gabinetto Vieusseux did not remain fruitless. It is worth remembering that Alessandro Manzoni frequented the Gabinetto Vieusseux precisely in the same years in which he was starting to revise the language of *I promessi sposi* in order to reproduce the Tuscan regional variety of Italian. Thanks in part to Manzoni's choice, Tuscan was destined to become the national *koiné*, and his novel would later be recognized as an example of a national literature. Therefore, Capponi's example testifies to the fact that in Vieusseux's circle the study of the Homeric memory could mirror itself in other projects concerning the linguistic and political destiny of the Peninsula.

Both the 'Lettera sullo studio degli antichi' and Capponi's lectures seem to repropose the keywords and the dynamics of Vico's *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (1708), the text in which he replied to the traumatic *Discourse sur la méthode* by Descartes (see Section 1. 1). In the first instance, they express the need to adapt to the necessities of the times by rethinking the relationship with the past forms of knowledge. They also react to a traumatic experience marking a fracture with the past (Descartes's shocking philosophy in the first case, the Revolutionary events in the second, but also the failed offsprings of 1820-1821). Finally, they all have a focus on the foundational role of study and education, though Vico's *De studiorum ratione* refers to the world of academic education, while Capponi's lectures and the letter on the study of the ancients are directed to the wider audience of modern bourgeoisie.

Both the anonymous letter and Capponi's texts are in a relationship of interdiscursivity with Vico. In the 'Lettera sopra lo studio degli antichi' Vico is also quoted as an example of Italian glory who had to wait a century for his deserved success; additionally, some lexical coincidences suggest that the *New Science* is an implicit point of reference for the 'Lettera'.<sup>30</sup> Capponi, on the other

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<sup>30</sup> An example of this is the expression 'tempi eroici misti di favole' (i. e. Homeric times; 'età eroica' according to Vico, *NS* § 81-81); these are opposed to 'i tempi della verità', (i.e. the age of Herodotus; also in the *New Science* Herodotus marks the transition to the 'età degli uomini' by

hand, did not mention Vico directly; rather he quoted Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729-1812), an author whose relationship of interdiscursivity with Vico is now well known.<sup>31</sup> Capponi thought that ancient literature should be addressed 'alla maniera di Heyne':<sup>32</sup> Heyne, in fact, is a representative of the new course of historic and classical studies in Germany, which have in common with Vico the establishment of an anthropological understanding of the ancient world.<sup>33</sup> Also in the case of Capponi's text, then, a mediated, oblique 'vichismo' characterizes these attempts to develop a renewed approach to the ancient world, in line with the new tendencies in European culture.

In addition to these figures, two enthusiastic readers and interpreters of Vico, Gabriele Pepe and Niccolò Tommaseo, fuelled the debate on the pages of *Antologia*. Although he is barely mentioned in studies on the Gabinetto Vieusseux and on Leopardi, Gabriele Pepe (1779-1849) is well known among scholars studying the reception of Vico.<sup>34</sup> There is no evidence of direct contact between Pepe and Leopardi; it is likely that they had the opportunity to meet, however, given the fact that they both frequented the Gabinetto Vieusseux in the same years. A cousin of Vincenzo Cuoco, Pepe was among the Neapolitan insurrectionists who were forced to leave their homeland after the 1799 revolution; he is now regarded as one of the figures who contributed to the debate about Vico in the nineteenth century. He wrote in the *Antologia* from its foundation to its closure in 1833: scholars compared Pepe's 'propaganda vichiana' in the *Antologia* to that of his cousin Cuoco in the *Giornale italiano*.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, Pepe proposed himself as the direct heir of Cuoco's ideological

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starting an historical narration of Greece: *NS* § 98). [Anonymous], 'Lettera sullo studio degli antichi', pp. 42-43.

<sup>31</sup> See Giuseppe C. D'Alessandro, 'Vico e Heyne: percorsi di una recezione', *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, 19:3 (1999), 372-98.

<sup>32</sup> Capponi, *Lettere*, p. 96. See Capponi, *Discorso sulla lingua*, p. 92.

<sup>33</sup> Silvia Caianello, *Scienza e tempo alle origini dello storicismo tedesco* (Naples: Liguori, 2005), pp. 140-141.

<sup>34</sup> Brancato, *Vico nel Risorgimento*, pp. 166-68.

<sup>35</sup> Pasquale A. Di Lisio, 'Letteratura e vita civile nel pensiero di Gabriele Pepe', in Gabriele Pepe, *Scritti letterari* (Naples: Società Editrice Napoletana, 1976), pp. IX-LIV (p. XXXVIII). Fulvio Tessitore, 'Sul vichismo di Gabriele Pepe', *Bollettino del Centro di Studi Vichiani*, 8 (1978), 112-15 (p. 112).

legacy by publishing in the *Antologia*, a few months after Cuoco's death (1823), a 'Necrologia di Vincenzo Coco', celebrating his cousin's cultural achievements.<sup>36</sup>

Scholars have marked Pepe's profile as an interpreter of Vico in a line of continuity with Cuoco's: according to these studies, Pepe found in Vico the theorizer of a self-constructed man, who, thanks to his free will, is responsible for making his own social progress. Overlooking Vico's ideas about divine Providence, Pepe stated that, for him, civil progress 'è tutt'opera volontaria e libera dell'uomo solo'.<sup>37</sup> This idea is built on Vico's theory of *conatus*, the inner force that guided primitive man out of his original feral state (*NS*, § 340; on this point, see the Conclusion of this work). In Pepe's thought, therefore, Vico's theory proved to be functional to the democratic dream of the renaissance of Italy.

A less widely-known aspect of Pepe's writings is the empowerment of the notion of philology. Pepe developed his peculiar understanding of Vico's ideas in an unusual context, that of geographical explorations, a topic in which he expressed interest from the beginning of his collaboration with *Antologia*. By comparing Vico's views about aboriginal men with modern ethnographic studies about savage peoples, Pepe reactivated an old primitivist principle, which spread throughout Europe after the discovery of America: people who still live like savages allow the moderns to have a partial experience of the western world's own remote past. When writing of the English General Gordon Laing's exploration of Sierra Leone, and specifically about the innate religious instinct of primitive peoples, Pepe drew a comparison between the Africans observed by Laing and episodes from the *Odyssey*. This gave him an opportunity to praise the role of the philologist:

Indi il *filologo* (nel senso del Vico, il quale denomina filologia la scienza di investigare il certo nelle opere umane) contemplatore dell'uman genere, scorge fra popoli sì diversi per sito età e progenie un fatto comune presuntivo di un comune modo di sentire; un fatto a documento

<sup>36</sup> Gabriele Pepe, 'Necrologia di Vincenzo Cuoco', *Antologia* 14:40 (April 1824), 99-105.

<sup>37</sup> Gabriele Pepe, 'Storia dell'Impero Osman ed. del cavalier de Hammer ec. volta in italiano da Samuele Romanini. Venezia 1828', *Antologia* 41: 121 (January 1831), 69-96, (p. 90).

del vero che i culti e le loro forme hanno il germe connaturalmente originario nel cuore umano.<sup>38</sup>

Vico's primacy acquires a new shade of meaning. Vico's legacy allowed Pepe not only to find a new way to acknowledge the ancient world, but also to make sense of the otherness of the savage peoples. 'I viaggiatori rinvergono e verificano presso le attuali genti incolte que' veri sugli eterni ordini primitivi della società che il Vico col suo solo ingegno divinava senza che escisse dal suo gabinetto',<sup>39</sup> added Pepe, with a hint of nationalistic pride. A few months later, he insisted again on Vico's philological method of exploring the past by praising the findings of Vico's *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*:

libro che non va a verso di taluni, a' quali parve romanzeria il tentativo di scrutar da' prischi vocaboli latini la metafisica poetica de' popoli italiani. Non è necessario qui ripetere o dimostrare che la lingua è la chiave unica ad intendere ogni pensiero e idea.<sup>40</sup>

The idea that ancients were comparable with savages, namely those peoples preserving primitive habits in the contemporary world, was not new in western culture. Already in the sixteenth century, with the first geographical explorations, travelers used mythological and classical references to make sense of the radical difference of primitive peoples, as Gabriele Pepe did. However, the spatial, physical distance of the savages, who lived far away in other continents, began to overlap with the chronological distance of the ancients. The modern idea that there is a difference between the phases of human development became more and more radical with the development of geographical explorations.<sup>41</sup> Descartes, in his *Discours sur la méthode* (quoted in Section 1. 1), had argued that the

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<sup>38</sup> Gabriele Pepe, 'Viaggio del maggiore Gordon Laing nell'Africa interna', *Antologia*, 25:75 (March 1827), 33-56 (p. 39), Pepe's emphasis.

<sup>39</sup> Pepe, 'Viaggio del maggiore Gordon Laing', p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> Gabriele Pepe, 'Viaggio del maggiore Denham, capitano Clapperton, e dottore Oudney nell'Africa interna', *Antologia* 26: 72 (April 1827), 67-104 (p. 77, n. 3).

<sup>41</sup> Hartog, 'Il confronto con gli antichi', p. 18. Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: the Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge, MA : Belknap, 1992).

ancients are as unfamiliar to the moderns as foreigners, and therefore an excessive dedication to the study of antiquity produces a sense of displacement and foreignness.<sup>42</sup> Descartes' theorization corresponded to the ultimate acknowledgement of the ancient as other. These ideas returned with renewed relevance in nineteenth-century Europe when the Napoleonic campaigns in Egypt fostered archaeological and anthropological research especially in Africa. In the Gabinetto Vieusseux the readings and the conversation on these topics followed the fashion of the time: geographical explorations were in fact a major area of interest for the wider community of the Gabinetto and for Pepe in particular, who wrote several articles on the topic between 1826 and 1831.<sup>43</sup>

This cluster of musings, which superimposed ancients and savages, reactivated Vico's idea of the comparison between ancients and children, moderns and adults, which Pepe reread in his own way:

Si avrà sempre più un documento dell'acre profondità di ingegno dell'italico pensatore (G. B. Vico), il quale insegnava a leggere le lapidi dell'eterna istoria dell'uman genere nella natura morale dell'uomo. Le genti tutte si rassomigliano con le medesime forme quando trovansi negli istessi stadi del progresso sociale; e vestono le medesime forme non già perché l'una le imiti dall'altra, ma perché sempre ed ovunque uopo è che l'uomo in alcuni dati periodi di esistere civile, senta, pensi, ed agisca allo stesso modo. La vita della società ha le sue età. Ed i modi naturali a cadauna età al pari dell'umana. E siccome in questa si bamboleggia quando si è bambini; si arde di amore e di fantasia nella gioventù; si ragiona nell'età matura; si langue o lauda il passato nella vecchiaja; e si fa universalmente tuttociò ovunque nasca l'uomo; così pure in quella, ogni epoca ha e deve avere, le sue rispettive immancabili e naturali forme. Indi arguisca ognuno il beffevole disegno moderno di rimbambire i popoli.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Descartes, *Discours sur la méthode*, p. 10. See Hartog, 'Il confronto con gli antichi', p. 20-21.

<sup>43</sup> See *Notizie di viaggi lontani. L'esplorazione extraeuropea nei periodici del primo Ottocento (1815-1845)*, ed. by Maurizio Bossi (Naples: Guida, 1984).

<sup>44</sup> Pepe, 'Viaggio del maggiore Gordon Laing nell'Africa interna', p. 51.

Pepe stressed the idea that primitive societies are not totally lost in an unattainable past, but are part of the contemporary world. The philologist who adopts Vico's method, therefore, becomes a powerful interpreter of the complexity of the world, and gains access, although partial and filtered by scientific and philosophical knowledge, to the childhood of man.

In the last sentence quoted above, Pepe hinted at the political situation in Europe: a 'beffevole disegno di rimbambire i popoli' was in progress, in his view. Probably, with this word 'rimbambire' literally meaning 'returning to the state of a child' he intended to hint at the 'regressive', paternalistic project of the Bourbon Restoration, and specifically at the suffocation of the democratic revolts in which Pepe himself had taken part.<sup>45</sup> Thus his reflections, although apparently disengaged, instead had a progressive, *engagé* background. Tommaseo too, as discussed in Section 3. 1 (but see also below), used the word 'rimbambita' to describe the old-fashioned *Ancien Régime* literary models that he refused.

With his peculiar perspective on the value of Vico's legacy, Pepe contributed to the *Antologia*'s aim to reassess the value of an updated approach to philology.<sup>46</sup> This view was shared by others, like Niccolò Tommaseo, another admirer of Vico.<sup>47</sup> In fact, between 1825 and 1826, Tommaseo recalled the studies of his youth, and stated that reading Vico revealed to him the key to look at antiquity ('l'infanzia della vita civile') through 'le norme di una morale più alta', that of Christian providence. 'Quei medesimi studii con intendimenti filosofici tentando al modo del Vico, raccogliero dolcissime verità'.<sup>48</sup> Vico's approach to the meaning of words, namely philology and etymology, was revealing for Tommaseo. He acknowledged this himself by recalling his 'esercizii' in practising Vico's method:

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<sup>45</sup> See Mauro Moretti, 'Pepe, Gabriele', in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 82 (Rome: Istituto Enciclopedia Italiana, 2015), pp. 245-49.

<sup>46</sup> See Fulvio Tessitore, 'Ancora sul vichismo di Gabriele Pepe', *Bollettino del Centro di Studi Vichiani*, 11, (1981), pp 211-13.

<sup>47</sup> See Michele Cataudella, 'Sugli scritti vichiani di Niccolò Tommaseo', *Bollettino del Centro Studi Vichiani* 2 (1972), 77-81.

<sup>48</sup> Niccolò Tommaseo, *Memorie poetiche* (Bari: Laterza, 1964), pp. 95 and 185.

e per esempio l'usar che i latini facevano *operari* o *facere* per 'sacrificare' m'indicava che la religione agli antichi era l'azione per eccellenza; e il modo *sic se res habet* mi diceva che la realtà possiede in certa guisa sé stessa [...]. E così dall'origine di *cogitare* (*co-ago*); e dalla formola *aliter atque* deducevo il tendere che in ogni pensiero, sin in quel delle differenze, fa anima all'unità. Dall'etimologia di *privato* deducevo l'egoismo essere negazione, imperfezione. E così discorrendo.<sup>49</sup>

Vico is therefore the key to a philosophical understanding of the traces that the ancient world left in language, a process that leads to overcoming philology in itself.<sup>50</sup> This topic recurs in Tommaseo's contributions to the *Antologia*, especially during the reactivation of the polemics about mythological poetry, between 1826 and 1827. Rejecting Classicist poetry, Tommaseo called for a new approach to the mythological heritage, one that should be grounded in Vico's principles. The application of such a renewed approach would help overcome both the dryness of pure erudition, and the ineffectiveness of Classicist poetry.

Le tradizioni mitologiche della Grecia e del Lazio furono sino ad ora trattate o come materia bruta di gelida erudizione, o come soggetto di poesia rimbambita: ma il cammino tracciato dal Vico, e ch'egli non tanto per forza di ragionamenti, quanto d'indovinamenti e di verisimili fantasie filosofiche, primo battè, fu lasciato senz'orma. [...] E sebbene gli studii della erudizione incomincino a prendere una direzione più ferma, più filosofica e più sincera; pure osiamo affermare che non è il tempo ancora di raccogliere le varie membra della tradizione universale in un corpo.<sup>51</sup>

In fact, Tommaseo aimed to synthesise all the different fields of knowledge, in which 'il morale, il religioso, il politico non saranno tre fini

<sup>49</sup> Tommaseo, *Memorie poetiche*, pp. 185-186; Tommaseo's emphases.

<sup>50</sup> Some passages by Tommaseo stating this are analysed in Section 2. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Niccolò Tommaseo, 'La "Biblioteca di Apollodoro"', p. 53.

distinti'.<sup>52</sup> Again, 'il cammino tracciato dal Vico' was for these writers an inspiration to search for a innovation of the disciplines dealing with the ancient in their time. However, it is not always clear what this meant in practical terms, and how precisely this new philology would be different from the previous one. It is likely that this obsessive evocation of Vico had an ideological foundation. As established in Section 2. 1, in fact, Vico had become, through the mediation of Cuoco, a symbol of a 'modern' Italian culture as opposed to the erudite and traditional one.

All these texts deal, explicitly or implicitly, with a basic principle of Vico's thought: that the understanding of the ancient world is possible only through the combination of philosophy and philology. To quote Vico's words:

Qui si accenna che 'n quest'opera, con una nuova arte critica, che finora ha mancato, entrando nella ricerca del vero sopra gli autori delle nazioni medesime (nelle quali deono correre assai più di mille anni per potervi provenir gli scrittori d'intorno ai quali la critica si è finora occupata) qui la filosofia si pone ad esaminare la filologia (o sia la dottrina di tutte le cose le quali dipendono dall'umano arbitrio, come sono tutte le storie delle lingue, de' costumi e de' fatti così della pace come della guerra de' popoli). (NS, § 7)

To explore 'tutte le cose che dipendono dall'umano arbitrio', philology and etymology are fundamental tools. In fact, going back to the original meaning of words can reveal information about the original conception of the object that the word indicates. Therefore, the original meaning of words does not give only grammatical and linguistic information, but also social and anthropological meanings: 'le etimologie delle lingue natie' are in fact for Vico 'istorie di cose significate da esse voci su quest'ordine naturale d'idee' (NS, § 22).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Niccolò Tommaseo, 'Biografia universale. Traduzione veneta. Presso G. B. Missiaglia', *Antologia*, 25:73 (January 1827), 43-53 (p. 49).

<sup>53</sup> On Vico's mythopoietic etymologies see Andrea Battistini, *La dignità della retorica* (Pisa: Pacini, 1975), pp. 101-52.

This attitude, retrospectively recognized by scholars as a ‘retaggio vichiano’,<sup>54</sup> was already present in Cuoco’s manifesto of ‘filologia universale’ (1809), in which he stated that, with this new subject grounded in Vico’s principles, ‘la scienza dell’erudizione diventa veramente filosofica’.<sup>55</sup> Through Pepe and Tommaseo’s mediation, this principle spread through Tuscan and then Italian culture, later to become a recurring feature of Italian philological thought.<sup>56</sup> This new conceptualization of the ancient could not materialise without the fracture of a line of continuity with classical antiquity – what we now call the culture of the *Ancien Régime* – caused by the French revolution, and that had come to light during the Classicist-Romantic quarrel. As Pietro Treves has suggested, the nineteenth century was the time, and the Gabinetto Vieusseux was one of the contexts, in which Italy developed a historicist approach to the disciplines concerning the ancient world. In this time-span, the relationship with the sphere of earliness in Italy became study, a relationship with alterity.<sup>57</sup> In fact, only the acknowledgement of the ancient as something separate, an object of study and of research can lead to a full historical understanding of it – to quote Capponi’s words, it was now necessary to look at the past ‘con quella fredda ragione, con cui si guardano le cose di un altro tempo’.<sup>58</sup> The otherness of ancient cultures is superimposed to the otherness of primitive peoples, that can be studied and observed in their peculiarities through the tools of an historical understanding. This historicistic attitude was accompanied by a feature of engagement: in fact, all the texts quoted here are directed towards the process of creating a renewed and unified Italian culture.<sup>59</sup> This is probably due to the fact that the understanding of classic antiquity as something different reinforced the necessity for the re-creation of Italian identity as something autonomous from the classical antiquity that haunted it.

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<sup>54</sup> Treves, *Lo studio*, p. 656.

<sup>55</sup> Cuoco, ‘Rapporto a Gioacchino Murat e progetto di decreto per l’organizzazione della pubblica istruzione’ (1809), p. 60.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Treves, *Lo studio*, p. 656.

<sup>58</sup> Capponi, ‘Discorso sulla lingua’, p. 98.

<sup>59</sup> See Treves, *Lo studio*, p. XII.

Therefore, it is possible to say that within the Vieusseux circle something happened that German culture had experienced a few years before with Friedrich August Wolf: the formulation of a new idea of philology, which, as synthesised by Pierre Judet de La Combe, 'was not valuable in itself, but only as it helped criticise and reform modernity', and that would help 'build modern authentic individuality'. This was for example the ideological framework, according to La Combe, of Wolf's *Darstellung der Alterthums-Wissenschaft* (1807).<sup>60</sup> Additionally, the birth of philology in the modern sense was based on a process of historicising the self-representations of nations, which contributed to shaping their identities.<sup>61</sup> These phenomena have been studied on a European scale – especially as far as Germany is concerned, a nation as politically fragmented as Italy – and seem to be reflected in part also in the Italian unification process.

