

Fleetingness and Flânerie: Leopardi, Baudelaire and the Experience of Transience.

La soif insatiable de tout ce qui est au delà, et qui révèle la vie, est la preuve la plus vivante de notre immortalité. C'est à la fois par la poésie et à *travers* la poésie, par et à *travers* la musique que l'âme entrevoit les splendeurs situées derrière le tombeau; et quand un poème exquis amène les larmes au bord des yeux, ces larmes ne sont pas la preuve d'un excès de jouissance, elles sont bien plutôt le témoignage d'une mélancolie irritée, d'une postulation des nerfs, d'une nature exilée dans l'imparfait et qui voudrait s'emparer immédiatement, sur cette terre même, d'un paradis révélé.

Baudelaire, *Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Poe* (1857)

La funzione del poeta sarebbe quella di non aver funzione, ossia di non adeguarsi ad un sistema che funziona, con le sue pale e ingranaggi.

Marco Lucchesi, interview

[<http://musibrasil.net/articolo.php?id=199>, retrieved 25/11/2010]

In his 1757 *Essai sur le goût*, Montesquieu notes: that our notion of pleasure is a cultural matter ([les] plaisirs [...] sont fondés sur les plis et les préjugés que de certaines institutions, de certains usages, de certaines habitudes lui [à notre âme] ont fait prendre", Montesquieu 1823:160) and that surprise is a determining factor in the elicitation of pleasure: "[la surprise] [...] plaît à l'âme par le spectacle et par *la promptitude de l'action*; car elle aperçoit ou sent une chose qu'elle n'attend pas, ou d'une manière qu'elle n'attendoit pas" (179).¹ Both points are intimately linked with time-bound experiences: the temporary duration and therefore changeability of customs, and the sudden, instant and swift experience of shock.

In the introductory remarks of Friedrich Schlegel's *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, written about 40 years later, the issue of the temporary nature of aesthetic values resurfaces, both in the sense of their transitory quality and the shock of the new. Schlegel laments the lack of "harmony", "completion" and "whole[ness]" in modern poetry: due to a succession of transient, and therefore failing, aesthetic experiences:

Public taste [...] or, rather, the caricature of public taste, *fashion* [original italics], pays homage *with every passing moment* to a new false idol. Each new splendid appearance inspires the confident belief that now the goal – ultimate beauty – has been attained and that, accordingly, the fundamental law of taste, the ultimate measure of all works of art has been found. All so that the next moment can put an

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all italics in the quotations are mine.

end to the *giddiness*, so that those who have come to their sense can destroy the image of the mortal idol, and in a new affected intoxication enshrine another in its place whose divinity *will not last longer than the mood* of its own worshipers! (Schlegel 2001:19)

The mutability of customs, the shock of surprise, and fashion are concepts dependent upon each other. The existence of fashion (even in art) is indeed ensured by the constant mutability of public taste deriving from, first, the emergence of, and, then, the habituation to, surprises in the form of commodities, and of new material or intellectual objects. Once surprise has settled into habituation, a new shock is needed to start the process all over again. As Patriarca notes (2008:58) were fashion to reach its goal, and succeed in uniformising collective taste, it would kill its own principle: self-perpetuation through the shock of new distractions, whose adoption becomes, at the same time, a mark of social distinction. Significantly Balzac in his *Traité de la vie elegante*, and Leopardi in the *Discorso sullo stato presente dei costumi degli italiani* both note that fashion is a privilege of those who do not have to work to earn a living, namely the nobles and rich.

The aim of this contribution is to analyse the centrality of the experience of transience in modern culture (of which fashion has become the quintessence) as it emerges from Leopardi's planned journal *Spettatore fiorentino*, and Baudelaire's essays on Poe, and the *Peintre de la vie moderne*. These texts incorporate the sense of the fragmentedness of existence, memory as a prosthesis of the self, and a piece of relic or a ruin (resulting from the repetition of death associated with life experiences), art as fashion, and fashion as death in life.

German Romanticism both sealed the notion of aesthetic relativism and acknowledged the domain of subjectivity in art. Despite Leopardi's scant knowledge of German authors, of Schlegel and Schiller among others, he held similar views on the relative and subjective nature of art (above all in the *Zibaldone*, and, of the many examples elsewhere, suffice it to quote the third chapter of *Il Parini, ovvero della gloria*).² While Leopardi's views converged on many points with a relative and subjective conception of art, it was his full emancipation from the notion that the aim of art should go beyond the strictly aesthetic that placed him on the threshold of modernity. As highlighted by Claudio Colaiacomo (in Rafele 2010:4), this threshold, characterised by the complete theoretical interiorization of the notion of mutability, will be codified later by Charles Baudelaire.

