

“To the Church with Manzoni . . . With Leopardi to War!”<sup>1</sup>

By Gianfranco Sanguinetti

Translated by Bill Brown\*

If the complete emancipation from the yoke of the conventions and ideologies of an epoch must be regarded as the principal sign of a powerful originality and a universal genius, able to make itself understood by posterity, then Leopardi<sup>2</sup> was, without a doubt, by far the greatest thinker that Italy has had in the last two centuries. No doubt several Italians have heard of him, but perhaps due to a kind of unavowed shame at not having recognized him outright, the authorized critics have to date kept themselves from affirming it publicly.<sup>3</sup>

The splendor of this originality, the genius of this man who merits being included in the heritage of all humanity, and who should bring glory to his country, and the grand independence of his historical and political thought produce an irruption in the current epoch – largely anesthetized by its misfortunes and hypnotized by the spectacle of the happiness that is on sale everywhere – with the freshness of a completely classic modernity and the force of a frankness and a seriousness to which we are not at all accustomed.

If our contemporaries are able to face Leopardi’s “incontestable and inconvenient” (G. Colli) truths with virility, this *Massacre of the Illusions* will be precious nourishment for them. Because Leopardi, who came from no philosophical school of thought and bypassed all systems that were in vogue at the time, is restored to us by the vengeance of the times as the most modern and most current of the thinkers of his century – his rediscovery proves it – and, in any case, worthy of a glory that is finally suitable for him.

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<sup>1</sup> Written as a publicity flier for Giacomo Leopardi, *Le Massacre Des Illusions*, Editions Allia, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Giacomo Taldegardo Francesco di Sales Saverio Pietro Leopardi (1798-1837).

<sup>3</sup> *Author’s note*: Representative of the completely ideological chagrin caused by Leopardi’s thought is the judgment made in 1923 by Benedetto Croce, the most celebrated Italian philosopher: “In verse and prose, he mocks the faith in the new century, the incessant growth and enlargement of the human spirit and progress, and he mocks the liberalism and the attempts at reform and change, and the economic and social-science studies, and modern philosophy” (B. Croce, *Poesia a non poesia*, Boria, 1923; also cited by C. Galimberti in his dense essay “Sommo poeta e sommo filosofo,” published in *50, rue de Varence*, Paris, March 1989.)

Leopardi escaped the tragic destiny that befell Machiavelli, Marx and Nietzsche, in the name of whom and against whom innumerable falsifications and massacres have been perpetrated by their [respective] fanatics, their dishonest and ignorant partisans and enemies: Jesuits, Stalinists and Nazis. One has been contented to include Leopardi among the poets, which was more reassuring, and he was thus more or less neglected – if not ignored outright – as a philosopher. This mutilation has limited the importance of Leopardi’s work and the knowledge that the world could have of it, due to the difficulties of translating his poetry. Posterity has had its reasons for acting in this fashion. On the one hand, Leopardi’s thought does not at all lend itself to any “ideological” usage, unlike that of Machiavelli, Marx and Nietzsche. On the other hand, the ingratitude of the Italians for their last great thinker, if it proves *a contrario* that they have largely merited not being saved by him, has not been due to simple pettiness. It has, instead, been a *vendetta*. They have indeed sensed that Leopardi understood them and their vices too well for them to pardon him.<sup>4</sup> His thought, unusable ideologically, has thus remained unused and, finally, little and badly known.

Leopardi elevates himself to a territory, a heroic, solitary and inviolable fortress, that no army could conquer or subject to its interests or its pleasures: he reaches a black hole in the firmament of Italian thought where a number of traveling salesmen of Catholic or Marxist illusions get lost. *Zibaldone*, his “pastiche” of observations, reflections and thoughts, his extremely rich mine of truths (as Montaigne would say), was completely ignored in his century; it was almost lost because Ranieri, Leopardi’s friend, who died before he could publish it, left the manuscript to his two housekeepers.

In the course of the century and a half that followed the death of its author, *Zibaldone* was only published in a complete edition three times. Neglected in Italy, *Zibaldone* risked experiencing the same fate abroad. This would have been serious, especially in France, which had greatly contributed to Leopardi’s fortunes, thanks to Sainte-Beuve’s publication of his famous essay of 1844 in which the global importance of Leopardi was affirmed even before it was recognized in Italy, as well as the publication of the note by Carlo Dionisotti, the great historian of Italian literature.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, in 1860, Marc Monnier recognized in Leopardi “a man so diverse that he doesn’t seem to be a single person but the synthesis of all of

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<sup>4</sup> *Author’s note*: cf. the very important text, *Discours sur l’état des coutumes des Italiens*, which will soon be published by Editions Allia in a translation by Michel Orcel. It is in this discourse that the expression “massacre of the illusions” appears.

<sup>5</sup> *Author’s note*: Carlo Dionisotti, *Appunti sui Moderni*, Bologna, 1988. [Translator: born in Turin in 1908, Dionisotti taught at Oxford and Bedford College from 1947 to 1970. He died in 1998.]

humanity”; and he added that Leopardi was as perfect in his ease of expression as Voltaire, as trenchant in his denunciations as Paul-Louis Courier, as perfect a Hellenist as André Chénier, a poet as impassioned and impetuous as Lord Byron, but endowed with greater vitality in the fervor of his hatred and love than the author of *Don Juan*, more serious than Voltaire, possessed of a deeper classic sentiment than Chénier and a higher nobility of invective than [Byron,] the satirist of the Restoration. And Monnier concluded with this eloquent chiasmus: “To the church with Manzoni . . . and with Leopardi to war!”<sup>6</sup>

Since the silence surrounding Leopardi, accompanied by a confused murmuring and approximate information, have not spared France, Editions Allia – after publishing *Pensées*, and *Petites oeuvres morales* – proposes *La Massacre des illusions*, a volume dedicated to Leopardi’s historical-political reflections. With this work, we inaugurate the complete thematic edition of *Zibaldone*, an immense philosophical journal, a fifteen-year-long uninterrupted dialogue between the author and himself. This edition will be world’s first complete translation.

When he was alive, the author felt the necessity of creating a thematic index to his work, with the idea of making a “Philosophical Dictionary.” This index would have allowed the reader to not get lost in the labyrinth of this immense storehouse of thoughts, to which he contributed day after day. The criteria that we<sup>7</sup> will follow will thus not be in opposition to the intention of the author, and will render his work’s richness and complexity more accessible. After this thematic edition, we will offer a chronological edition of *Zibaldone*, which will show Leopardi’s thought in its very [process of] generation and the synchronic deployment of his many interests.

The 4,526 pages of handwritten manuscript, housed at the National Library of Naples, were written between 1817 and 1832. We will publish them before 1998, which marks the bicentennial of Leopardi’s birth. We would like to put at the disposition of French readers, in a very short period of time, that which the vicissitudes of a century of publishing have until now deprived them of.

\* All footnotes by the translator, except where indicated.

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<sup>6</sup> *Author’s note*: Marc Monnier, *L’Italie est-elle la terre des morts?* Paris, 1860.

<sup>7</sup> Edition established by Mario Andrea Rigoni and translated from the Italian into French by Joel Gayraud.