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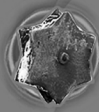
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Leopardi and Plato
*(Drama and Poetry vs Philosophy)*¹

Franco D'Intino

Abstract

The aim of the article is to frame the composition of the Operette Morali – a bizarre combination of poetry and philosophy, of comedy and tragedy, of orality and writerliness – within the complex, somehow ambivalent, relationship that Leopardi had with Plato. On the one hand, Leopardi found in Plato a familiar psychic and intellectual disposition: a ‘poetic’ ardour extinguished by philosophy, an ‘oral’ mind converted to writerliness.

On the other hand, he engaged himself in a battle against the platonic censure of poetry and theatre, which he appreciated with exactly the same arguments that Plato used to condemn them – that is, their corporeal, irrational and democratic dimension. This will be argued through a comparison with the “Prologue in Theatre” of Goethe’s Faust and with Tocqueville’s observations of the relationship between dramatic and democratic institutions.

1 I wish to thank Christine Bourgeois, Alessandra Aloisi and Matthew Coneys for their comments on the text.

Introduction

Leopardi had a decisive encounter with Plato in the first months of 1823. He was at the time in Rome, and was asked by a publisher to produce a complete edition of Plato's dialogues. The project never took off. On that occasion, however, Leopardi had the opportunity to familiarize himself with the Platonic corpus.

The immediate product of this encounter is a file of philological notes. In the following months, however, hundreds of pages of philosophical reflections written in the young scholar's private diary, the *Zibaldone*, show that he had been shaken by this reading at a much deeper level. It is not by coincidence that he dedicated the following year – 1824 – to the composition of the *Operette morali*. Here, one of the main issues at stake is the legitimacy and the role of poetry in the modern world, altogether a Platonic theme. In Plato Leopardi must have found a familiar psychic and intellectual disposition: a 'poetic' ardor extinguished by philosophy, an 'oral' mind converted to the absolute and fixed standards of writerliness¹.

1 See F. D'Intino, *Il gusto dell'altro: la traduzione come esperienza straniera in Leopardi*, in *Hospes. Il volto dello straniero da Leopardi a Jabès*, ed. A. Folin, Venice, Marsilio, 2003, 147-48; Id., *Errore, ortografia e autobiografia in Leopardi*

As Else writes: “Plato’s experience of poetry was determined initially by two main factors, his own acute sensibility and the central place of poetry in the Athens of his youth. [...] The vehemence of Plato’s rejection of poetry is a measure not only of the the ardor with which he had previously embraced it, but of the hold it continued to have over one part of his being”².

This contradiction – or rather ambivalence – was keenly noted by Leopardi: “Of the ancients, Plato, the profoundest, most wide-ranging and sublime of all ancient philosophers, who ardently desired to conceive of a system that would embrace all existence and make sense of all nature, was, in his style, inventions, etc., a poet in this sense, as everyone knows”.

This confirmed the fact that “the profoundest of all philosophers, the most penetrating investigators of the truth, [...] were expressly remarkable and singular also for their imaginative faculty and heart, were distinguished by a decidedly poetic bent and genius” (*Z* 3245, 23 August 1823). As these words show, Leopardi intuitively understood that Plato’s theories against poetry might be considered as a ‘repression’ of his ancient love for it. What Giacomo appreciates in archaic theatre (and more precisely in its Dionysian aspects) is therefore nothing less

e Stendhal, in Memoria e infanzia tra Alfieri e Leopardi, eds. M. Dondero and L. Melosi, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2004, 167-83.

2 G. F. Else, *Plato and Aristotle on poetry*, Chapel Hill and London, The University of North Carolina Press, 1986, p. 4.

than the reversal of a ‘modern’ Plato (‘the dialectic philosopher’), who contradicts an ‘older’ Plato (‘the poet’, or, more precisely, ‘the tragic poet’). Plato’s juvenile oral mentality and “acute sensibility”, in the words of Else, continued to maintain a “hold” over one part of him. For this reason what I refer to in the following pages as ‘Platonic’ includes, as it were, an ‘anti-Platonic’ element.

Plato and Aristotle

In his attack on poetry Plato’s criticism varies in relation to different genres. If in the *Republic* his main target is clearly Homer, elsewhere he establishes a hierarchy where dramatic art is subordinated to epos. For example in the *Minos* he affirms that Homer and Hesiod are certainly “more to be believed than all the tragedians together”³.

Tragic poets, unlike epic poets, say blasphemous things, and do not differentiate between good and evil people. In the second book of his *Laws* Plato also establishes a precise correspondence between genres and different kinds of audiences. The elderly appreciate Homer and Hesiod; literate women and youths, tragedies; adolescents prefer comedies;

3 *Minos*, 318e. All quotations from Plato and Aristotle are given in the translations of the Loeb edition, with minor changes.

children, puppets. This obviously represents a descending order of prestige, since the most beautiful muse is that which delights “the one man who excels all others in virtue and education”, that is the elderly⁴. The puppets are the last stage of a degeneration which also affects, to some extent, the other genres.

One might ask: what, exactly, degrades the dramatic form? Aristotle would later answer: the “means” of the mimesis. For Aristotle, the main difference between tragedy and epos concerns the means of expression; where epic poetry uses language and one kind of meter, tragedy uses a variety of means including rhythm, language, and music, to say nothing of dance, masks, costumes, and machinery. In Plato’s view, this expressive overload distracts the mind from the “object” of the mimesis, involving the spectators’ senses instead of their rationality.

