

Rewilding Arcadia: Pastoral and Leopardi's Search for the Natural

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田園詩におけるロマンティズムが再生する中で、ジャーコモ・レオパルディは自らの詩を書くにあたって田園詩の様式を認め、使用し、しかしながら同時に破壊もしている。それは、『アッラ・プリマヴェーラ』、『ウルティモ・カント・ディ・サッフォー』や『カント・ノットウルノ・ディ・ウン・パストーレ・エツランテ・デッラジア』などの詩に最も顕著である。これらの作品では、主人公は自然が完全に自らに馴染みのない、また冷淡なものと認識している。このような方法で自然というものにフォーカスを当てることで、レオパルディは自然の枠組みから人間という存在を脱中心化させ、自然を「再野生化」させている。このことは、人間の考える自らと自然の關係に修正を迫ることを示唆しているが、人間にとってそれが究極的に失われることは明らかに恐ろしいことなのだ。

Summary

In the wake of Romanticism's resuscitation of pastoral poetry, Giacomo Leopardi acknowledges, uses and subverts the modalities of pastoral in his own lyric output, most notably in poems like "To Spring," "Sappho's Last Song," and "Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia." In these works, the poetic subject discovers that nature is completely alien and indifferent to him. By focusing on nature in this way, Leopardi de-centers the human from the frame of nature, thus allowing nature to "rewild." Although this signals a rectification of the human's understanding of his relationship to nature, the ultimate loss for humans is palpably terrible.

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Although for a long time virtually unknown outside of his own country, Giacomo Leopardi is perhaps the greatest Italian poet of the 19th century, and is certainly one of the most important Romantic poets from any country. Over the last several years Leopardi's status has been rising, especially after the appearance of two milestone English translations of his work: the 2010 publication of his most important collection of poetry, *Canti*, and the 2015 publication of the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi's massive (2,592 pages) intellectual diary. Taken together, these volumes document the formidable intellect, learning, and poetic dexterity of a figure who has languished for too long in the margins of the international conversation since his death nearly two centuries ago.



Marginality was a constant in Leopardi's life. Leopardi was born in 1798 in the Marches region of eastern Italy. His hometown, Recanati, was at least 230 kilometers from any major cultural center, and was also separated from cities like Rome and Florence by the Apennine mountain range. Leopardi's isolated existence was made tolerable by a nearly obsessive study of the classics. He surpassed his tutors early on and continued to pursue literature in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and several modern languages while still in his teens. From age ten to eighteen he had already translated Hesiod's works, Moschus's *Idylls*, the first book of Homer's *Odyssey*, and the *Batracomiomachia* (also attributed to Homer). In addition to this, he composed several original works of poetry, drama, and scholarship while still a youth. But all of this study, pursued in near total solitude, came at a great loss to his social and physical development, something he regretted at the time and would regret later when health complications would contribute to his early death. The fury with which he studied affected his health—he was sickly for all of his life—and left him a hunchback. Although he did eventually succeed in escaping Recanati (spending time in Rome in 1822, Milan in 1825, Florence in 1827 and 1830, and Naples in 1833 where he would die four years later at age 36), and had some successes (he worked on an edition of the classics for the publishing house Stella while in Milan, and published, among other things, his first edition of *Canti* in 1831 and a second in 1835), Leopardi's life, as he expresses it in his poetry and other writings, remained deeply pessimistic. Disabused of religion and equally critical of the optimism and positivism of the Enlightenment, he wrote of the futility of these illusions and the impossibility of happiness or hope for the human condition or even escape from it.

This rejection of any sense of progress in modernity in Leopardi's poetry is coupled to a search for some truth in classical culture and literature. For this reason Leopardi's poetry either longs a kind of time-before-time, when the gods walked among us (as he does in "Alla primavera"), or he advocates a kind of patriotism based on the ancient Roman model (as seen in his first canzone "All'Italia"). However, Leopardi also seeks out a literary model that allows for a kind of poetic "elsewhere" in which he can express his intense nostalgia for irretrievable places and things, in which he can contemplate the catastrophe of time's flux, and in which he can dwell on nature's horrific indifference to the human plight. And thus, a little later in his career, Leopardi begins to write his *idilli* (idylls), poems written in the pastoral mode, modeled after the classical works of Theocritus, Bion, Moschus, and Virgil, as well as pastoral imitations from the modern era, in both Latin and the vernacular.¹

The goal of this paper is to show how Leopardi's imitation, citation, and subversion of pastoral poetic models is part of his effort to eliminate all literary conventions occluding a frank and unprejudiced representation of nature as it really is. While Leopardi on one hand longs for the pastoral space as a kind of ideal fictional landscape that should offer relief from the existential questions that tormented him, his critical mind does not allow him to use that space as a simple zone of retreat. Instead, in his poetry Leopardi evokes the pastoral world, a typically happy rustic space, and then allows his concerns to invade, which like changing weather darken the landscape, revealing its fragility and ultimate unsustainability when faced with the hard questions of existence. Leopardi calls these poems *idilli* but there is clearly nothing idyllic about them, and some critics call them "antipastorals" due to their systematic challenging and undermining of the typical conventions of the pastoral genre.² This paper will first review the history of pastoral poetry up to Leopardi's time. Next it will discuss the reassessment of classical literature in the Romantic period. Then the paper will turn to Leopardi's relationship to pastoral poetry. Finally, the paper will survey Leopardi's engagement with pastoral in his *Canti*, and will do so in four episodes. The first will examine how Leopardi cites the classics in "Alla primavera" ("To Spring"). The second will explore Leopardi's interrogation of pastoral space in "Ultimo canto di Saffo" ("Sappho's

¹ Because it is such an inclusive term, "pastoral" is often used to describe a kind of short poetry regarding matters of shepherding and country life; however, poets themselves used a wide variety of generic terms. The ancient Greek poems were often referred to as "idylls," while Virgil's poetry came to be called "bucolics" or "eclogues." In later centuries, poets would adopt one or another of these terms, or employ the newer term "pastoral."

² In the introduction of his translation of Leopardi's *Canti*, Jonathan Galassi describes the narrator of these idylls as "a solitary character at odds with his native setting, in a kind of alienated antipastoral" Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans. by Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), p. 19.

Last Song”). Next, Leopardi’s use of Renaissance pastoral imitations will be explored vis à vis his poems “A Silvia” (“To Silvia”) and “Il passero solitario” (“The solitary thrush”). The paper’s final episode will show how Leopardi finally destroys the literary fiction of pastoral space in “Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell’Asia” (“Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia”). I hope that this particular itinerary will demonstrate how Leopardi gradually “rewilds” his poetry by eliminating literary conventions that force a hackneyed representation of the natural world. While his initial evocations of pastoral space are erudite derivatives of a long textual tradition, they are from the beginning acutely aware of and uncomfortable with the mythologies they are founded upon. As Leopardi progresses in his work, he increasingly questions and dismantles the literary conventions determining representations of nature, until finally arriving at a late poem like “Canto notturno,” which is stripped bare of all that is “pastoral,” and which reveals instead, merely pasture in its unadorned simplicity.

1. A Brief History of Pastoral

Pastoral (a blanket term encompassing poems called “idyll,” “bucolic,” or “eclogue”) is a mode of writing featuring rustic settings, the lives of shepherds and other figures of everyday rural life, and an idealized picture of country living.³ Pastoral poems are usually short. Virgil’s third eclogue, his longest, is only 111 lines long. These small poems are often dramatic, featuring shepherds either talking together, engaging in singing competitions, or soliloquizing. Pastoral subject matter is featured in other works predating the actual genre of pastoral; shepherds make music in Homer (*Iliad* 18.525-26) and Hesiod’s *Works and Days* and *Theogony* explore agricultural themes and the myth of the Golden Age. But the inventor of pastoral is generally considered to be Theocritus from Syracuse, Sicily, who in the 3rd century B.C.E. produced a collection of poems titled *Idylls*. Theocritus was followed by two major pastoral writers: Moschus, also from Syracuse, and Bion, who lived in Smyrna. The originally Greek tradition of pastoral writing was eventually picked up by the Romans, and Virgil’s *Eclogues* (also sometimes known as *Bucolics*) is the most famous example of pastoral in Latin.