The idea of the journal *Spettatore fiorentino* originated from the financial constraints in which Leopardi found himself in 1831, on the expiry of the one-year subvention offered to him by his Florentine friends in 1830. By then, Leopardi, who had decided to throw in his lot with that of the young Neapolitan patriot Antonio Ranieri, found himself pressurised by the need to obtain a

² For the relationship between Leopardi and Schlegel, see in particular Musarra (2000).

regular income. In choosing to launch a journal, Leopardi gives the appearance of trying his hand with a booming and fashionable genre. Yet his preamble announces a journal *sui generis*, that restates, rather than relegates, his own pessimism. Its programme is in clear opposition to the social and progressive concerns of the *Antologia*, and in line with the sardonic, if not derisory tone of previous publications (the *Preambolo alle annotazioni* and some of the *Operette*). Significantly, Leopardi's project of the *Spettatore fiorentino* is introduced through a series of negations that carve a void around the contents of the journal, and the professional profile of its editors:

non sono letterati, [...] Non sono filosofi; non conoscono [...] nessuna scienza; non amano la politica, nè la statistica, nè l'economia pubblica o privata. Come essi non sono nulla, così è molto difficile a definire che cosa debba essere il loro Giornale. Essi medesimi non lo sanno [...] Non si trova altro che idee negative: Giornale non letterario, non filosofico, non politico, non storico, non di mode, non d'arti e mestieri, non d'invenzioni e scoperte [...] un'idea positiva, e una parola che dica tutto, non viene. [...] Se in italiano si avesse una parola che significasse quello che in francese si direbbe le flâneur, quella parola appunto sarebbe stata il titolo sospirato; perchè [...] il mestiere de' futuri compilatori del nostro Giornale, è quello che si esprime col detto vocabolo francese (PP. ii:1011).³

Elsewhere, in the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi had alluded to the insight and the “colpo d'occhio” that are the distinguishing skills of the true poet-philosopher allowing, him to grasp in an epiphanic instant the sense and meaning of the whole.⁴ Yet these skills did not lead in his opinion to “un'idea positiva, e una parola che dica tutto”, an all-encompassing *constructive* idea. Rather they define the capacity of grasping a general and overarching truth that may be, but is more likely not to be, flattering for man. The following *Zibaldone* passage seems to me to redefine the distinctly Leopardian notion of the ‘all encompassing idea’ in polemic with the type of scholars (literati, philosophers, scientists, politicians, and economists) he ironically refers to in the preamble of the *Spettatore fiorentino*, and to whom he opposes the figure of the flâneur:

d'un sol colpo d'occhio discernendo e mirando una moltitudine di oggetti, [...] egli [poeta, filosofo, uomo d'immaginativa e di sentimento] è in grado di scorgere con essi i loro rapporti scambievoli, e per la novità di quella moltitudine di oggetti tutti insieme rappresentantisegli, egli è attirato e a considerare, benchè rapidam., i detti oggetti meglio che per l'innanzi non avea fatto, e ch'egli non suole; e a voler guardare e notare i detti rapporti. Ond'è ch'egli ed abbia in quel momento una straordinaria facoltà di generalizzare [...], e ch'egli l'adoperi; e adoperandola scuopra di quelle verità generali e perciò veramente grandi e importanti, che indarno fuor di quel punto e di quella

³ All quotations from Leopardi's works, letters and the *Zibaldone* are from the Mondadori editions edited by Damiani and Rigoni (see bibliography). They are abbreviated as *PP.* and *Let.* followed by the volume number and page number, and respectively *Z.* followed by the number of the autograph page.

⁴ For example, see: *Z.* 1833-1839; 3245; 3271.

ispirazione [...] e furore o filosofico o passionato o poetico o altro, *indarno*, dico, *con lunghissime e pazientissime ed esattiss.^e ricerche, esperienze, confronti, studi, ragionamenti, meditazioni, esercizi della mente, dell'ingegno, della facoltà di pensare di riflettere di osservare di ragionare, indarno, ripeto*, non solo quel tal uomo o poeta o filosofo, ma *qualunqu'altro o poeta o ingegno qualunque o filosofo acutissimo e penetrantissimo, anzi pur molti filosofi insieme cospiranti, e i secoli stessi col successivo avanzamento dello spirito umano, cercherebbero di scoprire, o d'intendere, o di spiegare*, siccome colui, mirando a quella ispirazione, facilmente e perfettam. e pienam. fa a se stesso *in quel punto*, e di poi a se stesso ed agli altri, purch'ei sia capace di ben esprimere i propri concetti, ed abbia bene e chiaramente e distintam. presenti le cose allora concepite e sentite (Z. 3269-3271).

What does Leopardi describe here if not the activity of the flâneur, he who observes *en passant* (“discernendo e mirando”) a multiplicity of objects (“moltitudine di oggetti”) and captures their secrets in an instant-lasting epiphany (“d'un sol colpo d'occhio”, “rapidamente”, “in quel punto”)? It is not just the multitude of objects perceived as a whole that strikes as a novelty (“*per la novità di quella moltitudine di oggetti tutti insieme rappresentantise gli*”), but the single objects themselves that for the first time are apprehended in their mutual relations with one another (“egli è attirato e a considerare, benchè rapidamente, i detti oggetti meglio che per l'innanzi [...] e a voler guardare e notare i detti rapporti”). Thus, more than the professional philosopher who is perpetually analysing, and better than the poet absorbed by meditation, the flâneur, is the real poet-philosopher cherished by Leopardi, who recognises the underpinning pattern of reality, and intuits the substance of life at a glance.

In an early *Zibaldone* page, Leopardi had described the effect produced on the reader by the odes of Anacreon in similar terms. The rapidity of their impact derives from the apprehension of the text as a whole. Reading is a single piece of experience, which does not lend itself to analysis without destroying its poetic essence.