The figure of Vico the philologist, 'eccellente italiano', and forerunner of this approach to history, becomes highly significant in the process of formation of Italian identity. It is thus significant that the rhetoric of Vico 'the forerunner' initiated by Vincenzo Cuoco (analysed in Section 1. 3) was reactivated by his nephew Pepe precisely in this situation: in the unpublished *Piccolo corso letterario* (drafted 1827-1830), Pepe celebrated Vico as the founder of 'nuovi studi filologici, detti Filosofia dell'Istoria', forerunner of the new German philologists (he directly quoted Herde and Niebuhr), stressing the Italian primacy in this field.<sup>62</sup> Consequently, we can say that the figure of Vico found a new function in the new context.

Having noted that the Gabinetto Vieusseux fostered a progressive, optimistic narrative in Italian culture, witnessing a tension towards the modern

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<sup>60</sup> Pierre Judet de La Combe, 'Classical Philology and the Making of Modernity in Germany', in *Multiple antiquities - Multiple Modernities. Ancient Histories in Nineteenth Century European Cultures*, ed. by Gábor Klaniczay, Michael Werner, Ottò Gecser (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2011), pp. 65-88, (p. 71-73).

<sup>61</sup> See Gábor Klaniczay, Michael Werner, Ottò Gecser, 'Introduction' and Glenn W. Most, 'Philellenism, Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism', both in *Multiple Antiquities - Multiple Modernities*, ed. by Klaniczay, Werner, Gecser (pp. 5-16 and 113-127). See also Fulvio Tessitore, 'La crisi della filosofia della storia fra "Klassik" e "Romantik"', in *Contributi alla storia e alla teoria dello storicismo*, 2 vols (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1995), II, 482-526.

<sup>62</sup> Pepe, *Scritti letterari*, p. 117.

and the construction of the nation, it is worth examining more closely the ‘optimism’ of this group of intellectuals. With reference to Tommaseo’s collaboration with the journal, Umberto Carpi noted that the writer expressed the sensation of a general social and ideological crisis of his generation. The consciousness of being a ‘generazione di trapasso’, afflicted by a sense of crisis and disorientation, undermined and made more complex the *Antologia* group’s anxiety about progress and civilization of the group. Thus, Alessandro Poerio’s *I poeti venturi* (published 1843) wondered if the future would bring ‘poeti splendidi’ after the ‘rimorso’, ‘tedio’, and ‘pianto’ of his generation. In fact, for Poerio, contemporary writers are unable to speak as prophets to the present age: ‘A noi confonde l’anima / un’intima sventura’. A contemporary poet is of no help to his generation: ‘gli è chiuso l’avvenir / in lui de’morti secoli / s’accumula il patir’ (ll. 12-20).

These lines show how the past centuries, although perceived as lifeless (‘morti secoli’) still encumbered Italians. A similar feeling can be found in Tommaseo, who, when writing about Italy’s primacy, even spoke of Italy’s ‘anteriorità fatale’, which is now uninteresting (‘non eccita più l’orgoglio che di qualche imbecille’) and needed to be forgotten.<sup>63</sup> Later on, he would not hesitate to describe his generation as a sick one: their frustrating doubts and need of something to believe in were, for Tommaseo, ‘la malattia d’una generazione, d’un popolo, di gran parte d’Europa’. Young European generations were, for him, ‘avide di illusione e dall’esperienza del mondo [...] condotte a disingannarsi di tutto’.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the author of the ‘Lettera sullo studio degli antichi’, quoted above, complained that the invoked renewal of the Italian nation was still distant.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Niccolò Tommaseo, ‘Annali universali di Tecnologia, di Agricoltura, d’Economia rurale e domestica, d’arti e di mestieri, Milano, presso gli editori degli Annali di medicina, e di statistica. Luglio 1826’, *Antologia* 25:75 (March 1827), 57-67 (p. 61).

<sup>64</sup> Niccolò Tommaseo, ‘Necrologia di un anonimo’, *Antologia* 45: 134 (February 1832), 58-72 (p. 69).

<sup>65</sup> ‘Lettera sullo studio degli antichi’, p. 47.

In 1832, Leopardi, at the end of his Florentine stay, seized on this inner contradiction of the 'progressive' discourses of his peers and sarcastically unmasked it in *Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico*:

AMICO: Voi parlate, a quanto pare, un poco ironico. Ma dovrete almeno all'ultimo ricordarvi che questo è un secolo di transizione.

TRISTANO. Oh che conchiudete voi da cotesto? Tutti i secoli, più o meno, sono stati e saranno di transizione, perché la società umana non istà mai ferma, né mai verrà secolo nel quale ella abbia stato che sia per durare. Sicché cotesta bellissima parola o non iscusa punto il secolo decimonono, o tale scusa gli è comune con tutti i secoli. Resta a cercare, andando la società per la via che oggi si tiene, a che si debba riuscire, cioè se la transizione che ora si fa, sia dal bene al meglio o dal male al peggio. Forse volete dirmi che la presente è transizione per eccellenza, cioè un passaggio rapido da uno stato della civiltà a un altro diversissimo dal precedente. In tal caso chiedo licenza di ridere di cotesto passaggio rapido, e rispondo che tutte le transizioni conviene che sieno fatte adagio; perché se si fanno a un tratto, di là a brevissimo tempo si torna indietro, per poi rifarle a grado a grado. Così è accaduto sempre.

Leopardi, in fact, was completely uninterested in the progressive and constructive narratives that his contemporaries exchanged in the Gabinetto Vieusseux. Rather, he remained faithful to his idea that progress consisted mainly of a fragmented resurfacing of ancient civilization. He therefore dedicated his Florentine years to following this regressive strain of thought, as discussed in the following section.

#### 4. 2 - *Zibaldone 4311-4417: Leopardi Inside Homer's System*

In this problematic framework, full of contradictory tensions regarding the past and the future, Leopardi noted down the words quoted at the beginning of the previous section: 'il progresso consiste essenzialmente in recuperare il perduto' (*Zib.* 4289). These words are probably an apt description of Leopardi's sentiments

when re-opening the *Zibaldone* in 1827 to work on it intensely after a long period of intermittent writing. These words can be read as an epigraph to a considerable set of pages, around 110, in which Leopardi explored the Homeric world with an unprecedented interest in archaeological and anthropological data.<sup>66</sup> In fact, Leopardi was then regaining familiarity with Homer after a long pause, and reactivating his philological explorations. It is likely that Leopardi was planning to write a text on Homer,<sup>67</sup> but this was not to be: these months of research appear to have taken an unexpected direction, which would flow outside the *Zibaldone*, outside philological study, into the project of the 1831 *Canti*.

As a working hypothesis, I have selected as the object of this section's analysis the pages of the *Zibaldone* written during Leopardi's first stay in Tuscany, although reflections on similar topics echoed in the pages written in Recanati in the following months. This is, in fact, the section of the *Zibaldone* in which the reflections on Homer are more intense, and it includes quotations from the *New Science*; further reference to the development of Leopardi's reflections will be provided when necessary. The *Zibaldone* obliquely reflects – diffracts – the trends we have been exploring; and Leopardi's reaction to the stimuli described above led him in a completely different, but to some extent complementary, direction.

The *Zibaldone* 4311-4417 is a very peculiar section of Leopardi's journal; even though from the beginning it included numerous quotations and references to other books, in this phase the journal took the form of a portable library. Indeed it features an enormous quantity of bibliographical references, quotations and extracts from other books, particularly taken from the French journal *Bullettin de Férussac* which Leopardi could find at the Gabinetto Vieusseux. It is possible that, knowing that his financial resources would not allow him to stay in Florence for long, Leopardi sensed a need to absorb as much as possible from the

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<sup>66</sup> Anna Dolfi, 'Gli anni toscani dello *Zibaldone*. Dalle figure della ricezione al tempo del silenzio', in *Leopardi a Firenze*, ed. by Melosi, pp. 221-38.

<sup>67</sup> Possibly the notes were aimed at the projected *Dissertazioni omeriche* that are listed in a 'disegno letterario' (dated by Francesco Flora to 1828, see TPP, p. 1112), or the discourse on Homer mentioned at page 4435 (november 1829) of the *Zibaldone*.

bibliographical resources he had at his disposal at that moment to take back to Recanati.

It is not easy to describe in full the extent and the variety of the *Zib.* 4311-4417 notes, but it is possible to identify two main groups: a set of historical and philological notes concerning the ancient world, and a second 'diachronic' set of notes concerning the endurance of ancient patterns in popular songs and languages in the contemporary world. One could therefore argue that the essay on Homer would have included a section on the persistence of the oral tradition in modern times, among the lower classes or among under-developed peoples. It is thus noticeable that in Leopardi, as in Gabriele Pepe, the exploration of the remote past is accompanied by reflections on the survival of ancient features on the margins of modern society, among spatially remote civilizations and lower classes.

The first and main group of notes is dominated by Homer: Leopardi collected material about the Homeric question (4316-19, 4319-27, 4330, 4334-36, 4343-50, 4351-52, 4359-60, 4378-88, 4390-98, 4408-09), the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (4313-15), specific aspects of Homer's style (4405-06), the historical dimension of the Trojan war (4323, 4330), ancient Greek dialects (4320, 4404-05) and geography (4342-43), the birth of poetry as opposed to that of prose (4326, 4328, 4352, 4354-59, 4390-91, 4411), the passage of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* from oral to written form (4334-36), and on the practice of singing ancient poems (4352, 4362); but he also wrote about Herodotus (4400-04), Ossian (4408, 4414), the narration of origins in ancient Rome (4330) and other philological and archaeological news (4364-65, 4369-70, 4399).

The second group of extracts includes information about the popular songs of European peoples (4311, 4336-67, 4361, 4372, 4399), on the origins of runes (4312) and of other languages and alphabets (4336, 4341-42, 4373-74), the Moldavian language (4331-33), popular heroes like Wilhelm Tell (4340, 4362, 4372), oral languages (4362), the lyric traditions of nomads (4400), the survival of Scandinavian sagas (4406-8), and the oral tradition of chivalric stories in contemporary southern Italy (4388-89, 4408).

To address this series of topics, Leopardi engages with several writers, including Christian G. Heyne, Richard Payne Knight, Benjamin Constant, Friedrich August Wolf, Ugo Foscolo, Wilhelm Müller, August Wilhelm Schlegel, as well as Vico, and members of the Gabinetto Vieusseux who were interested in similar topics (Matteo Imbriani, Gino Capponi). Most of them, over time, had written works that were at least in part comparable to Vico's, such as Friedrich August Wolf's *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795), which reassessed Vico's idea that Homer was not an individual but a symbolic figure (although apparently Wolf was unaware of Vico's theories). Leopardi's pages, therefore, directly testify to how interdisciplinary, international and complex the discussion about Vico-related themes like the Homeric question had become around a century after the publication of the *New Science*. In other words, these themes had diffracted in time and space, multiplying the variety of voices engaged in the study of these issues. Leopardi's pages in fact sketch a sort of comparative history of the Homeric question, as well as of Vico's reception.

These pages also give the impression that Vico was not (or at least, no longer) the first, immediate reference to address this set of themes, probably because he had been surpassed by the more successful Wolf. An example of this is Leopardi's note that Vico came to the same conclusions as Wolf, but 'con minore abbondanza e sviluppo di prove' (*Zib.* 4395). Yet, it is possible to say that this section of the *Zibaldone* represents *de facto* a 'zona vichiana' of Leopardi's reflections, since Vico is indubitably, from our perspective, the founder of this range of *discoursivités* (Foucault) even in the absence of a direct relationship with the other authors. As a partial confirmation of this, it is noticeable that Leopardi seems to cover the development of the Homeric question backwards, from the most recent reflections on the topic by Wolf's pupil Wilhelm Müller (*Homerische Vorshule*, 1824)<sup>68</sup> and Foscolo (*Intorno alla traduzione dei primi due canti dell'Odissea* and *Discorso* on the Divine Comedy, both 1825),<sup>69</sup> back to Wolf's

<sup>68</sup> Müller's work was quoted in the *Bulletin de Férussac* (*Zib.* 4316).

<sup>69</sup> It is possible that it was precisely Foscolo's *Discorso sul testo e su le opinioni diverse prevalenti intorno alla storia e alla emendazione critica della Commedia di Dante* (1825) that reminded Leopardi of Vico's text: see the quotation in *Zib.* 4379.

*Prolegomena* (1795) and back to the start: Vico. Additionally, Leopardi was sensitive to the nationalistic pride characterising the circulation of Vico's name in those years. When starting to analyse the *New Science*, he pointed out that the Homeric question was first posed by 'il nostro Vico'. This demonstrates that the *Zibaldone* reflects with surprising accuracy, although obliquely, the tensions of its environment.

Leopardi quoted from the fourth book of the *New Science*, 'La scoperta del vero Omero', between page 4394 and 4397 of the *Zibaldone*. However, it is possible to surmise that even more pages might have been inspired by the *New Science*. For example, between page 4390 and 4391, Leopardi commented on the "Ciclo epico", che comprende varie poesie, incluse quelle d'Omero, la storia tutta del mondo, dalle Origini delle cose, cioè dalla teogonia ec. fino ad Ulisse'; this note, which dates back to 23 September 1828, two days before the first quotation from the *New Science*, seems to be paraphrasing *NS* 859: 'i poeti ciclici [...] conservarono tutta la storia favolosa de' greci dal principio de' loro dei fin al ritorno d'Ulisse in Itaca [...]: sì fatti autori ordinariamente si leggono detti κύκλοι ed ἑγκύκλιοι e la loro raccolta fu detta detta κύκλο επικός, κύκλια ἔπη, ποίημα ἑγκύκλιον, e, senz'aggiunta alcuna, talora κύκλος'. Additionally, a note on *Zib.* 4390, dedicated to the superimposition of heroism and love, might be read as Leopardi's spontaneous reaction to *NS* § 809 of the *New Science*: 'i popoli greci [...] ad Achille, ch'è il subietto dell'Iliade, attaccarono tutte le proprietà della virtù eroica e tutt'i sensi e costumi uscenti da tali proprietà di natura, quali sono risentiti, puntigliosi, collerici, implacabili, violenti, ch'arrogano tutta la ragione alla forza'. Leopardi seems to reply: 'L'eroismo ci strascina non solo all'ammirazione, all'amore. [...] Achille c'innamora per la virilità superiore, malgrado i suoi difetti e bestialità, anzi in ragione ancora di queste'. It should also be noted that Vico believed that the ancient Greek words '(ἔρωζ)' ('love') and 'ἥρωζ' ('hero'), had the same etymology (*NS*, § 508, 515).

Gilberto Lonardi states that in these pages Leopardi switched from the conceptualization of Homer as a person to Homer as a symbolic idea.<sup>70</sup> While I agree that these pages represent a turning point in Leopardi's understanding of the Homeric memory, I would instead argue a more accurate hypothesis is that we observe Leopardi, here, abandoning the literary idea of Homer as the perfect poet, the interpreter of the ancient world, an idea that he probably borrows from Gravina (see Section 1. 1); and switching to a more materialistic, anthropological and archaeological exploration of Homeric texts, which led him to consider them as documents of primitive ages, coming closer to Vico's understanding of them. While he had completely rejected the idea that Homer might have been a symbol in 1823,<sup>71</sup> in October 1828 (*Zib.* 4414), quoting Benjamin Constant,<sup>72</sup> he conceded that Homer was, in fact, a 'nome collettivo' – although he stated also that it would be 'umiliante' for the human spirit to have praised for such a long time a work 'casually' put together (*Zib.* 4327). A few pages earlier, Leopardi had also transcribed Vico's definition of Homer as 'un'Idea, ovvero un Carattere Eroico d'uomini greci', *Zib.* 4396). This approach can definitely seem, from our perspective, to be largely inspired by Vico, but, in the 1820s, it had multiple examples and representatives; Constant being just one example.

Lonardi also stresses how material and anti-idealistic Leopardi's research was at this stage.<sup>73</sup> On page 4305, Leopardi mused on the meaning of the first lines of the *Iliad*, by pointing out that 'Omero dice le anime (ψυχὰς) ed essi (αὐτοῦς), cioè gli eroi, non i loro corpi. Differenza non piccola, e secondo me, non senza grande importanza a chi vuol conoscere veramente Omero, e i suoi tempi'. This difference implies, for Leopardi, that Homer had no faith in the survival of the soul, and that the death of the heroes was interpreted as a complete defeat.

<sup>70</sup> Gilberto Lonardi, *Classicismo e utopia nella lirica leopardiana* (Florence. Olschki, 1969), p. 54.

<sup>71</sup> 'Omero stesso è un'idea vaga e conseguentemente poetica. Tanto che si è anche dubitato e si dubita ch'ei non sia stato mai altro veramente che un'idea. [...] Il qual dubbio, stoltissimo benchè d'uomini gravissimi, non lo ricordo se non per un segno di questo ch'io dico' (*Zib.* 3975-76, 12 December 1823).

<sup>72</sup> Constant's *De la religion*, an essay which argues that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were written by two different authors, was mentioned in an article in the *Bullettin de Férrussac* (Octobre 1824, tome 2, art. 329, p. 231-34), quoted in the previous pages of the *Zibaldone*.

<sup>73</sup> Lonardi, *Classicismo e utopia*, p. 53.

Significantly, Pepe had written something surprisingly similar a few months earlier, praising Vico's method of detecting features in the culture of the ancients through linguistic analysis. 'In confutazione di questi critici [di Vico] sarà sufficiente il dire che basterebbero le sole voci *pneuma* e *psuché* per farne certi che materiale era la psicologia de' greci'.<sup>74</sup> This is a sign that Leopardi's research sometimes paralleled that of other intellectuals at the Gabinetto Vieusseux.

What did Leopardi do with this series of notes? Among the wide variety of themes Leopardi addressed in these pages, one particular issue recurred: the tension between the oral dimension of ancient 'letteratura antiscritturale' (*Zib.* 4345) and the written world. In fact, Leopardi accumulated as much information as he could about the moment in which the Homeric songs passed from the oral to a written form. The extracts he took from Vico (*Zib.* 4395-97) and from Wolf (*Zib.* 4394) concentrate on this specific topic. Similarly, Leopardi frequently returned to the performative nature of the Homeric poems (*Zib.* 4323-26, 4366, 4414) and to the absence of a plan and of any specific aim in this performance (*Zib.* 4324). Finally, he concluded that singing the compositions was 'il solo modo di pubblicare i propri componimenti' (*Zib.* 4345), while in the modern times,

noi diciamo aver pubblicato un componimento quando ne abbiám fatto tirare qualche centinaio di copie, che andranno al più in qualche centinaio di mani [...] e la nazione veramente, il vero pubblico, il popolo, non ne sa assolutamente nulla. Pubblicare allora, era dare ed esporre al popolo, che oggi è straniero alle nostre *edizioni*. (*Zib.* 4347, Leopardi's emphasis).

Quegli antichi potrebbero dire con gran ragione, che i loro versi, semplicemente cantati, erano pubblicati, e che i nostri libri, stampati, sono sempre inediti. (*Zib.* 4352)

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<sup>74</sup> Gabriele Pepe, 'Essai politique sur le Royaume de la Nouvelle Espagne, ec. – Saggio politico sul regno della Nuova Spagna, di Alessandro di Humboldt. Seconda ediz. Parigi 1825. Vol 4 in 8° con atlante', *Antologia* 28:75 (October 1827), 67-93 (p. 77).