Pastoral poetry was never as rustic as it professed to be on the surface. It is a hyper-literary product of sophisticated urban writers well-versed in poetic techniques and traditions. The name *eidúllion* whence we get the word *idyll*, means a “short, highly wrought descriptive poem. Such description in two ways highlights that this is a product of careful and self-conscious poetic craft.⁴ First, the idyll is short: its choice of domestic scenes and humble characters is in deliberate contrast to the long narratives and heroic characters found in epics. The pastoral was also written in dactylic hexameter, the meter of epic; the pastoral’s redeployment of heroic verse in a non heroic context is an implicit challenge to that form. Second, the idyll is highly wrought: there is also a certain sophistication to the manner in which the subject matter is treated. Not only does pastoral treat relationships between humans and nature—via animal care, reflections on the passing of seasons, and comparisons between rustic living and city life—it also negotiates its own existence as an event in language. Through their song contests, pastoral figures show awareness of themselves as literary performers, and as poetic craftsmen in their own right. In this, the figures in pastoral offer the tantalizing possibility that—like figures in *Don Quixote*—they are aware of themselves as products of a literary fiction. In Virgil’s *Eclogues*, where the skin of pastoral is stretched thinly over a real-world framework, characters seem especially close to recognizing they are as metaphorical stand-ins for real historical Roman people and events. In the first eclogue, Meliobeus is exiled from his homeland for unspecified reasons, while Tityrus praises a patron from Rome who has offered him both manumission and real estate, a situation that critics view as a veiled reference to Octavian’s patronage of Virgil himself. The fourth eclogue is a eulogy of a divine child, which critics think intended someone from the Caesarian line yet to be born. In the fifth

3 For an overview of the identifying characteristics of pastoral, see Paul Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 8-43. For a more general summary of the history of pastoral, see Terry Gifford, *Pastoral, The New Critical Idiom* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999).

4 ‘εἰδύλλιον,’ in Henry George Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

eclogue, Menalcus and Mopsus deify the dead shepherd Daphnis and his poetry through song. Their employment of the elegiac poetic mode confirms the essentially literary quality of their existences, and their discussion of Daphnis in conjunction with his literary fame and literary immortality suggests they see themselves less like shepherds and more like poets such as Virgil and his contemporaries, who are obsessed with the eternal resonance of their own names among literary cognoscenti.

After Virgil, few poets revisited the pastoral until Dante—and later Petrarch and Boccaccio—in the 14th century. This inaugurated a proliferation of pastoral poems in both Latin and various vernaculars. In the centuries to follow, the pastoral also expanded its subject matter beyond the sheepfold to include gardens, vineyards, plowing, fishing, seafaring, and hunting. Pastoral also expanded its expressive modes. People begin to write pastoral letters (in fact Dante's resuscitation of the form was in an epistolary correspondence), pastoral dream narratives, and religious and devotional pastorals (these are seen in Petrarch and Boccaccio). Pastorals were also used to commemorate important events, and didactic and moralizing pastorals also emerged in this period. The Latinists of Naples pioneered the neo-mythical eclogue, in which mythical characters were situated in modern settings, and sometimes underwent Ovidian-style metamorphoses (Iacopo Sannazaro's *Salices* is a good example of this). In the 14th to 18th centuries, pastorals abounded in all countries across Europe.⁵ The most important of these originated in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque, and were written not in Latin but in the Italian vernacular: *Arcadia* by Iacopo Sannazaro (1458-1530), the pastoral plays *Aminta* by Torquato Tasso (1544-1595), and *Il pastor fido* by Giovanni Battista Guarini (1538-1612).⁶ (As a point of comparison, the first pastoral in English was Alexander Barclay's *Eclogues* [c. 1515], based on an Italian Renaissance source, and the first original English pastoral of real consequence did not come until 1579, with Edmund Spenser's *The Shepheard's Calender*.)

In the 18th century, perhaps as early as 1725, tastes turned away from these modern retreads of ancient pastoral.⁷ The beginning of the end was the foundation of the "Arcadian School" in Rome, which sought to return pastoral to its simpler roots, but ended up duplicating the "bizarre extravagances" of the preceding era, which included poets calling each other by rustic pseudonyms and dressing in shepherd's costumes for meetings.⁸ In his seminal work *The Oaten Flute*, Renato Poggioli says that "the modern world destroyed the conventional and traditional pastoral through four cultural trends that arose together and partly coincided. These were the humanitarian outlook, the idea of material progress, the scientific spirit, and artistic realism."⁹ In short, the new Enlightenment period found the pastoral artificial and insincere, altogether inadequate for the times.¹⁰

2. The Reassessment of Pastoral in the Romantic Period

In the Romantic period, the pastoral underwent a reconsideration and partial rehabilitation, which was closely connected to an attempt to get beyond the extravagances of recent centuries to return to the purity of expression found in the classics. Although the Romantics still considered pastoral formally and thematically unsuitable for describing the contemporary condition, they saw how pastoral, in juxtaposition to the arts of their own times, revealed the inadequacies

⁵ For an overview of the many uses of pastoral in the late Renaissance, see W. Leonard Grant, *Neo-Latin Literature and the Pastoral* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965). Chapter Eight describes an astounding proliferation of various subgenres in pastoral, while Chapters Nine through Twelve focus on its many new social uses, from tools for religious devotion, to more public and even political applications.

⁶ The pastoral poetic tradition is also closely linked to music. Guarini's *Pastor fido* was employed by Handel in 1712 as a libretto, and Tasso's works were also often set to music.

⁷ "The Neo-Latin art-pastoral retained its vitality from 1460 to 1725." (Grant, p. 163).

⁸ Carol Kidwell, *Sannazaro and Arcadia* (London: Duckworth, 1993), p. 190.

⁹ Renato Poggioli, *The Oaten Flute: Essays on Pastoral Poetry and the Pastoral Ideal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 31.

¹⁰ Samuel Johnson perhaps best summarizes this sentiment in his severe censure of Milton's pastoral poem "Lycidas," for its assumption of the pastoral mode: "Passion plucks no berries from the myrtle and ivy, nor calls upon Arethuse and Mincius, nor tells of *rough satyrs* and *fauns with cloven heel*. Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief. In this poem there is no nature, for there is no truth; there is no art, for there is nothing new. Its form is that of a pastoral, easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting" (*Lives of the Poets*, 6 vols [London, 1896], I, p. 173).

and contradictions of the modern positivistic and scientific outlook on both the world and the self. Because of this the Romantic attitude towards pastoral was one of nostalgia and longing. This stance is best expressed in Friedrich Schiller's essay "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry," which discusses the pastoral (which like Leopardi, he calls "idyll") in terms of two modes of poetic expression. There is the "naive" mode of our classical forebears, in which the poetic subject in his youthful naivete expresses himself without complication and sees himself as inextricably bound to nature. And then there is the "sentimental" mode of contemporary times; here, the subject is older, psychologically more complicated, and painfully aware of his separation from nature. For the ancient Greeks, Schiller says, "culture had not degenerated to such a degree that nature was left behind in the process," and for this reason he was "one with himself and content in the feeling of his humanity."¹¹ In contrast, we moderns are "neither one with ourselves nor happy in our experiences of humanity."¹² In this way Schiller demarcates difference on chronological grounds, the younger culture of the ancients on the one hand, and our older, decadent age on the other, in which we live and strive failingly towards the pure expression that our earlier selves once achieved without effort:

