

FROM VENUS TO PROSERPINE:  
SAPPHO'S LAST SONG  
Desmond O'Connor

Leopardi had shown interest in the ancient Greek poetess at least from 1814 when he included the translation of one of her poems in a small epithalamial collection of *Scherzi epigrammatici tradotti dal greco*:<sup>1</sup>

Oscuro è il ciel: nell'onde  
La luna già s'asconde,  
E in seno al mar le Pleiadi  
Già discendendo van.  
È mezzanotte, e l'ora  
Passa frattanto, e sola  
Qui sulle piume ancora  
Voglio ed attendo invan.

When compared to the translation of the same fragment from Sappho's lyrics made by his contemporary Foscolo and, in the twentieth century, by, for example, Quasimodo and Pontani, Leopardi's "scherzo" is a far more liberal and personal rendition of the four-line Sappho original, especially noticeable in the emphasis on the pointless nocturnal expectancy (ll. 6-8), which may be considered an anticipation of ll. 41-43 of *La sera del dì di festa* of 1820. By contrast, Foscolo limits himself to imbuing the fragment with a melancholy air ("Sparir le Pleiadi / Sparì la luna, / È a mezzo il corso / La notte bruna; / Io sola intanto / Mi giaccio in pianto"),<sup>2</sup> while Quasimodo, much later (1939) and almost as a tribute to Leopardi, underscores the transience of youth ("Tramontata è la luna / e le Pleiadi a mezzo della notte; / anche giovinezza già dilegua, / e ora nel mio letto resto sola").<sup>3</sup> A terse and more literal version of the original is that of modern Greek scholar Filippo Pontani ("È sparita la luna, / le Pleiadi. Notte / alta. / L'ora del tempo varca. / Io dormo / sola").<sup>4</sup>

Leopardi admired the lyrist from Lesbos, of whose work - he lamented in his essay of 1816 *Della fama di Orazio presso gli antichi* - very little had survived ("... quella gran donna di Saffo di cui abbiamo poco più che niente").<sup>5</sup> By 1818-1819 there are suggestions in his letters that behind this admiration for the poetry of Sappho was an empathy with her unhappy condition, that of a person praised for her artistic prowess but at the same time shunned by the person she loved because she was not physically attractive. Sappho's sad adventures seemed to suggest that *virtù* (in the Latin sense of *virtus* "excellence", "vigour", "worth") and physical beauty were mutually exclusive.<sup>6</sup> As Leopardi's health deteriorated from 1817, his preoccupation with the

relationship between his physical appearance and condition and his passion for literary recognition increased, heightened possibly by the connections being made that year by Pietro Giordani in his letters to Leopardi: “il bello considero nei volti e nelle membra umane, nelle azioni degli uomini: ch  la bellezza e la virt  sono le pi  rare e le pi  care cose del mondo”;<sup>7</sup> “troppo chiaro veggo che non siete sano, o almeno vigoroso. [...] Io fermamente mi son posto in cuore che voi dovete essere (e voi solo, ch’io sappia, potete essere) *il perfetto scrittore italiano*, che nell’animo mio avevo disegnato da gran tempo”;<sup>8</sup> “per tutte le care cose di questo mondo e dell’altro, ponete, carissimo Contino, ogni possibile studio a conservarvi la salute. La natura lo ha creato, voi l’avete in grandissima parte lavorato quel *perfetto scrittore italiano* che io ho in mente”.<sup>9</sup>

By early 1818 Leopardi was convinced that his “sette anni di studio matto e disperatissimo” had ruined his health, had weakened his physical constitution and had made him unattractive:

[...] mi sono rovinato infelicemente e senza rimedio per tutta la vita, e rendutomi l’aspetto miserabile, e dispregevolissima tutta quella gran parte dell’uomo, che   la sola a cui guardino i pi ; e coi pi  bisogna conversare in questo mondo: e non solamente i pi , ma chicchessia   costretto a desiderare che la virt  non sia senza qualche ornamento esteriore, e trovandonela nuda affatto, s’attrista, e per forza di natura che nessuna sapienza pu  vincere, quasi non ha coraggio d’amare quel virtuoso in cui niente   bello fuorch  l’anima.<sup>10</sup>

One year later, in the midst of his acute crisis of depression, torn between suicide and an urgent desire to escape from the “prison” of Recanati, and with eyes so painful that he could not read, he again reflected on the separateness of *bellezza* and *virt *, this time, however, identifying himself with Brutus who, when dying by his own hand, cursed virtue for being an empty word and denounced the gods for deceiving him. On 26 April 1819 he wrote to Giordani:

[...] io non trovo cosa desiderabile in questa vita, se non i dilette del cuore, e la contemplazione della bellezza, la quale m’  negata affatto in questa misera condizione. Oltre ch’i libri, e particolarmente i vostri, mi scorano insegnandomi che la bellezza appena   mai che si trovi insieme colla virt , non ostante che sembri compagna e sorella. Il che mi fa spasimare e disperare. Ma questa medesima virt  quante volte io sono quasi strascinato di malissimo grado a bestemmiare con Bruto moribondo.<sup>11</sup>

This contemplation of the place and value of virtue would find poetic expression in 1821-1822 in *Bruto minore* and *Ultimo canto di Saffo*, with whose protagonists, both suicides of antiquity, he felt a strong affinity. In the former poem, any nexus between the reverence and obedience demanded by, and given to, the gods and the achievement of human virtue is seen as an illusion. In the latter poem, the unattractive Sappho, despite her *virt *, is rejected by the gods as an ugly woman. This is a postprint author produced PDF of: O’Connor, Desmond 1998. From Venus to Proserpine: Sappho's Last Song. 'Rivista di Studi Italiani', vol. 16, no. 2, December, 438-453. Archived at Flinders University: [dspace.flinders.edu.au](http://dspace.flinders.edu.au)

oddity in the natural order. In both cases, their decision to end their lives is a gesture of protest against the cruel destiny that governs the universe.

Whereas the gods rejected Sappho for her unattractiveness, Christianity on the other hand, according to Leopardi, portrayed physical beauty as a misfortune, and ugliness as a gift from God. In his well-known, very personal portrayal in the *Zibaldone* of his own mother's strong and rigid Christian beliefs, Leopardi denounced the "barbarism" of her religious fervour and the attitude that she had towards her children: she abhorred beauty, praised God for her children's ugliness and deformities, and made little of their successes, because attractiveness and recognition would only expose them to worldly temptations.<sup>12</sup> Two years later, in 1822, in a less emotional and more reasoned consideration of Christianity, he criticised the Christian belief that misfortunes were a sign of God's favour and that beauty, for all its naturalness, was an evil:

La religion Cristiana fra tutte le antiche e le moderne è la sola che o implicitamente o esplicitamente, ma certo per essenza, istituto, carattere e spirito suo, faccia considerare e consideri come male quello che naturalmente è, fu, e sarà sempre bene (anche negli animali) e sempre male il suo contrario; come la bellezza, la giovinezza, la ricchezza ec. [...]. E li considera come male effettivamente, perciocché non si può negare che queste tali cose non sieno molto pericolose all'anima, e che le loro contrarie (come la bruttezza ec.) non liberino da infinite occasioni di peccare. E perciò quelli che fanno professione di devoti chiamano fortunati i brutti ec. e considerano la bruttezza ec. come un bene dell'uomo, una fortuna della società, e come una condizione, una qualità, una sorte desiderabilissima in questa vita. [...] E quindi l'opinione che le disgrazie (o come le chiamano, le croci), sieno favori di Dio, e segni della benevolenza Divina: opinione stranissima e affatto nuova; inaudita in tutta l'antichità e presso tutte le altre religioni moderne.<sup>13</sup>

Leopardi rejected outright this Christian view of beauty and goodness, just as he rejected the opposition of religion to suicide. Alienation from a past natural order in which humans were once happy, and the destiny now of humans to be forever profoundly unhappy, has led, claimed Leopardi, to an ardent desire for death, seen as the greatest good and the sole remedy for human unhappiness. Only religion and the question of an afterlife prevent humans from taking their own life. As a consequence, the idea of religion is "la più barbara cosa che possa esser nata nella mente dell'uomo", "il più gran male", "il sommo danno".<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the most direct and oft-quoted anticipation of *Ultimo canto di Saffo* is Leopardi's *Zibaldone* entry of 5 March 1821, which, as Fubini, Binni, Blasucci and others have noted,<sup>15</sup> highlights the emotional suffering that stems from a sense of exclusion, on account of physical unattractiveness, experienced by someone whose unrequited love is directed not so much at a particular person as at the whole of nature. The description of the love for nature felt by an individual of *virtù*, and implicitly by Leopardi, is so passionate and sensual that it borders on the erotic:

