



Evil: A History

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Leopardi

“Everything Is Evil”

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Abstract and Keywords

Giacomo Leopardi, a major Italian poet of the nineteenth century, was also an expert in evil to whom Schopenhauer referred as a “spiritual brother.” Leopardi wrote: “Everything is evil. That is to say, everything that is, is evil; that each thing exists is an evil; each thing exists only for an evil end; existence is an evil.” These and other thoughts are collected in the *Zibaldone*, a massive collage of heterogeneous writings published posthumously. Leopardi’s pessimism assumes a polished form in his literary writings, such as *Dialogue between Nature and an Islander* (1824)—an invective against nature and the suffering of creatures within it. In his last lyric, *Broom, or the flower of the desert* (1836), Leopardi points to the redeeming power of poetry and to human solidarity as placing at least temporary limits on the scope of evil.

Keywords: Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, pessimism, natural evil

On April 22nd 1826, Giacomo Leopardi wrote in his notebook:

Everything is evil. That is to say, everything that is, is evil; that each thing exists is an evil; each thing exists only for an evil end; existence is an evil and made for evil; the end of the universe is evil; the order and the state, the laws, the natural development of the universe are nothing but evil, and they are directed to nothing other than evil.¹

The notebooks in which Leopardi collected this and other thoughts became the *Zibaldone*, a massive collection of heterogeneous writings, spanning art and philology, etymological theories, and philosophy. It is not a diary; it is rather a nineteenth-century version of Montaigne's *Essays*.

Leopardi, like Montaigne, used his "book" to test different ideas and theories. Unlike (p.351) (p.352) Montaigne, however, he does not look for a friend nor for a publisher. His project is a solitary one. It was published only post mortem, in 1889-1900, which was more than half a century after the death of its author.² In the English-speaking world, the first complete translation of this epic, multilingual 4,000-plus page tome appeared more than a century later.

"Everything is evil," says Leopardi. But who was he?

Giacomo Leopardi was born in 1798 in Recanati, a small town in the Papal States which he both hated and inhabited for most of his life. He died in Naples in 1837. He is not only one of the major Italian poets and philosophers of his century, but he is a major figure of nineteenth-century Europe as well. The great pessimist Schopenhauer referred to him as a "spiritual brother";³ Nietzsche numbered him among four "very strange and truly poetic human beings in this century," the "masters of prose."⁴



Figure 8 Domenico Morelli
Giacomo Leopardi (1845)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giacomo_Leopardi_Morelli.jpg

“Everything is evil,” Leopardi writes. And he is a *connoisseur*. Vivacious and happy in childhood, he was made wretched from the age of sixteen by a form of tuberculosis affecting the bones. Ironically—and tragically—he was convinced that he caused his disease: “I ruined myself with seven years of mad and most desperate study (*studio matto e disperatissimo*).”⁵ However, his pessimism cannot be solely traced to his personal misfortunes; rather, it develops from theoretical assumptions concerning the condition of all sentient beings.

(p.353) Leopardi’s pessimism can be divided into two stages: a first, more moderate stage of historical pessimism, and a second, more radical one, on which I will focus here. In this later phase, suffering is conceived as intrinsic to existence. There is no possibility of avoiding suffering because nature itself is evil, and we are part of nature. We suffer because the world constantly frustrates our desires:

Nature has given us this need [for happiness] without the possibility of satisfying it, without even having put happiness in the world.⁶

Such extreme pessimism gets a polished expression in many of his literary and poetic works. I will consider here the *operetta morale: Dialogue between Nature and an Islander* (1824).

