

Tragedy, Futility, Labyrinths and Romance:  
some brief insights into Italian poetry and  
literature through the eyes of Foscolo,  
Leopardi, Eco and Manzoni.

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An examination of the life of Ugo Foscolo could only lead one to the conclusion that his poetry was but a representation of the passion, restlessness and despair which reigned over his daily existence. Being born to an Italian father and a Greek mother on the Greek island of Zante in 1778, Foscolo's earliest experiences seemed to have foreshadowed the life he was to lead. His later insecurities are traceable to the diversity of his familial background, the lack of a singular and secure sense of cultural identity and the political turmoil of the time in which he lived, which repeatedly forced him into a life as an exile.

This sense of rootless-ness and lack of security in his day to day life seems to have been the ongoing torment and disappointment of his entire existence. Thus, the inability to find some vestige of cultural identity in his own past and a homeland to call his own made it more necessary for him to seek joy and meaning in life's present moment. It is this attitude which has caused many scholars to categorize Foscolo as an existentialist, being that his life became an ongoing adventure in the pursuit of love and constant intrigue. Having no foundation upon which to stand, Foscolo sought fulfillment through the pursuance of pleasure, but he was ever restless and unsatiated. He was ever the pessimist and the wanderer.

Of the sonnets which he wrote, there are not many that do not resound of a deep sense of worry, restlessness and endless thinking. A good example of this thinking process is captured in his first sonnet, Alla Sera, which, by its fragmentation of thought with the use of enjambement, immediately places the reader in a meditative mood:

Forse perché della fatal quiete  
tu sei l'immagine a me sì cara vieni  
O Sera!

The "forse" expresses Foscolo's own questioning mind, which forever seems to be caught in the process of thinking. Yet, this continuity of thought is directly at odds with his utter expression of nihilism, his lack of belief in the continuation of man after life, or after thought. It is this thought process, this never ending worry, which is his only refuge from this apprehension of nothingness and this lack of identity, but it is also the main reason for his unending despair and disquietude. This is at the heart of his torment. Thus, we are examining a man at odds with himself, in a personal conflict, whose inquiry into life's meaning achieves its fruition through his poetry, but it is this very inquiry which is continually fostering his misery. Therefore, the root of Foscolo's joy and his misery are one and the same thing, and it is only he who has the power to come to terms with himself. In the same sonnet:

Vagar mi fai co'miei pensier sul'orme  
che vanno al nulla eterno, e intanto fugge

questo reo tempo, e van con lui le torme  
delle cure onde meco egli si strugge,  
e mentre io guardo la tua pace, dorme  
quello spirto guerrier ch'entro mi rugge.

The contemplation of the eternity of "Evening" puts to rest, temporarily, his warlike spirit and he knows that the uselessness of his worry shall, in the end, pass into nothingness.

His own perception that his talent and his search might bring him fame, but will never give him peace, is beautifully rendered in sonnet #7:

talor di lingua, e spesso di man prode;  
mesto i più giorni e solo, ognor pensoso,  
pronto, iracundo, inquieto, tenace:  
di vizi ricco e di virtù, do lode  
alla ragion, ma corro ove al cor piace:  
morte sol mi darà fama e riposo.

It is death alone which brings peace, and his desire for peace also conveys a desire for death, but he is unable to achieve it:

conosco il meglio ed al peggior mi appiglio,  
e so invocar e non darmi la morte.

While Foscolo is recognized as an existentialist, the Dei Sepolchri is an interesting departure for him into the past. It is not his polemic against the Napoleonic laws which seizes our attention, but

his apology for the bard of time, the poet, which is the theme. It is his being a poet, like Homer before him, which has become his identity, or his "family", as it were. Finding solace in time is, for him, to find solace in the past, which has always eluded him:

E me che i tempi ed il desio d'onore  
fan per diversa gente ir fuggitivo,  
me ad evocar gli eroi chiamin le Muse  
del mortale pensiero animatrici.

Giacomo Leopardi, although usually considered to be Foscolo's successor in Romantic poetry, could not have had a more different background. Unlike Foscolo, he was raised as a noble within the firm structure of the aristocracy, and while Foscolo desired to find himself through some sort of heritage, Leopardi wanted to liberate himself from the umbilical cord which tied him to his family. Evidently his extensive study habits as a child severely injured his spine and weakened his eyesight, but this was also the reason for his precocious intellect (John Heath-Stubbs, Poems from Giacomo Leopardi). These physical drawbacks made him extremely bitter and more susceptible to illness throughout his life.

In contrast to Foscolo, who had pursued the pleasure of the moment, Leopardi avoided the pain of the present by escaping into his dreams of love and freedom. What quickly comes across from Leopardi's Canti is his deep aura of loneliness. It seems that the ultimate frustration of his life was his physical deformity, but it was his own condemnation of this condition and of his own character

which brought about the real tragedy. The inability to accept himself was at the root of his agony. The loneliness which pervades his poetry is accentuated by an inability to forgive himself for being a cripple. In canto #23 he describes himself thus:

Vecchierel bianco, infermo  
mezzo vestito e scalzo,  
con gravissimo fascio in su le spalle, . . .

