

Speaking about infinity without recourse to fragments: Leopardi's *L'infinito* as a challenge to the sublime ellipsis.

It is a peculiarity of Leopardi's 1819 *L'infinito* that it contains not a single fragmentary utterance, but is instead composed of four complete sentences. This is striking not only because poetry as we think of it in the modern sense is a fragmentary discourse – a style that began with the very Romantics who were Leopardi's contemporaries. It is even more striking in a poem about infinity, particularly when the poem itself appears at first glance to be structured in list form. Such a repetitive structure in the construction of infinity is consistent with the procedure of the mathematical sublime, which in the hands of the Romantics and Enlightenment thinkers on the subject is linguistically managed with the fragment and the ellipsis, the traditionally appropriate tools for articulation of the ineffable. Indeed the breakdown of discourse in the face of something much greater than oneself is both a commonplace and a crucial philosophical and religious notion that humanity will naturally be frustrated in its attempts to reach – linguistically – the divinity or greatness of which it feels itself a part and to which it feels entitled. That the Romantics and Enlightenment thinkers fairly quickly overcome their fragmentary humility and repair the broken links in the chain of being, recovering language, internal equilibrium, and harmony with the external world, tells us that the fragment is generally also used as a temporary measure on the way to a successful reach toward the supernatural.

What, then, do we make of Leopardi's refusal of the fragment even at the height of necessity? One hesitates to say what a poem is *about*; more accurate might be to examine what the poem *does*, how it manages imagery and concepts that have long traditions and specific associations, restating that tradition or perhaps, as I will argue in this paper, acting out its impossibility and its undoing.

Leopardi's subversive turn in poetry is evident in the very title of this poem, *L'infinito*, which 'naturally' (that is to say, culturally) triggers an association with a spiritual or rarified element, but which I see instead as unavoidably tied to the poem's closing image of the "*mare*." In accordance with the double-edged concept of infinity as

spatial and temporal, I draw attention to both and to their eventual unity. A spatial reading of the poem illuminates a circular structure (the infinity of the title eventually identified with the “*mare*”), while in the succession of its component parts, and their gradual metamorphosis of one into the next – or better, the successive absorption of parts into the material whole of the sea (of which parts the poet is one) – we have a linear concept of time (from “*mi fu*” to “*m’è*” – from it *was* to me to it *is* to me). At the close of the poem, time is synonymous not only with space but with material extension, and Leopardi has given us the image of a material universe precisely as he appears to offer relief from that very determinism.

In order to demonstrate as briefly as possible Leopardi’s subversive use of Romantic and Classical topoi, I will limit my analysis to three key moments of *L’infinito*, drawing only on others as necessary: the first verbal crux (“*sempre...mi fu*,” for which there remains the problem of English translation from the historical past), the transformation of wind into tidal wave that washes over the poet, and the drowning/shipwreck of the final verses. At issue is a reconsideration of Leopardi’s materialism – usually pushed back to the late 1820s, once he begins, in the *Zibaldone*, to meditate upon the problem of order versus disorder or combination and recombination in nature within the contexts of evolution and chemistry. I am suggesting that there can be no such periodisation of Leopardian poetics, and also that the *Zibaldone* and the *Canti* may not comment upon each other in the strictest sense.

I argue that *L’infinito* as a poem is not *about* a remembrance (“*quest’ermocolle*” – this solitary hill), nor memory in general. It is not about the lost natural world, nor lost childhood, the poet’s own or that of humanity in general. It rather *begins* with these things, takes them as premises, but soon, after verse three – anticipated in the first verse, as I will suggest in my reading – moves us into a conception of infinity, nature, and poetry proper to the modern aesthetic of the revealed universe. I agree with Guido Guglielmi’s point in his 2000 *L’infinito Terreno* that for Leopardi the arrival of modernity is an “*eventostorico*” (an historical *event*), and therefore by definition irreversible. It is irreversible even in that imaginative space of poetry where supposedly anything is

possible, or at least where everything *used to be* possible.¹ Were poetry still that alternative, a-historical pastoral space, there would be no need for the death in the end, nor would the poem open with that dramatic past tense generally used to refer to one no longer living.