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L'uomo d'immaginazione di sentimento e di entusiasmo, privo della bellezza del corpo, è verso la natura appresso a poco quello ch'è verso l'amata un amante ardentissimo e sincerissimo, non corrisposto nell'amore. Egli si lancia fervidamente verso la natura, ne sente profondissimamente tutta la forza, tutto l'incanto, tutte le attrattive, tutta la bellezza, l'ama con ogni trasporto, ma quasi che egli non fosse punto corrisposto, sente ch'egli non è partecipe di questo bello che ama ed ammira, si vede fuor della sfera della bellezza, come l'amante escluso dal cuore, dalle tenerezze, dalle compagnie dell'amata. Nella considerazione e nel sentimento della natura e del bello, il ritorno sopra se stesso gli è sempre penoso. Egli sente subito e continuamente che quel bello, quella cosa ch'egli ammira ed ama e sente, non gli appartiene. Egli prova quello stesso dolore che si prova nel considerare o nel vedere l'amata nelle braccia di un altro, e del tutto noncurante di voi. Egli sente quasi che il bello e la natura non è fatta per lui, ma per altri (e questi, cosa molto più acerba a considerare, meno degni di lui, anzi indegnissimi del godimento del bello e della natura, incapaci di sentirla e di conoscerla ec.): e prova quello stesso disgusto e finissimo dolore di un povero affamato, che vede altri cibarsi delicatamente, largamente e saporitamente, senza speranza nessuna di poter mai gustare altrettanto. Egli in somma si vede e conosce escluso senza speranza, e non partecipe dei favori di quella divinità che non solamente [gli è presente e vicina], ma gli è anzi così presente così vicina, ch'egli la sente come dentro se stesso, e vi s'immedesima, dico la bellezza astratta, e la natura.<sup>16</sup>

The meditations on physical beauty and ugliness, on beauty, perfection and nature, beauty and *virtù*, suicide and Christianity occupy many of the pages of Leopardi's *Zibaldone* in the year preceding the composition of *Ultimo canto di Saffo* (13-19 May 1822).<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, on the very day that he began to compose the poem, in a letter to his cousin Giuseppe Melchiorre he complained of another severe bout of ill health and poor eyesight, saying that he was prevented from carrying out his normal activities by this sickliness that overwhelmed him each spring.<sup>18</sup> In the choice of the drama of Sappho Leopardi could easily see autobiographical elements extending to the more general reflections on physical make-up, human unhappiness and rejection.

The story of Sappho's unhappy life, unrequited love for Phaon and suicide was well known to Leopardi's readers: as he wrote in 1822 in the unpublished *Premessa all'Ultimo canto di Saffo*,<sup>19</sup> his primary reference was one of the imaginary love poems, or epistles, included in Ovid's *Heroides*, where, besides Sappho, other legendary "heroines" such as Dido, Penelope, Ariadne, Medea and Helen also tell their story. Sappho in her letter to Phaon insists that her lack of beauty and small build are counterbalanced by her poetic genius and her widespread fame:

[...] mihi Pegasides blandissima carmina dictant;

iam canitur toto nomen in orbe meum.

nec plus Alcaeus, consors patriaeque lyraeque,

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laudis habet, quamvis grandius ille sonet.  
 si mihi difficilis formam natura negavit,  
 ingenio formae damna repende meo.  
 sim brevis, at nomen, quod terras inpleat omnes,  
 est mihi; mensuram nominis ipsa fero.

(... For me the daughters of Pegasus dictate sweetest songs; my name is already sung abroad in all the earth. Not greater is the praise Alcaeus wins, the sharer in my homeland and in my gift of song, though a statelier strain he sounds. If nature, malign to me, has denied the charm of beauty, weigh in the stead of beauty the genius that is mine. If I am slight of stature, yet I have a name that fills every land; the measure of my name is my real height.)<sup>20</sup>

According to Leopardi, in the same *Premessa*, “la cosa più difficile del mondo, e quasi impossibile, si è d’interessare per una persona brutta”. The Sappho legend, however, was easier to represent, since it belonged to antiquity: “Il grande spazio frapposto tra Saffo e noi confonde le immagini, e dà luogo a quel vago ed incerto che favorisce sommamente la poesia. Per bruttissima che Saffo potesse essere, che certo non fu, l’antichità, l’oscurità de’ tempi, l’incertezza ec. introducono quelle illusioni che suppliscono ad ogni difetto”.<sup>21</sup> Compared to modern writing, which tended to define, detail and limit the object and hence restrict the resulting emotions, ancient poetry, in its simplicity, naturalness, childlike illusions and imagination, was able to produce works of infinite beauty and emotions. In Leopardi’s view, modern existence was dominated by narrow, sterile rationalism, whereas the ancient world was closer to nature and to the wholeness of the human personality, where lofty love of self was a form of heroism. As a young “heroine”, the unfortunate Sappho, with her “grandissimo spirito, ingegno, sensibilità, fama, anzi gloria immortale” was a good illustration.<sup>22</sup>