This Platonic scale naturally means that the more one grows intellectually and morally, the less one is liable to be seduced by dramatic “means” and vice versa; the more the body prevails over the soul (as is the case, for example, of children), the more it is likely to adjust – with no intellectual or moral mediation – to the forms of the dramatic performance, which are attractive *per se*, without regard for its “object”, that is, the ‘true’ or the ‘good’. The fault of all dramatic

⁴ *Laws*, 658e-659a.

forms is in other words that of making use of non-rational means in order to seduce the audience, appealing to its most contemptible nature: the irrational and childish desire for immediate pleasure.

This idea is clearly explained in the *Gorgias*⁵, where philosophy, as “art”, is distinguished from the “empiric practice” (*téchne*). Among his list of empiric practices, such as cooking, Plato includes flute and zither playing, choruses and dithyrambs, insofar as all these activities do not seek to instruct the soul about the ‘good’, but instead to please the body.

Tragic poetry, in particular, aims at amusing, teasing and flattering the audience. It is in the end only an embellished form of rhetoric; rhetoricians treat the public as if they were children in need of constant gratification (502e). If in the *Republic* epos is defined as ‘greater story’ (377c-d), the whole Platonic corpus makes it clear that the performative genres are even more appropriate to childhood, that is to the inferior part of man’s soul.

In the *Cratylus* the essence of the ‘tragic’ is explicitly identified on the one hand with falsehood, and on the other with coarseness, with the bestiality of the Dionysian cult of the goat:

the true part [of speech] is smooth and divine
and dwells aloft among the gods, but falsehood

⁵ *Gorgias*, 501e-502d.

dwells below among common men, is rough and like the tragic goat; for tales and falsehoods are most at home here, in the tragic life. (408c)

Again, in the *Cratylus*, the desire to hide the truth is put in connection with the machinery of the performance. When we are not able to go back to the true meaning of words we act as tragic poets who, when they cannot resolve difficult problems, “have recourse to the introduction of gods on machines” (425d). For Plato (‘the dialectic philosopher’) tragedy is certainly not an improvement over epos: quite on the contrary, it is a corruption of it.

To sum up, we can say that dramatic forms are an “empiric practice” linked to a childish corporeality, incapable of self-control. The main elements of this anthropology are: a non-regulated voice, louder than normal; immoderate gestures; a contradictory and distracted mind (which implies the inability to set oneself an objective and to control one’s own energy in order to achieve it)⁶; and finally a bold temperament, aggressive and shameless.

All of this is just the opposite of what is required by a dialectical interaction⁷. For these reasons tragic poets should not be allowed into the city, since the only true and noble tragedy is the political constitution, which is the imitation of a beautiful and noble life; tragedy, instead, is vulgar flattery of the crowd:

6 *Laws*, 668e, for the concept of “objective”.

7 Among other places, see *Republic*, 336b, 411d-e.

do not imagine, then, that we will ever thus lightly allow you to set up your stage beside us in the market-place, and give permission to those imported actors of yours, *with their dulcet tones and their voices louder than ours*, to harangue women and children and the whole populace, and to say not the same things as we say about the same institutions, but, on the contrary, things that are, for the most part, just the opposite⁸.

Here the righteous and sober words of the philosophers are overpowered by a louder and more seductive voice: the absolute corporeality of the “means” prevails over the well-tempered instrument of a mind concerned only with virtue⁹. What the actor/chorus and the audience share is a non-philosophical stance¹⁰ derived from the incapacity to restrain the body and keep its immoderate desire for pleasure under control.

The impetuous nature of all young creatures that, “since [they] are by nature fiery, they are unable to keep still either body or voice, but are always crying and leaping in disorderly fashion”¹¹, parallels the uneducated crowd’s preference for uncontrolled rhythms as opposed to performances which convey the ‘true’ and the ‘good’¹².

8 *Laus*, 817c.

9 Vico’s notion of the power and privilege of eloquence descends from this. See G. Vico, *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione*, in *Opere*, ed. A. Battistini, Milano, Mondadori, 1990, p. 137.

10 *Republic*, 475d-e.

11 *Laus*, 664e. See the portrait of Pericles sketched by Plutarch (5, 1).

12 *Laus*, 670b.

Although tragedy is the noblest among theatrical genres, it is corrupted by its inherent vulgarity and bestiality¹³, which ultimately derives from Dionysian folly¹⁴. Its original fault is its relationship to the body and to a non-intellectual sort of pleasure:

Socrates. Then what of the purpose that has inspired our stately and wonderful tragic poetry? Are her endeavor and purpose, to your mind, merely for the gratification of the spectators, or does she strive hard, if there be anything pleasant and gratifying, but bad for them, to leave that unsaid, and if there be anything unpleasant, but beneficial, both to speak and sing that, whether they enjoy it or not? To which of these two aims, think you, is tragic poetry devoted?

Callicles. It is quite obvious, in her case, Socrates, that she is bent rather upon pleasure and the gratification of the spectators¹⁵.

Plato's fundamental ideas on theatre, partially contradicted by an ambivalent use of the dialogue¹⁶, are indirectly confirmed by Aristotle, who in order to redeem the dramatic form – tragedy in particular – had to come to terms with his master. His complex

13 *Laws*, 669e.

14 *Laws*, 672b.

15 *Gorgias*, 502b-c.

16 See M. Vegetti, *Nell'ombra di Theuth, in Sapere e scrittura in Grecia*, ed. M. Detienne, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1989, 201-27; M. C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P. 1986.

strategy consisted essentially of equating epos to tragedy, and in overlooking and minimizing the latter's performative features¹⁷.