Io per esprimere l'effetto indefinibile che fanno in noi le odi di Anacreonte non so trovare similitudine ed esempio più adattato di un *alito passeggero* di venticello fresco nell'estate odorifero e ricreante, che *tutto in un momento* vi ristora in certo modo e v'apre come il respiro e il cuore con una certa allegria, ma *prima che voi possiate appagarvi pienamente di quel piacere, ovvero analizzarne la qualità, e distinguere perchè vi sentiate così refrigerato già quello spiro è passato*, conforme appunto avviene in Anacreonte, che e *quella sensazione indefinibile è quasi istantanea, e se volete analizzarla vi sfugge, non la sentite più*, tornate a leggere, vi restano in mano le parole sole e secche, *quell'arietta per così dire, è fuggita*, e appena vi potete ricordare in confuso la sensazione che v'hanno prodotta un momento fa quelle stesse parole che avete sotto gli occhi (Z. 30-31).

The fleeting pleasure of the poetic experience is as impossible to capture as a breeze; it leaves

behind nothing but relics (“le parole sole e secche”) and a feeling of irretrievable loss (“appena vi potete ricordare in confuso la sensazione che v’hanno prodotta un momento fa”).⁵ Leopardi’s notion of the flâneur coincides with his description of the “poeta, filosofo, uomo d’immaginativa e di sentimento” who is capable of grasping the sense of life in the same way as in the experience of reading Anacreon: “rapidamente”. After all, what is the apprehension of the whole if not the modern recognition that the essence of ultimate knowledge is impossible to capture, too overwhelming and deep for humans to encompass within their reason, and that apprehension brings with it the destruction of disciplinary barriers and the pointlessness of directing reason towards a specialized field, a discrete science? The editors of the *Spettatore fiorentino* “non sono nulla” because they are uncategorizable as either poets, philosophers or scientists. Like Filippo Ottonieri, Eleandro and Tristano, but also Saffo and the wandering shepherd, they aspire to the apprehension of the whole, namely the secret of the forever fleeting pleasure, which is the unreachable objective of human existence. The mystery of the universe which escapes human understanding ultimately coincides with the impossible fulfilment of human inborn and instinctual aspiration. Leopardi’s various *alter egos* are all flâneurs: they surrender to the seduction of the world spectacle, yet are kept from it by a feeling of estrangement deriving from its fleeting and ever provisional nature; they contemplate life as it unfolds in a series of plays of which they may pretend to be actors, but are ultimately mere observers and spectators – namely readers.

In his preamble to the *Spettatore fiorentino* Leopardi rejects the principle of positiveness (“un’idea positiva, e una parola che dica tutto”) because his journal transcends the fields of specific disciplines, as well as the pursuit of utility: “Noi non miriamo nè all’aumento dell’industria, nè al miglioramento degli ordini sociali, nè al perfezionamento dell’uomo. [...] Confessiamo schiettamente che il nostro Giornale non avrà nessuna utilità [...] Il nostro scopo [...] non è giovare al mondo, ma dilettere quei pochi che leggeranno” (PP. ii:1012). Here Leopardi reiterates a point repeatedly made in the *Zibaldone* and in a famous letter to Giordani of 24 July 1828:⁶ literature and

⁵ Extraordinary insightful readings of the experience of temporal discontinuity in Leopardi’s poetry have been conducted by Claudio Colaiacomo, to whom this study is largely indebted. See in particular the essays on *L’infinito* (pp. 23-48) and *La sera del dì di festa* (pp. 49-135) in *Camera obscura*, and “Conquista del tempo e testo nelle Ricordanze Leopardi”. For the ephemeral in modernity see also his essay “Post-etica rivoluzionaria”, and the conclusive analysis of *Il sogno* in “L’immagine romantica del canone”.

⁶ “[...] mi comincia a stomacare il superbo disprezzo che qui si professa di ogni bello e di ogni letteratura: massimamente che non mi entra poi nel cervello che la sommità del sapere umano stia nel saper la politica e la statistica. Anzi, considerando filosoficamente l’inutilità quasi perfetta degli studi fatti dall’età di Solone in poi per ottenere la perfezione degli stati civili e la felicità dei popoli, mi viene un poco da ridere di questo furore di calcoli e di arzigogoli politici e legislativi; e umilmente domando se la felicità de’ popoli si può dare senza la felicità degl’individui. I quali sono condannati alla infelicità dalla natura, e non dagli uomini né dal caso: e per conforto di questa infelicità inevitabile mi pare che vagliano sopra ogni cosa gli studi del bello, gli affetti, le immaginazioni, le illusioni. Così avviene che il dilettevole mi pare utile sopra tutti gli utili, e la letteratura utile più veramente e certamente di tutte queste discipline seccchissime” (*Let.*, 839).

poetry have no other aim but the elicitation of pleasure for its own sake. They are aesthetic, not ethic domains, alien from the clear-cut utility principle of institutionalised disciplines.⁷ The flâneur therefore embodies the condition of the poetry reader, who experiences the overwhelming emotions only poetry can raise. No matter how useless to the achievement of actual human pleasure, the flâneur disguises tears with consolation. Such a figure is therefore related to the theme of distraction and consolation that runs throughout the reflections in the *Zibaldone* on the role of poetry.