When Leopardi published the poem in 1824, he observed in an annotation that it “intende di rappresentare la infelicità di un animo delicato, tenero, sensitivo, nobile e caldo, posto in un corpo brutto e giovane: soggetto così difficile, che non mi so ricordare né tra gli antichi né tra i moderni nessuno scrittore famoso che abbia ardito di trattarlo, eccetto solamente la signora di Staël, che lo tratta in una lettera in principio della *Delfina*, ma in tutt’altro modo”.<sup>23</sup> Unexpectedly, Leopardi this time omitted Ovid and cited Mme De Staël’s *Delphine* of 1802, in which there is no direct mention of Sappho but merely the oblique observation that a woman’s literary success does not compensate for ugliness. In the first part of the novel *Mille d’Albémar* writes to Delphine: “Vous savez que j’ai l’extérieur du monde le moins agréable; ma taille est contrefaite, et ma figure n’a point de grace [...] Une femme disgraciée de la nature est l’être le plus malheureux [...] Plusieurs ont annobli par des lauriers les disgraces de la nature; mais les femmes n’ont d’existence que par l’amour; l’histoire de leur vie commence et finit avec l’amour”.<sup>24</sup> But Leopardi must have had more in mind than this in mentioning Mme De Staël in

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relation to Sappho. There are, in fact, other points of contact both in *Delphine* and in her other well-known novel *Corinne* (1807): although *Delphine* is not ugly (on the contrary, she is attractive), in the original edition she suicides as her beloved is about to be executed; *Corinne* is a famous poet and tragic actress who dies of unrequited passion for her lover; both *Delphine* and *Corinne* are doomed to suffer; both feel anguish that springs from a sense of isolation; both heroines are outsiders who are not recognised *as themselves* by society; both works are novels of revolt against the customs of the time and give a hint of Mme De Staël's anti-Catholic feelings. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the final poem which the moribund *Corinne* recites to her melancholy friends is given the title "Last song of *Corinne*" ("Dernier chant de *Corinne*").<sup>25</sup>

Readers of Leopardi's time were very familiar with another account of the Sappho story, the novel by Alessandro Verri *Le avventure di Saffo poetessa di Mitilene* (1782, followed by numerous reprints), and it seems likely, as Binni and Muscetta have pointed out, that Leopardi had assimilated some of Verri's language and images.<sup>26</sup> Above all, the appellation "misera Saffo" (similarly Leopardi, *Saffo*, l. 22) recurs frequently in Verri's text.<sup>27</sup> Occasionally are found, too, "placida notte", "placida luna" (cfr. Leopardi, l. 1), "negletta Saffo" (Leopardi, l. 47: "negletta prole"). Other adjectives that appear in both texts include "torvo", "arcano", "verecondo". Linguistic echoes aside, the differences in the portrayal of Sappho, however, are more conspicuous than are the similarities, almost as though Leopardi had in mind to ridicule the sugary and melodramatic Verri version. In the latter, Sappho appears at times as restless, broody and immature, capable of tantrums that induce her to lock herself away in her room or to snatch Phaon's letter and tear it up exclaiming "Così tu facesti, o ingrato, col mio cuore".<sup>28</sup> Leopardi's Sappho, on the other hand, is dignified, rational and mature as she ponders her life, her passion for Nature and Phaon, and their rejection of her. The culmination of Verri's melodramatic portrayal is the suicidal leap from the cliff, which becomes something of a backward dive: "La dolente fanciulla [...] rivolse gli omeri al mare, gittò in capo il manto, strinse le palpebre, e sospirando si abbandonò per l'indietro a capitolombolo".<sup>29</sup> In Leopardi's poem this final moment of the tragedy is not even described. Rather, the reader, well familiar with the legend and the outcome, is left to ponder Sappho's embrace with Proserpine in the abyss. A further important difference between the two texts is seen in the conservative and conformist spiritualism of Verri's work. Love is a "misera infermità" according to the priest in the temple of Apollo whom Sappho consults to find a way to extinguish this "fiamma tormentosa".<sup>30</sup> The solution is to enact the "sacro rito" of leaping from the cliff and she will survive and be cured provided she has faith, because "gli Dei esaudiscono chi in loro confida". But Sappho holds back hesitantly and fearfully, not having the faith to obey the priest's instruction. It remains for revengeful Venus, "implacabile persecutrice", to prick Sappho's heart so that she is goaded over the cliff and plummets to her death. Rather than a rite of purification and salvation, the leap becomes the suicidal (and therefore condemnable) gesture of one who

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does not believe that “una Provvidenza celeste governa l’universo con sapientissimo imperio, e che distribuisce le pene ed i premi con inappellabile e giustissima sentenza”.<sup>31</sup> Leopardi’s Sappho, on the other hand, goes towards her death resolutely, knowing that she has been excluded irrevocably from love and from Nature, determined to end her life so that the world can be rid of an ugly oddity (despite inner beauty), and as a protest against Fate for giving her inextinguishable and inexplicable unhappiness.