In certain passages, it is true, the difference between epos and tragedy is contained – just as it was for Plato – in the “means of imitation”. Whereas epic poetry uses only language and one kind of meter, tragedy uses more “means”: language, rhythm, music¹⁸. Yet in other passages Aristotle seems to hold a different position, especially where he argues that these “means” are the least significant part of the tragic genre.

Melody, he states, is an “embellishment”, and the performance is “effective”; but “indeed the effect of tragedy does not depend on its performance by actors” (50b18-19). Subsequently he confirms the subordination of the performance to the narrative structure (*mythos*), where he writes that it is preferable that the effect of fear and compassion derive from “the actual arrangement of the incidents”, and not from the “spectacle”. Indeed: “to produce this effect by means of an appeal to the eye is inartistic and needs adventitious aid [*choregía*]” (53b7-8).

When he belittles the spectacular qualities of tragedy, and therefore the emotional function of the poetic language¹⁹, Aristotle intends to rescue

17 See *Plato and Aristotle on poetry*, in particular pp. 135-36.

18 *Poetics*, 47b24-29. See also 49b9-19.

19 Else, *Plato and Aristotle on poetry*, p. 130.

the genre from its two flaws: its popular origin and the irrationality of the Dionysian cult. He does so by evoking the concept of “vulgarity”: mimesis is more accomplished if it is less “vulgar”, that is to say free from the more material and bodily parts of the performance, the acting and visual aspects. Here Aristotle seems to adhere to the traditional (and Platonic) opinion that tragedy is a vulgar genre:

The question may be raised whether the epic or the tragic form of representation is the better. If the better is the less vulgar and the less vulgar is always that which appeals to the better audience then obviously the art which makes its appeal to everybody is eminently vulgar. And indeed actors think the audience do not understand unless they put in something of their own, and so they strike all sorts of attitudes, as you see bad flute-players whirling about if they have to do “the Discus” or mauling the leader of the chorus when they are playing the “Scylla”. So tragedy is something like what the older schools of actors thought of their successors [...] The whole tragic art, then, is to epic poetry what these later actors were compared to their predecessors, since according to this view epic appeals to a cultivated audience which has no need of actor’s poses, while tragedy appeals to a lower class. If then it is vulgar, it must obviously be inferior (61b27-62a5).

He concedes that there are better and worse kinds of recitation, and that one should only condemn the latter (“the attitudes of the inferior people”). Yet the partial correction does not weaken the force of the comparison (and of the equivalence) between the tragic genre as a whole and the modern, bad style of recitation: “the whole tragic art, then, is to epic poetry what these later actors were compared to their predecessors”.

It is clear that Aristotle cannot easily forget and dismiss the original sin of tragedy: ignoring traditional criticism. Yet, he tries to raise the prestige of the genre insisting on the idea (already expounded at 50b17-21), that

tragedy fulfils its function even without acting, just as much as epic, and its quality can be gauged by reading aloud. So, if it is in other respects superior [for example, as he will say, with regards to the unity and the brevity of the action], this disadvantage [the acting] is not necessarily inherent (62a11-14)

A few lines further on he tries to defend music with similar arguments. It is true that music, compared to epos, produces a supplementary delight (“a considerable element of its own in the spectacle”, 62a15-16), but it is also true that tragedy’s “vividness can be felt whether it is read or acted” (62a17-18). As Else states:

It is important, however, to be clear why he insists so on the power of reading. First of all, because that was the way he himself had come to know most of the tragedies from the fifth century. But much more significant is the fact that abstraction – abstraction from the details of tragic character and thought as well as from its visible and audible garment – was Aristotle's chosen way of countering Plato. For Plato, the sensuous garb of tragedy, including the sense that the poet is lurking immediately behind the facade of words, was a primal intuition. Aristotle had no such primal intuition of poetry, but he was intelligent enough to perceive it in Plato and devise a system that would contain and neutralize it – defuse it, so to speak. That is what he is up to in the *Poetics*²⁰.

Goethe

Thanks to Aristotle's shrewd defense, tragedy has survived Platonic censure. The price it had to pay was its transformation into a written genre. Nonetheless, the Platonic objection (that is, in essence, the 'irrational' nature of the theatrical performance) remained valid until modern times. In mid-eighteenth-century Hamburg, an attentive reader of Aristotle's *Poetics*, G.E. Lessing, used utterly Platonic

²⁰ Else, *Plato and Aristotle on poetry*, pp. 137-38.

(much more than Aristotelian) concepts and words when he tried to reform a 'modern' theatre in which the audience expected to be seduced by *vulgar means*:

It is true the gallery greatly loves the noisy and boisterous, and it will rarely omit to repay a good lung with loud hand-clappings. The German parterre also shares this taste in part; and there are actors cunning enough to derive advantage from this state. The most sleepy actor will rouse himself towards the end of the scene, when he is to make his exit, raise his voice and overload the action, without reflecting whether the sense of his speech requires this extra exertion. Not seldom it even contradicts the mood in which he should depart [...]. But, alas! The spectators are partly not connoisseurs, and in part too good-natured, and they take the desire to please them for the deed²¹.

A century later, in America, the most acute observer of the customs of the new democratic world made similar observations:

les spectateurs [...] aiment à retrouver sur la scène le *mélange confus* de conditions, de sentiments et d'idées qu'ils rencontrent sous leurs yeux; le théâtre devient *plus frappant, plus vulgaire* et plus vrai²².