. . . corre via, corre, anela,  
varca torrenti e stagni,  
cade, risorge, e pi e pi s'affretta,  
senza posa o ristoro,  
lacerato, sanguinoso . . .

He perceives his life to be one long struggle: endless and dark. The present day, the present hour, were to be despised, for they brought only pain to him. Only in his dreams and in his thoughts was he able to achieve a capacity for escape and pleasure. From canto #23 Leopardi describes his view of life:

Questo io conosco e sento,  
che degli eterni giri,  
che dell'esser mio frale,  
qualche bene o contento  
avrà fors'altri; a me la vita è male.

When reading the Canti, one comes to realize that Leopardi

was much more emotionally handicapped from his condition than physically disabled. Although, indeed, he must have suffered great physical pain and must have been gradually weakened from his ongoing plight, the emotional turmoil which he endured seems to have been primarily induced by his own inability to come to terms with himself. Life eventually became one long hardship, reaching a degree of disappointment which he, himself, would continue to project. Thus, even when it was possible for him to fall in love, by some twist of fate it, too, became yet another affirmation of his essential worthlessness.

In A Silvia Leopardi loses a girl whom he probably had never even spoken to, but who, after her tragic death, represented in his imaginative mind his own youth, lost forever, dying before it could ever flourish:

Tu pria che l'erbe inaridisse il verno,  
da chiuso morbo combattuta e vinta,  
perivi, o tenerella. E non vedevi  
il fior degli anni tuoi; . . .

O natura, o natura,  
perchè non rendi poi  
quel che prometti allor? perchè di tanto  
inganni I figli tuoi?

Ultimately, he met with complete emotional defeat. He resigned himself to the bleakness of his life, to the travail of his journey and to a weary heart. Having accepted this defeat, whether through

unrequited love, or self-condemnation, the struggle was now over:

Or poserai per sempre,  
stanco mio cor. Però l'inganno estremo,  
ch'eterno io mi credei. Però. Ben sento,  
in noi di cari inganni,  
non che la speme, il desiderio è spento.  
Posa per sempre . . .  
. . . Amaro e noia  
la vita, altro mai nulla; e fango è il mondo.  
T'acqueta omai. Dispera  
l'ultima volta. Al gener nostro il fato  
non don che il morire . . .

Both Leopardi and Foscolo had a deep apprehension of tragedy in life and an insight into the eventual futility of man's struggle. Yet, they both perceived man's ultimate defeat as his basic heroism. Through their personal pain and emotional torment, they have projected nobility upon the lives they led. They have become martyrs to eternity, and though they might have lived in agony, their pain became the joy in the knowledge that they would, after all, be remembered for the works that their suffering engendered.

It is said that Umberto Eco's book, Il nome della rosa, is a semiotic novel and a lesson on the interpretations of signs. In his novel the monastery is apparently intended to represent a labyrinth, which Eco is said to have borrowed from Jorge Borges famous book of the same

name. This novel is not simply a murder investigation led by a medieval Sherlock Holmes and his dedicated sidekick, Adso, but a metaphysical orientation within God's universe. The monastery is a symbol of that medieval universe which, upon entering, one would find tremendously difficult to exit without some appropriate direction, or sign. Guglielmo asserts the importance of signs, and Eco his semiotics, near the end of the novel:

Non ho mai dubitato della verità dei segni,  
Adso, sono la sola cosa di cui l'uomo  
dispone per orientarsi nel mondo.

Yet, in this same passage Guglielmo refuses to receive praise from Adso for having discovered the murderer of the monks in the monastery. The reason he gives is that he had stumbled upon Jorge, the murderer, by pure chance, using no design, but only a series of random threads from which he accidentally had discovered the culprit:

Sono arrivato a Jorge inseguendo il disegno  
di una mente perversa e raziocinante, e non  
v'era alcun disegno...

Mi sono comportato da ostinato, inseguendo  
una parvenza di ordine, quando dovevo sapere  
bene che non vi è un ordine nell'universo.

Is this Eco's argument that these signs, directions, or semiotics, are



mere conventions created by man to grope his way through the dark labyrinth of the cosmos? When Guglielmo discovered the murderer, it appeared to Adso that he had done so intentionally. But when Guglielmo came upon the answer by chance, he realized that the universe was a little more chaotic than he would like to have believed. This event, therefore, made it very difficult for him to accept the concept of a universe without order, because that also intimated the possibility of one existing without God:

*È difficile accettare l'idea che non vi può essere un ordine nell'universo, perché offenderebbe la libera volontà di Dio e la sua onnipotenza. Così la libertà di Dio e la nostra condanna, o almeno la condanna della nostra superbia.*

Guglielmo's only refuge is to surrender all doubt and reason to an unquestioned faith in the will of God, and this is a conclusion which both soothes his disappointment and halts further inquiry into the possibility of a chaotic universe. The novel ends with the mysterious phrase: *stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus*. In translation this states that the pristine rose exists only in its name. This would seem to answer the question that was posed earlier: whether or not signs, and even names, are mere conventions, or sign posts in this vast cosmos. The rose is a rose only because we have categorized it as such. Without its name, does it exist? Adso writes his account of the adventure with Guglielmo at the end of his life and he concludes that he no longer believes that there is a God of glory or of joy, nor even of piety: "Gott ist ein lautes Nichts, ihn

ruhrt kein Nun noch Hier."