In the original condition of natural simplicity, where the human being still acts as a harmonious unity with all his powers at once, and where consequently his entire nature fully expresses itself in actuality, the most complete possible *imitation of the actual* is *what necessarily makes someone a poet*. On the other hand, here in the condition of culture, where that harmonious cooperation of the human being's entire nature is merely an idea, the elevation of actuality to the ideal or, what comes to the same, *the portrayal of the ideal* is *what necessarily makes the poet*. And, in general, these two are the only possible ways the poetic genius can express itself.¹³

In short, the ancient poet in his "condition of natural simplicity" could simply represent what he saw around himself. The modern poet, "in the condition of culture" can only represent that which he would *like* to see around himself. For Schiller what we would like to see is always the lost world of the ancients. In consequence, contemporary poetry is necessarily oriented towards elegy and nostalgia. Although Schiller's ideas have met challenges and emendations in the more than 200 years since its publication it still remains a fundamental statement on our understanding of pastoral poetry in the Romantic period and in our present day.¹⁴

Schiller's discussion of ancient poetry and the pastoral is revisited and emended by Leopardi himself in 1818. Like Schiller, Leopardi measures difference chronologically, equating the ancient with the vitality of a child and the contemporary with the debilitated senescence of an old man. Leopardi goes one step further than Schiller, by arguing that each individual progresses through these stages in his or her own lifetime: we begin "naive" as children, and eventually become "sentimental" as we age. Hence Leopardi's emphasis on fantasy and illusion in childhood:

quello che furono gli antichi, siamo stati noi tutti, e quello che fu il mondo per qualche secolo, siamo stati noi per qualche anno, dico fanciulli e partecipi di quella ignoranza e di quei timori e di quei dilette e di quelle credenze e di quella sterminata operazione della fantasia; quando il tuono e il vento e il sole e gli astri e gli animali e le piante e le mura de' nostri alberghi, ogni cosa ci appariva o amica o nemica nostra,

¹¹ Friedrich Schiller, 'On Naive and Sentimental Poetry', in *Essays*, ed. by Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom, The German Library (New York: Continuum, 1993), xvii, p. 195.

¹² Schiller, xvii, p. 195.

¹³ Schiller, xvii, p. 201. Italics original.

¹⁴ "Schiller provides an anatomy of modern thinking about pastoral and enables us to see connections and implications in a way no later criticism does" (Paul Alpers, 'Schiller's Naive and Sentimental Poetry and the Modern Idea of Pastoral', in *Cabinet of the Muses: Essays on Classical and Comparative Literature in Honor of Thomas G. Rosenmeyer*, ed. by Mark Griffith and Donald J. Mastrorarde [Atlanta, 1990], p. 319).

indifferente nessuna, insensata nessuna; quando ciascun oggetto che vedevamo ci pareva che in certo modo accennando, quasi mostrasse di volerci favellare; quando in nessun luogo soli, interrogavamo le immagini e le pareti e gli alberi e i fiori e le nuvole, e abbracciavamo sassi e legni, e quasi ingiuriati malmenavamo e quasi beneficati carezzavamo cose incapaci d'ingiuria e di beneficio; quando la meraviglia tanto grata a noi che spessissimo desideriamo di poter credere per poterci meravigliare, continuamente ci possedeva; quando i colori delle cose quando la luce quando le stelle quando il fuoco quando il volo degl'insetti quanto il canto degli uccelli quando la chiarezza dei fonti tutti ci era nuovo o disusato, né trascuravamo nessun accidente come ordinario, né sapevamo il perché di nessuna cosa, e ce lo fingevamo a talento nostro, e a talento nostro l'abbellivamo.

What the ancients were we all were, and what the world was for a few centuries, we were for a few years, that is children and participants in ignorance, fears, pleasures, beliefs and the ceaseless operation of fantasy; when the thunder, wind, sun, stars, animals, plants, walls of our dwellings, every one of these appeared to us either as friend or enemy, none indifferent; when every object that we viewed seemed in some way signaling, as if it wanted to speak to us; when—nowhere alone—we interrogated images, walls, trees, flowers and clouds, and we embraced rocks and wood, and—as if wounded—we mistreated, and—as if blessed—we caressed things incapable of wounding and blessing; when the marvel so welcome to us in which we so often wanted to be able to believe and marvel possessed us continually; when the colors of things, whether light or stars or fire or insect flight or birdsong or the clarity of fountains, were all novel or unusual, and we overlooked no accident as ordinary, nor did we know why these things were, and we modeled them to our desire, and our desire made them beautiful.¹⁵

Unlike Schiller, Leopardi finds no comfort in settling for “sentimental” poetry; on the contrary, for Leopardi one must pursue a kind of self-illusion until one finds oneself again in direct contact with nature, just like the ancients. Unlike the Schillerian poet, a mere imitation of nature will not suffice here; the Leopardian poet must—through some magical alchemy of illusion, folly and prophecy—arrive at the point where he again truly sees and expresses the world as he did in his youth, the world as the ancients saw it. As Leopardi says in a well-known passage from *Zibaldone*, “Tutto è follia in questo mondo fuorchè il folleggiare. Tutto è degno di riso fuorchè il ridersi di tutto. Tutto è vanità fuorchè le belle illusioni e le dilettevoli frivolezze.” (“Everything is folly in this world apart from folly. Everything is laughable apart from laughing at everything. All is vanity apart from beautiful illusions and delightful frivolity”)¹⁶ Illusion is, paradoxically, the natural state of man, and it is also the goal of the poet: “il poeta deve illudere, e illudendo imitar la natura.” (“the poet must make illusions, and by making illusions imitate nature”).¹⁷

3. Leopardi's Personal History with Pastoral

Pastoral themes and poetry play a large role in Leopardi's life from an early age. In the aforementioned *Discorso* Leopardi affectionately notes the frescoes of shepherds and sheep painted on the ceiling of his childhood bedroom, which fascinated him in his youth.¹⁸ Leopardi's description of paintings of nature rather than of actual pastures and shepherds indicate that from an early age he understood the pastoral as something essentially fictive, a representation

¹⁵ Giacomo Leopardi, *Discorso di un italiano intorno alla poesia romantica*, ed. by F. Flora (Milan: Mondadori, 1958), pp. 12-13. All translations of Leopardi's writing, both his prose and his poetry, are mine unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁶ Giacomo Leopardi, 'Giacomo Leopardi's *Zibaldone*: A Digital Research Platform' <digitalzibaldone.net> 3990, 2, 17 Dec. 1823.

¹⁷ Leopardi, *Discorso di un italiano intorno alla poesia romantica*, p. 14.

¹⁸ “Io mi ricordo d'essermi figurate nella fantasia, guardando alcuni pastori e pecorelle dipinte sul cielo d'una mia stanza, tali bellezze di vita pastorale che se fosse concessa a noi così fatta viva, questa già non sarebbe terra ma paradiso, e albergo non d'uomini ma d'immortali!” (*Discorso di un italiano intorno alla poesia romantica*, p. 13).

of reality (rather than reality itself), mediated by the hand of the artist.¹⁹ Pastoral was a formalized space of art, some kind of poetic or literary world to be inhabited when the real world proved intolerable. Over the course of his poetry, however, Leopardi will grow to reject this perspective, as will be shown later in this essay.