21 G. E. Lessing, *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, with a New Introduction by Victor Lange, translated by Helen Zimmern, Dover Publications, Inc., New York 1962, pp. 19-20.

22 A. de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Paris, Garnier-Flammarion,

It is as though the education of Enlightenment (and post-Enlightenment) intellectuals could be considered as accomplished only if it managed to overcome an initial childish infatuation with performances and actors. One immediately thinks, of course, of Goethe's character Wilhelm Meister. But I will briefly focus, instead, on the "Prologue in Theatre" of his *Faust*. It actually follows a Platonic plot, where the positions of – say – Socrates and his antagonist Callicles (in the *Gorgias*) are embodied in the respective characters of the "Poet" and the "Clown" (the "Director" being a sort of third arbitrator, nearer to the "Clown").

It is impossible here to discuss the whole "Prologue". I will limit myself to some allusions to the ancient debate on the hierarchy of genres. The Director starts by expressing his desire to please the audience ("I want to entertain the crowd out there" l. 37)²³. The Clown does the same: "And a full house will give you much more scope / To entertain them – and to move them, too" (ll. 83-84). It is important to remember that in the second book of his *Laws*, the question of whether or not it is right to please the majority of the audience²⁴ is the starting point of

1981, vol. II, p. 103 (vol. II, first part, ch. XIX): "The audience [...] likes to recover the *confused intermingling* of conditions, feelings, and ideas on stage that they find under their [own] eyes; theatre is becoming *more striking, more vulgar, and more true*" (translation mine).

23 J. W. Goethe, *Faust*, transl. John R. Williams (with some changes).

24 *Laws*, 657e-658b.

the whole discussion which ends with the hierarchy of poetic forms. In Goethe's "Prologue" the Clown maintains that his main aim is exclusively that of amusing the *present* public ("I don't want to hear about posterity! / And even if I did, what's it to me? / It's here and now they want to have some fun", ll. 75-77), described as a swaying unintelligent crowd, as opposed to a future public ("posterity") more able to judge on the basis of steady principles.

If one wants to seduce the crowd, one has then to offer large quantities of things (ll. 89-98)²⁵, and make a lot of noise, of course with "splendid scenery / and plenty of spectacular machinery", ll. 233-34), just like the tragic poets, who, when unable to recognize the ultimate truths, "have recourse to the introduction of gods on machines"²⁶.

Goethe portrays and makes fun of an educated audience which goes to the theatre after having "read the papers" (l. 116). This crowd behaves just as those false philosophers "lovers of spectacles" mentioned by Plato, who, distracted from their studies, and ready "to listen to every chorus in the land, run about to all the Dionysian festivals"²⁷. The Director would probably comment: "They come because they are curious to know / What's on; curiosity inspires their hurry"(ll. 117-118).

²⁵ Cfr. *Republic* 397a.

²⁶ *Cratylus*, 425d.

²⁷ *Republic*, 475d.

I don't think that these are accidental coincidences. Goethe, a connoisseur and a lover of Greek literature, was certainly aware of two aspects of the Dionysian dimension: the folly and the drunkenness that characterize the performance: "Let sense and reason, love and passion have their say / But let us have a bit of folly [*Narrheit*] as well" (ll. 87-88); "You know exactly what's needed here / We want strong drinks to appear" (ll. 222-23). (For the role of drunkenness see Plato's comments on the virtuous use of choruses in the second book of the *Laws*)²⁸. There is however a third and more crucial theme in the "Prologue" which recalls the main core of the Platonic discussions: poetry in general, and most particularly dramatic poetry, is the product of a childish disposition of mind. It implies the incapacity to recognize and represent the 'true' insofar as it cherishes those appearances and those illusions that speak to the instincts, not to reason:

Some vivid scenes, little clarity,
 A grain of truth and plenty of confusion,
 That's the surest way to mix a brew
 To please them all - and teach them
 something, too.
 Our finest youth will flock to see your play

²⁸ In a later stage of his thought when he is less critical towards poetry: "he has made an accommodation to the emotional power of poetry (and music and dance) for the purpose of harnessing it as a positive social force in the city of Laws" (Else, *Plato and Aristotle on poetry*, p. 63).

Expecting some momentous revelation;
 [...]
 They are young enough to move to tears or
 laughters,
 Excitement and illusion is what they're after.
 You'll never please the older ones, I know,
 Impressionable minds will be grateful,
 though (ll. 170-183).

Tocqueville and Leopardi: theology, ethics and the poetics of theatre

The “Prologue in Theatre” was probably composed in 1798. About twenty years later Leopardi identified, from a different vantage point, the core of the issues discussed by Goethe: the privileged relationship between poetry, theatre, the body, pleasure and the weakening of reason. The first memory of a personal experience of a performance is recorded in the *Vita abbozzata di Silvio Sarno*.

The year is 1819, and a short autobiographical sketch recalls an event which had occurred many years before, when Leopardi was an adolescent, or perhaps a child: “first trip to the theatre my thoughts on the sight of a turbulent crowd etc. marvel that the writers are not inflamed with passion etc. only place left to the people etc. Aeschylus’ Persians”²⁹.

²⁹ G. Leopardi, *Scritti e frammenti autobiografici*, ed. F. D’Intino, Rome, Salerno,

The fragmentary nature of this short note does not allow us to reconstruct the context, but it is clear that Leopardi's reasoning is part of the ethical and political considerations on the role of theatre as the only place where citizens can experience sympathetic feelings due to the patriotic emotion raised by performance (as Aeschylus states in Aristophanes's *Frogs*)³⁰.