God is a loud nothing. Like the rose, God is pristine only in his name, which is assigned to him by the conventions of man. But the real God, or the real rose, is un-nameable. The force of God cannot be represented by convention, nor can one represent the beauty of a rose. The unknowable force of the universe is immeasurable and unclassifiable. Thus, signs, or semiotics, are merely precepts and do not lead one to truth. This awe in the unknowable comes to Adso only at the end of his life, but in time for him to prepare to meet this *silenzio muto*, with a peaceful heart.

Alessandro Manzoni was a contemporary of both Ugo Foscolo and Giacomo Leopardi and he is also considered a part of the Romantic literary movement. Yet, his work, I Promessi Sposi, contains none of their famous pessimism. The main difference was his unshakeable faith in God. While Foscolo and Leopardi perceived man as essentially alone in the world and burdened by the forces of nature and fate, Manzoni believed that all of the problems of man would be resolved by God. His novel was written in the common language of the people and, in doing this, Manzoni broke with the tradition that saw Italian literature as only a tool for the intellectual. He wrote in the Florentine dialect, because he considered it the best standard from which Italy could unify its language and, by doing this, he basically helped to invent modern Italian literature.

I Promessi Sposi concerns a bet made by a Don Rodrigo for a girl named Lucia Mondella. This bet requires that Lucia's impending marriage with Renzo Tramaglino be stopped. Soon thereafter, two bodyguards of Don Rodrigo are sent to threaten the curate in charge

of the wedding, Don Abbondio, with death if he performs the ceremony. The remaining passages detail the comical adventures of Don Abbondio, who tries to avoid getting killed by the bodyguards, as well as elude Renzo's inquiries as to why he will not perform the marriage ceremony. Manzoni's writing style is very sarcastic and ironic throughout the story and it is difficult to understand how he could ever have been considered a member of the same literary movement as Foscolo and Leopardi.

Don Abbondio is a coward who, although also being a pastor, seems to have none of the spiritual faith of the others from his profession that God will protect him. He is strictly practical:

Ma fin da' primi suoi anni, aveva dovuto comprendere  
che la peggior condizione, a que' tempi, era quella  
d'un animale senza artigli e senza zanne, e che pur  
non si sentisse inclinazione d'esser divorato.

Abbondio appears to be more concerned with man-made laws than with those of God:

La forza legale non pretegeva in alcun conto l'uomo  
tranquillo, inoffensivo, e che non avesse altri mezzi  
di far paura altrui.

When Renzo confronts him and asks for an explanation, Abbondio simply mutters words in Latin in order to confuse the young man. It is only when the Cardinal confronts him that he is

forced to explain his long delay in marrying Lucia to Renzo. During this dialogue with the Cardinal, Abbondio is politely avoiding the issue and praying that the Cardinal will not press him for an explanation, but when he is ordered to do so, he complies.

The Cardinal cannot believe that a man of God could be so intimidated by a threat to his life, especially if he has faith in God:

E quando vi siete presentato alla chiesa . . . per  
addossarvi codesto ministero, v'ha essa fatto  
sicurit  della vita?

. . . Quello da Cui abbiam la dottrina e l'esempio,  
ad imitazione di Cui ci lasciam nominare e ci  
nominiamo pastori, venendo in terra a esercitarne  
l'ufizio, mise forse per condizione d'aver salva la vita?

Abbondio verbally admits that he is wrong, but thinks privately:

. . . gli stanno pi  cuore gli amori  
di due giovani, che le vita d'un povero sacerdote.

Manzoni has created a very humorous character in the guise of Don Abbondio. He is a curate who, being more concerned with daily problems and daily life than with anything spiritual, does his best to impede the happiness of a young couple for the sake of his own safety. He is self-centered and governed by practicality, but bears no demeanor of mercy or faith. What was Manzoni's intention in

fashioning such a character? He uses Abbondio as a foil for his humor, an object for ridicule and an example to avoid. Was it to ridicule organized religion, or simply to demonstrate to the public that its clergy was as flawed as any other man-made institution?

As a romantic writer, Manzoni certainly differs from his two contemporaries. While Foscolo and Leopardi were concerned with the problems issuing from their active minds, Manzoni appears to have suffered much less and seems to have been more interested in the problems and affairs of humanity in general and not just his own worries. Thus, the works of Foscolo and Leopardi come across as more personal than those on Manzoni, because they are more introspective, but Manzoni was far more accessible to the public because he made his language simple to understand and he was able to find humor and irony in life, not merely tragedy.