Leopardi's debt to pastoral is clear in many of his works, not just classical pastoral poems, but also those of the modern period. In the long history of Leopardi scholarship, critics have resisted any association between Leopardi and the writers of pastoral imitations from the 14th-17th centuries; for example, the influential Italian scholar Giosuè Carducci stated that anyone seeing such influences shows himself to be a dilettante of the poetic arts and "totally ignorant of metrical doctrines."²⁰ However, in the second half of the 20th century, studies have again argued for those influences that Carducci rejected, adding to Tasso and Guarini the pastorals of Antonfrancesco Grazzini (commonly known as "il Lasca,"), and Iacopo Sannazaro.²¹ More recently, it has been shown that Leopardi's poem "L'infinito" was made possible by his own early translation of Moschus's fourth idyll (composed when Leopardi was eighteen years old) as well as Virgil's first eclogue. Likewise, allusions to the Golden Age in "Inno ai patriarchi" owes a debt to Virgil's *Eclogues*, and 16th century vernacular imitations of classical pastoral, such as Torquato Tasso's *Aminta* and Guarini's *Pastor Fido*.²²

4. Citing the Classics in "Alla primavera"

An examination of "Alla primavera o delle favole antiche" ("To Spring, or on the Ancient Myths") (1822) will demonstrate how the theoretical concerns that Leopardi outlines in his "Discorso" are expressed through his evocation of ancient, mythical landscapes and vignettes, as handed down to the poet from classical predecessors like Ovid, Horatio, Theocritus, and Virgil.

...Arcane danze
 d'immortal piede i ruinosi gioghi
 scossero e l'ardue selve (oggi romito
 nido de' venti): e il pastorel ch'all'ombre
 meridiane incerte ed al fiorito
 margo adducea de' fiume
 le sitibonde agnelle, arguto carme
 sonar d'agresti Pani
 udì lungo le ripe; e tremar l'onda
 vide, e stupì che non palesa al guardo
 la faretratra Diva
 scendea ne' caldi flutti, e dall'immonda
 polve tergea della sanguigna caccia
 il niveo lato e le verginee braccia.

¹⁹ Nicola Gardini perceptively notes Leopardi's telling preference for the painted scenes of nature on his ceiling to any actual view of nature from his window, suggesting that Leopardi's "memory is already codified in terms of genre" (Nicola Gardini, "History and Pastoral in the Structure of Leopardi's *Canti*", *The Modern Language Review*, 103.1 [2008], 76-92 [p. 84]).

²⁰ "mostra essere un orecchiante di arte poetica, assai ignaro della dottrina metrica" qtd. in Emilio Bigi, *La genesi del 'Canto notturno' e altri studi sul Leopardi* (Palermo: U. Manfredi, 1967), p. 144.

²¹ For a general argument, see "Il Leopardi e l'Arcadia" in Bigi, pp. 143-84. For Leopardi's use of Sannazaro, see Maria Corti, "Passero solitario in Arcadia", *Paragone*, 194.14 (1966), 14-25. This essay was reprinted, with some emendations in Maria Corti, *Metodi e fantasmi* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1969), pp. 195-207. For Leopardi and il Lasca, see Nino Borsellino, "A Silvia: variazioni su un sonetto pastorale", in *Leopardi e la letteratura italiana dal duecento al seicento. Atti del IV convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani* (Florence, 1978), pp. 419-26.

²² For "L'infinito" see Gardini, pp. 84-87. Pp. 88 for "Inno".

... Arcane dances
of immortal foot shook
the steep heights and the high forests (today abandoned
nest of winds): and the shepherd boy who among the uncertain
mid-day shadows and along the flowered
banks of the river led
his thirsty lambs, heard the piercing song
of wild Pans sounding out
along the shore; and saw the trembling
waters, and wondered, that in open view
the bequivered Goddess
descended into the warm currents, and washed
her snow-white sides and virgin arms
of the unclean dust from the bloody hunt.
(25-38)²³

Most notable of Leopardi's redeployment of classical motifs are 25-27's rewriting of Horace's "alterno terram quatiant pede" (Odes, I, 4, 7); 28-33's reference to both Theocritus's *Idylls* ("Shepherd, I may not, for reverence of Pan, / pipe in the noonday; at that hour he rests / worn out with the hunt. He is wrathful if roused" [I, 15-18]) and Virgil's *Eclogues* ("sub incertas Zephyris notantibus umbras" [V, 5],²⁴ and "arguta...fistula" [VII, 24]; 35-38's citation of Ovid ("Hic dea silvarum menatu fessa solebat / virgineos artus liquido perfundere rore" [*Metamorphoses* II, 162-63); and another reference to Horace in 38 ("niveum...latus" [*Odes* III, 27, 25-26]).²⁵ Add to these the obviously classicizing words chosen, hardly usual to spoken Italian: "ruinosi," "meridiane," "sitibonde" "faretrata," to name only a few. The extraordinary density of the citations and classicizing diction suggest that Leopardi wants much more than to simply recall a time when gods walked the forests and spirits resided in trees; he wants to recreate the textual world that sustained those myths. The title of this poem, after all, is "delle favole antiche"; it is explicitly about the myths, the stories, the texts that form this world.

In the following stanza Leopardi forecloses on the possibility of returning to a world so mythically charged: "Vissero i fiori e l'erbe, / Vissero i boschi un dì" ("the flowers and plants lived, / the forests lived one day") (39-40). That death is of poetry, not of places or living beings. In the lines to follow citations of the classics are reduced dramatically, and when they do occur they feature telling modifications. Lines 40-57 recall the famous Apollo/Daphne scene from the first book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1.452-67), but with telling modifications. In the original story, Apollo is stricken with love for the nymph Daphne and chases after her. Daphne is not persuaded by Apollo's overtures and begs her father, Peneus, to save her. Peneus obliges and turns her into a laurel tree. Leopardi's redeployment of the Ovidian dynamic of pursuit epitomizes Schiller's conception of the sentimental as the "condition of culture" which prevents a human from operating in "harmonious cooperation" with himself. Leopardi's traveler ("viator") is not motivated by lovestruck desire to pursue anything. Instead, he is driven by fear or perhaps disgust to flee "impure / urban society and its deadly rage and disgrace" ("impuri / cittadini consorzi e le fatali ire"). Furthermore, while Apollo, pursues

²³ Citations of Leopardi's poetry are from Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, ed. by Fernando Bandini (Milan: Garzanti, 1975). Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

²⁴ The reference to Virgil is actually explicit; Leopardi notes it in the margin of this poem's manuscript.

²⁵ Citations of Theocritus, Virgil, Ovid, and Horace are from: Theocritus, *The Poems of Theocritus*, trans. by Anna Rist (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978); Vergil, *Eclogues*, ed. by Robert Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Ovid, *Metamorphosi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979); Horace, *Q. Horati Flacci Opera* (Oxford: Oxford: Clarendon, 1901).

singlindedly a sole object, this traveler cannot focus his desire on any one thing and embraces several tree trunks, seeking out the heartbeat of a Daphne, or a Phyllis, or of one of the Heliades mourning the death of Phaethon, who was struck down by the sun (“*Quel che sommerse in Eridano il sole*”). The traveler's conscious fleeing of the city embodies the condition of the sentimental poet, who must also deliberately turn away from modernity in order to create. In addition to this, the multiple objects of the traveler's desire, represented by the heartbeats of various characters from Ovid, echo the Schillerian existential quandary in which the self cannot be unified harmoniously. What more than the burden of multiple incompatible desires can so dramatically cleave the self from self ?