Leopardi must have retained strong memories of that performance. Ten years later, in February 1829, he copied in the *Zibaldone* a passage by Niebuhr, where the historian mentions the same work, "Aeschylus' Persians". According to Niebuhr, this piece is not a tragedy, because the argument is not drawn from mythology; he adds that such works with historical content – he also mentions Frinicus's *The Destruction of Miletus* – "were plays that drew forth all the manly feelings of bleeding or exulting hearts, and not tragedies" (Z 4459). Leopardi's attention was probably caught by the possibility that a poetic work might have such a strong influence on the public, arousing their passions fire whilst appealing to their emotions. We may detect a similar interest in a lengthy note of 1823 on tragedies with unhappy endings (like Alfieri's *Oreste*), the "poetic effect" of which "leaves a strong feeling in the hearts of the listeners, makes them leave with their minds upset and stirred" (Z 3454, 16-18 September 1823).

1995, p. 78-79.

³⁰ Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 1026-1031.

Leopardi thus gave a positive evaluation of a certain kind of dramatic performance to which the audience reacts with immediate instinctiveness (the same goes for poetic recitals). This is the first clue that Leopardi did not share the Platonic mistrust of dramatic genres (and of poetry in general). It seems in fact that he appreciated them with exactly the same arguments that Plato uses to condemn them.

This is confirmed by two extremely interesting passages. The first is dated March 1821. Leopardi is reflecting on the fact that a national literature rarely produces, “in two different periods”, “two excellent and outstanding writers in the same genre” (Z 801-802). The day after, Leopardi adds a brief note suggesting that there may have been, in antiquity as well as in modern times, one single exception: dramatists. Why? What is so specific about them? The main difference, he argues, lies in the fact that he who writes for the theatre is deeply entangled in the social life of the nation.

There are two sides to this problem. As far as the public is concerned, there is a continuous request for “novelty”: the public “always seeks novelty, indeed demands not so much perfection as novelty in writings” (Z 810). This comment reminds us of the Director in Goethe’s *Faust* (“I don’t want to hear about posterity! / And even if I did, what’s it to me? / It’s here and now they want to have some fun”, ll. 75-77). One of the first historians of modernity, Alexis

de Tocqueville, noted that in democratic countries innovations tend most commonly to appear in the field of theatre, since the public is more ready to accept what is on offer: “Le spectateur d’une oeuvre dramatique est en quelque sorte pris au dépourvu par l’impression qu’on lui suggère. Il n’a pas le temps d’interroger sa mémoire, ni de consulter les habiles; il ne songe point à combattre les nouveaux instincts littéraires qui commencent à se manifester en lui; il y cède avant de les connaître”³¹.

The ephemeral nature of the performance and the strong impact of the bodily presence of actor and spectator in the same space, ensure that the latter does not have time to pause and reflect, so that the audience is more likely to surrender, as it were, to what they see on the spot. And this often determines the immediate success of the play.

This means, in Platonic terms, that the essence of performed dramatic literature lies in the immediate pleasure that stuns the senses and prevents the interference of the intellectual faculties. “Il n’y a pas de jouissance littéraire plus à portée de la foule que celles qu’on éprouve à la vue de la scène. Il ne faut ni préparation ni étude pour les sentir”³².

31 Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, vol. II, p.101 (vol. II, first part, ch. XIX): “The spectator of a theatrical work is in a sense caught off guard by an impression that is suggested to him. He has the time neither to consult his memory nor to consult the experts; he does not dream of fighting the new literary instincts that are beginning to manifest themselves in him; he gives in to them before he knows them” (translation mine).

32 *Ibid.* “There is no literary enjoyment more within the grasp of the masses than

This phenomenon is observed by Tocqueville with suspicion, since he sees it as the model for the quick circulation of books inviting a superficial form of reading and, consequently, a diminished consideration of the role of culture in general³³. As we have seen, in Goethe's *Faust* we also find a precise analysis of the manipulative function carried out by performances vis-a-vis a crowd incapable of reasoning, eager for pleasure and distraction, an easy prey for illusionist tricks ("They only want a few hours of distraction", l. 131).

Leopardi's judgment, on the contrary, is clearly positive. One of the reasons of this (and here we come to the other side of the problem) is that the search for novelty promotes the prosperity of authors who write for the theatre. They are seen by Leopardi as writers who live in and deal with the concrete circumstances of everyday life, who are eager for success, fame, praise, and material gratification: "Thus, a dramatist always has to earn his place and procure his share of praise, his inspiration for the enterprise, and his reward for success. All these factors are such that even a very talented author may be satisfied and stimulated by them, as well as by the minor incidents in society that inspire theatrical compositions; by those who for professional reasons or out of interest seek and

that which is experienced at the sight of a stage. Neither preparation nor study are required to feel it" (translation mine).

33 *Ivi*, pp. 76-81, 102 (vol. II, first part, ch. XIV-XV, XIX).

encourage writers of this sort; by the interests or needs of the authors, their commitments, their desire for certain forms of praise or success that we might call civic, or accorded by a party, or in conversation, and by friends, etc.” (Z 810-811).

Recurrent key-words are: *advantage*, *prize*, and *praise*, but the most crucial are *interests* and *needs*. From a Platonic point of view, we are evidently in the sphere of the body. The image of the man of letters sketched by Leopardi in this passage – surprising in many ways – is similar to that of the rhetorician, or the tragic author, as Plato saw them. He could be the main character, for example, in Balzac’s novel *Lost illusions*; without question Tocqueville’s sociological analysis authorizes the link between the dramatic genres and journalism, or, more generally speaking, the cultural industry.