The idea behind *Dialogue* is that all living creatures suffer, without thus promoting the happiness of other creatures. This thought dates from a few years before, when Leopardi wrote in the *Zibaldone* (well before Darwin):⁷

in order to account for the accidental difficulties that occur in the system of nature . . . [nature] included them in its great order and arranged them in accordance with its ends. Nature is the most benign mother of the whole, and also of the particular genera and species that are contained in it, but not of individuals.⁸

If in this passage from the *Zibaldone* there is the possibility of a bigger scheme of things, the possibility of conceiving Nature **(p.354)** as a loving mother, in the *Dialogue* this possibility is dead. The protagonist is a traveling Icelander in search of peace. He aims at living a quiet life, which need not be a happy life. To this purpose, he decides to limit all social interactions, since he realizes that these tend to create troubles. Although Iceland suits the seeker of solitude, it is an inhospitable land: the climate is extreme, and natural threats such as volcanos are abundant. Therefore, the Icelander sets himself en route, in the hopes of finding a better alternative. As if Nature, which created us, also created a place for us to rest. Unfortunately, his pilgrimage will prove the contrary.⁹

Ultimately he arrives in a remote region of Africa, where he meets Nature herself, embodied in an enormous woman. The scene is sublime: “her face as

beautiful as it was terrifying.” Having realized that there is no place suited to any earthly creature, the Icelander accuses Nature:

I am bound to conclude that you are a manifest enemy of men, and of all the other animals, and of all your own creatures . . . Either by habit or rule, you are the slaughterer of your own family and of your own children and, as it were, of your own flesh and blood. Therefore, I have no more hope.¹⁰

Nature is our mother, but she is not a loving mother as in the passage quoted from *Zibaldone*; rather, she is an evil stepmother (*matrigna*). In response to this confrontation, Nature is impassive and explains that in her economy of creation, the anguish of human beings is not even considered:

(p.355)

When I harm you in any way and with whatever means, I don't notice it, except very rarely . . . Finally, even if I happened to wipe out your entire species, I wouldn't notice it. (*E finalmente, se anche mi avvenisse di estinguere tutta la vostra specie, io non me ne avvedrei.*)¹¹

However, the Icelander continues to accuse her:

Then it is not your duty, if not to keep me happy and satisfied in this kingdom of yours, at least to see to it that I am not tormented and tortured and that living in it is not harmful to me? And what I say about myself, I am also saying about the entire human race, about the other animals, and about all living creatures.¹²

Nature does not provide any real answers to the questions of the poor Icelander, whose ensuing death is doubly ironic and tragic. The narrator proposes two different endings. In the first ending, the Icelander gets eaten by two starving lions. In the second ending, he gets mummified by the wind and subsequently found and exhibited in some museum in Europe.

The Icelander accuses Nature herself, personified as a woman, considering her accountable for the suffering of all creatures. It is this personification that allows for an assignation of moral responsibility which is generally absent from “natural evils.”¹³ Nature herself is our host, but she behaves treacherously.¹⁴

(p.356) “Everything is evil.” However, before dying, Leopardi offers us a remnant of hope in *Broom, or the flower of the desert* (*La ginestra o, il fiore del deserto*) from 1836. From the acceptance of the inevitability of evil and the recognition of its true source a poetic illusion can arise which helps us live and offers a message of solidarity with our “human family.”

The broom is a beautiful flower that grows on the mountainside of the volcano Vesuvius, symbol of our evil *matrigna*:

Here on the dry flank
of this terrifying mountain,
Vesuvius the destroyer,
which no other tree or flower brightens,
you spread your solitary thickets,
scented broom,
at home in the desert (*contenta dei deserti*). And I've seen your
shoots
embellishing the lonely plain¹⁵

As the philosopher Emanuele Severino has pointed out, the broom symbolizes the poet, and the fragrance his verses.¹⁶ The desert is a place of suffering; however, the broom is at home there, because the desert becomes the subject of poetry and poetry helps us live in this inhospitable world. Leopardi anticipates Nietzsche in pointing to the indispensability of the illusion of art and poetry for human life.¹⁷

(p.357) The recognition of evil and of its true source generates also a sense of solidarity between people, which arises when “man” stops blaming himself

but assigns responsibility
to the truly guilty: she who is
mother of mortals when she gives us birth,
stepmother when she rules us (*Madre di parto e di voler matrigna*)
Her he calls his enemy.¹⁸