This image bears another important modification, which heightens the poet's sense of estrangement from ancient myth; the equation of Phaethon's killer with the sun. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1.748-2.349), Phaethon requests permission from his father Phoebus (the god of the sun) to spend a day driving the chariot of the sun across the sky. Phoebus would refuse this wish but is bound by a promise to grant it. Phaethon's course across the heavens is catastrophic, causing the seas to boil, and pushing the constellations out of their positions in the sky. Eventually, Jupiter strikes him down to save the world, and Phaethon drowns in the sea. In contrast to Ovid's telling, Leopardi has Phaethon drowned by “*il sole*,” Phoebus himself. Phoebus is frequently associated with Apollo, the god of lyric poetry. In this way, the endeavor to drive the chariot of the sun across the sky could be paralleled to Leopardi's own poetic endeavor: to somehow resume the ancient myths. The equation of Phaethon's daring with that of the poetic mission to write the extraordinary dates back at least to Dante (*Inferno* 17.106-40). Likewise in Leopardi's retelling Phaethon becomes a stand-in for the poet, a mortal who dares to do something reserved only for gods. “*Your fate is mortal, what you attempt is not for mortals*” Phoebus warns Phaethon before he takes the reins (“*Sors tua mortalis: non est mortale quod optas*” [*Metam.* 2, 56]). Anyone who pursues such folly will be burned out from the sky.

The message is clear in “*Alla primavera*”: we are cut off from our past, which was once so rich with ancient myth. Now, nature is “*much less dear*” (“*men caro assai*,”) to us, and the rooms of Olympus are now empty (“*vote*”) (80-83). The gods have departed, and nature does not love us.

5. The Interrogation of Pastoral Space and Pastoral Relations in “*Ultimo canto di Saffo*”

Nature's rejection of humankind is more deeply meditated on in the “*Ultimo canto di Saffo*” (“*Sappho's last song*”) (May 1822). In this poem, Leopardi features a commonplace of the pastoral poetic tradition: a lovesick figure who is rejected by the object of his affection on account of his ugliness.²⁶ This emblematic figure of the unattractive spurned lover originates in Theocritus's eleventh *Idyll*, where the cyclops Polyphemus mourns his failure to attract Galatea on account of his one eye, his rustic manners, and his general ugliness. He highlights instead his inner qualities—such as his steadfast loyalty—in an attempt to change her mind: “*If my looks repel you, seeming over-shaggy, / I've a heart of oak within*” (48-49). Virgil later revisits this theme in his second eclogue: a shepherd called Corydon issues a disorganized (“*incondita*”) lament to the forests and hills regarding his rejection by “*cruel Alexis*” who cares nothing for his songs (“*crudelis Alexi, nihil mea carmina curas?*”) (II.5-6). Corydon later comments that he is after all not that hideous (“*nec sum adeo informis*”), having recently seen his reflection in the water on the shore when the wind was still (“*nuper me in litore uidi, / cum placidum uentis staret mare*”) (25-26); more than anything else, a clarification such as this seems only to highlight his reputation for unattractiveness.

In an innovation on the Theocritan/Virgilian practice of establishing a young love-struck and rustic man as protagonist, Leopardi recruits the historical poetess Sappho to play the role of Polyphemus/Corydon. Like them, she speaks about her misfortune and her unappealing appearance, but the object of her desire is no single person, but rather the entire natural world around her.

²⁶ Poggioli, p. 26.

Bello il tuo manto, o divo cielo, e bella
 sei tu, rorida terra. Ahi di cotesta
 infinita beltà parte nessuna
 alla misera Saffo i numi e l'empia
 sorte non fenno. A' tuoi superbi regni
 vile, o natura, e grave ospite addetta,
 e dispregiata amante, alle vezzose
 tue forme il core e le pupille invano
 supplichevole intendo. 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

Your cloak is lovely, divine heaven,
 and you are lovely also, dewy earth.
 Alas, the gods and pitiless fate
 saved none of this endless beauty for poor Sappho.
 In your proud kingdoms I am worthless, Nature,
 an uninvited guest, an unloved lover.
 My heart and eyes address your gracious form
 in hopeless supplication. The sunlit shore
 or the bright dawn out of heaven's gate
 doesn't smile on me. No brilliant birdsong
 or beeches' murmur
 greets me:
 and where a bright brook
 shows its pure white curve
 in the shadow of the bending willows,
 its lilting water
 shrinks from my unsteady foot,
 running ahead to lap the fragrant bank.
 (20-36)²⁷

Leopardi's use of Sappho, a historical figure and a poet, both confirms and challenges conventional practices in pastoral poetry. While it is common for pastoral poets to establish figures as alter egos in the poem, the employment of a historical character in that role is new.²⁸ And while the theme of the spurned lover is a common pastoral trope, as has been shown,

²⁷ Translation here by Jonathan Galassi (Leopardi, *Canti*, pp. 85-87).

²⁸ There is no historical evidence that that Sappho was ugly, however Ovid's 15th epistle, verse 31ff: "si mihi difficilis formam natura negavit"

Sappho declares that she is unloved “in your proud kingdoms,” that is, by Nature itself. She addresses Nature “in hopeless supplication,” receiving no response from “the sunlit shore,” and no greetings from beeches. Nature flees her: the water from a brook “shrinks from my unsteady foot.” This actual retreat of the natural world from her body is quite literally a personal apocalypse.

In classical pastoral, themes of unrequited love are often connected to a disruption of the harmonic relationship between the subject and the natural world around him; this disruption amounts to a temporary neglect of herding or farming duties, until the heartbroken shepherd returns to his senses. In contrast, Leopardi’s employment of this dynamic of disruption exposes an unbridgeable chasm between nature and the subject. The examples from classical literature discuss this disruption as temporary and due to the subject’s neglect. In Virgil’s fourth eclogue, Corydon forgets his work due to heartache, and then comes to his senses at the end of the poem: “Ah, Corydon, Corydon, what madness mastered you! / You’ve left a vine half-pruned upon a leafy elm” (“a Corydon, Corydon, quae te dementia cepit! / semiputata tibi frondosa uitis in ulmo est” (69-70). In Theocritus’s eleventh idyll Polyphemus neglects his herds, and in his tenth idyll a figure named Bucaeus similarly forgets about his harvest work while lamenting his lovesick state. In these classical models, nature is something adjunct and subordinate to the shepherd/lover’s main crisis. And the beloved’s neglect of the lover is echoed in the lover’s own neglect of the plants and animals he ought to be tending to. These hierarchies of neglect clearly demonstrate that a shepherd’s engagement in poetic lament is more important than the needs of nature. Much like the pastoral frescoes on the ceiling of Leopardi’s bedroom, in which representations of nature are first and foremost strokes of paint on wet plaster, here the world of plants and animals are only possible because the shepherd shifts his attention to them. Leopardi gives the lie to this fundamentally anthropocentric conception of nature by returning nature to its primary position. In Leopardi we desire neither Galatea or Corydon. It is the natural world that we desire, the natural world that rejects us, and the natural world that neglects us. What we say about it is irrelevant to its existence. The water retreating from Saffo’s foot is a ghastly reminder that the world is not made of words and representations. The world is real, and if harmonious coexistence with it is impossible, it affects us far more than it affects nature.

The possibility that Saffo is always out of place in her world is suggested in her lines “Qual fallo mai, qual sì nefando eccesso / macchiami anzi il natale.” (“What failing was it, what heinous excess / marked me before my birth”) (37-38). Her ugliness has marked her as not part of nature, and yet she is doomed to live within it. In consequence Saffo can find solace only in exiting the world to which she is so unwelcome: “Morremo. Il velo indegno a terra sparto, / rifuggirà l’ignudo animo a Dite.” (“We will die. Once the unworthy veil / falls to the ground, the naked soul will fly / to Dis again” (55-57). The use of the first person plural in “morremo,” (“we will die”) makes the disturbing announcement, that it is not just her but all of us who are toxic to the natural world around us. And there is no reconciliation, ever, except in death.