The poem opens with Sappho already at the site where, according to legend, she will meet her end, indicated by “la rupe” (l. 3), which in Ovid and Verri is given its precise toponym “rupe di Leucate”, the cliff on the island of Leucadia:<sup>32</sup>

Placida notte, e verecondo raggio  
della cadente luna; e tu che spunti  
fra la tacita selva in su la rupe,  
nunzio del giorno; oh dilettose e care  
mentre ignote mi fur l’erinni e il fato,  
sembianze agli occhi miei; già non arride  
spettacol molle ai disperati affetti.

The world of nature once gave the semblance, and offered the hope, of an intimate relationship with Sappho, one that Venus, beautiful goddess of love and herald of the morning, seemed to announce in Sappho’s youth, when Sappho was unaware of her sad destiny and of the existence of the Erinyes, the tormenting deities from Tartarus. Now, in these last moments, Venus is still present, as in Ovid, appearing before Sappho on the tranquil nocturnal landscape, a luminous reminder of Sappho’s uninterrupted love, albeit not returned.<sup>33</sup> The reality of life’s experience has proven the hopelessness of Sappho’s “insano amore”.<sup>34</sup> In her present condition it is no longer the tranquil, silent landscape that gives her joy, but rather immersion in billowing storm clouds,<sup>35</sup> contemplation of thunder, lightning and turbulent winds, frightened flocks and surging torrents, a landscape consonant with her anguished state of mind:

Noi l’insueto allor gaudio ravniva  
quando per l’etra liquido si volve  
e per li campi trepidanti il flutto  
polveroso de’ Noti, e quando il carro,  
grave carro di Giove, a noi sul capo,  
tonando, il tenebroso aere divide.  
Noi per le balze e le profonde valli  
natar giova tra’ nemi, e noi la vasta  
fuga de’ greggi sbigottiti, o d’alto

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fiume alla dubbia sponda  
 il suono e la vittrice ira dell'onda.

As dawn is about to break, Sappho, who feels her own human mantle to be so unattractive, is passionately moved by the beautiful cloak with which the dewy earth and divine sky are clothed (“Bello il tuo manto, o divo cielo, e bella / sei tu, rorida terra”). Semblance and reality, attraction and rejection: the incongruity is so evident that reciprocity of passion is out of the question. The plainness of Sappho’s “form” is in marked contrast to the “vezzose forme” of nature; nature takes no account of Sappho’s *virtus*, her inner qualities, but deems her a *hospes vilis*, a burdensome outsider of no value (“vile ... e grave ospite”); despite her *pietas*, the gods and “empia” fate decreed that she would have no part of the world’s beauty. As the first light of morning appears, it brings no brightness to Sappho: she is not only ignored but shunned and disdained by the world with whose sights, sounds, caresses and fragrances she is so deeply in love:

A me non ride

l’aprigo margo, e dall’eterea porta  
 il mattutino albor; me non il canto  
 de’ colorati augelli, e non de’ faggi  
 il murmure saluta; e dove all’ombra  
 degl’inchinati salici dispiega  
 candido rivo il puro seno, al mio  
 lubrico piè le flessuose linfe  
 disdegnando sottragge,  
 e preme in fuga l’odorate spiagge.

The first half of the poem (ll. 1-36) depicts the setting and creates the mood, which is conveyed through Leopardi’s use of repetition, juxtaposition, caesura and interjection. The moon gives way to Venus, dawn begins to break and Sappho’s unhappy demise is presented in terms of her passionate desire to belong to a beautiful natural order that now she, as an adult, realises does not want to accept her. Leopardi has already shifted the emphasis of the legend from the indifference felt by the young and beautiful Phaon (so far unmentioned) to the portrayal of nature as the primary object of her love, to nature’s rejection of her as an unfitting presence in the world, and to the active role that the gods and fate have played in assigning to her an ugly, stunted physical form. The gods’ involvement is felt throughout: in the appearance of Venus, in the Erinyes, in Jove the personification of thunder and lightning (l. 12), in the “divo cielo” (l. 19), and in the cruel decision of the numina (l. 22), the controllers of the phenomena of nature, to make Sappho unbeautiful.

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The second half of the poem is introduced by probing questions that lead to reflection and the resolution of the dilemma:

Qual fallo mai, qual sì nefando eccesso  
 macchiommi anzi il natale, onde sì torvo  
 il ciel mi fosse e di fortuna il volto?  
 In che peccai bambina, allor che ignara  
 di misfatto è la vita, onde poi scemo  
 di giovanezza, e disfiorato, al fuso  
 dell'indomita Parca si volvesse  
 il ferrigno mio stame?