In the modern world, only a public performance guarantees an actual ‘publication’ of a text: this is the case of the chivalric songs traditionally performed in the street in Naples (*Zib.* 4317, 4389, 4388), a situation which reproduces the performances of ancient rhapsodes (*Zib.* 4408). Leopardi was probably elaborating on the publication of his *Operette morali*. The book was in fact published in 1827, a few months before the writing of these pages, but it did not meet the public’s approval. The pages of the *Zibaldone* that are here object of analysis are full of thoughts about the ineffectiveness of the written word in finding a way to communicate with the audience, and about the difficulty of being read and understood (*Zib.* 4301, 4329, 4345-46, 4352, 4354, 4389-80). Additionally, in 1827 he had jotted down thoughts about the ephemeral nature of modern books (*Zib.* 4289), which contrast with the enduring afterlife of the oral Homeric tradition.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, the moment of the passage from the oral to the written form appears, to Leopardi, as a sort of ‘year zero’: the moment that meant the end of oral prehistory, that phase of history in which true communication among men was possible. The start of writing marks the beginning of a process of literacy, which, as Franco D’Intino suggested, is for Leopardi the start of a process of corruption.<sup>76</sup>

The tension between the oral and the written word, and the individuation of the oral dimension as the space of authentic, effective communication seem therefore to be the main focus of Leopardi’s reflections in these weeks. However, this issue raised a second question: what was the nature of the first compositions? Leopardi progressively demystified the common idea that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* originated from an epic tradition. In fact, the more he read from Wolf’s *Prolegomena ad Homerum* and other works on the topic, the more he became convinced that the original rhapsodic songs were lyrical (*Zib.* 4359, 4412-13). Therefore, they were characterized by brevity, the absence of a plan, spontaneity, abruptness (‘la poesia sta essenzialmente in un impeto’, *Zib.* 4356). As a

<sup>75</sup> See D’Intino, *L’immagine della voce*, p. 164.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. This topic is not new in Leopardi’s thought. As highlighted by Franco D’Intino (*Volgarizzamenti in prosa*, pp. 107-139) a reflection on the loss of the oral dimension recurs in Leopardi from his youth. The poet tackled the topic also in the *Operette morali* (‘Parini, ovvero della Gloria’ and ‘Dialogo di Timando ed Eleandro’).

consequence, the Homeric poems were retrospectively acknowledged as epic poems 'da un falso presupposto' (*Zib.* 4356).

These weeks of study, thus, gave shape and foundation to an idea that Leopardi had already conceptualized and drafted at the end of 1826 (*Zib.* 4234, 15 December 1826): that the first, original form of poetry is the lyrical one, the free and unconditioned expression of feelings, genuinely universal: 'proprio di ogni nazione anche selvaggia'. This is applicable also for the resurfacing of Italian literature from the obscurity of the barbaric medieval times: in fact, according to Leopardi, the first document of Italian literature, the *Divine Comedy* 'non è altro che una *lunga Lirica*' (*Zib.* 4417, Leopardi's emphasis).

Therefore, while Vico-related contemporary narratives focused on epic production, Leopardi found in lyric poetry the most remote of primitive forms of expression. As discussed previously (Section 1. 3), Foscolo had expressed nostalgia for ancient epic narration that strengthened the bonds between men; Ludovico Breme had reassessed Italian chivalric production by stating that it was the direct heir of Homeric songs (Section 2. 1); Gino Capponi had reflected on how Homer used his language to keep the Greek nation united (see above); the author of the letter 'sopra lo studio degli antichi' had invoked a new Italian Homer; and finally, Manzoni was attempting to give Italy a historical novel on the model of Walter Scott, 'l'Omero del romanzo storico'.<sup>77</sup> Leopardi, instead, progressively focused on the lyric as the most unconditioned form of human expression.

This exploration of the primordial past before the invention of the written form affected Leopardi's poetic production. In fact, his musings on the performance of ancient rhapsodes, and on the performative nature of the Homeric poems, led Leopardi to compose poems that did not respect the traditional metric conventions, inventing what has now been called the 'canzone libera leopardiana'. This new form, while respecting the division into stanzas of the Petrarchan canzone, allows for a free alternation of hendecasyllables and heptasyllables,

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<sup>77</sup> Alessandro Manzoni, 'Del romanzo storico e, in genere, de' componimenti misti di storia e d'invenzione' (1850), in *Tutte le opere*, ed. by Mario Martelli (Florence: Sansoni, 1988), p. 1730.

which, in turn, enables a highly fluid expression of the feelings of the poet.<sup>78</sup> It is possible that these innovations were meant to approximate that primitive, original lyrical dimension Leopardi had explored in the previous months. Additionally, it is likely that the individuation of singing as the primary poetic act led Leopardi to collect his compositions, in the Florentine 1831 edition, under the title of *Canti*, which was unprecedented in the Italian tradition. Leopardi himself had previously collected his poems in books whose ‘titoli rematici’ reflected traditional forms: ‘Canzoni’ (1818, 1824), ‘Idilli’ (1825, 1826), ‘Versi’ (1826).<sup>79</sup> Paradoxically, the title of ‘Canti’ brings to the fore the oral, lyrical dimension of Leopardi’s compositions as spontaneous and unconditioned expressions of the self, while remaining the title of a printed book.

The most significant result of Leopardi’s 1827-28 anthropological research probably falls outside the philosophical and experimental space of the *Zibaldone*: it is the 1829 poem ‘Canto notturno di un pastore errante nell’Asia’. Scholars generally agree that Leopardi found inspiration for this poem in an article from the *Journal des savants* about the Asian Kirgis people: the article is quoted in *Zib.* 4399-4400, among the set of notes that I have called the ‘diachronic notes’. These people, according to the article, gathered together at night under the moon to sing traditional sad songs.<sup>80</sup> This notice probably reminded Leopardi of a passage from Ossian, in which the bard-rhapsode addresses his songs to the moon (*Dartula*, ll. 8-12). In his translation from Ossian’s poems, Melchiorre Cesarotti had commented on this passage, stressing its singularity: ‘sembra realmente ch’egli prendesse la luna per un corpo animato, capace dei sentimenti e degli affetti degli uomini’.<sup>81</sup> Cesarotti’s understanding of Ossian owed much to Vico (Section 1. 2), and this passage is no exception: in fact, Vico had stressed the capacity of men to imagine human life in natural objects.

<sup>78</sup> See Antonio Girardi, *Leopardi nel 1828. Saggi sui ‘Canti’* (Venice: Marsilio, 2011), in particular pp. 99-113.

<sup>79</sup> See Blasucci, *I titoli dei “Canti”*.

<sup>80</sup> Giovanni Battista Bronzini, ‘I Kirghisi e Leopardi’, *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*, 66 (1979), 124-34; Dionisotti, ‘Preistoria del pastore errante’, in *Appunti sui moderni*, pp. 157-77.

<sup>81</sup> Cesarotti, *Poesie di Ossian* (1763), II, 58. See Lonardi, *Classicismo e utopia*, p. 59.

Therefore, we can say that when Leopardi selected the material for the composition of his 'Canto notturno', he was in a Vico-inspired environment. Gabriele Pepe had moreover exalted the validity of Vico's message in understanding the customs of exotic peoples. It is therefore not impossible that Leopardi's interest in the lasting legacy of ancient traditions in other spaces was fostered by these kinds of discourses. A dimension that was remote both chronologically (the rhapsodes, Homer, Ossian) and geographically (the Kirgis) found in Leopardi's poetry a synthesis in the figure of the anonymous Asian shepherd, who, in an indefinite time and place, sings a melancholic song to the moon about the meaninglessness of life. The anonymity of the 'pastore errante', who has no name, no identity, reflects Leopardi's musings on anonymous ancient poets, collectively identified with Homer's 'nome collettivo' (*Zib.* 4327). 'Canto notturno' is therefore a representation of lyrical poetry production as a human phenomenon, autonomous from any form of authorship. Leopardi's philological and anthropological research which, as noted above, had several points in common with the main tendencies of Vico's reception in the Gabinetto Vieusseux, led him to a philosophical conclusion, which he expressed in a lyrical form.

'Canto notturno' is therefore a highly synthetic poem, which collects and epitomizes the results of Leopardi's work in the preceding months: its theme is the centrality of the oral dimension and the individuation of the lyric as a universal language. The shepherd singing his lyrical song to the moon is for Leopardi an image of the universality of the poetic spirit and of the human voice singing, over time and space. Like the Ossianic bard, and like the Asian nomads, Leopardi's 'pastore errante' addresses his questions to the moon, as if it were a human being capable of giving an answer: 'Che fai tu, luna, in ciel?' (l. 1), 'Dimmi, o luna' (l. 16), 'tu forse intendi / questo viver terreno' (ll. 62-63).

It may seem that, despite some common themes and points of contact, Leopardi's interests had nothing to do with the activities of the Gabinetto Vieusseux. Leopardi's musings seem completely disengaged; after all, the Italian nation is barely mentioned in his notes, and even then only to refer to ancient Italian literature. I have shown how Leopardi reflected on the lack of impact of

modern printed books as opposed to ancient oral songs. There appears no sign of a project, of a will to intervene in the Italian cultural or political scene. Additionally, Leopardi had abandoned any project of public intervention – at least in an explicit form, not mediated by ironic or satiric deformation – by leaving his 1824 *Discorso sopra lo stato presente dei costumi degli italiani* in an unfinished state.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, he made it clear that he did not have any intention of restarting any kind of *engagé* production; in fact, he refused the insistent requests from Vieusseux to write something for the journal *Antologia*, by blaming his ‘vizio dell’*absence*’.<sup>83</sup> Leopardi’s production in these years seems, therefore, to be lacking in any design and any will for public engagement.

However, it is possible to argue that Leopardi’s attitude at this stage included engagement of a very different nature. Though apparently he did not take part in the activities of the Gabinetto Vieusseux, and seemed completely uninterested in any discourse of initiative concerning the education of Italians, the political destiny of the nation and the problem of linguistic unification, he nonetheless was engaged in a search for a language common to all human beings, and he found it in the lyrical language of the ‘pastore errante’. Thus, Leopardi was not thinking of the Italian nation, but about all the nations of every time and space. In *Zib.* 4347, he noted that, to make ‘poesia popolare’, it would be necessary ‘sperfezionarla, tornarla a una specie d’infanzia, a una rozzezza, sacrificando il bello all’utile’. Although ‘Canto notturno’ is not an example of ‘poesia popolare’, it is certainly an attempt to reproduce some features of a poetry that was conceived and performed in a remote anteriority before the invention of writing. Leopardi’s ‘project’, therefore, can be read as complementary to that of the *Antologia* group, and particularly to Manzoni’s. As Lonardi has suggested, Manzoni and Leopardi were both looking for a renewed, ecumenical language, capable of ‘giving voice’ to the ‘people’; for Manzoni, the target was the national

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<sup>82</sup> See Marco Dondero, *Leopardi e gli italiani* (Naples: Liguori, 2009), p. 70.

<sup>83</sup> Letter to Anton Pietro Vieusseux, *Epistolario*, I, 855. See William Spaggiari, ‘La mancata collaborazione di Leopardi all’“Antologia”’, in *Leopardi a Firenze*, ed. by Melosi, pp. 75-104.

community, in desperate need of a common language; for Leopardi, it was human beings in general, beyond time and national boundaries.<sup>84</sup>

Overall, it is possible to conclude that Leopardi's excavation of the past and search for an original principle connecting the whole of mankind were in opposition to the engagement, the projection on the future and the anxiety of those gathered around the Gabinetto Vieusseux. His search for recuperation was in opposition to the tension towards renovation, re-foundation, resurrection of his time. The following chapter will explain how this special form of engagement developed in the form of denunciation in Leopardi's philosophical and poetical testament, 'La ginestra'.

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<sup>8484</sup> Lonardi, *Classicismo e utopia*, p. 62.

## CHAPTER 5

### NAPLES

#### Recourse, Belief, and Poetry Among 'I Nuovi Credenti' (1832-1840)

In the previous chapters I have explored the movement of Vico's legacy from Naples to northern Italy and to Florence; the next session explores how, in the thirties, the influence of the *New Science* comes back to Naples, the city of Vico. Leopardi moved to Naples in 1833 and witnessed the new wave of 'vichismo' characterising Neapolitan culture. The aim of this section is to take a close look at the fate of the *New Science*'s legacy in Vico's hometown almost a century after its publication, and to define Leopardi's reaction to it.

Naples had never forgotten its illustrious citizen. In the first years of the century, Vico was a frequent object of discussion and a cultural reference for the renegotiation of the meaning of the revolutionary experience of 1799. Later, rereading the *New Science* meant, for Neapolitan intellectuals, initiating a debate about the meaning of history and of human development. To this end, Vico's work provided a frame that helped the thinkers of that age to conceptualize their present as an age of rebirth, in which something was about to begin or begin anew. This led to an increasing ideologization of the concept of progress and human perfectibility, which, alongside the increasing popularity of Hegel's works, climaxed in the 1848 revolts.

While contemporary scholars are aware of the resurfacing of Vico's theories in 1830s Naples, this new wave of 'vichismo' has mainly been looked at as a unitary phenomenon. However in this context, not unlike in those previously explored, rereading Vico led to a proliferation of multiple and even contradictory

meanings. In this case, too, then, Vico's message underwent a process of deformation and diffraction, as this chapter explains.

While Neapolitan culture of the thirties offers noteworthy examples of its main cultural dynamics, it is particularly difficult to explore Leopardi's Neapolitan years. He stopped taking notes in the *Zibaldone* in Florence in 1832, and the only written traces he left were some letters as well as his last works, whose connection to Neapolitan culture is not always evident.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is possible to argue that the last part of Leopardi's life is characterized by a noteworthy conflict with Neapolitan culture: indeed, Leopardi himself, with the publication of the *Operette Morali* (1827, re-published 1835) and the *Canti* (1831), acquired a sort of symbolic nature: he was perceived as the paradigm of a pessimistic attitude. As discussed below, there is some evidence that Leopardi became an element of disturbance for members of the dominant cultural milieu. Furthermore, Leopardi's later works, such as 'I nuovi credenti' and 'La ginestra', entered into polemics with the dominant axes of Neapolitan culture; this chapter will clarify that they also rejected the then-current interpretation of Vico's legacy.

The first section of this chapter will shed light on the problematic rereading and interpretation of Vico's thought in Naples during the period between 1830 and 1840. The second section will focus on Terenzio Mamiani's *Inni sacri* (1832), a work that was particularly successful in Naples also because it engaged with Vico-related cultural tensions. The third section will explore the concepts of progress, belief and fable in Leopardi's last works; these thematic nodes, in fact, evidence Leopardi's indirect dialogue with Vico as diffracted by Neapolitan culture.

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<sup>1</sup> On this point see Botti, *Leopardi e il destino della poesia. Dalla crisi del classicismo alla 'Ginestra'* (Naples: Dante & Descartes, 2002), p. 128.

5. 1 - *Rereading Vico in Post-revolutionary Naples: History, Progress, Perfectibility*

Naples, Vico's homeland, was in 1799 the only city in Italy to witness a revolt that was not simply an offshoot of the French Revolution.<sup>2</sup> The Neapolitan riot was violently repressed and rapidly became, in the collective imagination, a watershed in local history. Later on, Croce argued that the suppression of the Neapolitan republic meant the loss of the only opportunity for southern Italy to claim moral and political leadership of the Peninsula.<sup>3</sup> This is probably one of the foundational events for the myth of the failed revolution that characterized the Italian memory of the nineteenth century and continued to do so in recent political debates (such as the myth of the First World War as a 'vittoria mutilata' and Tangentopoli).<sup>4</sup>

The Neapolitan Revolution, like the French Revolution, was immediately perceived as an event which marked the end of the previous epoch. The extreme violence and irrationality of the revolt and its repression seemed to have destroyed any previously existing rational order, as well as questioning the possibility of making sense of historical events. As Fulvio Tessitore argues, it is not a coincidence that philosophical speculation in post-revolutionary Naples was characterized by discussions on the utility and the conceptualization of history.<sup>5</sup> In fact, history meant, for writers of that age, the possibility of making sense of

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<sup>2</sup> John Robertson, 'Enlightenment and Revolution: Naples 1799', in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 10 (2000), 17-44.

<sup>3</sup> Benedetto Croce, *La rivoluzione napoletana del 1799* (Bari: Laterza, 1953). See Thomas Willette, '1799/1899: Heroic Memory in the Centennial of the Repubblica Napoletana', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 4:3 (1999), 369-79.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Grew, 'The Paradoxes of Italy's Nineteenth-Century Political Culture', in., *Revolution and the Meaning of Freedom in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Isser Woloch (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 220. For the French Revolution, see also *Unfinished Revolutions: Legacies of Upheaval in Modern French Culture*, ed. by Robert T. Denomné and Robert H. Simon (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Also during the preparation of the revolutionary events of 1799 Neapolitan jacobins expressed doubts on the possibility, for human intellect, of making sense of history. See Vincenzo Russo, Vincenzo Russo, 'Pensieri politici', in *Giacobini italiani I: Compagnoni, Nicio Eritreo, L'Aurora, Ranza, Galdi, Russo*, ed. by Delio Cantimori (Bari: Laterza 1956), pp. 255 and 355.

human events according to recognizable laws. In this renegotiation Vico's legacy played a key role.

Section 1. 3 of this work has made clear how Vincenzo Cuoco, during his Milanese exile, had used Vico to re-read the meaning of the traumatic events of the revolutionary era. In 1801, he published the *Saggio storico sulla rivoluzione napoletana del 1799*, one of Italy's most influential history books. This work is now regarded, precisely, as a first attempt to make sense of the traumatic event that had shattered the Neapolitan community. In it, as mentioned in Section 1. 3, Cuoco made extensive use of his readings of Vico to explain and debate the meaning of the 1799 events and to explain the reasons for the failure of the revolt.<sup>6</sup> Back in Naples, Cuoco continued his journalistic activity in the journal *Il Monitore delle due Sicilie*: in it, he also fostered debates on the importance of historical knowledge. An example of this activity is 'L'utilità delle scienze, e specialmente della storia' (1812),<sup>7</sup> a piece of prose writing in which Cuoco drafted a historical parable about Solon of Athens' historical education: to become a good ruler, Cuoco stated, knowledge of history is key.

Around the same time, another protagonist of the 1799 revolt, Melchiorre Delfico, published a successful book that acted as a counterpart to Cuoco's exaltation of history: *Pensieri su l'Istoria e sull'incertezza ed inutilità della medesima* (first published in 1806, reprinted in 1809 and 1814). In this book, Delfico stated that history is a mere recollection of past events: it cannot therefore lead to a full understanding of human behaviour. Paradoxical as it may seem, Cuoco himself welcomed Delfico's anti-historicistic views as part of Vico's heritage. In fact, as he wrote in a review, Delfico seemed to him an 'emulo del gran Vico', because he reassessed the necessity of understanding man as he is in any stage of his development, just as Vico thought. 'Il libro sull'"inutilità della storia"', Cuoco wrote, 'sarà la miglior guida per scrivere una storia che sia utile'.<sup>8</sup> Cuoco, therefore, seems interested in individuating a sort of 'historicist school' in

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<sup>6</sup> See De Francesco, *Vincenzo Cuoco, una vita politica*, pp. 66-77.

<sup>7</sup> Vincenzo Cuoco, 'L'utilità della storia', in *Scritti vari*, II, 235-47.

<sup>8</sup> 'Sul significato della così detta "inutilità della storia"', in *Scritti vari*, II, 250-51.

Neapolitan thought, and to refer every participant's contribution in the current debate to Vico as their illustrious forerunner.

Thus, as Tessitore observed, Cuoco and Delfico represent two opposite cultural factions in post-revolutionary Naples, the two opposite poles of concurrent reflection on the possibility of historical understanding of human actions. Tessitore also suggests that Cuoco and Delfico's experiences are quintessentially post-revolutionary, as the shadow of the traumatic events continuously haunted their writings.<sup>9</sup>

These debates demonstrate how Vico's legacy was kept alive in his hometown and acquired new meanings; specifically, they highlight the question of history and of human perfectibility, which were key points in the discussions of the following decades. In fact, during the Napoleonic sovereignty, the use of Vico's legacy, either welcomed or rejected, was symptomatic of a need to make sense of past events; by contrast, after 1830 it would be used to foster optimism and confidence in the future of the Neapolitan community.