6. Salvaging Modern Pastoral Imitations to Construct an Antipastoral World

The degree of Saffo’s alienation from the world far exceeds anything seen yet in the pastoral poetic tradition, even if death and exile are not alien to pastoral. In Virgil’s first eclogue Meliobeus discusses the seizure of his home. In the fifth, two shepherds mourn the death of Daphnis. In the ninth, Menalcas is evicted from his home and is almost killed. Here and in other classical pastoral poems, pain comes from external sources. Saffo, however, suggests that there is something native to our character that brings this cataclysm down on our heads. That suggestion of some inborn defect can be found in the early modern pastoral imitative tradition.

Maria Corti’s work on “Il passero solitario” (“The Solitary Thrush”) (1831-35) exposes modern poetic influences on Leopardi, namely Iacopo (sometimes Iacobo) Sannazaro’s *Arcadia* (1504), which Leopardi frequently

suggest a possible poetic source for Leopardi.

commented on in his *Zibaldone*.²⁹ Sannazaro is figure worthy of note, a Neapolitan humanist and poet equally comfortable writing in Latin, Italian, and the native dialect of Naples. *Arcadia*, written in Italian, is his most seminal work, influencing many poets in the 16th and 17th centuries. Leopardi's admiration of Sannazaro, it bears noting, is not without qualification; he calls Sannazaro an "imitator of Virgil" in a passage critical of contemporary pastorals, and elsewhere he remarks that Sannazaro's eclogues lack an adequate rusticity to compare favorably to Theocritus.³⁰

In light of Leopardi's only partial admiration of Sannazaro, his use of the Sannazaro in "Il passero solitario" might seem odd; however, Corti shows that Leopardi's poetic method involves salvaging parts from the husks of inferior works and redeploying them in innovative contexts. His intellect, Corti explains, is a strong one. Leopardi might interpret and emend texts with the precision of philologist, but he will use them instrumentally when acting as a poet.³¹ Corti is not the only critic to argue Leopardi's aggressive reuse of inferior poets. Nino Borsellino claims that Leopardi's "A Silvia" ("To Silvia") (1828) borrows from the work of Antonfrancesco Grazzini (1503-1584), a minor poet known as "Il Lasca".³² Apparently, Leopardi means to generate endless variations on Lascan themes in "a Silvia", much like one does in music.³³ These examples show that Leopardi is the "strong" sort of poet that Schiller calls for in his essay *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*, who can extend the pastoral voice beyond its traditional tonal range, who can seek out and crack open the fissures in the pastoral edifice that his predecessors have constructed, and who can lead that poetry into new territory.³⁴

In spite of his criticism, Leopardi does find something to be recommended in Sannazaro's poetry. In *Arcadia* Leopardi finds shepherds who are saddled with an existential grief totally alien to classical pastorals. In his *Zibaldone* Leopardi remarks, "e tanto è miser l'uom quant'ei si reputa disse eccellentemente il Sanazzaro" ("and man is as miserable as he considers himself Sannazaro so excellently said"), and follows this with a reflection on the relationship between a person's feelings and his disposition towards these feelings.³⁵ This is a sentiment that Leopardi replays in his poem "Il passero solitario," which describes a young narrator who, despite finding himself in a pleasant springtime setting ("Primavera dintorno / brilla nell'aria"), nevertheless identifies with the mournful sparrow: "tu pensoso in disparte il tutto miri; / non compagni, non voli, / non ti cal d'allegria, schivi gli spassi; / canti, e così trapassi / dell'anno e di tua vita il più bel fiore. / Oimè, quanto somiglia al tuo costume il mio!" ("Pensive and apart, you watch it all. / No comrades and no flights, / no happiness for you. You shun their games; / you sing, and so you spend / the high time of the year and of your life" (5-18).³⁶ As in Sannazaro's work, grief permeates "Il passero solitario." The narrator compares the

²⁹ Corti, 'Passero solitario in Arcadia'. See pages 15-16 for the diverse mentions of Sannazaro in Leopardi's *Zibaldone*.

³⁰ For Sannazaro as an imitator of Virgil: 'Giacomo Leopardi's *Zibaldone*: A Digital Research Platform' 143.1 27, Giugno 1820. For Sannazaro as not a true "Theocritan": "I nostri veri idilli teocritei non sono nè le egloghe del Sanazzaro nè ec. ec. Ma le poesie rusticali come la nencia, Cecco da varlungo ec. Bellissimi e similissimi a quelli di Teocrito nella bella rozzezza e mirabile verità [...]"(Leopardi, 'Giacomo Leopardi's *Zibaldone*: A Digital Research Platform' 57,2 11 Gennaio - 21 Maggio, 1819).

³¹ Corti describes Leopardi's reading of Sannazaro as "una lettura puntuale, in cui i testi vengono interpretati ed emendati dal filologo, strumentalizzati dal poeta" (Corti, 'Passero solitario in Arcadia', p. 14).

³² Borsellino calls the poem by Il Lasca under discussion in his study "an insignificant product of 16th century rhymer" as well as an "inane pretense of a pastoral love lament" ("insignificante prodotto di rimeria cinquecentesca," "insulsa finzione di un pastorale lamento d'amore") (Borsellino, p. 419).

³³ "Lo schema è semplice," Borsellino adds, "come in musica: una citazione (oculta nel nostro caso) enuncia il tema e lascia libero corso metrico e strofico al commento. A ridosso di quel tema, tanto meglio se convenzionalmente rappresentativo, si istituisce la nuova espressività, e il soggetto, mentre lo raccoglie, altera irrimediabilmente il vecchio codice, si congeda, parlandolo, dal linguaggio antico dell'immaginazione" (Borsellino, p. 427).

³⁴ Schiller calls for poets to break free of the "narrower indigent pastoral world" as they revitalize the pastoral genre: "Let him undertake the task of idyll so as to display that pastoral innocence even in creatures of civilisation and under all the conditions of the most active and vigorous life, of expansive thought, of the subtlest art, the highest social refinement, which, in a word, leads man who cannot now go back to Arcady forward to Elysium." (Cit. in Alpers, 'Schiller's Naive and Sentimental Poetry and the Modern Idea of Pastoral', p. 325). Paul Alpers associates this directive with Harold Bloom's definition of a "strong" poet, who moves beyond the confines of his predecessors (Alpers, 'Schiller's Naive and Sentimental Poetry and the Modern Idea of Pastoral', pp. 325-26).

³⁵ The passage continues: "Ora in quello stato chi'io diceva in un pensiero poco sopra, egli non reputandosi misero neanche sarebbe stato, come ora tanti in condizione alquanto simile a quella ch'i ho detto, poco reputandosi miseri, lo sono meno degli altri, e così tutti secondo che si stimano infelici" ('Giacomo Leopardi's *Zibaldone*: A Digital Research Platform' 58,6, 11 Gennaio - 21 Maggio, 1819).