What I propose is that the idea of fragmented discourse as representative of the fragmented reality and psyche of the modern requires the distinctly *non-Leopardian* – because anthropocentric – point of departure. The poet in *L'infinito* does experience a rupture, even what I would call a death of the self – first anticipated and then fully acted out – but that rupture is not mirrored in the syntax of the poem. The sentence structure of *L'infinito* acts out instead a unity that belongs to the external, natural world rather than the ultimate unity of human intellectual activity with principles of eternity and extension or, its Classical version, the unity of the human subject with surrounding reality.²

Inadequately explained by Epicurean or Lucretian materialism, Leopardian material infinity is instead consistent with the geological notion of 'deep time' first proposed by James Hutton in a 1788 speech before the Royal Society. Hutton's reading of the volcanic rocks at Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh found "no vestige of a beginning, no prospect for an end," thus irrevocably tying the traditionally supernatural principle of infinity to the slow – potentially unending – accumulation of natural phenomena. Uniformitarian geology, eventually distilled into this concept of deep, or layered, time, refuted the catastrophist narrative of the earth's history (consistent with Biblical chronology), and was unique amongst the sciences of the period in offering an infinite universe without restating the continuity of the human subject with that infinity, except in terms of pure matter, divested of all traces of character or uniqueness. This materialist version of discontinuity is clearly established in the first four lines of *L'infinito*, and its

¹Cf. *Discorso intorno alla poesia romantica*.

²It is true that in the end we have the poem – an inescapably human product – in front of us; it is, however, also true that the poem's closing 'shipwreck of the self' gives this product an independent existence, acting out what is until this point merely anticipated: the undoing of the centrality of the human subject in a necessarily hierarchical universe. It is further true of this poem what is true of Leopardi in general: that to whatever extent one reading may furnish the required poetic artefacts (natural or rhetorical), another reading will undo interpretive stability and show instead a shift of meaning. Furthermore, within the poem the poet appears to refer to the creative activity of poetic composition ("*ionel pensier mi fingo*"), though I read this according to a different framework: Newton's "*Hypotheses non fingo*."

version of material continuity subsequently established in the last lines. My interpretation builds a connection between this early 1819 text and the late poem of circa 1836, *La Ginestra*, by reading the first as part of Leopardi's lifelong challenge to Romantic ideals of nature, subjectivity, and the notion that survives to this day: nature as mirror and sanction of Western socio-cultural models and ideologies of progress. As I will show in my brief treatment of the apparently tautological reflexive "*mi fingo*," deep timeframes a long-standing problem in Leopardi criticism: the relationship, or supposed incompatibility, between illusion and truth in poetry, as Leopardi himself discusses in the 1818 *Discorso intorno alla poesia romantica* [*Discourse on romantic poetry*].

I begin my analysis with the grammatical crux of the opening verse, its paradoxical association of the time of the "*sempre*" with the remote past of the self and that self's affectionate, emphatically *private*, relationship to the hill inherent in "*Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermocolle*." The Romantic sublime requires this kind of death of the self, or at least a rupture of its integrity – often referred to as a sublime fission, in which one stands over oneself, aware of one's own awareness, contemplating one's own cognitive processes as though they were taking place externally. The difference here, and that which creates an organic, essential link between the opening and closing verses of *L'infinito*, is that during the poem Leopardi resolutely does *not* stand over and above himself, mapping his own consciousness (cognitive process, or memory), but instead submits entirely to the movement *away* from himself, the progression and result of which are determined by elements encountered in his exploration of the universe and not by the poet's mental activity. This constant movement away from the self is specifically figured as a movement *away* from one of the most important identifying factors of a Romantic sublime poem: the personalised, natural space in which takes place the whole process of breakdown and recovery (and even acquisition of a higher self). With the rupturing *passatore* motif of "*mi fu*" as well as the "*ma*" that follows the first two lines we dramatically leave behind the – presumably childhood – self and its hedge-framed space of the "*ermocolle*," to which the poem pointedly never returns.

There is much critical disagreement about the significance of the verbal construction of the opening line, though an attentive grammatical analysis has, to my knowledge, not yet been done. In my dissertation I do such an analysis contrasting the

“*sempre...mi fu*” of Leopardi’s opening verse with Proust’s (not coincidentally) opening sentence in *À la recherche du Temps perdu*: “*Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure.*” I will here limit my observation to the connection – or rather, disconnection – between the “*fu*” of this first line and the “*è*” of the last. My reading differs considerably from Margaret Brose’s analysis of *L’infinito*, which draws out the connection between the two instances of the verb ‘to be’ and what she argues is their link to the images of hill and sea, brought together through the memory of the childhood feeling of eternity. In this reading, the ambiguous “*mi sovviene*” reasserts the presence of the poet and the workings of his mind as central to the construction of meaning or to the substance of the poem, precisely where I feel that this presence is instead most fully denied.