The fall of Napoleon, the violent repression of the 1820-21 revolts meant Neapolitan culture endured a long period of censure, until the accession of Ferdinand II to the throne in 1830. This event corresponded with the beginning of a period of relative freedom. The historian Francesco De Sanctis, who grew up in and studied in this context, provided an insightful description of the tensions between progress and reaction characterising this phase of Neapolitan history: 'Non cessò la reazione, ma temperò, sopportò di più la libertà d'insegnamento [...]. Avemmo dunque un movimento liberale dal trenta al quarantotto; cioè la libertà era in ciò che il freno era un po' allentato; la fisionomia delle cose rimaneva reazionaria'.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Benedetto Croce, in his history of Naples, provided a wholly optimistic synthesis of this moment of transition, highlighting the role of Vico:

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<sup>9</sup> Fulvio Tessitore, 'La cultura filosofica tra due rivoluzioni (1799-1860)', in *Storia di Napoli*, 12 vols (Naples: Società Editrice Storia di Napoli, 1975-1981), X, 443-509.

<sup>10</sup> Francesco De Sanctis, *La letteratura italiana nel secolo XIX*, ed. by Franco Catalano, 2 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1953), II, 53-54.

Già in Napoli si era levato un Vincenzo Cuoco, critico delle astratte ideologie, teorico dello svolgimento storico dei popoli, assertore del costume paesano e della sua intrinseca virtù; già nel 1818 il Iannelli aveva celebrato l'importanza della storia e della scienza della storia e riposto nella storicità il carattere del nuovo secolo. [...] Come il cartesianesimo fece in Napoli rivivere il Campanella e i naturalisti del Rinascimento e il Galilei, il nuovo moto degli studi del secolo decimonono ritrovò il suo antenato indigeno nel Vico, allora per la prima volta compreso e da allora letto, ristampato, commentato e da tutti citato.<sup>11</sup>

Significantly, Croce also drew a comparison between Naples in the thirties and Naples during Vico's age (see Section 1. 1 above). For Croce, philosophy and thought flourished in Naples during these two periods in similar ways. This description, in Croce's idealistic perspective, gives a sense of how the culture of Naples mirrored itself not only in Vico as a writer, but also as a moment in the history of thought, the symbol of a particularly prosperous era of the city's history.

I would like to develop a different argument here: that Naples found itself, with around fifteen years' delay due to the political circumstances described above, in the same situation as Milan in 1816, the first post-revolutionary year. There, too, the feeling that nothing could ever be as it had been before spread among intellectuals: consequently, they argued, a new culture needed to be created. New journals were established, and the public debates reactivated some of the axioms of the Classicist-Romantic quarrel, which in turn, as examined in Section 2. 1, was symptomatic of a collective identity revision. Questions asked included the following: what is the purpose of literature? What is the Italian national canon? How can culture be useful to the people? Of course, this was not a mere expansion of the old Milanese debates: there were also local specificities. In particular, Neapolitan intellectuals displayed an almost unanimous enthusiasm for

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<sup>11</sup> Benedetto Croce, *Storia del Regno di Napoli* (Bari: Laterza, 1944), 255-56.

Vico's theories, and therefore reflection on history played a central role in public debates. As in Milan during the decade 1810-1820, Vico proved to be useful to narratives of a renewal of culture, because he was perceived as an isolated genius who had undeservedly been forgotten and recently rediscovered. He therefore provided elements of novelty while ensuring continuity with the previous Neapolitan tradition.

The two new Neapolitan publications of Vico's complete works of 1834 – with the commentary by Jules Michelet testifying to the Italian thinker's European success – and 1840<sup>12</sup> are evidence of the new wave of enthusiasm for Vico. So was the new edition of *Cenni sulla necessità e la natura della scienza delle cose umane* (first published 1817) by the Neapolitan philosopher Cataldo Jannelli (see section 2. 1); he was in fact unanimously perceived as an heir of Vico.<sup>13</sup> Jannelli's essay provoked a remarkable proliferation of Vico-inspired discourses, centred on the possibility of turning history into science, and of identifying recognizable laws in human development. Additionally, Jannelli's work contributed to the construction of an Italian philosophical tradition; as Gian Domenico Romagnosi acknowledged, the philosophical lineage joining Vico and Jannelli produced a 'dottrina dell'incivilimento', which was 'un titolo di gloria per la nostra Italia'.<sup>14</sup>

This phase of Vico's reception, compared to those analysed in the previous chapters, is characterized by a historicisation of the *New Science*. In other words, while reassessing the originality and importance of Vico's work, the Neapolitan

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<sup>12</sup> *Opere di Giambattista Vico, precedute da un discorso di Giulio Michelet sul sistema dell'autore* (Naples: Tipografia della Sibilla, 1834); *Opere di Giambattista Vico, illustrate da Giuseppe Ferrari* (Naples: Jovene, 1840). See Oldrini, *La cultura*, p. 149, Rosa Rossi 'La filosofia. Galluppi e l'ecllettismo', in *Giacomo Leopardi*, pp. 266-69.

<sup>13</sup> *Cenni di Cataldo Jannelli sulla natura e necessità della scienza delle cose e delle storie umane, con cenni sui limiti e sulla direzione degli studi storici di Gian Domenico Romagnosi; e discorso e analoga appendice sul sistema e sulla vita di Vico del professore Giulio Michelet* (Milan: Fontana, 1832). See for example the review of Cataldo Jannelli's book in *Biblioteca italiana* 3: 11 (September 1818), 289-306.; Jules Michelet, *Principes de Philosophie de l'Histoire, traduits de la Scienza nuova de J. B. Vico et précédés d'un discours sur le système et la vie de l'Auteur* (Paris: Jules Renouard, 1827), p. 58; Gian Domenico Romagnosi's 'Premessa' to Jannelli, *Cenni sulla natura e necessità delle cose umane*, pp. V-XIX.

<sup>14</sup> Gian Domenico Romagnosi, 'Premessa' to Jannelli, *Cenni sulla natura e necessità delle cose umane*, p. XIX.

writers seemed to perceive it as less contemporary and less ‘modern’ than the previous generation had done, and therefore in need of historical contextualization. The editor of the 1834 edition, for example, stated that the *New Science* ‘può ancora dirsi ben nuova dopo un secolo di esistenza’,<sup>15</sup> but, at the same time, he explained the development of the philosophy of history after Vico, implying that while originally pioneering, Vico’s theories had been developed and updated by other philosophers, such as Herder and Ballanche (further examples of this will be provided below).<sup>16</sup> Naples’ intellectuals, therefore, harked back to Vico, as a forerunner and an inspiration, but also acknowledged that his theories needed to be re-conceived so as to remain meaningful.

As mentioned above, new journals were founded in this period of relative freedom in Naples. One in particular – nowadays perceived as the most important Neapolitan journal at that time<sup>17</sup> – was particularly active in the promotion of Vico-related themes, so much so that the historian Francesco Brancato has defined it ‘un periodico vichiano a Napoli’.<sup>18</sup> Its title, *Il progresso delle scienze, delle lettere e delle arti*, gives an immediate idea of the semantic field and the ideological frame in which the Neapolitan intellectuals discussed Vico’s ideas at that time. Re-reading and reassessing the *New Science* had a specific meaning for the editorial board of *Il progresso*: it meant fostering the myth of the indefinite perfectibility of the human condition. Besides, it was among intellectuals involved with *Il progresso* that the idea of dedicating a monument to Vico matured.<sup>19</sup> With this initiative, Vico was finally celebrated as a local and national hero: a further step in his establishment within the canon of national glories.

*Il progresso* was founded in 1832 by the Neapolitan man of letters Giuseppe Ricciardi (1808-1882), who was, at that time, only 24 years old. He was therefore part of a new generation that had not experienced the traumatic events of the French and of the subsequent Neapolitan revolutions, and therefore did not

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<sup>15</sup> *Opere di Giambattista Vico* (1834), p. VI.

<sup>16</sup> *Opere di Giambattista Vico* (1834), pp. VII-IX.

<sup>17</sup> Oldrini, *La cultura*, p. 139. Novella Bellucci, *Leopardi e i contemporanei. Testimonianze dall’Italia e dall’Europa in vita e in morte del poeta* (Florence : Ponte alle Grazie, 1996), p. 141.

<sup>18</sup> Brancato, *Vico nel Risorgimento*, p. 95.

<sup>19</sup> Brancato, *Vico nel Risorgimento*, p. 104.

share the disenchantment of those who had seen the revolutionary dream fail. Nonetheless, the young Ricciardi was able to gather together men of different generations: young passionate scholars like Emmanuele Rocco (1811-1892), and, later, Stanislao Gatti (1820-1870), people who had been active during the 1820-21 revolts like Raffaele Liberatore (1787-1843) and Giuseppe Ferrigni (1797-1864), but also protagonists of the 1799 Neapolitan Republic, such as Giuseppe De Cesare (1777-1856) and Luigi Blanch (1777-1856) .

As mentioned above, with the accession of Ferdinand II, the political climate changed and Neapolitan expatriates, such as Gabriele Pepe (about whom, see Section 4. 1) and Antonio Ranieri (see below), were allowed to come back to Naples, where they contributed to the new journal. Additionally, the Florentine journal *Antologia* closed down in 1833 due to censorship; this caused some of its writers to migrate to *Il progresso*, which was regarded as a novelty in the Italian cultural landscape. For a while, *Il progresso* was perceived as the legitimate heir of Vieusseux's journal; it rapidly became clear, though, that the new publication was not as influential as the *Antologia* had been, because of the limits on freedom of print in the Kingdom of Naples.<sup>20</sup>

In 1830, Leopardi had already started living with Antonio Ranieri (1806-1888), a young Neapolitan patriot he had met in Florence. The two had become friends, and Ranieri took good care of Leopardi during their stay in Florence, as Leopardi's physical conditions continued to deteriorate. When Ranieri was allowed to return to Naples, the two decided to move together: the salty air of Naples was believed to be healthy for Leopardi.<sup>21</sup> Once in Naples (from 2 October 1833), they started frequenting the circles of the city's cultural elites, in particular those around of *Il progresso*. In fact, Giuseppe Ferrigni (1797-1864), one of the co-founders of the new journal and one of its most active contributors – he was the one who had chosen the title<sup>22</sup> – was Ranieri's brother-in-law. Additionally, a popular gathering point for some members of the editorial board of *Il progresso*

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<sup>20</sup> On this passage, see Raffaele Ciampini, *Gian Pietro Vieusseux. I suoi viaggi, i suoi giornali, i suoi amici* (Turin: Einaudi, 1953).

<sup>21</sup> See Leopardi's letter to his father, 1 September 1833 (*Epistolario*, II, 1431).

<sup>22</sup> Giuseppe Ricciardi, *Memorie autografe d'un ribelle* (Paris: Sassin et Xavier, 1857), p. 150.

was Villa Ferrigni (nowadays known as Villa delle Ginestre), in Torre del Greco, near Naples, where Leopardi resided from 1836 until his death.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Leopardi was inevitably close to the new journal's environment, and, despite his poor health, must have come into contact with the main cultural dynamics of the new publication.

Progress and civilization had been the poles that oriented much of the philosophical, socio-political and economic discussion in Europe since the Enlightenment; in Naples, however, the debate on human perfectibility acquired a sort of local specificity. Why was this? In the thirties Naples rediscovered Vico, and rediscovered itself as Vico's hometown. Therefore, in these years, these themes were entangled with a re-reading of the *New Science*, as well as with the development of economics and statistics. These 'new sciences' were in fact compatible with history: they had in common the idea that it is possible to individuate scientific rules that determine social and economic development.<sup>24</sup>

Upon close analysis, the dynamics of Vico's reassessment and appropriation prove to be a rather complicated and contradictory phenomenon. From 1832 to 1838 Vico was mentioned and praised in every single issue of *Il progresso*. However, articles making direct reference to Vico are also sometimes problematic and show how rapidly the reception of Vico's thought was changing. In fact, the centrality of history in Neapolitan thought underwent a progressive ideologization. The reflection on history, that is to say, the attempt to make sense of historical events, was being replaced by a mythologization of human perfectibility in a teleological sense.

A key text for understanding this transformation is Giuseppe De Cesare's 1832 article 'Cenni sugli studi storici'. This text is important because it expresses the ambivalent attitude of Neapolitan intellectuals towards Vico's notion of 'recourse', or the inevitable decline of human civilization from phases of glory to phases of barbarism. The writer praised Vico's findings 'nel Mondo delle

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<sup>23</sup> Ricciardi, *Memorie autografe*, p. 256; see Brancato, *Vico nel Risorgimento*, p. 99.

<sup>24</sup> Oldrini, *La cultura*, p. 119. See also Fabiana Cacciapuoti, 'Napoli tra il 1830 e il 1840. Note per un'ideologia del progresso', in *Giacomo Leopardi* (Naples: Macchiaroli, 1987), pp. 251-62 (p. 252-53).

Nazioni', but he also argued that the idea of the 'ricorso delle nazioni' was 'sconsolante, deprimente'. Significantly, De Cesare seems unconcerned as to whether Vico was 'right' or 'wrong', but rather worries about the effect of his ideas on the collective psychology: Vico's theories are depressing and unsuitable to progressivist optimism. Therefore, he claimed that Vico's thought should, on this point, be substituted by that of the French philosopher Condorcet, who claimed that mankind is universally perfectible. Finally, De Cesare argues:

oramai immancabile è l'andamento progressivo dei popoli nella  
intelligenza e nella morale, è chiaro che, in faccia ad un orribil passato, ad  
un soffribil presente, e ad un migliore avvenire, grandissima debba essere  
la utilità della storia.<sup>25</sup>

Apparently, De Cesare tried to correct Vico's theories, proposing a new conceptualization of history. He seemed convinced that after an 'orribil passato' – possibly a reference to the repression of the revolutionary revolts – a positive phase of history was about to arrive.

Another scholar, Emmanuele Rocco, testified to Vico's success in those years: 'Non mai le opere di Vico sono state con più amore studiate, quanto a' dì nostri. [...] Il Vico era uno di quei genii che antivedono il futuro e si trasportano colla mente in mezzo ad esso, prevenendo l'ordine de'tempi',<sup>26</sup> he wrote. The image of Vico as a forerunner of the contemporary age echoed also in other writings, such as the historian Luigi Blanch's, according to whom Vico foresaw the needs of the following century.<sup>27</sup> However, Rocco rejected Vico's idea that humanity was destined to decline. Vico, he wrote, was 'incerto sulla ultima destinazione dell'umanità'. Why? Because of his historical situatedness:

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<sup>25</sup> *Il progresso*, I (1832), pp. 90-93. On the usefulness of history see Oldrini, *La cultura*, p. 147.

<sup>26</sup> Emmanuele Rocco, 'Saggio sopra la Scienza Nuova di G. B. Vico di L.T., Lugano, 1835, coi tipi di Ruggia e Comp. in 8', *Il progresso* 12 (1835), 63-78 (p. 63).

<sup>27</sup> Luigi Blanch, 'Elogio storico di G. B. Vico di Gennaro Rocco', *Museo di scienze e letteratura*, 3 (1844), 304-333 (p. 304).

la nuova sapienza de' filosofi e la quasi universal corruzione de' costumi, la forza e la ragione contrastantisi nel principio del secolo XVIII facean travedere da una parte il ricadimento in uno stato quasi ferino e selvaggio, dall'altra una nuovissima via di salvamento e rigenerazione.<sup>28</sup>

Rocco's point probably implies that Vico would not have been pessimistic about the destiny of the future ages had he lived longer. In fact, according to Rocco, later theories, such as Condorcet's, would have led to a 'teoria di un progresso indefinito'.<sup>29</sup> Rocco concluded with the wish that Italy 'innalzi questa scienza [the science of law, of which the *New Science* is an example], al grado di perfezionamento che richiede il progresso morale e intellettuale dell'età nostra'.<sup>30</sup>

Another 1837 article by Luigi Blanch is particularly ambivalent as far as Vico's notion of 'recourse' is concerned: to him, Vico was among those who had 'dimostrato il corso dell'umanità, chi ha dedotto la sua morale essenza e la sua tendenza progressiva'. Nonetheless, Blanch dismissed Vico's idea of the cyclical recurrence of barbarism in favour of a concept of the human spiritual progress inspired by Fichte: 'lo spirito umano progredisce in linea spirale; immagine felicissima la quale esprime il movimento costante, progressivo'.<sup>31</sup> Blanch's point is in itself contradictory, since a spiral does not really convey an idea of progressive and stable movement, but rather that of a cyclical return accompanied by a slow, progressive movement away from the point of departure. However, as the quotation shows, Blanch too seemed to prefer newer and more teleological theories about human progress to Vico's, who, in turn, remains a constant reference point for Neapolitan writers.

One year later, the young writer Stanislao Gatti wrote even more lucidly on this point. Praising Vico's ideas about human development, he provided an interesting mixture of Vico's understanding of history with what seems a superficial understanding of Hegel's theories on the same topic.

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<sup>28</sup> Rocco, 'Saggio sopra la Scienza Nuova', p. 74.

<sup>29</sup> Rocco, 'Saggio sopra la Scienza Nuova', p. 77.

<sup>30</sup> Rocco, 'Saggio sopra la Scienza Nuova', p. 78.

<sup>31</sup> Luigi Blanch, 'Sull'Istoria della filosofia antica di Enrico Ritter, tradotta in francese da Tissot', *Il progresso*, 16 (1837), 3-29 (p. 19).

Lo svolgimento dell'esistenza umana ha tre periodi [...] qualunque nome vogliasi dare a questi periodi, o che, sotto l'aspetto civile e sociale, voglia chiamarsi il primo divino, il secondo eroico ed il terzo umano, come ha fatto il Vico [...] indubitata cosa è [...] che noi siamo venuti oggi a questo terzo periodo dello svolgimento intellettuale, secondo che il bisogno potentissimo de' nostri tempi non è già di distruggere, ma di creare, non di scomporre, ma di comporre; in somma non è l'analisi, ma la sintesi.<sup>32</sup>

In this case, Gatti is referring to Vico's idea of a 'human era', that of abstract thinking and reasoning, as opposed to the heroic and divine times that are characterized by an ingenuous and blossoming imagination (*NS*, § 52 and *passim*). Vico's point is purposely misunderstood and deformed so as to propose an optimistic image of the present as an era of rebirth and creativity, destined to make the most of the previous experiences and re-establish confidence in human development. Besides, like De Cesare and Blanch Gatti here represses the controversial notion of 'recourse' and forgets that for Vico history has a cyclical nature, and leads to cyclical phases of development and barbarism.

The widespread habit of mixing Vico with other philosophical trends should not be surprising in an environment such as that of *Il progresso*. In fact, the journal's ideological framework was described by the contributor Saverio Baldacchini as 'eclecticico', that is to say equidistant 'dall'abuso del dommatismo e del sincretismo, cioè dalla tirannide e dalla licenza'. The function of this alleged eclecticism was to foster harmony among the various fields of knowledge, in order to achieve 'un pacifico e ordinato perfezionamento', grounded in the principle that 'questa umana razza [è] perfettibile'.<sup>33</sup> As Botti argues, this

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<sup>32</sup> Stanislao Gatti, 'Sampiero. Romanzo storico di Giuseppe Gallotti', *Il progresso*, 20 (1838), pp. 251-2. See Brancato, *Vico nel risorgimento*, pp. 102-03.

<sup>33</sup> Saverio Baldacchini, 'Memorandum. Ossia discorso in nome de' compilatori del Progresso intorno al fine e al metodo di questa opera periodica', *Il progresso* 13 (1836), I- XXIII (pp. VII, XIII).

manifesto alluded to the necessity for Neapolitan intellectuals to overcome their ideological differences and to gather together in an organic ruling class.<sup>34</sup>

Another key cultural axiom of the period 1830-1848 was a resurfacing of Catholic spiritualism as a reaction to secular Enlightenment culture.<sup>35</sup> Vico was also useful to this ideology: since Catholic doctrine and Providence play a fundamental role in the *New Science*. A good example of interest in this aspect of Vico's theorization is Baldacchini's approach to the *New Science*: scholars have, in fact, highlighted how confidence in the providential development of history is the key to Baldacchini's understanding of Vico. As Dotti explains, the idea that the course of history was controlled by divine justice served to counter the ghost of the traumatic events of 1799, as well as the fear of a resurgence of violent riots.<sup>36</sup>

'Vichismo' and spiritualism gave rise to a new conception of poetry among the thinkers of *Il progresso*. Saverio Baldacchini's 1836 article 'Del fine immediato di ogni poesia' testifies to this. For him, the perfect model for poetry was religious poetry; in fact, 'come il Vico sapientemente ragiona', poetry should regain the role that it had occupied in early societies, when it guided primitive men towards civilization, 'facendoli capaci d'informarsi di migliori costumi e di passare ad un vivere composto e civile'.<sup>37</sup> Manzoni's *Inni sacri* was, for this writer, the perfect example of modern poetry: Baldacchini thought that 'dopo Giovan Battista Vico', none had given 'una immagine più compiuta dell'arte' than Manzoni, inspired by 'bellezza morale' and animated by 'un profondo sentimento religioso'.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, Baldacchini found in Manzoni's poetry a moral, constructive inspiration that reminded him of the role of ancient poetry described in the *New Science*.