The same conclusion is reached both by the traveling Icelander and by Leopardi himself: Nature is guilty, and her creatures are the victims—the latter should therefore be forgiven. A few years before, on January 2, 1829, Giacomo Leopardi wrote in his notebook:

My philosophy, not only does not lead to misanthropy, as might seem to anyone who looks at it superficially, and as many accuse it of doing, but by its nature it excludes misanthropy . . . My philosophy makes nature guilty of everything, and by exonerating humanity altogether, it redirects the hatred, or at least the complaint, to the higher principle, the true origin of the ills of living beings, etc. etc.¹⁹

In the end, Leopardi suggests, perhaps not *everything* is evil.

Notes:

(1) Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. Michael Caesar and Franco D’Intino, trans. Kathleen Baldwin, Richard Dixon, David Gibbons, Ann Goldstein, Gerard Slowey, Martin Thom, and Pamela Williams (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013),

[4174] 1822. Here and below I cite the page number of the original manuscript in brackets, and then the page number from this translation.

(2) Giacomo Leopardi, *Pensieri di varia filosofia e di bella letteratura*, ed. Giosue Carducci. (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1898).

(3) For an early comparison of the thought of the two, see: Francesco De Sanctis, "Schopenhauer e Leopardi," *Rivista contemporanea*, anno VI, vol. XV, fasc. 61 (Torino, 1858): 369-408.

(4) The other three being "Prosper Merimee, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walter Savage Landor the author of *Imaginary Conversations*," Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), §92, 145-146.

(5) Giacomo Leopardi's letter to Pietro Giordani on March 2nd, 1818, in: Prospero Viviani, *Epistolario di Giacomo Leopardi* (Napoli: Presso Giuseppe Marghieri, 1860) 76. For more biographical details, from which some of this was taken, see: Pietro Citati, *Leopardi* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2010).

(6) Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [4517], 2064.

(7) This connection was first pointed out by Leopardi scholar Mario Fubini, in: Giacomo Leopardi, *Operette morali*, ed. Mario Fubini (Firenze: Vallecchi Editore, 1955) 155.

(8) Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [1531], 712.

(9) Baudelaire expresses a similar thought in "Any where out of this world," a little prose poem in the *Paris Spleen* collection. In this text, the poet compares humans to patients in a hospital who constantly complain to change their beds. Like the Icelander, they do not realize that changing location won't help. Charles Baudelaire, *Le Spleen de Paris: Petits poèmes en prose* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).

(10) Giacomo Leopardi, *Operette morali*, trans. Giovanni Cecchetti (Oakland: University of California Press, 1983) 194-195.

(11) Leopardi, *Operette morali*, 194-197.

(12) Leopardi, *Operette morali*, 198-199.

(13) A similar personification, in which the moon is conceived as a young woman speaking for Nature, is present in the poem: *Night Song of a Wondering Shepherd in Asia* in Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans. Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2011). This poem is relevant as another expression of Leopardi's deep pessimism, but, for reasons of space, I cannot discuss it here.

(14) For Dante, treachery is the worst of all sins. Betraying the trust of a guest is particularly condemnable because of the asymmetric relation between host and guest: the latter is inevitably vulnerable. See Eleonore Stump's Reflection on Dante in the present volume.

(15) Leopardi, *Canti*, "La ginestra," v. 286-7, 1-7.

(16) Emanuele Severino, *Il nulla e la poesia* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1990) Ch. XII.

(17) Severino, *Il nulla e la poesia*, 343. Leopardi's (and Nietzsche's) conception of art is far from Schopenhauer's because the former does not conceive art as truthful and as giving us the means to negate the will to live, but on the contrary as an illusion that helps us live.

(18) Leopardi, *Canti*, "La ginestra," v. 122-126, 294-295.

(19) Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [4428], 1997.

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