For Brose, the opening “*mi fu*” as an absence, will be rectified with the closing “*m’è*” restating subjective presence. “This reappropriation,” she writes,

is only possible by means of the memory (*rimembranza*) of a childhood illusion which, despatialised and detemporalised, metaleptically returns *inviolata*.³

“*Returns inviolata*” – as though a contained, framed, pointedly finite space, the temporal coordinates of which are before and after (as appropriate to memory), were equal to the fluid, unbounded, impersonal space of a kind of ‘*pelago*’ (open sea). ‘*Pelago*’: the space in which the epic adventurer and Italian poet traditionally drown, and which lies *beyond* time, neither before nor after, is, after all, what is implied by the combination of *naufragio* (shipwreck) and *mare* in the final verse.

Both because of its reflexive form and because of the tradition of the term *fingere* as meaning ‘to feign,’ “*ionelpensier mi fingo*” (“I create in my mind, or with my thoughts”) of the following lines implies precisely this Romantic formulation of the sublime as a function as result of the creative and constructive power of mind:

sedendo e mirando, interminati
spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani

³Margaret Brose, “Leopardi’s *L’infinito* and the language of the Romantic sublime” *Poetics Today* Vol.4, No.1 (1983), p.48.

*silenzi, e profondissima quiete
io nel pensier mi fingo...*

The term “*fingo*” is fraught with contradictory, or at least apparently mutually exclusive, readings. It is generally taken to mean, ‘to invent,’ to imagine in the modern understanding of the word – that is, to create something in one’s mind that does not exist in the external world: to *feign*. This returns us to the common idea of poetry as pure *menzogna* (fiction, lie), or disengaged in the Crocean sense. However, in reading “*mi fingo*,” one must keep in mind Leopardi’s notion of poetry as a transposition of nature *into* the poem through the medium of imagination, the *imprinting* faculty. Here we encounter a difficulty in *L’infinito*, however, for as pointed out earlier, within the first few verses the poet moves *away* from the natural setting immediately before him, apparently constructing the poem on the basis of things *not* seen and pointedly inaccessible to the senses. It is precisely this structure, however, that gives the use of sensory impressions in relation to their transfiguration by the imagination common ground with the late eighteenth-century notion of deep time. Deep time relies upon the cooperation between sensory objects and the capacity of the observer to extrapolate from the visible in order to situate the objects in meaningful interplay, eventually arriving at the image of a total working system that is itself not visible and barely, if at all, comprehensible. The dynamic relationship between visibility and invisibility is then intrinsic to the nature of deep time, whether understood in a cosmological or a geological context.

‘*Fingere*’ therefore comprehends both the sensory and extra-sensory components of deep time and poetic objects, and indicates, as well, the wholly physical nature of poetic speech, which is conveyed not only in terms of surface imagery, but also by a complex allusion in the following verses to two episodes of Dante’s *Commedia*.

*...E come il vento
odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello
infinito silenzio a questa voce
vo comparando...*

The first allusion in these lines is to the episode of Pier delleVigne in the wood of the suicides in canto thirteen of the *Inferno*. The second is the quintessentially Dantesque gerund, “*vocomparando*” (literally, *I go comparing*) unmistakable in its twisted echo of Dante’s “*vosignificando*” in canto XXIV of *Purgatorio*:

*I' mi son un che, quando
Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo
ch'è ditta dentro vo significando* [xxiv.52-5].

For considerations of time I will limit my analysis to the first allusion, which has the effect of linking the Leopardian “*voce*” to the natural laws of necessity that apply to delleVigne’s bloody and windy speech, stripped of that which had made it noble according to Dante’s own categorisation: the intellectual component, or that which unites dispersed physical bodies into a coherent, *metaphysical* entity (the language of natural law or poetry⁴). According to the logic of infernal punishment, DelleVigne’s speech has now been reduced to a bloody sputtering, speech caused not by the movement of his own will but by either the Harpies that eternally inflict wounds on his branches (limbs), reopening them as they heal, or, in this case, by Dante’s plucking of one of those branches.

In case we are inclined to miss or underestimate the importance of the allusion, Leopardi makes a characteristically Dantean gesture by placing the allusive words, “*vento*” and “*voce*,” in rhyming position, which in the *Inferno* are instead found as follows:

*Allor soffiò quel tronco forte, e poi
si convertì quel vento in cotal voce* [xiii.91-2]

Similarly unrarified, Leopardi’s *vento* gathers power not through the *poet*, thus not through the movement of desire or will but independently of – or better, *in spite of* him. The poem builds as the wind draws into itself “*l’eterno, e le mortestagioni, e la presente e*

⁴Cf. *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. For Dante, the metaphysical, intellectual aspect applies only to poetry of a certain kind: generally speaking, the poetry of praise of his *Vita Nuova*, or, again his own, that which is famously indicated in *Purgatorio* xxiv: “*I' mi son un che, quando / Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo / ch'è ditta dentro, vosignificando...*” [vs. 52-54].

viva, e 'l suon di lei" (it seems reasonable to read the "*suon di lei*" as the spring sound of wind storming through the plants from a few verses before), eventually forming a tidal wave, which is the poem itself and which eventually drowns the poet's thought ("*mi sovvien*," I read, therefore as "*mi sopravviene*" – *it comes over me*, to render it as literally as possible). This, of course, appears to furnish the required sublime moment of breakdown or loss of language, and we may expect anellipsis or fragment, but grammatical integrity is maintained precisely because it is now a product of nature in the fullest Leopardian sense: utterly indifferent to the human.