For Leopardi, human existence, driven by a life-long search for unattainable pleasure, is imbued with suffering. Therefore, from its very beginning existence is marked by its own limitation and end, death, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. By representing human experience, however, poetry enacts life in two ways: it re-lives a fragment of existence, however sad it may have been, and by doing so, it celebrates existence itself; it enacts a moment of life anew, that lasts for as long as the experience of reading. Poetry is generated by the recognition of finality, it is an experience of pleasure that begins from the acknowledgement of its own impossibility, it is a moment of life originating from death and returning to it. This re-enactment is consoling in itself, it is a way of celebrating life anew, but also an acknowledgement that it is dramatically limited. Since pleasure is as impossible as is the achievement of ultimate knowledge, life is surrounded by death. As Moroncini notes (2008:9-32), although we live life moment after moment, we ignore what it is, so that its narration becomes ‘a prosthesis of the self’ that suspends death the very moment it acknowledges it.⁸ Every piece of poetry is thus an elegy, a mourning song, as well as a hymn to life. As a reader of poetry, the flâneur is he who witnesses his own end; as a poet himself, he witnesses the mysteries of existence in order to become able to tell them in poetry. If from an empirical viewpoint life is fleeting – a death perennially re-enacted, – from a philosophical perspective it cannot be apprehended, its meaning slips away. This is what makes inutility the destiny of art, which is a record of existence legitimised by writing.

In his uncategorizable nature as a character who is capable of re-enacting the (non)sense of the prismatic world that he observes unfolding moment after moment, the flâneur is an incarnation of the modern man. This man is at once a witness of, and a spokesman for, fashion. This ambivalence that puts him both in and out of fashion creates an ambiguity, which permeates Leopardi’s entire preamble to the *Spettatore fiorentino*. Leopardi announces that the journal will contain fashionable

⁷ Already at page 3 of the *Zibaldone* Leopardi had noted: “L’utile non è il fine della poesia benchè questa possa giovare. E può anche il poeta mirare espressamente all’utile o ottenerlo (come forse avrà fatto Omero) senza che però l’utile sia il fine della poesia, come può l’agricoltore servirsi della scure a segar biade o altro senza che il segare sia il fine della scure. La poesia può esser utile indirettamente, come la scure può segare, ma l’utile non è il suo fine naturale, senza il quale essa non possa stare, come non può senza il dilettevole, imperocchè il dilettere è l’ufficio naturale della poesia”.

⁸ For the useless but pleasure-giving activities of literature and poetry see also Givone (1995:99-154).

and trendy rubrics:⁹ “spesso si daranno pareri intorno a libri nuovi [...] Anche si parlerà di teatri e di spettacoli; e si daranno traduzioni di cose recenti e poco note da diverse lingue” (PP. ii:1013). Most significantly, Leopardi invites subscriptions from the public of fashion par excellence, women. Yet he appeals to a female audience on account of their noble qualities of generosity and sensitivity, and at the same time eschews frivolity: “Sottoscrivano massimamente le donne; alle quali soprattutto cercheremo di soddisfare, *non per galanteria, che niente ci par più ridicolo che la galanteria messa a stampa*; ma perchè è verisimile che le donne, come meno severe, usino più degnazione alla nostra inutilità” (1012). So while Leopardi’s journal, by its very genre, seems to partake in the construction of the ephemeral – fashion – it simultaneously also denounces its flimsiness and fragile consistency. No wonder that, as the editor announces, its nature is ultimately tragi-comic:

Benchè proponghiamo di ridere molto, ci serbiamo però intera la facoltà di parlar sul serio: il che faremo forse altrettanto spesso, ma sempre ad oggetto e in maniera di dover dilettere, anco se si desse il caso di far piangere.

Perchè, per confessare il vero, l’inclinazione nostra sarebbe piuttosto di piangere che di ridere. Ma per non annoiare gli altri, ci attenghiamo a questo più che a quello, considerando che se il riso par che sia poco fortunato in questo secolo, il pianto fu e sarà sfortunatissimo in tutti i secoli. Ad ogni modo, forse si è riso già troppo in questo preambolo, quand’anche a qualche lettore il nostro riso paresse una sorta di pianto (1012-1013).

Folin observes that Leopardi’s is not the superior and admonishing smile of a moralist such as Democritus, but the melancholic smile of one who has discovered ultimate truth in universal relativity (1993:127-28). The nature of Leopardi’s journal suggests that the tragic mystery of death manifests itself in life also in the form of fashion, and that our only distraction and consolation, poetry, is yet as ephemeral and useless as fashion itself. Accordingly, the flâneur, as both a protagonist and an observer of life and fashion has a tragic message to convey. However, he compensates for it with laughter. Significantly, Leopardi notes in the *Zibaldone* that laughter befits tragedy, and that it shows in the face of someone who has deliberated on taking his life, in other words who is on his way to death:¹⁰

Ne’ pazzi i più malinconici e disperati, è naturaliss. e frequente un riso stupido e vuoto, [...]. Vi prenderanno per la mano con guardatura profondissima, e nel lasciarvi vi diranno *addio* [original

⁹ Leopardi’s addressees are clearly the ruling classes, the only ones, as Balzac noted almost contemporarily in his *Traité de la vie élégante*, who could afford to entertain themselves without having to work manually to earn their living.