Sappho attempts to analyse the reasons for this exclusion. While Ovid suggests that Sappho's destiny may have been decreed by the Fates from birth,<sup>36</sup> Leopardi, on the other hand, resorts to Christian concepts of fault, evil, sin and stain and queries whether the blame might lie *beyond* the sinlessness of Sappho's innocent childhood and be tantamount to the prenatal culpability of original sin.<sup>37</sup> Leopardi, however, envisages no system of divine providence and redemption, no explanation for an imperfect, guiltless, unhappy human condition. Indeed, there is only one certainty: "Arcano è tutto, / fuor che il nostro dolor". In this unfathomable world Sappho is orphaned ("negletta prole") and alone in her suffering, abandoned by Jove, "padre eterno", "padre non-padre",<sup>38</sup> who gives eternal reward only to the physically attractive ("alle amene sembianze"), whereas one who is not "dazzling fair" ("candida", according to Ovid)<sup>39</sup> can have no place in heaven, even though the intangible qualities of *virtù* and poetic talent are the manifestation of an equivalent spiritual beauty:

Alle sembianze il Padre,  
 alle amene sembianze eterno regno  
 diè alle genti; e per virili imprese,  
 per dotta lira o canto,  
 virtù non luce in disadorno ammanto.

Despite the increasing brightness of the dawn, the use of the verb "non luce" to indicate the invisibility of *virtù* marks the entry of Sappho into her final dark contemplation and the strengthening of her resolve to correct the error of blind fate by ridding herself of her ugly mantle, thus liberating her spirit. The use of *enjambement* to emphasise "cieco", the blindness of fate (l. 57), seems to be an ironic touch: since fate too is physically impaired, or at least a dweller of the night, it must not therefore be able to see Sappho's bodily imperfection.

The defenceless, delicate, love-sick Sappho makes the ultimate decision on her own. In This is a postprint author produced PDF of: O'Connor, Desmond 1998. From Venus to Proserpine: Sappho's Last Song. 'Rivista di Studi Italiani', vol. 16, no. 2, December, 438-453. Archived at Flinders University: [dspace.flinders.edu.au](http://dspace.flinders.edu.au)

Leopardi's account there is no recourse to a priest of Apollo (as in Verri) or to a Naiad (as in Ovid) for guidance and advice on how to free herself of her predicament. Here Sappho decides her destiny resolutely and independently. Like Virgil's Dido who, as she fell on her blade, cried "I shall die, and die unavenged; but die I shall. Yes, yes; this is the way I like to go into the dark",<sup>40</sup> so too Sappho's "Morremo" (l. 55) indicates the same determination to be liberated from suffering. Only now is Phaon addressed by Sappho, who underscores again, as she has already done when expressing her love for nature ("invano" l. 26), the pointlessness ("indarno" l. 59) of a fiery passion that her beloved does not return. At this point, for the first time, in her generous wish for Phaon's future happiness ("vivi felice"), Sappho progresses to the consideration that unhappiness is the destiny that Jove bestows not only on herself but on all mortals:

[...]  
 vivi felice, se felice in terra  
 visse nato mortal. Me non asperse  
 del soave licor del doglio avaro  
 Giove, poi che perir gl'inganni e il sogno  
 della mia fanciullezza. Ogni più lieto  
 giorno di nostra età primo s'invola.  
 Sottentra il morbo, e la vecchiezza, e l'ombra  
 della gelida morte.

Unhappiness is no longer seen simply as the destiny of an unattractive person, and one who is extremely gifted. Rather, it is an integral part of the human condition, appearing the moment that the dreams and illusions of youth disappear. All humans are faced with the unhappy reality of illness and old age and death's icy shadow, a universal truth reinforced in Leopardi's subsequent poetry, and most explicitly in his last poem *Il tramonto della luna*.

Sappho has now advanced to the edge of the cliff:

Ecco di tante  
 sperate palme e dilettoni errori,  
 il Tartaro m'avanza; e il prode ingegno  
 han la tenaria Diva,  
 e l'atra notte, e la silente riva.

Ironically, blameless Sappho sees Hades as the only reward and the only joyful illusion that remain for her (in Tartarus the wicked suffer punishment for their misdeeds on earth).<sup>41</sup>

Divested of her ugly, unacceptable body, she assigns to the underworld her real essence, her  
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“prode ingegno”, the noble talent that the world ignored. This is the only “palma”, the only victory, hollow as it is, that she can hope for. The gods finally welcome her, but it is not Jove, eternal father, rather his daughter Proserpine (“la tenaria Diva”), once famous for her splendid beauty, now queen of hell, together with Dis (l. 56), hell’s king. Now, in this plunging from light into darkness, the opening “placida notte” (l. 1) is transformed into the “atra notte” of the abyss (l. 72), the “tacita selva” (l. 3) into the “silente riva” (l. 72) of watery Acheron which divides the living from the dead. And Venus, who as the harbinger of dawn was Lucifer, the bearer of light, is now the bearer of darkness.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>G. Leopardi, *Tutte le opere*, 2 vols., a cura di W. Binni con la collaborazione di E. Ghidetti (Firenze: Sansoni, 1969), I, p. 382. All future references are to this edition of Leopardi’s works. The *Scherzi* were published in Recanati by Fratini in 1816 (G.L., *Tutte le opere*, I, p. 1446) on the occasion of the wedding of Luigi Santacroce and Lucrezia Torri.