These examples show how enthusiastic, but also how controversial and problematic, the discussions on Vico in the pages of *Il progresso* were. While

<sup>34</sup> Botti, *Leopardi e il destino della poesia*, p. 135.

<sup>35</sup> See Oldrini, *La cultura*, p. 123.

<sup>36</sup> Saverio Baldacchini, *Purismo e romanticismo*, ed. by Edmondo Cione (Bari: Laterza, 1936). See Dotti, 'Introduzione' to *Il progresso*, p. 50-51.

<sup>37</sup> Baldacchini, 'Del fine immediato di ogni poesia', p. 258.

<sup>38</sup> Baldacchini, 'Del fine immediato di ogni poesia', p. 294.

they appreciated Vico, intellectuals wished to correct some of his principles, or select from his thought the features that they found more interesting or useful for their age. Besides, the use of Vico is, in this context, particularly fragmented: none of the articles mentioned above makes any reference to the *New Science*; rather, they quote ideas that seem to travel from reader to reader losing any direct connection with the original text and their function within Vico's philosophical system. In this case, too, therefore, Vico became a symbolic presence-absence. His name was again exploited as a tag that immediately conveyed a set of meanings, keywords, and discourses. These meanings are held together through a sort of collective agreement rather than through any deep study of Vico's texts.

More specifically, this manipulation of Vico's principles also implies a redefinition, or sometimes a suppression, of the 'regressive' tendency individuated by Vico in the history of human development, along with the 'progressive'. This is the notion of 'recourse' that Vico explores in book 5 of the *New Science* (*NS* § 1046-96). This suppression, which corresponds to the centrality of the notion that Vico calls 'storia ideale delle leggi eterne' (*NS*, § 1096), would nurture the idea of Vico as the forerunner of the philosophy of progress, climaxing in the idealistic interpretation of Vico synthesised by De Sanctis in the following passage:

Né altro è la storia di Vico, che una critica dell'umanità, l'idea vivente, fatta storia, e nel suo eterno peregrinaggio seguita, compresa, giustificata in tutt'i momenti della sua vita. I principî, come gl'individui e come la società, nascono, crescono e muoiono, o piuttosto, poiché niente muore, si trasformano, pigliando forme sempre più ragionevoli, più conformi alla mente, più ideali. Indi la necessità del progresso, insita nella stessa natura della mente, la sua fatalità. La teoria del progresso è per Vico come la terra promessa. La vede, la formula, stabilisce la sua base, traccia il suo cammino, diresti che l'indica col dito, e quando non gli resta a fare che un passo per giungervi, la gli fugge dinanzi, e riman chiuso nel suo cerchio e non sa uscirne. Poneva le premesse e gli fuggiva la conseguenza.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> De Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana del secolo XIX*, II, 258.

This interpretation that connects the *New Science* with nineteenth-century theories of indefinite progress would later flow into Croce's idealistic perspective on Vico – Croce was a pupil of De Sanctis – and materialized in the 1911 monograph *La filosofia di Giambattista Vico*. It came to dominate scholarly perspectives on Vico throughout the twentieth century.

Borrowing a term from Hayden White,<sup>40</sup> one might therefore see Neapolitan culture as gradually turning from a cyclical conception of history to a comic 'emplotment' of history: human progress is teleologically oriented and tends towards an optimum; in other words, it is directed towards a 'happy ending'. To use White's words, the Neapolitan writers discussed in this section were convinced that society was destined to become 'purer, saner, and healthier'<sup>41</sup> as a result of the social changes occurring at that time. White also argues that nineteenth-century historians looked for 'adequate grounds for belief in progress and optimism in the full awareness of the failure of eighteenth-century historical thinkers to provide those grounds',<sup>42</sup> this seems the case with Neapolitan nineteenth-century readers of Vico.

This phenomenon anticipates the course of Neapolitan thought of the following years. Neapolitans became increasingly interested in the new German idealist thought and in particular Hegel.<sup>43</sup> As discussed above, in Gatti's manipulation Vico's conceptualization of human development acquired a Hegelian taste; it is not difficult to understand, therefore, how this 'vichismo' could merge, in the 1840s, with a collective enthusiasm for Hegel's thought. Neapolitan culture progressively elaborated what Hartog calls a 'cronosophy',<sup>44</sup> that is to say a universal conceptualization of time mingling periodization and prophecy, that looked at the age of the revolutions as a starting point for a progressive, teleological development of societies.

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<sup>40</sup> White, *Metahistory*, pp. 7-10.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> White, *Metahistory*, p. 48.

<sup>43</sup> Oldrini, *La cultura*, pp. 169-90.

<sup>44</sup> Hartog, *Regimens of Historicity*, p. 52.

It seems, then, that a reassessment and revision of Vico's texts were responsible for the diffusion, in Naples between 1830 and 1840, of a set of keywords that framed the ideological trends of those years, such as 'progresso', 'civiltà', 'perfezionabilità'. In other words, one can say that Vico functioned as the palimpsest of Naples' specific declination of the debates on history and civilization, and that, in accordance with the intellectual eclecticism of those years, the *New Science* was blended with a variety of new trends and authors (such as Condorcet or Fichte).

To conclude, it is possible to say that the variety of writings analysed here, despite their different approaches to Vico, converged towards a collective mythologization of the present as an era of constructiveness. It has been already noticed how much Stanislao Gatti insisted on the necessity of 'creare', 'comporre', 'sintetizzare' (see Gatti's article quoted above). Construction was also the goal of *Il progresso*, as explained by Baldacchini: 'edificare, non distruggere ci conviene, a voler conseguir quello scopo che ci siamo proposto, ch'è, ed esser debbe, il miglioramento degli uomini'.<sup>45</sup>

This notion of constructiveness is probably the reason for the conflict between Leopardi and Naples' ideological environment. In fact, Leopardi was viewed with diffidence: he was perceived as a defeatist, destructive, polemic voice that stressed the inner contradictions of the current optimism. He himself complained to his father that he lived 'in un perfettissimo isolamento da tutti'.<sup>46</sup> Scholars have found significant evidence of the conflict between Neapolitan culture and Leopardi. On one hand, Leopardi was the likely, if implicit, target of Baldacchini's polemic against lonely poets ('abitatori di solitudine') who have abandoned society ('l'umana famiglia') to which friendly poetry ('sociabil [...] poesia')<sup>47</sup> should be dedicated. To Baldacchini, poetry could be melancholic, but

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<sup>45</sup> Saverio Baldacchini, 'Memorandum', p. XII.

<sup>46</sup> Letter to Monaldo Leopardi, 25 November 1834, *Epistolario*, II, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Saverio Baldacchini, 'Del fine immediato di ogni poesia', *Il progresso* 14 (1836), 275-89 (pp. 278, 280). See Gennaro Savarese, *L'eremita osservatore. Saggi sui "Paralipomeni" e altri studi su Leopardi* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1995), p. 54, and Achille Tartaro, 'La ginestra, o il fiore del deserto', in *Lectura leopardiana. I quarantuno "Canti" e i "Nuovi credenti"*, ed. by Armando Maglione (Venice: Marsilio, 2003), pp. 632-625. Similarly, the abbot and geographer Luigi Galanti (1785-?)

not desperate: desperation is ‘la bestemmia della parte ferina e materiale dell’uomo’.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Baldacchini’s poem, *Claudio Vannini o l’artista*, has been recognized as a polemic explicitly addressed to Leopardi, prophet of ‘una fantasia inferma e odiatrice degli uomini’.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Giuseppe Ricciardi, in his memoirs, spoke of Leopardi’s *Operette morali* as a book of ‘filosofia desolante [...] imbevuta di miserabile scetticismo’.<sup>50</sup> Finally, *Il progresso* remained obstinately silent about the poet, who was rarely mentioned. On the other hand, as the following paragraphs demonstrate, Leopardi’s last works can be read as a reaction against Neapolitan culture. One can therefore say that Leopardi, in Naples, was perceived as a voice of conflict in a cultural atmosphere where Vico served as an important element of cohesiveness. Again, as Giordani suggested years before (see Section 2. 2), Leopardi was indirectly perceived as an anti-Vico figure. In the following section I will analyse a specific and particularly interesting case of the reception of a Vico-related work in Naples and Leopardi’s rejection of it.

### 5. 2 - ‘Cantare la religione civile’: Vico’s Ideas in Poetry

A particularly effective interpreter of the Neapolitan cultural background was, paradoxically, an outsider: Terenzio Mamiani Della Rovere (1799-1855), cousin of Leopardi. Born in Pesaro, he was living in exile in Paris when his works, published by French publishers, were enthusiastically welcomed in

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complained about ‘I disturbatori di questo bell’ordine della Provvidenza [...] i più atroci nemici dell’umanità’ (‘Sulla civiltà’, *Il progresso*, 3 (1832), p. 79), and De Cesare about ‘coloro i quali studiansi di combattere questa magnifica dottrina’, who ‘son quegli stessi che fan di tutto per peggiorare i destini degli uomini’ (‘Cenni sugli studi storici’, p. 93).

<sup>48</sup> Baldacchini, ‘Del fine immediato di ogni poesia’, p. 286.

<sup>49</sup> Saverio Baldacchini, *Claudio Vainini o l’artista* (Naples: R. De Stefano e socii, 1836), pp. 6 and 7. See Bellucci, *Leopardi e i contemporanei*, p. 149-152, Botti, *Leopardi e il destino della poesia*, p. 139. It is also true that there were attempts at mediating between Leopardi’s radical materialism and the new spiritualistic sensibility: Alessandro Poerio wrote that sublime poetry leads to religious faith despite the fact that the poet expressed ‘idee all’intutto contrarie [...]. Così avviene nella poesia del Leopardi ancora’. Alessandro Poerio, ‘Novantanove pensieri’, in *Il viaggio in Germania, il carteggio letterario, ed altre prose*, ed. by Benedetto Croce (Florence: Le Monnier, 1917), pp. 269-270.

<sup>50</sup> Giuseppe Ricciardi, *Silvio, ossia memorie di un galantuomo* (Naples: Stamperia Del Vaglio, 1864), p. 160.

Naples.<sup>51</sup> In fact, Mamiani shared with the Neapolitan dominant culture his ideological position, an antimaterialistic liberal Catholicism. Additionally – and this point has not been noted by scholars until now – his works also bore the marks of a very specific ingredient of Neapolitan culture: they carried fragmentary but clear evidence of a Vico-related inspiration, which might have been relevant in determining Mamiani's success in the Neapolitan context.

Mamiani published a collection of *Inni sacri* in Paris in 1832; the conceptual framework of the preface introducing the poems echoes Vico's reflections. For this reason, it must have sounded particularly familiar to the literati of 1830s Naples, who had refamiliarised themselves with Vico's thought:

[L]a vita civile incomincia dalla religione; con lei crescono, durano e si fanno venerande le glorie nazionali, i riti, le leggi, i costumi tutti d'un popolo: radunansi in lei e partecipano del lume suo le memorie precipue de'tempi e le auguste speranze dell'avvenire. Sentirono in questo modo e procederono così in ogni cosa quegli Italiani, che nel [decimo] secondo e [decimo]terzo secolo rinnovarono le maraviglie del valore latino; beati davvero e gloriosi senza fine nella ricordanza dei posterì, se mai dalla mente non cancellavano essere tutti figlioli d'una grande patria e che la prima legge evangelica prescriveva loro il sempre amarsi l'uno l'altro come uguali e fratelli, come chiamati a condurre ad effetto con savia reciprocanza di virtù e di fatiche le sorti magnifiche e progressive dell'umanità!

Con tale intendimento furono dettati questi inni sacri [...]. Così mi sforzava di trarre alla comune utilità il ministero della poesia [...]. Ho pertanto richiamato le muse al più antico loro ufficio di cantare la religione civile; che perciò appunto elle furono stimate deità e gli alunni loro, portentosi e più che uomini.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See Savarese, *L'eremita osservatore*, pp. 98 and 100. Francesco Paolo Botti has recently reassessed the importance of Mamiani's works to understand the cultural dynamics of Leopardi's Naples and to grasp the background of Leopardi's 'La ginestra'. Botti, *Leopardi e il destino della poesia*, pp. 143-45.

<sup>52</sup> Terenzio Mamiani della Rovere, *Inni sacri* (Paris: Éverat, 1832), p. 5.

This introductory passage, extracted from the dedication of the book to Mamiani's cousins, is full of echoes of Vico, but also of Foscolo's Vico-inspired *La chioma di Berenice* (see Section 1. 3). Firstly, the idea that religion constitutes the starting point for civilization is a key feature of the *New Science*, which Foscolo had reassessed – even if in Vico's original text the argumentation is more complex: in fact, as explained in *NS* § 340 (and *passim*), men were savage and violent like beasts until lightning inspired them to fear and respect the divine. As stated in *NS* § 1110 against Bayle's theories, religion is the key for the formation and the conservation of societies. Secondly, Mamiani's references to the importance of national heroes, and moreover to rites, laws and customs recalled the 'dipintura' that opens the *New Science*, in which the main features of the work are summarized. Rites and laws are, in particular, the object of Vico's attention. Finally, Mamiani's declarations about the purpose of poetry are taken from Vico's work: Mamiani's sacred hymns, at least according to the author's intentions, aimed to make poetry useful by strengthening social bonds. To do so, he tried to imitate what he saw as the original purpose of the Muses – that is to say, in Vico's terms, the personification/deification of poetry itself. Mamiani intended to give poetic expression to fear of the divine through the 'alunni' of the Muses, that is to say the first poets/theologians. This passage is probably inspired by *NS* § 365, in which Vico describes the birth of the symbolic image of the Muses in the human imagination and stresses the role of ancient poets-theologians as interpreters of the gods' messages.

For Mamiani, therefore, poetry with a religious content could awaken religious feelings and convey moral lessons, and even establish or re-establish civilization. This implies that he believed that he lived in an age that could somehow reproduce the features of primitive poetry in a modern, philosophical age. Additionally, Mamiani seems to claim for himself and for his poems the semi-divine, foundational role that Vico had attributed to the first poets. Mamiani's allusions to the *New Science* also implied that the present, 'almeno per

quanto il concederono i tempi e il luogo gravemente pericoloso',<sup>53</sup> is an era of renewal and refoundation. These arguments must have sounded familiar to Neapolitan readers and congenial to their own ideas.

Mamiani also claimed that mankind was destined to 'sorti magnifiche e progressive';<sup>54</sup> as discussed in the following section, Leopardi would make this phrase famous by quoting it in 'La ginestra' and by making it a symbol of his contemporaries' inconsistent ideology of progress. In fact, Mamiani's faith in providential progress was completely in accordance with the Neapolitans' 'progressivist' views on history. According to Timpanaro, Mamiani's use of the word 'progressivo' in the sense of 'destined to progress' and not of 'gradual', was a neologism in the Italian language.<sup>55</sup> It rapidly became a keyword among Vico's Neapolitan readers (who spoke of the 'andamento progressivo', or 'tendenza progressiva' of history: see above), proving that there was an affinity between Mamiani's discourse and the interpretation of the *New Science*.

The idea that Mamiani was familiar with Vico's works and that he may have been inspired by the *New Science* is reinforced by the fact that, in 1834, he published a philosophical essay, *Del rinnovamento dell'antica filosofia italiana*, in which he argued for the existence of a typically Italian philosophical tradition. As others had already argued (see Section 1. 3), Vico was a key figure of this tradition.<sup>56</sup> Not surprisingly, Mamiani's philosophical essay was reviewed and praised in *Il progresso*.<sup>57</sup> It espoused optimistic narratives about the renewal of Italian culture and presented Vico as a model for the future development of an Italian philosophy.

Predictably, Mamiani's *Inni sacri* was immediately successful in Naples: the local printer Tramater reprinted it in 1833. This Neapolitan edition is

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<sup>53</sup> Mamiani, *Inni sacri*, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Sebastiano Timpanaro, "Le magnifiche sorti e progressive" ("La ginestra", 51)', in *Classicismo e illuminismo nell'Ottocento italiano*, pp. 261-65.

<sup>56</sup> Terenzio Mamiani Della Rovere, *Del rinnovamento della filosofia antica italiana*, 2 vols (Paris: Philan Delaforest, 1834). See for example vol. I, 72, in which Vico is presented as one of the trailblazers of a 'novella scuola italiana'.

<sup>57</sup> Luigi Blanch, "Del rinnovamento della filosofia antica italiana" del C. Mamiani della Rovere', *Il progresso*, 10 (1835), pp. 29-51.

particularly interesting because it included both Mamiani's *Inni sacri* and, as an appendix, Leopardi's 'Inno ai patriarchi', composed several years earlier (1822) and published in the Florentine *Canti* edition of 1831. As stated in the introduction to the book, by publishing the two poems together the editor wanted to encourage comparison between the two works.<sup>58</sup> The implicit intention, however, was probably meant to underline the distance between two opposite views of poetry via inviting comparison.

Mamiani's Vico-related inspiration were recognized in Raffaele Liberatore's review in *Il progresso*. The reviewer stated that Mamiani's poems demonstrated that, finally, Italian poetry was returning to 'i suoi veri principî' – a word that was deliberately ambiguous because in Italian encompasses both the meanings of 'origins' and 'foundational rules' (on this, see Section 1. 3). He then affirmed that Mamiani's poetry, as well as that of Manzoni, Borghi, and Berchet, is inspired by the Muses of religion and politics; then, in terms that seem borrowed from Vico (see *NS* § 383 for example), he described the origins of poetry among the Greeks, highlighting the role poets had played in the process of civilization: 'i primi poeti, legislatori e sacerdoti ad un tempo, ammaestrarono i popoli negli elementi del culto e del viver civile'.<sup>59</sup> The reviewer concluded by recognizing in Mamiani's works a resurfacing of ancient Greek religious and political poetry:

Ecco alla fine degl'Inni sacri in cui mi gode l'animo di riconoscere almeno un saggio di quella greca maniera. [...] Per la prima volta, se non m'inganno, gl'inni attribuiti ad Omero, e consacrati ad Apollo, a Cerere, a Mercurio ed alle principali divinità de' Gentili, veggonsi nel volgar nostro imitati in quanto alla fattura ed al metro [...]. Per tal forma ei riconduce nobilmente gli animi alle idee religiose, a quelle pie credenze che furono le compagne e il conforto della nostra infanzia.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> *Inni sacri del c. Mamiani della Rovere* (Naples: Tramater, 1833), p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Raffaele Liberatore, 'Gli Inni sacri di Terenzio Mamiani', *Il progresso* 8 (1833), 137-47 (p. 146).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

The final reference to the sphere of childhood adds further nuances to Liberatore's Vico-inspired reading of Mamiani. In fact, if Mamiani's poetry can bring the reader back to the lost era of childhood, and inspire noble religious feeling in him or her, this means reacquiring literature's original function of inspiring magnanimous feelings in primitive people and fostering the development of society.

After this, Liberatore focused on Mamiani's 'Inno ai patriarchi', the last and the most effective poem of the collection in attaining the goals of civic and religious poetry. The aim of the poem is to celebrate the innocence of the primitive people and to incite modern readers to charity, reciprocal love, and brotherhood. This composition is also an example of the use of Vico's imagery in poetry. Thus, the author narrates the story of the first emergence of human life borrowing some features from the *New Science*. For example, the idea that the giants developed from beastly men and wandered in the woods ('ferine, smisurate a lor crescevano / le ferree membra, e parver pieni i boschi / di giganti', ll. 53-55) seems inspired by *NS* § 369 ('dovettero a dismisura ingrandire le carni e l'ossa, e crescere vigorosamente robusti, e sì provenire giganti'); the reference to the civilizing function of marriage, sacrifice, and divination (ll. 171-173) is probably taken from *NS* § 9-11, in which Vico describes the importance of precisely these institutions for societal development. Not only Mamiani's ideology seems inspired by Vico, but also that his poetry is permeated with images inspired by the *New Science*.