¹⁰ One should remember that, on the point of taking his life, Brutus “maligno alle nere ombre sorride” (PP. i:30) while the speaking *I* of Leopardi’s *Ad Arimane* warns the divinity of evil that: “Pianto da me per certo Tu non avrai” (686).

italics] con un sorriso che parrà più disperato e più pazzo della stessa disperazione e pazzia. Cosa però notabiliss. anche nei savi ridotti alla intiera disperaz. della vita, e massimamente dopo concepita una risoluzione estrema, che li fa riposare appunto in questa estremità d'orrore, e li placa, [...] (Z. 188).

Laughter, moreover, transforms *passion* into *compassion* (Folin 1993:128), a feeling that Leopardi considers the noblest of humankind (“la compassione [...] è un miracolo della natura. [...] E perciò appunto gli uomini compassionevoli sono sì rari, e la pietà è posta [...] fra le qualità le più riguardevoli e distintive dell’uomo sensibile e virtuoso” Z. 108). Compassion also has for Leopardi a healing and soothing role: it consoles. Tragedy and laughter are bound together by compassion, perform a therapeutic function mediated by aesthetics, as Leopardi remarks repeatedly in the *Zibaldone*, and explicitly lays out in the famous pages of 4 October 1820, and 15 February 1828.¹¹ By saying that the work of genius is consoling because it kindles enthusiasm and enlivens the dejected spirit even when portraying death, Leopardi is defining what the work of art is for him: a moment of death brought back to life. Significantly Leopardi calls his works ‘relics’ (“qualche reliquia de’ miei sentimenti passati”), namely ruins that bear the mark of what life once was. Underpinning the preamble of the *Spettatore fiorentino* is the awareness that with it Leopardi was contributing to the production of the ephemeral not only by proposing the fashionable genre of journalism, but because the matter of the journal, poetry, was the celebration of the ephemeral itself. While recognizing the impossibility of fleeing the limit of death, which enters life as life unravels, Leopardi with his poetic journal is striving to perpetuate the fleeting moment, like the fresh breeze

¹¹ The two extracts read as follows: “Hanno questo di proprio le opere di genio, che quando anche rappresentino al vivo la nullità delle cose, quando anche dimostrino evidentemente e facciano sentire l’inevitabile infelicità della vita, quando anche esprimano le più terribili disperazioni, tuttavia ad un’anima grande che si trovi anche in uno stato di estremo abbattimento, disinganno, nullità, noia e scoraggiamento della vita, o nelle più acerbe e *mortifere* [original italics] disgrazie [...] servono sempre di consolazione, raccendono l’entusiasmo, e non trattando nè rappresentando altro che la morte, le rendono, almeno momentaneamente, quella vita che aveva perduta. E così quello che veduto nella realtà delle cose, accora e uccide l’anima, veduto nell’imitazione o in qualunque altro modo nelle opere di genio (come p.e. nella lirica che non è propriamente imitaz.), apre il cuore e ravviva. Tant’è, siccome l’autore che descriveva e sentiva così fortemente il vano delle illusioni, pur conservava un gran fondo d’illusione, e ne dava una gran prova, col descrivere così studiosamente la loro vanità [...] nello stesso modo il lettore quantunque disingannato, e per se stesso e per la lettura, pur è tratto dall’autore, in quello stesso inganno e illusione nascosta ne’ più intimi recessi dell’animo, ch’egli provava. E lo stesso conoscere l’irreparabile vanità e falsità di ogni bello e di ogni grande è una certa bellezza e grandezza che riempie l’anima, quando questa conoscenza si trova nelle opere di genio. E lo stesso spettacolo della nullità, è una cosa in queste opere, che par che ingrandisca l’anima del lettore, la innalzi, e la soddisfaccia di se stessa e della propria disperazione. (Gran cosa, e certa madre di piacere e di entusiasmo, e magistrale effetto della poesia, quando giunge a fare che il lettore acquisti maggior concetto di se, e delle sue disgrazie, e del suo stesso abbattimento e annichilamento di spirito). Oltracciò il sentimento del nulla, è il sentimento di una cosa morta e mortifera. Ma se questo sentimento è vivo, come nel caso ch’io dico, la sua vivacità prevale nell’animo del lettore alla nullità della cosa che fa sentire, e l’anima riceve vita (se non altro passeggiata) dalla stessa forza con cui sente la morte perpetua delle cose, e sua propria. Giacchè non è piccolo effetto della cognizione del gran nulla, nè poco penoso, l’indifferenza e insensibilità che inspira ordinarissimam. e deve naturalmente ispirare, sopra lo stesso nulla. Questa indifferenza e insensibilità è rimossa dalla detta lettura o contemplazione di una tal opera di genio: ella ci rende sensibili alla nullità delle cose, e questa è la principal cagione del fenomeno che ho detto” (Z. 259-261).