³⁶ Translation by Jonathan Galassi. Maria Corti discovers many parallels between the voice of this narrator here, and that of the shepherd Eugenio in *Arcadia*, most especially regarding themes of time, old age, and the regret that follows a life unfulfilled. Note these lines in

happiness of others to his own inability to participate in their joys: “Tutta vestita a festa / la gioventù del loco / lascia le case, e per le vie si spande / e mira ed è mirata, e in cor s’allegra. Io solitario in questa / rimota parte alla campagna uscendo, / ogni diletto e gioco / indugio in altro tempo” (“Dressed up to celebrate / the young people of the place / leave their homes and gather in the streets, / and, seeing and being seen, are glad. / Only I, who make for this / remote spot in the countryside / put off every pleasure and enjoyment / to another time.”) (32-39).³⁷ Instead, he questions his own existence: “Che di quest’anni miei? Che di me stesso?” (“And of my life? And of my own self?”) (57).³⁸

Other sections of Sannazaro’s *Arcadia* find connections to Leopardi. In the seventh prose, the character Sincero (who is explicitly identified as Sannazaro himself), reports that the pastoral world is entirely intolerable, not only to people of the city (like him), but even to the beasts that live there (“non che i gioveni ne le nobili città nudriti, ma appena mi si lascia credere che le selvatiche bestie vi possano con diletto dimorare”)³⁹ Even for animals, the specter of misery seems to threaten them. In the last prose of *Arcadia*

Le nostre Muse sono estinte; secchi sono i nostri lauri; ruinato è il nostro Parnaso; le selve son tutte mutole; le valli e i monti per doglia son divenuti sordi. Non si trovano più Ninfe o Satiri per li boschi; i pastori han perduto il cantare; i greggi e gli armenti appena pascono per li prati, e coi lutulenti piedi per isdegno conturbano i liquidi fonti, né si degnano, vedendosi mancare il latte, di nudrire più i parti loro. Le fiere similmente abandonano le usate caverne; gli uccelli fuggono dai dolci nidi; i duri et insensati alberi inanzi a la debita maturezza gettano i lor frutti per terra; e i teneri fiori per le meste campagne tutti comunemente ammariscono. Le misere api dentro ai loro favi lasciano imperfetto perire lo incominciato mèle. Ogni cosa si perde, ogni speranza è mancata, ogni consolazione è morta.

Our Muses are extinct; dry our laurels; ruined our Parnassus; the forests have gone silent; the valleys and the mountains have become deaf from sorrow. No more Nymphs or Satyrs can be found in the forests; the shepherds have lost their song; the flocks and herds hardly graze in the fields, and with muddy hooves disdainfully sully the clear springs, nor do they bother, seeing themselves lacking milk, to nourish their newborns anymore. Likewise the beasts abandon their usual caverns; the birds flee their dear nests; the hard

Arcadia:

Questa vita mortale al dì somigliasi,
il qual, poi che si vede giunto al termine,
pien di scorno all’ocaso rinvermigliasi.
Cosí, quando vecchiezza avvien che termine
i mal spesi anni che sí ratti volano,
vergogna e duol convien c’al cor si germine.

This mortal life is like the day
which, after it sees itself brought to an end,
turns scarlet, full of scorn for the setting sun.
Just so, when old age must bring to a close
the poorly spent years which so swiftly fly away,
shame and suffering sprout up in the heart.
(37-42, translation mine)

Corti says that “L’ocaso...provoca la similitudine fra il giorno e la vita mortale,” which finds its echo in lines 43-44 of Leopardi’s poem “Cadendo si dilegua, e par che dice / che la beata gioventù vien meno” (Corti, ‘Passero solitario in Arcadia’, p. 17.). “Segue lo spettro della vecchiezza” Corti says, recalling Leopardi’s lines 50-52, and she likewise notes that the “mal spesi anni che s ratti volano” anticipate “Che di quest’anni miei?” in 57. Finally she draws a bead on “vergogna e duol (pentitrommi ... sconcolato) come esiti fatali della vecchiezza. Lo stesso tono stilistico nella previsione...e nella finale affermazione dell’inevitabile futuro di pentimento e di dolore” (Corti, ‘Passero solitario in Arcadia’, p. 18).

³⁷ Translation by Jonathan Galassi.

³⁸ Translation by Jonathan Galassi.

³⁹ Jacobo Sannazaro, *Arcadia*, ed. by Alfredo Mauro, Opere volgari (Bari: Laterza, 1961), p. 52.

and unfeeling trees throw their fruit to the ground before they have matured; and the tender flowers together grow rotten in the sorrowful countryside. The doomed bees in their hives leave their unfinished honey to perish. Everything is lost, every hope is gone, every consolation is dead.⁴⁰

Sannazaro at the end of his work writes an apocalypse into Arcadian space. Although the classics cast occasional doubt on the viability of the pastoral world *qua* world, here, Sannazaro, crumples it up and throws it away. All is dead. Leopardi, who discovers a fundamental *Weltschmerz* hiding under the literary games of this 15th century humanist poet, would have us take Sannazaro's words here at face value.⁴¹

7. The Shepherd's Wandering/Error in "Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia"

The itinerary of this paper has traced the development of Leopardi's use of pastoral poetry and pastoral conventions across his *Canti*, highlighting above all Leopardi's varied choice of pastoral models, from the original ancient Greek and Latin exemplars, to more recent imitations (whether more or less faithful) of those classics. As has been shown, much of Leopardi's poetic work refers to the writings of others, through citation, revision, use of key words, or in reference to stereotyped scenarios. Later in his career, Leopardi changes the way that he makes poetry, adopting simpler language and sentences and almost entirely eliminating citations, in search for a more direct and more frankly philosophical poetic voice.⁴²

A prime example of this purified later poetry is "Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia" ("Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia"), written between October 1829 and April 1830. The poem deals with pastoral subject matter, but it is hardly pastoral from a generic perspective. The matter the poem treats—a shepherd and his herd, the pristine plains where the sheep graze, the moon and the stars in the sky to which the shepherd sings—certainly bespeaks the pastoral genre; however, there is nothing in the mood of this poem that makes one think of pastoral. There are no references to Arcadia, no typical love themes (whether requited or not) no evocations of classical poets or ancient myth. There are no other characters, save the sole shepherd. There is no sense whatsoever of "idyllic" nature; the shepherd lives in the countryside but he does not find himself at one with it, nor does he view his surroundings as beautiful or brimming with life. He is alone, on a bare plain, conversing with the moon.

The language, as stated, is not at all classicizing. There is little in it that would make us think of ancient pastoral poetry.⁴³ Apart from the occasional rhyming couplet *ritornellos* in this poem—which some critics claim recall certain cadences in pastoral poetry—there is nothing to recall Theocritus, Bion, Moschus or Virgil, or any Neo-Latin or vernacular pastorals more current to Leopardi's time.⁴⁴ In fact, the only traceable influence on this poem is a passage in an 1826 academic article about Kyrgyz shepherds of Bukhara, who apparently sang sad songs to the moon at night.⁴⁵ The shepherd-narrator's words are simple, his grammar straightforward and closer to spoken language than that of much of Leopardi's other poems. The shepherd's utterances are stripped down, but not simple; there is something universal

⁴⁰ Sannazaro, p. 143. Translation is mine.

⁴¹ And here I paraphrase Corti, who says Leopardi has "il potere di far leggere alcuni testi del Sannazaro in una chiave nova e sorprendente," and thus discovers in Sannazaro the "tristezza del vivere, quel richiamo dei sogni vani, che affiora sotto il letteratissimo gioco del quattrocentesco poeta umanista" (Corti, 'Passero solitario in Arcadia', pp. 23-24).

⁴² Bigi, p. 166.

⁴³ Bigi calls the style "sulla tradizione arcadico-preromantica, ma assolutamente privo di ogni effetto tenero o pittoresco" (Bigi, p. 135).

⁴⁴ Those rhyming couplets are considered by some to be a possible echo of Virgil's eighth eclogue, or of *epithymion*, a rhyme artifice used by the Greeks (Mario Martelli, 'Influenza della metrica classica nella poesia leopardiana', in *Leopardi e il mondo antico: atti del V convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani*. [Florence: Olschki, 1982], pp. 493-96).