Liberatore subsequently compared Mamiani's hymn to the homonymous poem by Leopardi. The reviewer praised both poems, but defined Mamiani's as 'più poetico', and Leopardi's as 'più filosofico'. In fact, as Liberatore had stated, Mamiani's poetry had the power of inspiring pious feelings and of bringing the reader back to the purity of his or her childhood: these were the 'poetical' properties of ancient poetry. By contrast, defining Leopardi's hymn 'più filosofico' means denying these characteristics to Leopardi's poem. Additionally, in Vico's (but also Leopardi's) perspective, in accordance with his Platonic

inspiration, poetry and philosophy are two opposite terms, the one negating the other (see for example *NS* 215-19).

Though the two poems overlap thematically, Mamiani's hymn idealised the purity of origins and was thus intended by its author to stimulate its emulation. Leopardi's hymn instead centres on the fracture between the lost era of the fathers ('incliti padri') and the following generations ('figli dolorosi', ll. 1-2), insisting on the theme of human guilt (ll. 11-21) without giving space to any possibility of redemption.

It is not difficult to imagine, then, how the comparison between the two texts exacerbated the conflict between the philosophical, defeatist, cynical perspective of Leopardi and the optimistic, constructive and thus in a sense 'poetic' Neapolitan culture. Meanwhile, in the same context, Leopardi was elaborating his reply to these cultural tensions, which will be the object of the following section.

### 5. 3 - *Regress, Disbelief and Fable in Leopardi's Last Works*

The vanity of ideologies of progress and belief is a key theme of Leopardi's Neapolitan works. Leopardi struck at the very heart of current ideologies by criticizing the philosophical incoherence of ideology itself, which he considered a mere comforting device. This is particularly evident in the specific declination that the themes of the fable – acknowledged, in a Vico-related perspective, as a credible discourse – and of belief had in Leopardi's Neapolitan works. The following pages will be dedicated to this thematic nexus.

Leopardi had probably already read Mamiani's *Inni sacri* immediately after its publication, when he was still in Florence,<sup>61</sup> but, given the success of his cousin's work in the Neapolitan context, it is not surprising that the memory of it, and in particular of the introduction to the poems, resurfaced in Naples, when

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<sup>61</sup> A letter from Vieusseux dated 1832 stated 'Tenetevi pure gl'*Inni* del Mamiani per leggerli, ma non pensate altrimenti a far l'articolo' (*Epistolario*, II, 1949); probably Vieusseux had asked to Leopardi to review the poems for the *Antologia*, but Leopardi declined.

Leopardi started to compose the powerful philosophical poem 'La ginestra'. This text, widely regarded as Leopardi's philosophical testament,<sup>62</sup> attached the optimism characterising contemporary Neapolitan culture, contrasting it with the bitter truth of the hopeless condition of mankind. For Leopardi, there was no reason to hope for a better future, either on earth or in any afterlife. 'La ginestra' also implicitly objected to some of the Vico-related myths analysed in the previous pages.

Leopardi extracted from Mamiani's introduction the phrase 'le sorti magnifiche e progressive dell'umanità',<sup>63</sup> and used it in 'La ginestra', ironically, to mock the moderns' idealistic progressivism: 'Dipinte in queste rive / son dell'umana gente / *le magnifiche sorti e progressive.*' ('La ginestra', ll. 49-51, Leopardi's emphasis). Leopardi also added an ironic footnote to this line: 'parole di un moderno, al quale è dovuta tutta la loro eleganza'. By doing so, he stressed on the one hand the link between the faith in progress and contemporary thought, and, on the other his own implicit anti-modernism. In fact, not only did the poem mock the faith that Neapolitan culture had in the providential development of history but it also countered with a narrative of acceptance and lucid disenchantment. The broom, a fragile but resistant plant, that grows on infertile fields ('campi cosparsi / di ceneri infeconde e ricoperti / dell'impetrata lava', 'La ginestra', ll. 17-19) epitomized this attitude.

In my view, Leopardi included his cousin's words in this poem because they synthesised the optimistic views characterising the Neapolitan culture; but also because Leopardi rejected the general meaning of the whole introduction to Mamiani's *Inni sacri* from which they are extracted. By so doing, Leopardi also reversed the role of the poet that Mamiani had implicitly claimed for himself. For Leopardi, the poet should not spread deceptive myths and fables that only prevent the reader from facing the truth, as the ancient poet-theologians had; on the contrary, authentically 'true' poetry should denounce and unveil misleading

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<sup>62</sup> This is how Pamela Williams defines it, in her "'La ginestra", the last will and testament of a poet', in *Giacomo Leopardi. A Cosmic Poet and His Testament*, ed. by Roberto Bertoni (Turin: Trauben, 1999), pp. 35-68.

<sup>63</sup> Mamiani, *Inni sacri*, p. 5.

narratives describing the destiny of mankind as a happy one. Even the poem's epigraph ('E gli uomini vollero piuttosto le tenebre che la luce'), taken from the Gospel of John, must be read in this sense: men do not want to be 'enlightened' by the bitter truth, but rather they choose to stay in the dark, protected by their consolatory beliefs. Therefore, Leopardi's voice in 'La ginestra' is a totally anti-poetic lyric: it neither creates nor constructs, but rather demystifies ideological truths; it does not inspire, but teaches and leads to disenchantment. In other words, Leopardi's later poetry totally negates its original role, becoming fully and consciously philosophical. Similarly, the 'noble' poet, argues Leopardi is the one who dares to tell the truth:

Nobil natura è quella  
che a sollevare s'ardisce  
gli occhi mortali incontra  
al comun fato, e che con franca lingua,  
nulla al ver detraendo,  
confessa il mal che ci fu dato in sorte,  
e il basso stato e frale;

'La ginestra', ll. 111-17

The poem also contains a second element of fracture between Leopardi and his cultural environment: 'La ginestra', in fact, depicted the contemporary age as an age of regression, overturning contemporary narratives that exhibited an optimistic confidence in progress. In fact, the present time, 'secol superbo e sciocco', was for Leopardi regressing towards childish consolatory narratives and reversing the progress that modern thought had made from the Renaissance onwards. Additionally, 'La ginestra' accused the 'progressivist' propaganda of disguising regression as progress ('del ritornar ti vantì / e procedere il chiamì', ll. 57-58). Leopardi reversed the hopeful narratives of Neapolitan writers that looked towards social changes with confidence (De Cesare's 'migliore avvenire',

Blanch's 'andamento progressivo': see above). It is evident that Leopardi was polemicising against the axioms of those who, quoting Vico, praised progress and perfectibility, but also against Mamiani's claims about the religious and social value of his poetry.

Qui ti mira e qui ti specchia,  
secol superbo e sciocco,  
che il calle insino ad ora  
dal risorto pensier segnato innanti  
abbandonasti, e volti addietro i passi,  
del ritornar ti vanti,  
e procedere il chiami.

[...]

Libertà vai sognando, e servo a un tempo  
vuoi di nuovo il pensiero,  
sol per cui risorgemmo  
dalla barbarie in parte, e per cui solo  
si cresce in civiltà, che sola in meglio  
guida i pubblici fati.

'La ginestra', ll. 52-58 and 72-77

As is evident from the quotation, philosophy in 'La ginestra' acquired a positive value and was opposed to uncritical religious and ideological certainties. This marks a revision of Leopardi's previous opinions. Contrary to his earlier writings (see Section 3. 1), he now believes that Renaissance philosophy ('risorto pensier') had led Western civilization out of medieval barbarism, and that rational thought was necessary to improve the conditions of life. Leopardi also contrasts his cyclical conception of history ('ritornar') with the linear and progressive views expressed by the Neapolitans ('procedere'). In 'La ginestra' the present is

described as a regressive phase ('il calle [...] abbandonasti', 'volti addietro i passi'). Leopardi blamed the resurfacing of religious beliefs as a step backwards, towards the stage of barbarism that men had managed to overcome. The poetic 'I' claimed to have witnessed the return of these barbaric features in the present and blamed them for limiting philosophical knowledge ('servo pensiero' versus 'libertà').

The re-discovery of the ruins of Pompeii, just outside the optimistic Naples, warned the moderns about the cyclical ruin that societies periodically undergo. As Fabio Camilletti summarised, Pompeii is a *memento mori* that 'threatens the historicist illusion of a continuity in time'.<sup>64</sup>

Torna al celeste raggio  
 dopo l'antica obblivion l'estinta  
 Pompei, come sepolto  
 scheletro, cui di terra  
 avarizia o pietà rende all'aperto [...].

'La ginestra', ll. 269-73

The resurfacing of the ruins of the ancient world acquires a new value here, in comparison to Leopardi's early writings. As analysed in Section 2. 1, a few years before, in 'Ad Angelo Mai' (1821), Leopardi had praised the 'risorgimenti' of 'feconde [...] carte' (ll. 9-10). There, the philological restoration of the ancient text was capable of giving a new voice ('a parlar gli meni', l. 3) and a new life ('svegliar dalle tombe', l. 2) to the classic writers. Additionally, it had been the philologist's virtue ('valor', l. 13) to give back to the dead the ability to speak to the present. On the contrary, in 'La ginestra', it is greed for treasures or pity for the dead (l. 273) that drive the archaeologist. Rather than re-establishing connection with the past, as the philologist's work had in 'Ad Angelo Mai', the

<sup>64</sup> Fabio Camilletti, 'Leopardi *avec* Sade. Impotence and *jouissance* in "La ginestra"', in, *Ten Steps: Critical Enquiries on Leopardi*, ed. by Camilletti and Cori, pp. 205-25, on pp. 210-11.

re-discovery of the ruins of Pompei seemed menacing and haunting, a reminder to the moderns of the vanity of their eudaimonistic ideology.<sup>65</sup>

In 'La ginestra', some of the basic keywords of Leopardi's philosophical system acquire a new meaning. In addition to 'pensiero' and 'civiltà', which, as seen above, acquired a positive value, the semantic area of childhood took on new shades of meaning. While in the past the child was the epitome of naturalness and happiness (see Section 3. 1-3. 1), in 'La ginestra' Leopardi accused intellectuals of his time ('gl'ingegni tutti') of praising 'pargoleggiar' (l. 59), that is to say, childish behaviour. As mentioned above, Raffaele Liberatore claimed that Mamiani's poetry was capable of enabling readers to return to their childhood. In this case, the image of the child epitomizes a naïve and uncritical belief in false modern myths. For Leopardi, the time of infancy belongs to the past; and the childish behaviour exemplified in the uncritical attitude of the Neapolitans is ridiculous. Men should instead behave like adults and face the bitter truth: teleological narratives and religious beliefs have no philosophical foundation.

As early as 1832 the image of the child had acquired a problematic meaning in Leopardi's perspective. In 'Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico', a text that explicitly expressed Leopardi's rejection of the ideologies of his time, the author had in fact accused his contemporaries of pursuing regress to a state of childhood; this, for him, was due to the excessive spiritualism of modernity, which, in turn, led to a neglect of the body and of physical exercise: 'uno che sia debole di corpo non è uomo, ma bambino'. Therefore the ancients, traditionally described as 'children' as opposed to the moderns, were paradoxically described by Leopardi as more manly and virile than the moderns, who were in comparison 'poco più che bambini'.<sup>66</sup>

Like 'pensiero', and 'civiltà', also the word 'fable' reversed its value from positive to negative. In 'La ginestra' Leopardi defined the inconsistent optimistic

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<sup>65</sup> About the 'Pompeian uncanny' see Camilletti, 'Leopardi avec Sade', p. 210. See also Maria De Las Nieves Muniz Muniz, 'Tracce dell'antico nella "Ginestra"', in *Feconde venner le carte. Studi in onore di Ottavio Besomi*, ed. by Tatiana Crivelli (Bellinzona: Casagrande, 1997), pp. 486-505; Francesca Fedi, *Mausolei di sabbia. Sulla cultura figurativa di Leopardi* (Lucca: Maria Pacini Fazzi, 1997), pp. 15-25.

<sup>66</sup> Leopardi, 'Dialogo di Tristano e di un Amico', in OM, pp. 412-13.

discourses of his contemporaries as ‘superbe fole’ (l. 154), and the production of positive narratives about the human condition as ‘favoleggiar’ (l. 190). As discussed in Chapter 3, Leopardi’s conception of the fable had significant points of contact with Vico’s, in particular in the poem ‘Alla Primavera’ (1822). For both Vico and Leopardi the ancient fable was a natural projection of the primitive imagination and was characterized by being believed without any skepticism despite their falsity. The fable is therefore a matter of belief. ‘Propria materia’ of the fable, for Vico, was ‘l’impossibile credibile’ (NS, § 383), that is to say, content that is impossible to believe for modern man. Being incapable of noting the fictional nature of fables, primitive men believed them to be true; truth and fiction, *mythos* and *logos* were therefore superimposed in ancient times (see Section 3. 1). In ‘Alla Primavera’ Leopardi had argued for the impossibility of reproducing fables in modernity, since philosophical truth had uncovered their fictional nature. To use Vico’s words, the ‘impossibile’ content of the fable is no longer ‘credibile’. Therefore, according to Leopardi, a ‘modern fable’ is impossible, unless it is false and misleading. This is precisely the case, according to Leopardi, of the eudemonistic and teleological ‘superbe fole’ circulating in Naples, depicting the human race as ‘signora’ and ‘data al Tutto’ (‘La ginestra’, ll. 188-89). Additionally, as Vico explained, primitive men instinctively believed in the fictional truth of the fable; or, in other words, true and believed in primitive times were indistinguishable. As Vico explained, quoting Tacitus, primitive men fantasized and at the same time believed (*‘fingunt simul creduntque’* NS, § 376).<sup>67</sup> On the contrary, modern men know the truth – for example, they know that natural entities have no mind –, and therefore their belief is an act of choice. For Leopardi ancient fables were ‘favole significanti’, while modern ‘fole’ are ‘favole insignificanti’.<sup>68</sup> Both of them are false from a rational point of view, but the former provided generous, magnanimous illusions and contributed to cementing communities; the latter, on the other hand, are mere illusory propaganda. Taken out of its original context, a mythical narrative cannot but foster false and

<sup>67</sup> On this point see De Luca, ‘Finzione e fruizione poetica in Vico e Coleridge’, p. 63.

<sup>68</sup> On this point see Tateo, ‘Alla Primavera’, p. 32.

unnatural illusions, which, for Leopardi, were not inferior to the knowledge of the truth. In particular, new mythologies about the perfectible condition of the human race sounded to Leopardi dangerous and deceitful, as testified by the resurfacing of Pompei ('La ginestra', ll. 269-79).

Fable, illusion and belief, and their imaginary nature, had previously held a specific, positive function in Leopardi's thought. Not only had Leopardi believed, for a while, in the capacity of poetry to reproduce the ancient illusions; he had even explored the social and even existential implications of belief: 'l'uomo senza credenza stabile non ha stabile motivo di determinarsi, quindi di agire, quindi di vivere' (*Zib.* 414), he wrote in 1820. For the early Leopardi, religion, as well as social, political, and ideological beliefs, even if false, had a precise societal function. In *Zib.* 423-27 (18 December 1820), Leopardi reflected on the progressive decline of pagan religions, as increasingly ill-suited to the needs of men, who had become more and more used to abstract thinking and philosophy. A response to the need to re-generate the illusions fostered by ancient beliefs was the Christian truth, as one that had been (or at least, was understood to be) 'revealed' by God (through Jesus). In fact, Leopardi considered religion as revelation to be the only plausible form of belief for a refined modern mind: 'senza il fondamento della rivelazione, come può una perfetta ragione credere o tornare a credere quello che, umanamente parlando, è veramente falso?' (*Zib.* 426). During the same period (1820-22), Leopardi had sketched a project of writing a cycle of sacred hymns. The Christian religion is suitable for poetry because 'ha moltissimo di quello che somigliando all'illusione è ottimo alla poesia'.<sup>69</sup> For a short period Leopardi, therefore, thought that the credibility of the religious message, supported by Christian Revelation, could become material for poetry; he consequently planned to write something close to Mamiani's *Inni sacri*. However, he never wrote any poems reflecting on this.

Leopardi's musings on belief then took a socio-anthropological turn. As summarised in the *Discorso sopra i costumi degli Italiani* (1824), nations like Germany or England, which still cultivated illusory notions like love for the

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<sup>69</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, 'Inni sacri', in TPP, p. 460.

fatherland or self-respect ('amor proprio'), possessed what Leopardi called a 'società stretta'. This term described a form of mutual control that replaces moral principles ('i principii morali [...] perduti') and reinforces social bonds ('serve alle società di legame').<sup>70</sup> On the contrary, Leopardi thought that the lack of this social control in Italy, the most philosophical of all nations, resulted in social underdevelopment. Belief and illusion, despite being philosophically inconsistent, had a specific social function and therefore a positive value.

Leopardi had, for a long time, argued for the social function of illusion and for the capacity of poetry to foster it. In 'Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro' (1824) he wrote that he believed that poetic books, 'prendendo questo vocabolo largamente; cioè i libri destinati a muovere la immaginazione', would be the most useful to society: a good poem 'lascia al lettore nell'animo un tal sentimento nobile, che per mezz'ora, gl'impedisca di ammettere un pensier vile, e di fare un'azione indegna',<sup>71</sup> thus preventing disbelief and cynicism. However, in the thirties, Leopardi's disenchantment radicalised, possibly also as a consequence of the limited success of his collection of poems, *Canti*, published in 1831. Additionally, he sympathised more and more with atheistic positions. From 1832 onwards, Leopardi stopped putting forward arguments in favour of the social or philosophical value of illusion. 'Credenza', in Leopardi's view, had therefore turned itself into 'credulità', and this is the sense that we should give to the use of vocabulary of belief in Leopardi's later works.

A telling example of this stance is the satire 'I nuovi credenti' (composed in 1835), which mocked precisely the credulity of Neapolitan intellectuals, and specifically those who gathered around *Il progresso*. In particular, scholars have identified Saverio Baldacchini, Raffaele Liberatore (or Emidio Cappelli), and Nicola Corcia,<sup>72</sup> contributors to the journal and authors of direct polemics against

<sup>70</sup> TPP, p. 1014.

<sup>71</sup> OM, p. 344. See Michael Caesar, "'Mezz'ora di nobiltà": Leopardi e i suoi lettori', in *Leopardi a Firenze*, ed. by Melosi, pp. 461-72.

<sup>72</sup> See Botti, *Leopardi e il destino della poesia*, p. 133, Benedetto Croce, 'Commento storico ad un carne satirico di Giacomo Leopardi', in *Aneddoti di varia letteratura*, 3 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1954), III, 451-64; Angiola Ferraris, 'Il linguaggio perduto, per una lettura dei "Nuovi credenti"', *Otto/Novecento* 12 (1988), 35-42, Palermo, 'I nuovi credenti', pp. 746-47.