“Uno de’ maggiori frutti che io mi propongo e spero da’ miei versi, è che essi riscaldino la mia vecchiezza col calore della mia gioventù; è di assaporarli in quella età, e provar *qualche reliquia de’ miei sentimenti passati*, messa quivi entro, *per conservarla e darle durata*, quasi in deposito; è di commuover me stesso in rileggerli [...]” (Z. 4302).

deriving from the reading of Anacreon. Half a manifestation of the sad superficiality of modern times and half an expression of the deathly essence of the life celebrated in poetry, fashion is experienced by Leopardi in its fully dramatic ambivalence. His own *Canti* and *Operette morali*, the works from which he was expecting consolation in his elderly age, were ephemeral products, replications of the fleetingness of life experiences, yet capable of drawing suffering away through the illusory perpetuation of life (“conservarla e darle durata, quasi in deposito”) and the consoling power of poetry reading. Hence his appeal to perspective readers: “se nel gravissimo secolo decimonono [...] v’è ancora di quelli che *vogliono leggere per diletto, e per avere dalla lettura qualche piccola consolazione a grandi calamità*, questi tali sottoscrivano alla nostra impresa” (*PP.* ii:1012).¹²

Thus Leopardi places himself between fashion as consolation and death as fashion, challenging his audience to recognise the latter’s skeletal features not only in the decline of modern Italian society, but also between the lines of poetry itself. The flâneur is the survivor of epistemological and ontological failure, who disguises life’s deathly essence under the beautiful dress of both fashion and poetry. I could not find a more striking visual representation of Leopardi’s sense of the brotherhood between fashion and death, as stated in the *Dialogo della moda e della morte*,¹³ and implied in the Preamble to the *Spettatore fiorentino*, than Jacques Roubille’s frontispiece in a 1950 numbered edition of *Les fleurs du mal*.

Les fleurs du mal par Charles Baudelaire. Dix Illustrations en couleurs de Jacques Roubille.
Collections “Pastels”, Éditions du Panthéon, Paris, 1950. Exemplaire n. 1882.

¹² As noted by Claudio Colaiacomo (in Rafele 2010), we are still beyond the culturological view of money that will be observed in the developments of fashion first by Simmel at the end of the 19th century, and later on by Benjamin, into the estranging distraction derived from the “sex appeal of the inorganic”. Yet Leopardi, who enhances the high and noble nature of distraction in the form of poetic consolation, seems to sense its future evolution in an economic and monetary direction. And it is ironic that a journal dedicated to the pleasure of the inutility of poetry should end with a plain request for the material and monetary counterpart of the release of the journal, the subscription costs: “Il prezzo dell’associazione in Toscana, è di paoli 12 per un trimestre, 20 per un semestre, e 36 per un anno” (*PP.* ii:1013). The vulgar principle of utility, the impelling need to find a source of living after the end of the one-year-subvention provided by his Florentine friends, forced Leopardi, at least in his original intensions, into a compromise with the useful.

¹³ “MODA. Non mi conosci? [...] Io sono la Moda, tua sorella. MORTE. Mia sorella? MODA. Sì: non ti ricordi che tutte e due siamo nate dalla Caducità?” (*PP.* ii:24).



Unlike Leopardi, who turned down all the possibilities of collaborating with the leading journal of his time, the *Antologia*, of which his *Spettatore fiorentino* was meant to be a counter model, Baudelaire made wide use of journalism to disseminate his aesthetic views. It appears that in order to be able to assert the eternal value of art, which for him, as for Leopardi, was alien from the idea of utility, Baudelaire had to immerse himself in the transitory genre par excellence, what his friend Balzac called “un gouffre qui dévore tout et ne rend rien [...] un monstre qui n’engendre pas” (2000:9).

Baudelaire had been publishing for a few years when he first encountered the work of Edgar Allan Poe, and voiced his discovery to his French audience in the journals *Revue de Paris* in 1852 and *Le Pays* in 1856. Another comprehensive essay, “Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Poe” would

appear in Baudelaire's translations of Poe's short stories in 1857, and be re-published numerous times.

The two journalistic contributions offer a writing and re-writing of Poe's life and works, and reveal that Baudelaire progressively recognised in Poe a kindred spirit. Significantly the second text, *Edgar Poe, sa vie et ses oeuvres* published just over a year before the release of *Les fleurs du mal* (1857), contains an unequivocal statement of poetics that seals not only Baudelaire's self-perceived affinity with Poe, but is the prelude to a striking similarity with Leopardi, which, as the second and third quotations below suggest, will become almost literal in Baudelaire's later essay:¹⁴

[Poe] croyait, en vrai poète qu'il était, que le but de la poésie est de même nature que son principe, et qu'elle ne doit pas avoir en vue autre chose qu'elle-même (EC:305).

l'idée d'utilité, [est] la plus hostile du monde à l'idée de beauté (328).

aucun poème ne sera si grand, si noble, si véritablement digne du nom de poème, que celui qui aura été écrit uniquement pour le plaisir d'écrire un poème. [...] La poésie ne peut pas, sous peine de mort ou de défaillance, s'assimiler à la science ou à la morale; elle n'a pas la Vérité pour objet, elle n'a qu'Elle-même (333).

The principle of the self-sufficiency of art and poetry justifies the singularity of the artist, endowed with an exceptional sensitivity and an exceptional imagination. The latter is, again, described by Baudelaire in terms that sound like an almost literal translation from the entry in the *Zibaldone* of 7 September 1821:¹⁵ "*L'Imagination est une faculté quasi divine qui perçoit tout d'abord, en dehors des méthodes philosophiques, les rapports intimes et secrets des choses, les correspondances et les analogies*" (EC:329). Significantly the peculiar sensitivity of the artist who Baudelaire repeatedly describes as a 'writer living on his nerves' ("l'écrivain des nerfs"; 316, "les poètes [sont] une race irritable"; 330), is a faculty associated with the immediate perception of truth, justice and beauty.¹⁶ Like Leopardi, Baudelaire acknowledges the philosophical nature of poetry, its

¹⁴ All quotations from Baudelaire's prose works are from the second volume of the Gallimard edition quoted in the bibliography, abbreviated as EC and followed by the page number.