We might therefore ask ourselves: what lies behind this idea of theatre as a separated – in a certain way privileged – domain of literary production? First of all, we should consider Leopardi’s personal circumstances. In 1821 the still very young Giacomo was trying to build his reputation as a scholar and a poet, and was far from having succeeded in establishing it. He still had no chance to escape from Recanati, where he had little hope of making his name known to a wider public. It is easy to guess in which sense he would consider dramatists as privileged compared to – say – poets,

novelists, or, even worse, scholars and erudites. One has only to compare the two great Italian artists of the first half of the nineteenth century: Leopardi and Giuseppe Verdi.

The former half-starved all his life, struggled to establish his reputation in élite literary circles; the latter, barely fifteen years younger, rapidly became, without too much effort, the richest and most famous Italian artist of his time – just what Giacomo wanted to be. Leopardi's little note of March 1821 on theatre acknowledges this simple truth: in order to be a Verdi, he should have been a dramatist, not a writer; a tragic, oral poet, not a modern, writerly, philosophical poet.

The mundane success of dramatists, however, is not merely a material phenomenon; it implies a creative process which is based on (and incorporates) an immediate proximity with the tendencies, the temperaments, the active and lively forces of society at large. In 1840, in the second volume of his *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville comments:

Il n'y a point de portion de la littérature qui se rattache par des liens plus étroits et plus nombreux à l'état actuel de la société que le théâtre. Le théâtre d'une époque ne saurait jamais convenir à l'époque suivante si, entre les deux, une importante révolution a changé les mœurs et les lois³⁴.

³⁴ Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, vol. II, p. 106 (vol. II, first part, ch.

Twenty years before, from his provincial hometown, Leopardi had already observed that “The difference between this and other kinds of composition lies in the fact that the consequences, the use, the intended purpose of a play are, so to speak, alive, and always living, and mobile, whereas those of other kinds of composition are, as it were, dead and at rest” (Z 811-812). This is the point: the positive evaluation of theatre has its theoretical foundation in the concepts of vitality and energy, pivotal to Leopardi’s poetics (as well, for example, as to Balzac’s). In ancient times, poetic and dramatic texts, as well as histories (for instance Herodotus) were recited in “those assemblies of the people” (Z 812). Today the writer can meet his public and draw energy from it only in the theatre, and even there it is more and more difficult to achieve that perfect unison between author and audience (rooted in childish pleasure) often evoked by Leopardi (for example at Z 4317, which I will discuss below).

Body, pleasure, vitality, energy, movement, nation, crowd, these are the pivots around which Leopardi’s thoughts rotate. We might label this kind of conceptual net democratic-popular, or perhaps archaic-communitarian. But there is another side to this picture. If we take a step back we find that

XIX): “There is no portion of literature that is tied to the current state of society by as tight and as numerous bonds as theatre. The theatre of one period will never suit the period that follows if, in the meantime, the customs and laws have been altered by a revolution of some importance” (translation mine).

the note on theatre dated March 1821 originates in a long reflection of some days before on the capacity of the Greek language (as opposed to Latin) to grow and renew itself freely without adhering to a fixed model. This happened to Latin with Cicero:

While the Greek language was acquiring shape, consistency, order, and stability it did not have one single writer in whom, because of the abundance, variety, importance, merit, and outstanding fame of the writings, the whole of the language was reckoned to be contained. Before or after this period the fact would not have had the same effect. But the Latin language did have such a writer, and it had him in the very period to which I have referred, in Cicero (Z 743, 8-14 March 1821).

Cicero is an absolute, a perfect “model”, beyond which one cannot proceed without degenerating and corrupting. As is often the case when Leopardi reflects on languages, this is a Platonic kind of reasoning, but turned against Plato. In the following pages in fact Leopardi argues that the original sin of Latin is not only that of having achieved a perfection (Cicero) which has inhibited any further change, but also that of having derived its structures from an external model (Greek). On the contrary, Greek formed and created itself, as it were, from within itself:

Whatever the origin of Greek language, literature, philosophy, and wisdom may have been, it is certain that Greece, even if it was not the inventor of its letters, sciences, and arts, received them in an unshaped, unstable, imperfect, and undefined state, and having received them thus, shaped, stabilized, perfected, and defined them itself, and within itself and by its own hand and intelligence, so that its literature and its knowledge came to be its own, and, it may be said, its own work. Hence Greece did not need to have recourse to other languages to express its own knowledge [...]. As I was saying, Greece did not need these other languages, but, in shaping its knowledge, shaped its language also, and so always profited by and cultivated its own resources, from which it drew the whole treasury of speech (*Z* 746-747).

We see at work here a theological/philosophical model that asserts the supremacy of experience over any authoritative, external, absolute ideal. In a note dedicated to Plato (17 July 1821), Leopardi argues that:

everything is taught to us by our sensations alone, which are relative to the pure mode of being, etc., and because no notion or idea is derived by us from a principle prior to experience (*Zib.* 1340).

This is not true for Plato, who, having surprisingly reached “the ultimate depths of abstraction” (*Z* 1712-13), is considered by Leopardi a bizarre exception in a Greek oral world dominated by experience

and change. To presuppose that there are absolute concepts prior to experience means to agree with Plato, for whom things must:

absolutely and abstractly and necessarily be thus or thus, with these good and those bad, independently of every will, of every accident, of every concrete circumstance, which in reality is the sole reason for everything, and is therefore always and only relative (*Z* 1341, Leopardi's emphasis).