If the Leopardian *vento* is real in the sense of its being a product of nature (which is itself distinctly infinite here: "*l'eterno*"), there is also another long-standing poetic topos at work that increases the materiality even of the spaces of poetic flight: air equals water. For, again continuing with the analogical structure of "*comparando*," air is the *same as* water. The synthesis of air and water within the context of prohibition against unaided navigation in either (or, since they are materially identical in *L'infinito*, in both) and the threat, or actual punishment, of drowning has an important precedent in two episodes in particular of Dante's *Inferno*. The first is the flight of Geryon in cantoXVII and the second the navigation of Ulysses in cantoXXVI, both of which are, in turn, grounded in the Ovidian myths of Icarus and Phaëthon.⁵

We know from the Ovidian stories of Icarus and Phaëthon, as well as from Dante's version of the fate of Odysseus, that one should venture into neither air nor water for two main reasons: doing so indicates arrogance and folly, and both are spaces in which, as Hans Blumenberg puts it in *Shipwreck with Spectator*, "the reliability of the cosmos becomes questionable."⁶One may venture *occasionally* out to sea, during the "favourable season," as Blumenberg reminds us is the case in Hesiod's advice to Perses in *Works and Days*, but not during the "uncertain conditions of spring"⁷ (*L'infinito* takes

⁵In a further identification of flight and sea navigation in the *Commedia* (of which there are, in fact, many), *Paradiso* XXXIII figures the beginning of human civilisation as Neptune's observation of the sailing Argo on the surface of the water, a navigation that, from the bottom of the sea, looks like a flight. For the analogy, I am indebted to John Freccero, who frequently made this observation during his graduate seminars on Dante's *Commedia*.

⁶Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), p.8.

⁷*Ibid.*, p.9.

place precisely in that season of unfavourable navigational conditions: the “*stagion[e]...presente e viva*”). We know that Leopardi’s voyage into the cosmos ends in the same way as do these stories, with a drowning. The idea of inevitability, however, is not restricted to the final shipwreck, but also includes the voyage itself. This would be something along the lines of a more modern idea of seafaring, in which there is no choice but to leave the harbour (or the “*ermocolle*”) in the sense that life itself is the sea voyage, death its inevitable end, and as such cannot be chosen.

L’infinito thus works in accordance with Romantic philosophy to a point by denying the Lucretian or Epicurean possibility for existential fullness in abstinence from the exercise of the faculties. The divergence from Romanticism lies in the *result* of that exercise, of the fullness of experience and refinement of the faculties, which for Leopardi is the very same shipwreck that Ulysses experienced at the hand of Dante – death, in other words, as the inevitable result of attempting to surpass the limits of human comprehension, or in this case, human relevance. In the end, just where we expect flight and a general feeling of lightness, we have instead a gradual lowering of the perspective, a heaviness that we should have found in the beginning of the poem with the weight of memory, the sense of one’s own finitude, from which the sublime process is meant to be a liberation. However, the plenitude that we find there, in verse fifteen, is not that of the self projected into, I quote Brose, a “*remembrance of eternity*”⁸ that characterises the child’s apprehension of the future as limitless possibility, but rather the only kind of plenitude applicable to human beings: that which comes at the close of life, when the restless vacillation, or dialectic, between past and future that characterises life will resolve itself into the *true* present (“*m’è*”) that characterises death. Unity, harmony of the poem’s disparate selves, times, spaces, movements, is achieved only in the death/shipwreck of verse fifteen in which all tensions are dissolved into that quintessential material infinity, the “*mare*.”

English text of Leopardi’s *L’infinito* (from 2010 translation by Jonathan Galassi)

⁸Ibid.

Infinity

*This lonely hill was always dear to me,
 and this hedgerow, which cuts off the view
 of so much of the last horizon.
 But sitting here and gazing, I can see
 beyond, in my mind's eye, unending spaces, and superhuman silences, and
 depthless calm,
 till what I feel
 is almost fear. And when I hear
 the wind stir in these branches, I begin
 comparing that endless stillness with this noise:
 and the eternal comes to mind,
 and the dead seasons, and the present
 living one, and how it sounds.
 So my mind sinks in this immensity:
 and foundering is sweet in such a sea.*

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