¹⁵ "Proprietà del vero poeta è la facoltà e la vena delle similitudini. [...] L'animo in entusiasmo, nel caldo della passione qualunque ec. ec. discopre vivissime somiglianze fra le cose. Un vigore anche passeggero del corpo, che influisca sullo spirito, gli fa vedere dei rapporti fra cose disparatissime, [...] gli mostra delle relazioni a cui egli non aveva mai pensato, gli dà insomma una facilità mirabile di ravvicinare e rassomigliare gli oggetti delle specie le più distinte, [...] d'incorporare vivissimamente il pensiero il più astratto, di ridur tutto ad immagine, e crearne delle più nuove e vive che si possa credere. [...] Or questo è tutto il filosofo: facoltà di scoprire e conoscere i rapporti, di legare insieme i particolari, e di generalizzare" (Z. 1650).

¹⁶ "[...] la fameuse irritabilité poétique n'a pas de rapport avec le *tempérament* [original italics] [...] mais avec une clairvoyance plus qu'ordinaire relative au faux et à l'injuste. Cette clairvoyance n'est pas autre chose qu'un corollaire de la vive perception du vrai, de la justice, de la proportion, en un mot du Beau [...] l'homme qui n'est pas (au jugement du commun) *irritabilis* [original italics], n'est pas poète du tout" (EC:331).

capacity to capture the essence of life in its disturbing and mysterious truth. The public resistance to Poe's "vérité philosophique" (*ÆC*:318) recalls the response to Tristano's "filosofia dolorosa, ma vera" (*PP*. ii:214). In particular, in his Poe articles, Baudelaire gives shape and defines key concepts for modern aesthetics that revolve around the experience of transience and that will be reiterated, and unequivocally codified in his *Peintre de la vie moderne*: the transience of the artist's emotions, emotions as a barometer of the transience of life, the ephemeral as the essence of modernity and of its aesthetic code.

As we have observed, intrinsic to Poe's burning passion for the beautiful is a sensitivity that subjects him, like all artists, to sudden shocks. These, in turn, elicit further shocks in his interlocutors, even when he attempts to disguise his impetus under a cold smile: "lorsque j'appris que Poe désirait m'être présenté, j'éprouvai un sentiment singulier et qui ressemblait à de l'effroi [...] – says Baudelaire in reporting Mrs. Osgood's first encounter with her future friend Edgar Allan – il me salua, calme, grave, presque froid; mais sous cette froideur vibrat une sympathie si marquée que je ne pus m'empêcher d'en être profondément impressionnée" (*ÆC*:310). In a state of permanent alert ("son étonnant cerveau incessamment en éveil", 311) Poe's temperament is close to the flâneur-type, always in search of new stimuli, powerful, though flippant and elusive sensations, which poetry strives to capture and eternalise as fragments of life:

[...] il est incontestable que – semblables à *ces impressions fugitives et frappantes, d'autant plus frappantes dans leurs retours qu'elles sont plus fugitives*, qui suivent quelquefois un symptôme extérieur, une espèce d'avertissement comme un son de cloche, une note musicale, ou un parfum oublié, et qui sont elles-mêmes suivies d'un événement semblable à un événement déjà connu et qui occupait la même place dans une chaîne antérieurement révélée, - semblables à ces singuliers rêves périodiques qui fréquentent nos sommeils, - il existe dans l'ivresse non seulement des enchaînements de rêves, mais des séries de raisonnements, qui ont besoin, pour se reproduire, du milieu qui leur a donné naissance (*ÆC*:315).

Thus, Baudelaire justifies Poe's addiction to drinking as the springboard of poetic inspiration.¹⁷ The allure of pleasure is too powerful; resistance gives in to the seducing force the vision of alcohol can yield ("Il ne pouvait résister au désir de retrouver les visions merveilleuses ou effrayantes, les conceptions subtiles qu'il avait rencontrées dans une tempête précédente; c'étaient de vieilles connaissances qui l'attiraient impérativement", *ÆC*:315). In Baudelaire's eyes, Poe's drinking habit becomes a means to follow the call of poetry, to surrender to the song of the sirens,

¹⁷ One could remember here the conclusion of Leopardi's *Dialogo di Torquato Tasso e del suo genio familiare*, in which Tasso begs the spirit to tell him where to go and find him again: "TASSO. [...] La tua conversazione mi riconforta pure assai. [...]. Acciò da ora innanzi io ti possa chiamare o trovare quando mi bisogni, dimmi dove sei solito di abitare. GENIO. Ancora non l'hai conosciuto? *In qualche liquore generoso*" (*PP*. ii:74-75).

to redeem life by becoming one with the ephemeral, the hallucinatory excitement of alcohol and the poetic ecstasy it gave way to. Not unlike Leopardi's polemic against the ethic of utility that informed Italian culture, Baudelaire disassociated himself from contemporary American and French society, led by the principle of the edification of public conscience, who criticised Poe's poetry on moral grounds. Moreover, for Leopardi as much as for Baudelaire as a critic and sympathiser with Poe, the pleasure of poetry was as consoling as it was tragic, because in its philosophical nature it captured the sorrowful essence of life.¹⁸ The expression on the face of the poet-flâneur, who wavers between the melancholic smile of Leopardi, and the grimace of Poe and Baudelaire, is not an expression of superiority; it is the recognition, anguishing or devilishly pleasing, that in its endless transience, existence is a repeated and mysterious experience of loss and death.