Leopardi (see above) as the poet's targets. However, the satire is probably directed against the entire ideological mind-set of the journal, as the voice of the city's cultural trends. The satirised characters are collectively defined as 'color che sanno', but the phrase is most probably to be read as ironic: they do not know, they just believe. Knowledge, instead, is on the side of Leopardi, the philosophical poet. The title 'I nuovi credenti' probably does not refer exclusively to the new wave of Catholic spiritualism, that is to say, to the religiosity of the mocked characters. It also refers to the fact that they *believed* the optimistic narratives they themselves produced. As Vittorio Panicara argues, progressivism in Naples had taken the role of a lay religion.<sup>73</sup> Its believers regressed to a state of uncritical acceptance, like that of a child: for example, Emidio Cappelli, here called Galerio, 'pende dal labbro' of Baldacchini, called Elpidio, 'con quella fede / che il bimbo ha nel dottor [...]: ed ei, contento e pio, / loda i raggi del dì, loda la sorte / del gener nostro, e benedice Iddio' (ll. 49-57).<sup>74</sup>

Knowledge, for Leopardi, had the specific function of demonstrating the falsity of mistakes, ideologies and superstitions: it had, thus, a negative function, and does not lead to further acquisition of knowledge. Leopardi had expressed this idea clearly in 1835, in a passage from *Paralipomeni alla batracomiomachia* (IV, 19): advancement in knowledge ('imparar') consists in the first place of 'avvedersi di credenze stolte', that is to say, in being aware of the vanity of one's beliefs. Secondly, it means to seek the knowledge 'del fanciullo'. In this case, the child is a positive figure: he does not know anything more than modern man, but at least 'di veder né di saper non crede'. Incredulity, therefore, seems to Leopardi the only intellectually honest position; the broom, in fact, is said to be 'più saggia' and 'meno inferma' than man, because it does not believe in anything: 'le frali / tue stirpi non credesti / o dal fato o da te fatte immortali' ('La ginestra', ll. 314-17).

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<sup>73</sup> Vittorio Panicara, *La nuova poesia di Giacomo Leopardi. Una lettura critica della Ginestra* (Florence: Olschki, 1997), in particular pp. 20-23 and 78-80. On the same page Mario Marti, 'Leopardi e Napoli', in *Le città di Giacomo Leopardi*, p. 196.

<sup>74</sup> See Antonio Palermo, 'I nuovi credenti', in *Lectura leopardiana*, 737-53.

Leopardi's last poem, with its radical iconoclasm, probably represents the most distant point between the poet and nineteenth-century 'vichismo'. However, paradoxically, the conception of history, the cyclical recurrence of barbarism is precisely one of those fields in which contemporary scholarship has sought a comparison between Leopardi and Vico.<sup>75</sup> In fact, in contradiction with the trends of his age, Leopardi was always convinced that medieval times were a time of superstition and regress, as he explained fully in *Discorso sopra i costumi degli Italiani*. Similarly, Vico saw the Middle Ages ('barbarie ritornata') as proof for the cyclical 'ricorso che fanno le nazioni'; 'barbarie ritornata' had, for Vico, features in common with 'barbarie prima', that is to say, primitive times: violence, slavery, superstition, divine law, wars of religion (*NS* § 1047-50). While Vico tended to stress the analogies between the two phases, Leopardi had a propensity to keep them separate.<sup>76</sup>

As in the Florentine context, in the case of Naples too Leopardi proved himself to be highly responsive to Vico-related cultural trends of his time. A re-reading of Vico – however ideologically charged and sometimes misleading – contributed to the construction of myths such as those of progress, Providence, poetry as civil religion: myths that Leopardi entirely rejected. This rejection contributed to the construction of the last, extreme form of Leopardi's social engagement: instead of fostering fragile social myths, he trusted that poetry could unveil the inconsistency of modern fables. It is therefore possible to say that Leopardi took a critical and nonconformist position in the Neapolitan milieu and implicitly rejected the interpretation that the concepts of history, belief and progress, originally coming from the *New Science*, had taken in that context. Leopardi's theories of barbarism and regress, however, are certainly compatible with a cyclical conception of history as that proposed by of Vico. And, now that idealistic and 'progressivist' perspectives on the *New Science* are less in fashion

<sup>75</sup> See for example Crivelli, 'I due tempi della barbarie', p. 35.

<sup>76</sup> 'Altro è il primitivo altro è barbaro. Il barbaro è già guasto, il primitivo ancora non è maturo', (*Zib.* 118). 'La storia dell'uomo non presenta altro che un passaggio continuo da un grado di civiltà ad un altro, poi all'eccesso di civiltà, e finalmente alla barbarie, e poi da capo. Barbarie, s'intende, di corruzione, non già stato primitivo assolutamente naturale, giacché questo non sarebbe barbarie' (*Zib.* 403-04). See my entry 'Barbarie', in *Lessico leopardiano 2014*, pp. 43-48.

among scholars, Leopardi's theory of cyclical regress can be read in dialogue with Vico.

## CONCLUSION

Le dottrine debbono cominciare  
da quando cominciano le materie che trattano.

Vico, *New Science*, § 314

In 1807 Ugo Foscolo published *Dei sepolcri*, a poem that celebrated the series of tombs of famous Italians hosted in the Florentine Church of Santa Croce. As seen in Section 1.3, the poem is largely inspired by Vico's description of the beginnings of human civilization, in particular as far as the importance of devotion towards the dead in cementing communities is concerned.<sup>1</sup> Foscolo's influential text rapidly spread among his contemporaries, both in Italy and in Europe, imbuing Santa Croce with significant symbolic value. As O'Connor notes, the construction of a *lieu de mémoire* is a matter of reiteration and sharing, and Foscolo's powerful rendering of Santa Croce as a pantheon of Italian memories was mediated by both national and international texts, in factual accounts as well as in fiction, as the following examples demonstrate. Terenzio Mamiani,<sup>2</sup> Aleardo Aleardi,<sup>3</sup> and, later, Giosuè Carducci<sup>4</sup> celebrated the monument, inaugurating a stream of patriotic sepulchral poetry. The poet Corinne, in Madame De Staël's *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807), describes a renewed enthusiasm provoked by walking between the illustrious tombs.<sup>5</sup> Byron's *Childe Harold*

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<sup>1</sup> See Section 1.3.

<sup>2</sup> Terenzio Mamiani, 'Sonetti sui monumenti di Santa Croce a Firenze' (1828), in *Poesie di Terenzio Mamiani* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1857), pp. 344-350.

<sup>3</sup> Aleardo Aleardi, 'I tre fiumi', in *Poesie* (Naples: Francesco Rossi Romano, 1860), pp. 163-168.

<sup>4</sup> Giosuè Carducci, 'Ai sepolcri dei grandi Italiani in Santa Croce', in *Rime* (San Miniato: Ristori, 1857), p. 105.

<sup>5</sup> Anne-Louise Germaine Necker De Stael, *Corinne, ou l'Italie*, 3 vols (Paris: Librairie Stérotipe, 1807), II, 387-89.

(1818)<sup>6</sup> and Stendhal's travel journals (1817)<sup>7</sup> contributed further to the construction of the culture of memory surrounding Santa Croce.<sup>8</sup> All these texts, intentionally or not, contributed to the diffusion of a Vico-related inspiration in early nineteenth-century Italian culture. This specific configuration of the theme of the sepulchres, and the emphasis on the tombs of Santa Croce as a site of a collective identification, is inspired by Vico's theories (as seen in Section 1. 3). The constellation of texts cited is extremely telling of the obsession in Bourbon Restoration culture with the notion of temporality. Through Foscolo's mediation, the sepulchre came also to denote this preoccupation.

The young Leopardi also took part in the collective enthusiasm for Santa Croce as a symbolic space. In 1818, he composed and published two patriotic songs, one of which was dedicated to the preparation of a monument to Dante destined to be added to Santa Croce's collection of celebrative monuments.<sup>9</sup> This memorial, although it is not a 'real' sepulchre (Dante's body is in fact conserved in Ravenna), responded to the lack of a *lieu de mémoire* dedicated to the poet.<sup>10</sup> For Leopardi, this was an occasion to participate in the collective commemoration of the glorious Italian forefathers ('patri esempi de la prisca etade', 'Sopra il monumento di Dante', l. 5), and to praise the 'schiera infinita d'immortali' (l. 12) resting in Santa Croce. By publishing his *Canzoni* in 1818 Leopardi was probably attempting to position himself as a new Italian patriotic poet, an argument further attested by the dedication of the two songs to Vincenzo Monti.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> George Gordon Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (London: John Murray, 1816), Canto 4, Stanzas 54-61, p. 30-36.

<sup>7</sup> Marie-Henri Beyle [Stendhal], *Rome, Naples et Florence* (Paris: Delaunay, 1817) pp. 100-04.

<sup>8</sup> See O'Connor, *Firenze. La città e la memoria*, pp. 23-39.

<sup>9</sup> A Manifesto published on the 18 July 1818 announced the initiative, later recalled in the *Gazzetta di Firenze* (n. 101, 21 August 1818, p. 1). The Manifesto was signed by several Florentine intellectuals, including Gino Capponi.

<sup>10</sup> The Manifesto explicitly refers to the disdain of the foreign visitors who did not find a monument to Dante when visiting Florence, possibly echoing Byron ('Ungrateful Florence! Dante sleeps apart / like Scipio, buried by the upbraiding shore', *Childe Harold*, Canto 4, Stanza 57, ll. 1-2). Similarly, Leopardi complained that 'per lo toscano suol cercando già / l'ospite desioso / dove giaccia colui per lo cui verso / il meonio cantor non è più solo' ('Sopra il monumento di Dante', ll. 18-22).

<sup>11</sup> TPP, p. 219-20. On the topic see Luigi Blasucci, 'Sulle prime due canzoni', in *Leopardi e i segnali dell'infinito* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984), pp. 31-80.

Foscolo's *Dei sepolcri* is probably the implicit model of this work: for instance, whilst Foscolo complained that Napoleon's Edict of Saint Cloud (1804) imposed a spatial dislocation of cemeteries in Italy, undermining the aggregative role of the collective devotion towards tombs (*Dei sepolcri*, ll. 51-53), Leopardi, with 'Sopra il monumento di Dante' expresses despair for the loss of brave young Italians during the Napoleonic Russian campaign: emphasizing that they had died far away from their homeland, and that their bodies would not be buried ('Sopra il monumento di Dante', ll. 139-41 and 156-62). Therefore, through the strategy of emulating Foscolo, Leopardi participated in a cluster of tensions addressing the construction of a common cultural identification through the memory of the dead. While for Foscolo, however, and for others such as De Staël's *Corinne*, the space of Santa Croce stimulated desire for glory and its emulation,<sup>12</sup> already in 'Sopra il monumento di Dante' Leopardi stressed the loss and inefficacy of the power of the examples. For Leopardi there were no contemporary immortal heroes; the Italian nation is consequently depicted as a widow ('Sopra il monumento di Dante', l. 9). Italy (and the Italians) should be ashamed of itself ('Sopra il monumento di Dante', l. 15), because 'pietade' towards the nation is 'morta / in ogni petto' ('Sopra il monumento di Dante', ll. 37-38). This is in sharp contrast with Foscolo's poem, which is constructed around a rhetoric of hope and engagement,<sup>13</sup> for Foscolo the tombs still possess the power to urge the viewer to action: 'a egregie cose il forte animo accendono / l'urne de'forti' (*Dei sepolcri*, ll. 151-52).

Despite the fact that Leopardi, in writing this poem, wished to renew civil poetry as a genre,<sup>14</sup> the presentation of the glorious past as irretrievable dominates the composition. Rhetorical questions and expressions of doubt undermine the

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<sup>12</sup> 'La vue de cette église, décorée par de si nobles souvenirs, réveilla l'enthousiasme de Corinne: l'aspect des vivans l'avait découragée, la présence silencieuse des morts ranima, pour un moment du moins, cette émulation de gloire dont elle était jadis saisie'. De Staël, *Corinne, ou l'Italie*, p. 38. Leopardi probably read the book precisely in the same period, or immediately after. It is in fact quoted at page 73 of the *Zibaldone*.

<sup>13</sup> Cesare Federico Goffis spoke of a 'retorica della missione': Cesare Federico Goffis, 'La canzone ad Angelo Mai ed il suo antagonismo con i "Sepolcri"', in *Miscellanea di studi in onore di Vittore Branca*, 5 vols (Florence: Olschki, 1983), IV, 677-702 (p. 684).

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Pietro Giordani, 19 February 1819, *Epistolario*, I, 111.

poem's patriotic message ('Sopra il monumento di Dante', ll. 54-63, 180-89). The poet queries the efficacy of his message, and the subject is trapped in the impossibility of taking action in favour of his homeland.

The exemplarity of the dead, therefore, cannot but highlight the inadequacy of the moderns to improve humanity's collective fate. Less than two years later, in 1820, in 'Ad Angelo Mai', Leopardi pointed out the end of any possible communication between the voices of the dead and the present, depicting the latter as 'secol morto' (see Section 2. 2).<sup>15</sup> Antiquity had been deprived of its fascination and its exemplarity, and therefore it could no longer speak to modernity. Though 'Ad Angelo Mai' praises an Italian pantheon of heroes – Dante, Petrarch, Christopher Columbus, Lodovico Ariosto, Torquato Tasso, and Vittorio Alfieri – this celebration of the past does not equate with hope for the future. Similarly, the theme of shame emerges even more forcefully in this composition than in 'Sopra il monumento di Dante': 'questo secol di fango o vita agogni / e sorga ad atti illustri o si vergogni' ('Ad Angelo Mai', ll. 179-80).

In 'Bruto minore', a poem composed in 1821, Leopardi returned to the theme of sepulchres to state that they were completely useless. In fact, as Brutus claims in the poem, there is no point in preserving the memory of the dead if 'in peggio / precipitano i tempi' (ll. 112-13), and if the custody of the cultural heritage is forcedly given to undeserving heirs ('vil caterva', 'putridi nepoti', ll. 112 and 114). Brutus prefers that his body is eaten by vultures and his name is abandoned to the wind (ll. 116-20). This passage of the poem is most likely aimed to reverse the message of Foscolo's *Dei sepolcri*.<sup>16</sup>

In 1823, Leopardi further developed this theme by describing in the *Zibaldone* the practice of burying or burning corpses as unnatural (*Zib.* 3430-33, 15 September 1823); in fact, it was a cultural, and therefore un-natural, practice, born at the dawn of civilization. He explained that, originally, the idea of the survival of the soul, as well as that of the existence of an afterlife, were taught to

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<sup>15</sup> Goffis ('La canzone ad Angelo Mai ed il suo antagonismo con i "Sepolcri"', pp. 677-702) saw in this composition a direct reply to *Dei sepolcri*.

<sup>16</sup> Roberto Rea, 'Bruto e la sovversione dell'ideologia dei "Sepolcri"', *Italianistica* 28:3 (1999), 427-39.

primitive men by the ancient poets and wise men, in order to discipline the grief for the loss and provide consolation. This was the birth of the practice of burial: 'così gli antichi dirigevano la religione al ben pubblico e temporale, e secondo che questo richiedeva la modellavano' (*Zib.* 3432). This excerpt closely recalls passages of the *New Science*: for example *NS* § 337, in which Vico clarified that the idea of the immortality of the soul started with the 'seppolture', and that the ancient poets were responsible for inducing primitive men to obey the will of the gods (*NS*, § 661 and *passim*). Once again, we observe how Leopardi contributes to the diffraction of a typically Vico-related theme.

Immediately afterward, however, Leopardi reflected on how ancient cultures were oriented toward eternity, while modern culture was ephemeral and volatile: 'Volendo onorare un defunto [gli antichi] innalzavano un monumento che contrastasse coi secoli, e che ancor dura forse, dopo migliaia d'anni. Noi spendiamo sovente nelle stesse occasioni quasi altrettanto in un apparato funebre, che dopo il dì dell'esequie si disfa, e non ne resta vestigio' (*Zib.* 3437-38). Consequently, he argued, while the ancient world cherished durability and solidity, the present is focused on transience and fragility: 'Ed è ben naturale in un'età egoista. Ell'è egoista perchè disingannata', he concluded (*Zib.* 3438, 15 September 1823).<sup>17</sup>

Here the poet implicitly demystified the myth of Santa Croce that fascinated so many of his contemporaries. Monuments and sepulchres, he argued, no longer had an effect on a modern, disenchanted imagination, because the latter implies egoism and cynicism. For Vico, too, an excess of abstract reasoning leads to egoism and anti-social behaviour: this is what is represented in the recurrence of 'barbarie della riflessione', when people become accustomed to 'non ad altro pensare ch'alle particolari proprie utilità di ciascuno' (*NS*, § 1106).

Chapter 5 of this work noted how Leopardi's *œuvre* was perceived among his contemporaries as an example of a defeatist, philosophical and disillusioned narrative. Leopardi's positions, indeed, stood in opposition to the prevalent optimistic ideologies of that time. For instance Leopardi's poem, 'Inno ai

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<sup>17</sup> On these passages, see Camilletti, *Leopardi's Nymphs*, pp. 31-32.

patriarchi’, addressed directly the fracture with the sphere of origins, stressing the state of desperation of the generations who lost their direct communication with God. Throughout Leopardi’s works this pattern can be easily traced. For him, especially after the recognition of his irreparably ‘modern’ condition (*Zib.* 144, 1 July 1820, see Section 3. 1), following the crisis of 1819, philosophical and scientific progress provoked a disenchantment that undermined the basis of the social bonds that kept ancient societies together. That same crisis corresponded also to the abandonment of his series of civic compositions (the lyrics ‘All’Italia’, ‘Sopra il monumento di Dante’, as well as the prose writing *Discorso sopra la poesia romantica*, all composed in 1818), and to the desertion of the role of patriotic poet that Leopardi had carved out for himself in the first part of his career.

The biennium 1819-1820 therefore marked the end of Leopardi’s engagement in contemporary society, and reflected the acknowledgement that ancient civilization – for Leopardi, the only type of society capable of fostering illusions, virtue, and giving life a sense of meaning – was no longer attainable, or reproducible. From that moment on Leopardi was convinced that the ancient world could resurface only in phantasmic ways, such as through memory (*Zib.* 4415, 21 October 1828), or could only be restored partially, by the recuperation of its lost features (*Zib.* 4289, 18 September 1827, see Section 4. 1). Leopardi rejected the modern, along with its language and its symbols, as demonstrated by his attitude towards Romantic poetry (see Section 2. 1). At best, as Franco D’Intino has argued, the relationship with the modern can take the shape of an uncanny and devilish temptation.<sup>18</sup>

Leopardi’s treatment of the theme of the sepulchres is therefore exemplary of a radical difference between Leopardi’s approach to the theme of temporality and that of his contemporaries. In this dissertation, I have tried to give a series of examples of Leopardi’s unique approach to this theme, and to highlight its

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<sup>18</sup> Franco D’Intino, ‘Il monaco indiatolato. *Lo Zibaldone* e la tentazione faustiana di Leopardi’, in *Lo Zibaldone cento anni dopo*, ed. by Centro Nazionale di Studi Leopardiani (Florence: Olschki, 2001), pp. 467-512.

discontinuity with those typical of his generation, especially in relation to the areas of Italian culture in which Vico's influence was more evident. But what is the *fil rouge* that keeps all this together? I will try to clarify this by resorting to Edward Said's theorization of 'beginnings' as opposed to 'origin'.

Edward Said, in his much-debated 1974 book,<sup>19</sup> individuated in the *New Science* a distinction between the sphere of 'origins' and the sphere of the 'beginning'. The first is unique, sacred, privileged and unattainable, whilst the second is secular, human, defective and constantly repeated. Said elaborated this distinction by building on Vico's theorization of 'storia sacra' as opposed to 'storia gentilesca'. As Vico explains in the *New Science* (*NS*, § 54) and frequently repeats, his research is about the history of the pagans ('i gentili'); because the Sacred history (the history of the Jews) is told by the Bible, it is a matter of faith, and requires no scientific exploration. Said builds on this point, hypothesizing that there is an untouchable, unattainable, divine world of origins and a human, earthly, ungiven world of beginning.<sup>20</sup>

It is possible to expand this concept to further aspects of Vico's cyclical conception of history: for Vico the sphere of origins is completely lost and is even difficult to imagine ('or intendere appena si può, affatto immaginar non si può come pensassero gli uomini che fondarono l'umanità gentilesca', *NS*, § 378), and it can only resurface in part in the so-called 'barbarie ritornata' (*NS*, § 1047-96 and *passim*). Instead, Vico's narration of human history accounts for a multiplicity of beginnings, new beginnings, and phases of rise and decline. As Said synthesizes, 'the relatively uninteresting sterility of the three cycles' of divine, heroic and human times co-exist in Vico with 'the really powerful community of intractable human detail which Vico pours out with that unstinting philosophical zeal of his'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Edward Said, *Beginnings. Intention and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Granta, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> A similar distinction between history and origin has recently been reassessed by Roberto Esposito in *Pensiero vivente*, pp. 74 and 225. Esposito attributes the identification of this distinction to Vico, but he also individuates its recurrence in recent Italian philosophy (pp. 225-43).