Hence the metaphysical conclusion that “the principle of things, and indeed of God, is nothingness” (*Z* 1341).

It is easy, at this point, to see the connection between metaphysics and an interpretation of Greek culture based on the oppositions orality/writerliness and poetry/philosophy. It is within this picture that Leopardi's theory of genres belongs.

His attack on Platonic ideas is in agreement with a theory of theatre according to which value and success do not depend on external absolute entities, but rather on events and the interests, tendencies, and temperaments of an audience that changes in time and is eager for novelty and amusement. Value and success depend on “every will”, “every accident”, “*every concrete circumstance*”. The force of dramatists lies precisely in those ‘circumstances’, because they, unlike ‘writerly’ writers, are able to reflect “the

shifting nature of the theatrical customs and usages that belong to plays as much as by those that occur in the life and concerns to be represented" (Z 811).

It should be clear by now that when Leopardi reflects on theatre and dramatists he is thinking not only in historical and political, but also in theological and philosophical terms. He is reacting in his own way against what we might call, with Nietzsche, the Platonic invention of *homo theoreticus*. This is confirmed by another important entry in the *Zibaldone*, dedicated to the function of the chorus in the "ancient plays" (June 1823). This entry deals initially with an aesthetic problem: the chorus is appreciated because it produces an effect of the "vague" and the "indefinite". But Leopardi's attention slowly shifts to a crucial philosophical point. The chorus, an anonymous and collective entity, is the antithesis of the "individual", as it has been conceived by Western philosophy from Plato onwards (this is why it is censored by Plato in the *Gorgias*).

Leopardi's target is therefore, once again, none other than Plato. The institution of the chorus embodies all that Plato abhorred in ancient, oral Greek culture: the impossibility of submitting ideas (especially the idea of 'good' and 'bad') to rational philosophical analysis. Which is, of course, why Leopardi admired it. "The beautiful and the great need indefiniteness, and this indefiniteness can only be brought on to the stage by bringing on the

multitude. Everything that stems from the multitude is respectable, though it is composed of wholly contemptible individuals” (Z 2804).

This paradox is not very Leopardian, since the unhappiness of individuals cannot, according to him, make for the happiness of the “multitude”. Yet what appeals here to Leopardi is that the crowd in the public square is as one with the crowd of the chorus. One mirrors the other, as in the democratic, Rousseauian dream of the popular feast:

And there was a sense in which the audience came in order to hear the selfsame feelings which the performance inspired in them, represented in the same way on the stage, and they saw themselves transported as it were on to the stage in order to play their part (Z 2808).

Leopardi had ambivalent feelings towards an idea of *doxa* that dispenses with all kinds of criticism; he is generally not inclined to sympathize with it³⁵. But when he thinks in terms of genres, and reflects on the function of drama he does not hesitate to hold a position that is completely opposed to the conservative and aristocratic stance held by Plato in the *Republic* and in the *Laws*. If the performance, as Plato maintains, is beautiful insofar as its ethical content is true, only the elder and the wiser citizens

35 See F. D’Intino, *L’immagine della voce. Leopardi, Platone e il libro morale*, Venice, Marsilio, 2009, pp. 182-88.

can judge it, and certainly not the crowd, which is bound to be enchanted and fooled by anyone who has a seductive power: rhetoricians, poets, actors.

The problem is, that Leopardi is not ready to banish rhetoricians, dramatists and poets from his own Republic.

A mute dionysian

Notwithstanding his Enlightenment education (and what I would call his native psychological Platonism), Leopardi is in fact attracted exactly by the possibility that writerly literature, embodied and empowered by performances, could mesmerize and influence a non philosophic crowd. He analyzes with great care what Aristotle called dramatic “means”, without forgetting the setting in which performances take place³⁶. As we have seen, Plato considered dramatic works inferior to epic poems exactly because they made use of a surplus of “means”, exceeding the

36 “Furthermore, since the few moderns who have introduced the chorus into their ordinary plays, as Racine did in *Esther*, did not give it the conditions it had in those of antiquity, they therefore produced no, or almost no effect. And the very nature of these plays, in both a moral and a material sense (since the setting is for the most part imagined to be in a covered and enclosed place, with other such circumstances that restrict, and diminish, and circumscribe, and depoeticize ideas), was not suited either to the chorus of the ancients or to its effects. I am also talking about comedies, which among the ancients were for the most part, or for most of each play, presumed to take place in the city square, or in the port, as with the *Rudens* of Plautus, or in short in the open air, etc” (*Z* 2906).

power of language – so much so that Aristotle had been obliged, in order to rescue tragedy from infamy, to diminish the importance of such means, legitimizing a non-performed, writerly dramatic literature.

Leopardi, well aware of this, maintains that the etymology of “epic”, “epopea” etc., referring “to narrative verses, poems, and poets”, proved “that narrative poems had no melody, were not sung but recited, or at most sung as recitative, like the nonlyrical verses of dramas, and in the way our free hendecasyllables would be sung. *Epic* (as if to say *spoken*) verse was the prose of those times, when all composition was in verse”.