⁴⁵ The article that Leopardi read and cited in his *Zibaldone*, is the "Voyage d'Orebourg à Boukhara," by Baron Meyendorff, from the *Journal des Savants* in September 1826. Leopardi was impressed by Meyendorff's account of Kyrgyz shepherds who pass the night observing the moon and improvising sad songs. "Plusieurs d'entre eux (d'entre les Kirkis), dice M. de Meyendorff, ib., passent la nuit assis sur une pierre à regarder la lune, et à improviser des paroles assez tristes sur des airs qui ne le sont pas moins" (Leopardi, 'Giacomo Leopardi's *Zibaldone*: A Digital Research Platform' 4399,4. 3. Ottobre. 1828).

about what he says.⁴⁶

This style is at least in part a product of Leopardi's more recent thinking about the origins and purpose of lyric poetry. In 1826 he writes in his *Zibaldone* that lyric poetry is the "first born" of all literary genres ("primogenito di tutti"), and is thus the purest ("vera e pura poesia in tutta la sua estensione"). It is a form available to all, even the primitive, who could "console himself with song and with measured words in whatever way" ("consolarsi col canto, e colle parole misurate in qualunque modo").⁴⁷

"Canto notturno thus begins simply, primitively, a direct address to the moon by the "errant shepherd" that the title suggests:

Che fai tu, luna, in ciel? Dimmi, che fai,
 silenziosa luna?
 Sorgi la sera, e vai,
 contemplando i deserti; indi ti posi.
 Ancor non sei tu paga
 di riandare i sempiterni calli?
 [...]
 Dimmi, o luna: a che vale
 al pastor la sua vita,
 la vostra vita a voi? dimmi: ove tende
 questo vagar mio breve,
 il tuo corso immortale?

What are you doing, moon, in the sky? Tell me what are you doing?
 Silent moon?
 You rise in the evening, and you go,
 contemplating the deserts: where you set.
 Are you not yet finished
 traveling these eternal roads?
 [...]
 Tell me, what worth
 is the shepherd's life to him,
 or your life to you? tell me, where
 does my brief wandering aim for,
 or your immortal track?
 (1-6, 16-20, translation mine)

No shepherd in pastoral has ever been so curious about his existence. In classical poetry shepherds never ask what their life means, much less do they express any melancholy that is not motivated by some external event. But in Leopardi's rendition, the shepherd thinks of his life as a matter of worth ("che vale") and destination ("ove tende"); in other words, he thinks of existence in terms of limits, of boundaries. These boundaries—it bears mentioning—extend

⁴⁶ Bigi says that the bare lines achieve an effect neither primitive or popular, but elementary and universal ("non primitivo o popolare ma elementare ed universale") (Bigi, p. 136).

⁴⁷ Leopardi, 'Giacomo Leopardi's *Zibaldone: A Digital Research Platform*' 4234, 15. Dic. 1826.

far beyond the boundaries traditional in pastoral: the edge of the pasture, the limits of the city, the shoreline. For example, in a fragment by Moschus (which Leopardi translated at age eighteen) the shepherd is at first “stirred” by the vastness of the ocean; however when the “waves rage high” he anxiously turns his gaze back to the land: “grateful to me is the earth, and pleasant the shady wood.”⁴⁸ This classic pastoral shepherd will not gaze or venture beyond his limited surroundings, at least not for long. Leopardi writes of a different shepherd here, who regards the stars high in the sky and asks what purpose they serve: “E quando miro in cielo arder le stelle; Dico fra me pensando: / a che tante facelle?” (“and when I gaze at the stars afire in the sky, I say, thinking to myself: / to what end all these torches?”) (85-86). The shepherd here peers deep into the infinite – perhaps afraid as he does so, but also unwilling to resign himself to the comfort of boundaries.

The shepherd’s contemplation of limits and bounds is not gratuitous, for in the second stanza he describes the life of man as a journey that finishes at the abyss we call death (the most terrifying of limits). The “white-haired and sick old man” (“vecchierel bianco, infermo”) struggles over the mountains and rivers of life, in all weather and always moving faster (“più e più s’affretta, / senza posa o ristoro”) until finally he arrives at that “horrible and immense abyss / where he, falling, forgets everything” (“abisso orrido, immenso, / ov’ei precipitando, il tutto obblia”) (21, 35-36). Leopardi succinctly summarizes this vignette from the second stanza with a killing rhyming couplet: “vergin luna, tale / è la vita mortale” (“virgin moon, such / is the life of mortals”) (37-38).

If life is struggle and death a terrifying unknown, one would hope for at least some kind of companionship to give solace to the suffering soul. However Leopardi’s shepherd recognizes that he is completely alone. The moon is indifferent to his plight: “But you are not mortal, / and perhaps care little for what I say” (“Ma tu mortal non sei, / e forse del mio dir poco ti cale”), the shepherd says to the moon (59-60). Likewise his sheep seem blindly indifferent to the fact that they and the shepherd share any suffering in common due to their animal ignorance: “Oh my herd at rest, how happy you are / that you don’t know (I think) your misery! / How much I envy you!” (“O greggia mia che posi, oh te beata, / che la miseria tua, credo, non sai! / Quanta invidia di porto!”) (105-07).

The final stanza suggests a possibility the shepherd could in some way transcend his actual situation, but that possibility seems doomed from the outset. He could be happier if he “had wings / to fly above the clouds, / and number the stars one by one, / or like the thunder, wander from mountain pass to mountain pass” (“s’avessi io l’ale / da volar su le nubi, / e noverar le stelle ad una ad una / o come il tuono errar di giogo in giogo”) (133-35). But the shepherd recognizes that all this is just wishful speculation. The shepherd describes such fantastic thinking as a wandering (“errar”) from an awful truth (“forse erra dal vero, [...] il mio pensiero”), which is that “the day of our birth is fatal” (“è funesto a chi nasce il dì natale”) (139-43).

Pastoral poetry is marked by wandering. The Latin verb “erro, -are,” is used often in Virgil’s *Eclogues*. Sheep and cows “err” through pastures (1.9, 2.21, 6.40), ivy “errs” up the side of a wall (6.61), and people “err” among the hillsides (6.52). At some point between Virgil and Leopardi, the word “to err” acquired a new, negative meaning: to stray from the truth, to make a mistake. In “Canto notturno” Leopardi exploits both meanings. “Error” is of tantamount importance to the poem in question. The poem’s title describes the shepherd as “errante,” “wandering,” however as the poem approaches its end the meaning of that word shifts from physical wandering to mental wandering, and thereby straying from the truth. When he wishes to be like the thunder encompassing the mountain ranges, he describes that movement as “errar,” an external kind of movement across borders that echoes the shepherd’s own wandering attention and thought. To err like thunder would in some way be liberating, but the ultimate problem is that the shepherd is locked out from that kind of wandering. His mind may move, but his body cleaves to the land. And thus, as the shepherd says, his mind “errs from the truth” (“erra dal vero”), and in so doing lays bare the unfortunate limitations of the pastoral, as both a poetic genre, poetic space, and poetic possibility. There is no escape. While millennia of poets have found relief

⁴⁸ *The Greek Bucolic Poets.*, trans. by A.S.F. Gow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 142.

in the pretense of pastoral space, using it to describe some dramatized, “elsewhere” where they can escape—at least temporarily—the suffering of everyday life, Leopardi finds it a trap—our erring is limited to this little pasture, this sad little hill covered with grazing sheep. The shepherd’s mind in this poem is a wandering and wondering one, and in this speculation, he finds himself straying from the “vero,” the truth of the limits set on a life. Disabused of the conventions of traditional pastoral, the shepherd—and by extension Leopardi—sees only what stares him back in the face, the fact that “è funesto a chi nasce il dì natale.” Our birth is our funeral.