<sup>21</sup> Said, *Beginnings*, p. 354. On this point see also Esposito, *Pensiero vivente*, p. 74-5.

Said posits that, on the one hand, the sphere of origins is so far back in time, and the primitive men were so different from modern men, that ‘not only is it hard for modern man to locate his beginning, but even when he becomes aware of his historical aboriginality he cannot even truly imagine what it is’.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, human history is characterized by an innate tendency to begin, and begin again: which is what Vico calls the ‘recourse’ of the nations. As Said explains, even if beginning implies replication of some features that belong to the sphere of origins (‘return and repetition’), it does not reproduce ‘the same’, but it rather produces difference.<sup>23</sup>

Said’s distinction helps clarify the ambiguous nature of some of Vico’s most influential statements about the theory of historical cycles. According to Said’s interpretation, in fact, the world of origins stands alone, far away and separated in all its otherness and obscurity (‘materia [...] incerta, informe, oscura’, *NS*, § 41) while the replicability and heterogeneity of the sphere of the beginning, instead, determines the progressive process of loss and differentiation from that world, shifting it further and further away over time. Indeed, the beginning implies a partial, fragmented and mysterious recurrence of some features of the original world. This is what it is possible to observe in the ‘barbarie ritornata’: as Cuoco pointed out, a phase of chaotic disorder like the revolution made the ties that bind communities more evident.<sup>24</sup>

This dissertation has tried to distinguish how Vico’s legacy in the early nineteenth century is related with a new beginning and renewal of time – what Francesco Lomonaco called ‘ri-salire’ from ‘disordine’ towards ‘ordine’,<sup>25</sup> Vincenzo Gioberti called a ‘rinnovamento’,<sup>26</sup> Stanislao Gatti called ‘creare’, ‘comporre’, ‘sintetizzare’,<sup>27</sup> in the progressive construction of a long-term process that is still called the *Ri-sorgimento*. In their interpretation, the *New Science* nineteenth-century readers sustained this strain of thought. For the most part,

<sup>22</sup> Said, *Beginnings*, p. 348-49.

<sup>23</sup> Said, *Beginnings*, p. 353-54.

<sup>24</sup> Cuoco, *Saggio storico*, pp. 6-7. See Section 1.3.

<sup>25</sup> Lomonaco, *Vite degli eccellenti italiani*, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Vincenzo Gioberti, *Del rinnovamento civile d’Italia* (Naples: Morano, 1851).

<sup>27</sup> See Section 4. 1.

Vico's Bourbon Restoration readers, while aware of the fracture with the lost sphere of *origins*, and of the irreproducibility of their symbolic imagination (as was the case of the self-defined Romantics) were attracted by what Said later identified as the sphere of the *beginning*.

A new beginning looked necessary to those Vico readers after a series of traumatic events that they perceived as a fracture in the *continuum* of history. To quote François Hartog, 'the old order of time had shattered, and after an initial period of *tabula rasa*, the emergent modern order was still uncertain of its direction'.<sup>28</sup> The disturbing events leading to this fracture, and transforming the paradigm of historicity, namely the French Revolution and the Napoleonic campaigns (1789-1815, with all their intermediate stages) inflect various dimensions. Sometimes they are reflected in material, historical and political perspectives, as is the case with Cuoco and Foscolo (Chapter 1); sometimes their phantasmic presence indirectly shapes literary and cultural debates, as in the case of the Classicist-Romantic quarrel (Chapter 2); we have observed also the solitary elaboration of the peripheral and isolated Leopardi (Chapter 3), the socio-political debates in the Gabinetto Vieusseux (Chapter 4), and the narrative of renovation and optimism in 1830s Naples (Chapter 5).

The fracture between old and new therefore applies to different spheres: the negotiation of the meaning of the age of the revolutions, which was perceived by Leopardi's contemporaries as a watershed between a 'before' that could never return and an 'after' that needed to be completely reinvented. The rapid change of political equilibrium – despite the restoration of the previous forms of power – caused the interruption of that long-term cultural pattern, unifying courtly Europe over time and across space, which we now call (Neo)Classicism. This immediately resulted in questioning of the exemplarity of the ancients, and of the possibility of imitating them.

The acknowledgement of the ontological difference between modern and ancient brought as a consequence the need to critically evaluate philology, to push it towards the status of a fully historical discipline. Leopardi's contemporaries

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<sup>28</sup> Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, p. 178.

believed that, while reestablishing a text, philology should also be capable of clarifying its historical dimension. Finally, the change in the conception of history led to the understanding of the present as a time of philosophical, abstract thought (Vico's 'l'età della ragione spiegata'), as opposed to ancient, bodily, concrete thought. This raised in turn the issue of verisimilitude and of the fictional in literature: in other words, what could possibly be poetic for the modern mind.

The interest in the beginning became inextricably linked with an interest in the poetic, in the sense that Vico gives to this word: 'poet', to Vico, etymologically means 'creator'; therefore, the space of the 'poetic' is the space of 'construction' and 'constructiveness'. To be 'constructive', however, poetry needs 'belief'. This theoretical nexus recurred among early nineteenth-century Vico readers, especially within the Classicist-Romantic quarrel. For Foscolo, Vico was the key to identifying memory and poetry, in its original, etymological function, as the clusters of post-Napoleonic reconstruction of the nation. The Romantics sought ways to adapt the ancient virtues of poetry to modernity, by indicating, for example, religious poetry as a model.<sup>29</sup> The Neapolitan Vico readers fostered collective beliefs in progress and historical development, and for this reason Leopardi stigmatized them as 'nuovi credenti'.<sup>30</sup>

As Said points out, Vico also provides a theoretical framework through which historical development can be contemplated in terms of a collective fate: 'in no philosopher before Marx, Freud and Nietzsche does one find an assimilative capacity as great as Vico',<sup>31</sup> he argues. Said was specifically interested in Vico's notion of 'conatus', the instinctive and powerful force that led primitive men to rise from their original beastly state. Said reads Vico's account on the origins of humanity as a self-made, earthly and humble voluntary construction.<sup>32</sup> This focus on the notion of free will and self-construction of human society helps to explain the success of Vico among post-Marxist

<sup>29</sup> This is the case, for example, of Berchet and Tommaseo (see Section 2. 1).

<sup>30</sup> See Section 5. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Said, *Beginnings*, p. 352.

<sup>32</sup> 'Il conato [...] è proprio dell'umana volontà, di tener in freno i moti impressi alla mente del copro, per o affatto acquetargli, ch'è dell'uomo sappingente, o almeno dar loro altra direzione ad usi migliori, ch'è dell'uomo civile' (*NS*, § 340). Said, *Beginnings*, p. 353.

philosophers like Said, as well as the wave of studies connecting Vico and Marx.<sup>33</sup> We can draw some parallels between these tendencies and some post-Napoleonic Vico readers, such as those gathered in the *Gabinetto Vieusseux* (Chapter 4), whose viewpoints can be in fact ascribed to a dawning pre-Socialist thought.<sup>34</sup> Most of those who engaged with these ideas, indeed, had a propensity to think in terms of collectivity: the Italian 'nazione', the 'masse', the 'cittadini' represented their ideal audience.

Nineteenth-century Italian culture continuously returned to the sphere of origins in order to measure its distance. It therefore elaborated, consciously or unconsciously, its difference from the long-term cultural pattern linking Italian culture with the classical legacy. In other words, Bourbon Restoration Italy developed a critical distance from the symbolic imagination that had been completely familiar to previous generations. This was the time in which writers sought to rethink and debate the Italian tradition, the Italian canon, and the Italian identity. This was the time in which, later than other European countries, Italy embarked on a historical study of the ancients.<sup>35</sup> Historicizing, as Vico taught, also means placing the past at a distance.<sup>36</sup> In short, the Bourbon Restoration period is a phase of preparation of an ambiguous Italian modernity. Vico was an inspiration, and, sometimes, the key, in fostering a beginning-again narrative after an event perceived as a watershed, and in elaborating the difference between a renewed Italian culture and previous cultural models.

A further objective of my research has been to clarify Leopardi's position in this cluster of tensions, in order to question the alleged legacy of Vico in his thought. Leopardi's work is dominated by a regressive tension toward the lost sphere of origin, which is expressed in terms of nostalgia, loss, fracture, sometimes of fragmented survival. The case of the theme of the sepulchres, analysed in this conclusion, is a perfect example of how Leopardi's system

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<sup>33</sup> See *Vico and Marx: affinities and contrasts*, ed. by Giorgio Tagliacozzo (London: MacMillan press, 1983) Nicola Badaloni, *Marxismo come storicismo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975).

<sup>34</sup> Carpi, *Letteratura e società*, p. 22.

<sup>35</sup> Treves, *Lo studio dell'antichità classica*, p. ix.

<sup>36</sup> See Esposito, *Pensiero vivente*, p. 75.

explores antiquity in its non-negotiable alterity, and uses it to highlight the characteristics, peculiarities, and fractures of his age. Leopardi leaves little space for the notion of *beginning*, in the sense that Said gives to the word; for Leopardi, the past can resurface in an eerie form – as stated in ‘Ad Angelo Mai’ – but it cannot return. In fact, according to Leopardi, any narrative dealing with the present as an era of beginning is false and misleading, and leads to regression rather than to progress (Section 5. 3). There is again stark contrast here between Leopardi and other Vico readers. In the poem ‘Alla Primavera’, analysed in Section 3. 1, the cyclical return of springtime does not correspond to a new beginning. Rather, the blossoming of nature stresses the linearity of human time, which is accompanied by a progressive distancing from the sphere of the origin.

The fundamental difference between Leopardi and nineteenth-century Vico readers lies precisely in these contrasting approaches to the binary notions of beginning and origin. Post-revolutionary culture as a whole dealt with the fact that the lines of continuity with the classical antiquity had been abruptly interrupted by a sudden, irreversible change. The relationship with origins therefore became complicated; some, like Foscolo, had to completely revise their approach to antiquity, and therefore to classicism, philology, and authority. Many intellectuals of the post-Napoleonic years, instead, reacted to the trauma by fostering progressive and even optimistic narratives about the future of the national community.

As far as collective fate is concerned, Leopardi considered himself unable to think in terms of ‘collectivity’; as he admitted in a letter to Fanny Targioni Tozzetti: ‘rido della felicità delle masse, perché il mio piccolo cervello non concepisce una massa felice, composta d’individui non felici’.<sup>37</sup> The centrality of the notion of individual is for Leopardi a characteristic of modernity; a collective public spirit was possible within ancient communities, but it is irreproducible in modern times. This feature is evident from his early civic compositions, in which the poet stands alone against the weakness of modernity (e.g. ‘combatterò,

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<sup>37</sup> Letter to Fanny Targioni Tozzetti, 5 December 1831, *Epistolario*, II, 1852.

procomberò sol io', 'All'Italia', l. 38), while Foscolo's *I sepolcri* alludes to a shared mission of renewal.

In 1820, immediately after giving up his patriotic poetical vein (see above), Leopardi drafted a satirical prose piece with the working title of 'Per la novella Senofonte e Machiavello'. This prose mocks Leopardi's previous 'civil' beliefs. As Machiavello, *alter ego* of the author, declares, he had been fool enough, in his youth, to take action 'contro la tirannide, in pro della patria'. But then,

avendo conosciuto la vera natura della società e de' tempi miei [...], non feci come quei stolti che pretendono colle opere e coi detti loro di rinnovare il mondo, che fu sempre impossibile, ma quel ch'era possibile, rinnovai me stesso. E quanto maggiore era stato l'amor mio per la virtù, e quindi quanto maggiori le persecuzioni, i danni e le sventure ch'io ne dovetti soffrire, tanto più salda e fredda ed eterna fu la mia apostasia.<sup>38</sup>

This unfinished sketch is unanimously considered to be one of the the first experiments of the *Operette morali*, composed four years later. This group of compositions, normally called the 'prosette satiriche',<sup>39</sup> consequently represents the first example of Leopardi's satirical vein. Satire, irony, and laughter, are the ultimate form of expression of a philosophical mind-set, as Vico theorized ('l'ironia certamente non poté cominciare che da' tempi della riflessione, perch'ella è formata dal falso in forza d'una riflessione che prende maschera di verità', *NS*, § 408), as Foscolo had reaffirmed in *La chioma di Berenice* ('la poesia ragionatrice [...] si può usurpare bensì nella satira'),<sup>40</sup> and as Leopardi knew well ('Terribile ed *awful* è la potenza del riso: chi ha il coraggio di ridere, è padrone degli altri, come chi ha il coraggio di morire', *Zib.* 4391, 23 September 1828).

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<sup>38</sup> OM, p. 489. See my 'Attorno all'Epistola al conte Carlo Pepoli: contraddizione, ritrattazione, palinodia, apostasia', in *L'ellisse. Studi storici di letteratura italiana*, 10:2 (2015) [forthcoming].

<sup>39</sup> This is how Leopardi refers to them in a letter to Pietro Giordani. *Epistolario*, I, 438 (4 September 1820).

<sup>40</sup> Foscolo, *La chioma di Berenice*, p. 53.

Leopardi's abandonment of the 'civic' production, therefore, corresponds to the embracing of a fully 'philosophical' profile. By doing so, Leopardi refused all aspects of the contemporary production that carried constructive, poetical features: the mythical aura of the sepulchre, the illusion of indefinite progress, religious poetry, and so on. Rejecting Vico's legacy from an ideological point of view, Leopardi nevertheless developed in his reflections some of the most important axioms of that legacy, such as the dichotomies illusion/disbelief, nature/reasoning, and progress/regress.

From this perspective a purely genealogical approach to Leopardi's reception of Vico appears clearly unsatisfactory. From the point of view of the actual transmission of ideas, it is possible to say that Vico's philosophy was in fact transmitted to Leopardi bearing a series of cultural connotations that Leopardi rejected: for example, the *New Science* was probably perceived as one of the theoretical backbones of the Romantic movement (Section 2. 1); it was quoted and discussed by the Neapolitan 'nuovi credenti' a work supporting the theory of indefinite progress. Additionally, Leopardi himself was presented by Pietro Giordani as a sort of anti-Vico, the one who would finally provide Italian with the 'lingua filosofica' it lacked (Section 2. 2). It is not a mere coincidence that the only period in which Leopardi actually resorted to Vico's theories was when he started on a wholly autonomous historical and philological exploration of the past (Section 4. 2).

The continuity between Leopardi and Vico is therefore not a problem of mysterious or indirect sources, but rather a matter of critical interpretation. As I explained in the Introduction, for a long time scholars have preferred to talk about Vico's discoveries in the field of history, of human development, of cyclical phases of course and recourse; in other words, many scholars have focused on a nexus of ideas that refer to what Said calls 'beginning'. Now that idealistic, historicist and Marxist readings of Vico are no longer in fashion, or at least less so than in the past, other scholars have focused on Vico as a thinker characterized by a regressive propensity. Paolo Cristofolini's description of Vico as an

archaeologist, a 'maestro di scavo',<sup>41</sup> epitomizes this second strain of thought, highlighting how nowadays some scholarship prefers to examine Vico's musings on 'origins'. I would add that Vico is unparalleled in his elucidations on how the ancients and their cultural features, as exemplified by the Homeric poems, were completely and irreversibly 'other' than the moderns.

This explains, at least in part, the paradoxical axiom from which my research stems: why Leopardi, possibly the most anti-historicist author of Italian literature, now looks closer to Vico than he has ever previously seemed, and why scholars tend to read them through each other. I argue that, from our perspective, Leopardi is definitely a possible 'heir' of the philosophical lineage traced by Roberto Esposito; along with Machiavelli, Bruno and Vico, he forms part of a tradition of philosophers characterized by a 'comune tensione verso un'origine non solo inattuabile – perché insieme arretrata e proiettata in avanti – ma anche ambivalente'.<sup>42</sup> However, we can say that Leopardi was a recipient of Vico's legacy against his will.

The originality of Leopardi's thought in this framework consists in his reassessment of the old myth of the golden age by drawing a link between the sphere of the primitive mind, with its tendency towards illusion and fiction, along with primitive societies, and their strong social bonds, with the sphere of happiness. This is in fact a marginal aspect in Vico's texts; rather, he seems to make a strong connection between happiness and order, and therefore with civilization ('la legislazione [...] fa la civile felicità', *NS*, § 132). For Leopardi, it was the impossibility of reproducing the balance between natural instinct and civil coexistence, as per his idealized sphere of origins, and the impossibility of reproducing the social function of poetry that led the poet to express his relationship with the past in terms of nostalgia and fracture, inaugurating a semantic field that would come to characterize large parts of Italian modernity.

This work is a historical study of Vico's ambivalent reception in the early nineteenth century, with a focus on Leopardi. It explores the obsessions of that

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<sup>41</sup> Cristofolini, *Vico pagano e barbaro*, p. 100.

<sup>42</sup> Esposito, *Pensiero vivente*, p. 85.

age in relation to such essential notions as temporality, history, tradition, and belief. The findings of this dissertation enhance our understanding of the specificities of the culture of the Bourbon Restoration, which is often overlooked as a mere prelude to the Risorgimento. Additionally, this work identifies Leopardi as a particularly acute, yet nonconformist, interpreter of the tensions of his age.

In doing so, this dissertation aspires to open the path to further research on the role of Vico in the construction of Italian national identity. As outlined in Section 1. 3, Vico had in fact a double function in the construction of an Italian canon: not only was he the symbol of a typically Italian philosophy, but his biography also inspired his readers as a projection of the collective fate of the nation. Like Vico, Italy would rise from oblivion to a new phase of glory.<sup>43</sup>

Further research on Vico and Leopardi's articulation of specific themes is also necessary. An accurate investigation into Vico and Leopardi's approach to ancient rhetoric, building on Franco D'Intino's research on the role of the voice in Leopardi's thought, seems to me both promising and timely.<sup>44</sup> I touched upon this topic in Section 4. 2, but its complete development falls outside the aims of this dissertation. An equally stimulating path lies in going beyond the boundaries of Italian culture by exploring how a 'discoverta' by Vico, such as the Homeric question, shaped the European modernity as far as the conceptualization of the ancient is concerned. Though there is no shortage of information on the Homeric question itself, our understanding of its cultural impact on a European scale is very limited. This is a strain of research I hope to develop in the future.

Finally, this research generates new perspectives about the issue of the Italian peculiarity within the European framework, as raised by Roberto Esposito.<sup>45</sup> Vico and Leopardi, and Bourbon Restoration culture as a whole, offer an exceptionally meaningful perspective on how Italian culture, in crucial phases of its progress, developed its particular approach to modernity. In fact, an inextricable nexus of innovation and tradition, negotiation and fracture

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<sup>43</sup> I have started to explore this topic in my 'Giambattista Vico personaggio drammatico. Francesco Lomonaco, Giulio Genoino, Domenico Buffa', *Filologia e critica*, 39: 2 [forthcoming].

<sup>44</sup> D'Intino, *L'immagine della voce*.

<sup>45</sup> Esposito, *Pensiero vivente*, pp. 22-33.

characterizes this interesting passage of Italian history, with long-term consequences. This is in fact the period in which Italian dominant culture characterized itself as a historicist one, in which the Italian literary canon and historical narration acquired the centrality they still conserve in Italian high schools – where students, for instance, still use ‘storie letterarie’ that reiterate the canon of Italian ‘best’ writers elaborated during the Classicist-Romantic quarrel. The modern Italian approach to philology and textual criticism, which still characterizes Italian academia in the worldwide context,<sup>46</sup> was born during the Bourbon Restoration thanks to Vico’s legacy (see Section 4. 1). Leopardi’s polemical voice certainly problematized the issue of historicity, but, as seen in Section 3. 1, Leopardi also reiterated the necessity of conceptualizing humanity in its historical situatedness. The diffraction of Vico’s message during the nineteenth century, therefore, laid the foundation of some of the features that still characterize Italian culture worldwide, and therefore deserves increasing scholarly attention.

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<sup>46</sup> See Paolo Trovato, *Everything You Wanted to Know About Lachmann’s Method. A Non-Standard Handbook of Genealogical Textual Criticism in the Age of Post-Structuralism, Cladistics, and Copy-Text* (Padua: Libreria Universitaria, 2014), p. 11.

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