He concludes, with Courier³⁷, that Homer was a historian, not a lyric poet: “I do not therefore think it is right to describe his poems as lyric, even if they were perhaps accompanied by some instrument, like recitatives in dramas” (Z 4318, Leopardi’s emphasis). Coherently with this later entry, Leopardi had already asserted (June 1823) that it is in the choruses of dramas that we find the “lyric”. Indeed, it is here that:

the maxims of justice, virtue, heroism, compassion, patriotism [...] were expressed in lyric verses, *and the latter were sung and accompanied by musical instruments*. All these circumstances, *which we are at liberty to condemn as implausible, as absurd*, etc., what other impression

37 P.-L. Courier, *Prospectus d’une traduction nouvelle d’Hérodote*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, Bruxelles, A la librairie parisienne, 1828, tome III, p. 253.

could they give save a vague and indeterminate one, and hence one that was altogether great, beautiful, poetic? Those maxims were not put in the mouth of an individual, who recited them in an ordinary and natural tone (Z 2805, 21 June 1823).

Lyric poetry derives thus from choral poetry, where the voice does not speak but sings, and is reinforced by spectacular “means” such as “musical instruments”. He may have had in mind the Platonic objections and the Aristotelian defense.

He cannot help perceiving the *absurdity*, the *implausibility* (that is, perhaps, the puerility and vulgarity) of the choruses, which appeal to the childish and irrational nature of the audience. Yet, this is exactly what the ‘lyric’ and the ‘poetic’ are. Indeed, the entire nation:

did not speak like each of the mortals who performed the action, it expressed itself in verses that were lyrical and full of poetry (Z 2806).

That Leopardi was engaged in a battle against Plato’s censure of poetry and drama is proved by the conclusion of the entry, which evokes the Dionysian root of the dramatic performances and the sensual pleasure provoked by sounds and rhythms through which the audience became in tune with the performers:

In comedies the multitude is also conducive to enthusiasm and the indeterminacy of joy, to βακχεία [Bacchic frenzy], and serves to give some apparent and illusory weight to the always vain and false causes we have for feeling delight and enjoyment, and in some way *to drag the spectator into gladness and laughter, as though blinding him, inebriating him, overwhelming him with the authority of the vague multitude* (Z 2809, 23 June 1823).

Here Leopardi was referring to comedy, not tragedy; nevertheless, he is interested in the performative and choral dimension that the two share, always resulting in a Dionysian effect³⁸. The comic performance works exactly like tragedy: it makes reason blind, the public forgetful of truth and intoxicated by the orgiastic pleasure of music, songs and laughter.

For Plato too, as we have seen, tragedy and comedy share the same “means”; they only differ in their degree of vicinity to the corporeal, irrational dimension. At the end of the *Symposium*, Socrates claims that “the same man could have the knowledge required for writing comedy and tragedy – that the fully skilled tragedian could be a comedian as well”

38 On laughter in connection with the volume of the voice cfr. Z 4391, 23 September 1828: “You laugh *openly and loudly* about something, even entirely innocently, [...] simply *laughing out loud* gives you a definite superiority over all those near and around you, without exception. The power of laughter is terrible and *awful*: anyone who has the courage to laugh is master over others, in the same way as anyone who has the courage to die” (*laughing out loud* and *awful* Leopardi’s emphasis).

(223d). Laughter is condemned in the *Republic*, together with lamentation, as a kind of sound that exceeds a reasonable measure, due to lack of bodily control: “One must not be prone to laughter. For ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter his condition provokes a violent reaction” (388e).

Leopardi's reflections on the Dionysian dimension of comedy are dated June 1823, a few months before he began composing the *Operette morali*, his little book of dialogues that could perhaps be considered as a script for a performance³⁹. If Leopardi's interest in the dialogic forms had stemmed from his juvenile reading of Lucian, there is no doubt that in later years he reflected on its philosophical implications, i.e. on the functional similarity between the comic, the tragic, and the poetic, as opposed to an idealistic, Platonic philosophy.

Yet Leopardi cannot wholeheartedly embrace a poetics of Dionysian performativity. First of all, he knows that the historical conditions did not allow his Greek reverie to return. Ancient dramas were performed in the open, before an audience which coincided with the whole polis; modern dramas were, on the contrary, written texts recited before an elite public in the narrow spaces of bourgeois theatres. Leopardi always paid a great deal of attention to the last traces of popular reception of poetry in public

39 Mario Martone has indeed recently staged the *Operette morali*, with great success.

squares⁴⁰. Nevertheless, he was also conscious that they were archaeological fossils of a forever-lost era, at least in Europe (we have recalled Tocqueville's observations on the relationship between dramatic literature and democratic institutions).

Other, even more powerful reasons have to do with Leopardi's personal sensibility. The dramatic potential of his dialogues, inhibited by an Enlightenment education and a repressive Christian super-ego, cannot develop towards the orgiastic archaic-communitarian model theorized in the *Zibaldone*, which would imply an unacceptable intellectual blindness. Notwithstanding his struggle against Plato, and his corresponding love for Homer, he was (and always remained) a post-Platonic thinker. His Greek poetic mind had gone through the rational discipline of dialectic and the torturing difficulties of writerliness. His battle against philosophy was a battle against himself. Hence it is the bizarre combination of opposites that make up the strange charm of the *Operette morali*: a writerly, analytic, mute Dionysian, an enlightened primitivism, a rational corporeality, an anti-Platonic Platonism. Hence the ambivalence of the voices that inhabit those wonderful worlds of invention: comic and tragic voices, delicate and strident, silent and spectacular, destructive and moving, philosophical and poetic.

40 See D'Intino, *L'immagine della voce*, pp. 161-169.

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