<sup>2</sup>U. Foscolo, *Le poesie* (Milano: Garzanti, 1974), p. 435.

<sup>3</sup>*Per conoscere Quasimodo* (Milano: Mondadori Oscar, 1980), p. 138.

<sup>4</sup>*Saffo, Alceo, Anacreonte. Liriche e frammenti*, prefazione e traduzione di Filippo Maria Pontani (Torino: Einaudi, 1965), p. 33.

<sup>5</sup>G.L., *Tutte le opere*, I, p. 890.

<sup>6</sup>For Leopardi’s definition of *virtù* see *Tutte le opere*, II, p. 580 (*Zib.* 2215, 3 December 1821): “Virtù presso i latini era sinonimo di *valore*, *fortezza d’animo*, e anche s’applicava in senso di *forza* alle cose non umane”.

<sup>7</sup>G.L., *La vita e le lettere* (Milano: Garzanti, 1983), p. 46 (Giordani to Leopardi, 10 June 1817).

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 50 (Giordani to Leopardi, 24 July 1817).

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 54 (Giordani to Leopardi, 21 September 1817).

<sup>10</sup>G.L., *Tutte le opere*, I, pp. 1050-1051 (Leopardi to Giordani, 2 March 1818). This early connection between Leopardi’s personal experiences and Sappho’s unhappy condition has been made by Luigi Blasucci in his essay on *Ultimo canto di Saffo in I titoli dei “Canti” e altri studi leopardiani* (Napoli: Morano, 1989), p. 71.

<sup>11</sup>G.L. *Tutte le opere*, I, p. 1076.

<sup>12</sup>“Io ho conosciuto intimamente una madre di famiglia che non era punto superstiziosa, ma saldissima e esattissima nella credenza cristiana, e negli esercizi della religione. [...] Considerava la bellezza come una vera disgrazia, e vedendo i suoi figli brutti e deformati, ne ringraziava Dio, non per eroismo, ma di tutta voglia. [...] Scemava quanto poteva colle parole e coll’opinione sua i loro successi [...] e non lasciava passare anzi cercava studiosamente l’occasione di rinfacciar loro, e far loro ben conoscere i loro difetti. [...] Tutto questo per liberarli dai pericoli dell’anima [...]. Ora questo che altro è se non barbarie?” (G.L. *Tutte le opere*, II, pp. 134-135, *Zib.* 353-355, 25 November 1820).

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, II, p. 634, *Zib.* 2456-2457 (4 June 1822).

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, II, pp. 240-241, *Zib.* 814-818 (19 March 1821). See also II, p. 534, *Zib.* 1981 (23 October 1821): “Non v’è dunque che la religione che possa condannare il suicidio. L’esser contrario alla natura, nel presente stato dell’uomo, non è prova nessuna ch’egli non sia lecito”.

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, G.L., *Canti*, a cura di Mario Fubini (Torino: Loescher, 1978), p. 96; G.L., *I canti*, a cura di Luigi Russo (Firenze: Sansoni, 1968), p. 192; D. Consoli, *Cultura coscienza letteraria e poesia in G.L.* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1967), p. 82; L. Blasucci, *op. cit.*, p. 76; W. Binni, *Lezioni leopardiane* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1994), p. 243.

<sup>16</sup>G.L. *Tutte le opere*, II, pp. 219-220, *Zib.* 718-720 (5 March 1821).

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 381-653, *Zib.* 1309-2442 (10 July 1821-13 May 1822). On suicide and Christianity see also, shortly after completion of *Ultimo canto di Saffo*, pp. 634, 642, 653, *Zib.* 2456-2458, 2492, 2549-2555 (4, 23 June and 5 July 1822).

<sup>18</sup>“Se la debolezza degli occhi e della testa non mi travolgesse straordinariamente, come suol fare in primavera, vi potrei servire circa l’iscrizione greca metrica. Ma mi trovo in istato che non posso attendere neppure alle mie cose ordinarie” (*Ibid.*, I, p. 1126, Leopardi to Giuseppe Melchiorri, 13 May 1822).

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 76.

<sup>20</sup>Text and translation from Ovid, *Heroides and Amores, with an English translation by Grant Showerman*, 2nd ed. (Camb. Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1977), pp. 182-183.

<sup>21</sup>G.L., *Tutte le opere*, I, p. 76.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, I, pp. 56-57. Leopardi was well aware that contemporary writers avoided ugly protagonists and in the *Zibaldone* mentioned Mme De Staël as a case in point: “Un protagonista brutto è lo stesso che rinunciare a qualsiasi effetto. [...] Madama De Staël non era bella: in un’anima come la sua, questa circostanza avrà prodotto mille pensieri e sentimenti sublimi, nuovissimi a scriverli, profondissimi, sentimentatissimi [...]. Ella, come tutti i grandi, dipingeva ne’ i suoi romanzi il suo cuore, i suoi casi, e però si serve di donne per li principali effetti; nondimeno si guarda bene di far brutti o men belli i suoi eroi o le sue eroine” (*Ibid.*, II, p. 472, *Zib.* 1692-1693, 13 September 1821).

<sup>24</sup>M. De Staël, *Delphine*, Première Partie, Lettre VII. Edition consulted: Genève: Droz, 1987, pp. 117-118. For a useful analysis of sources used by Leopardi in *Ultimo canto di Saffo*, see C. Muscetta, *Leopardi. Schizzi studi e letture* (Roma: Bonacci, 1976), pp. 49-91 (originally published in *Rassegna della Letteratura Italiana*, LXIII (1959), pp. 194-218).

<sup>25</sup>Edition consulted: Madame De Staël, *Corinne ou l’Italie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985). Mme De Staël actually wrote a tragedy entitled *Sappho* (1811), but there do not seem to be any direct connections with Leopardi’s poem. See Muscetta, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

The word “ultimo” suggested to Leopardi a feeling of pain and melancholy alongside a feeling of pleasure that was due to the idea of infinity contained in the word, which he labelled “poeticissima”. See G.L., *Tutte le opere*, II, p. 587, *Zib.* 2251, 13 December 1821. Furthermore, a song, “canto”, also suggested infinity and a feeling of pleasure owing to the vague and indefinite idea that it produced (*Ibid.*, p. 523, *Zib.*, 1928, 16 October 1821).

<sup>26</sup>Binni, *op. cit.*, p. 244. Binni had first noted Leopardi’s use of Verri’s novel in *Preromanticismo italiano* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1947), p. 311. See also Muscetta, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-63.

<sup>27</sup>In the edition consulted, Alessandro Verri, *I romanzi*, a cura di Luciana Martinelli (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1975), see pp. 144, 146, 154, 176, 189. It should, however, be pointed out that “me miseram” is also in Ovid’s *Sappho* (*Heroides and Amores, op. cit.*, p. 194, l. 204) and that in Cesarotti’s rendition of Ossian’s *Canti di Selma Colma* calls herself “Miseram!” (l. 117).

<sup>28</sup>Verri, *I romanzi, op. cit.*, pp. 98-99, p. 207.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 210; Ovid, *op. cit.*, pp. 192, 194 (ll. 166, 187).

<sup>33</sup>“Venus orta mari mare praestat amanti” (“Venus who rose from the sea stands out on the sea for the lover”), Ovid, *op. cit.*, p. 196 (l. 213).

<sup>34</sup>“Sit procul insano victus amore timor!” (“Away with fear, my maddening passion casts it out”), *ibid.*, p. 192 (l. 176).

<sup>35</sup>“Aura, subito et mea non magnum corpora pondus habe” (“Come, breeze, and bear up my body: it is no heavy weight”), *ibid.*, p. 192 (ll. 177-178).

<sup>36</sup>“Semper causa est, cur ego semper amem - sive ita nascenti legem dixere Sorores nec data sunt vitae fila severa meae [...]” (“There is ever cause why I should ever love - whether at my birth the Sisters declared this law and did not spin my thread of life with austere strand [...]”, *ibid.*, p. 186 (ll. 80-82).

<sup>37</sup>For the biblical principle of prenatal guilt and the desire for stainlessness, see, for example, *Psalms*, 50, 7-10.

<sup>38</sup>W. Binni, *La protesta di Leopardi* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1973), p. 74.

<sup>39</sup>“Candida [...] non sum”, Ovid, *op. cit.*, p. 182, l. 35.

<sup>40</sup>*The Aeneid*, Book IV, ll. 657-659.

<sup>41</sup>Leopardi noted that the irony was intentional: “Il Tartaro è forse una palma, o un error diletto? Tutto l’opposto, ma ciò appunto dà maggior forza a questo luogo, venendoci ad entrare una come ironia. Di tanti beni non m’avanza altro che il Tartaro, cioè un male” (*Premessa all’Ultimo canto di Saffo*, G.L., *Tutte le opere*, I, p. 76).