In a crucial passage of *Notes nouvelles* Baudelaire comments on the effectiveness in which Poe's short-stories encapsulate fragments of experience mirroring the rhythms of life (*ÆC*:329), and concludes:

“Un long poème n'existe pas [...]” En effet, un poème ne mérite son titre qu'autant qu'il excite, qu'il enlève l'âme, et la valeur positive d'un poème est en raison de cette excitation, de cet *enlèvement* [original italics] de l'âme. Mais, par nécessité psychologique, *toutes les excitations sont fugitives et transitoires*. Cet état singulier, dans lequel l'âme du lecteur a été, pour ainsi dire, tirée de force, *ne durera certainement pas autant que la lecture de tel poème qui dépasse la ténacité d'enthousiasme dont la nature humaine est capable* (*ÆC*:332).

Baudelaire draws from Poe the conclusion that the effect of poetry is time-bound and limited. The affinity between this passage and page 30 of the *Zibaldone*, where Leopardi describes the effect Anacreontic odes have on him, or the *Dialogo di Timandro ed Eleandro*, where the latter notes that real poetry ennobles the reader for half an hour is striking:

Se alcun libro morale potesse giovare, io penso che gioverebbero massimamente i poetici [...] cioè libri destinati a muovere la immaginazione; e intendo non meno di prose che di versi. Ora *io fo poca stima di quella poesia che, letta e meditata, non lascia al lettore nell'animo un tal sentimento nobile, che per mezz'ora, gl'impedisca di ammettere un pensier vile, e di fare un'azione indegna. Ma se il lettore manca di fede al suo principale amico un'ora dopo la lettura, io non disprezzo perciò quella tal poesia: perchè altrimenti mi converrebbe disprezzare le più belle, più calde e più nobili poesie del mondo* (*PP*. ii:173-174).

¹⁸ “Il analyse ce qu'il y a de plus fugitif, il soupèse l'impondérable et décrit, avec cette manière minutieuse et scientifique dont les effets sont terribles, tout cet imaginaire qui flotte autour de l'homme nerveux et le conduit à mal” (*ÆC*:317).

The principle of temporality rushes into art. For Leopardi “la poesia sta essenzialm. in un impeto [...] I lavori di poesia vogliono p. natura essere corti” (Z. 4356). Leopardi suggests that this is a key principle of poetry in general, valid for classical as well as for modern poetry. In fact, his confession that his own works hold in store (“in deposito”) relics of his youth (“qualche reliquia de’ miei sentimenti passati”) for him to go and cherish over time (“per conservarla e darle durata”) redirects Leopardi’s observations on the temporality of poetry towards himself as a spokesman of *modern poetry*. Michael Caesar observes the continuity between Leopardi’s vision and Poe’s own in *The Philosophy of Composition* (1845): “there is a distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art - the limit of a single sitting”. This principle, to which as we have seen Baudelaire gives due emphasis, has, however, different repercussions for him and Leopardi.

In her fascinating *Thinking Fragments* Jane Fox observes: “The rebellion of a revolutionary philosopher is characterised as much by a mostly unconscious ambivalence toward the past as by an absolute break with it” (1990:10). The provocation and exceptionality of revolutionary thought results from an ambivalence and tension between the stream of tradition and innovation, between the past of history and the future of novelty, between the knowledge which comes from the past and the challenge to offer, or even just to consider, new possibilities for human life. In his devotion to beauty, and scorn of utility, Leopardi’s *Spettatore* discloses an aristocratic nature that bears witness to this tension: the resistance against the deterioration of noble values at a time of progressive conformism, and yet the striving for something new. As Baudelaire describes it:

[...] tous participent du meme caractère d’opposition et de révolte; tous sont des représentants de ce qu’il y a de meilleur dans l’orgueil humain, de ce besoin, trop rare chez ceux d’aujourd’hui, de combattre et de détruire la trivialité. De là naît, chez les dandys, cette attitude hautaine de caste provocante, même dans sa froideur. Le dandysme apparaît surtout aux époques transitoires où la démocratie n’est pas encore toute-puissante, où l’aristocratie n’est que partiellement chancelante et avilie. Dans le trouble de ces époques quelques hommes déclassés, dégoûtés, désœuvrés, mais tout riches de force native, peuvent concevoir le projet de fonder une espèce nouvelle d’aristocratie, d’autant plus difficile à rompre qu’elle sera basée sur les facultés les plus précieuses, les plus indestructibles, et sur les dons célestes que le travail et l’argent ne peuvent conférer. Le dandysme est le dernier éclat d’héroïsme dans les décadences (*ŒC*:711).

Like Leopardi, Baudelaire replaces the principle of temporality for the eternal in art, sweeping away classical aesthetics with the modern. Yet for the poet from Recanati this is a painstaking loss that he hardly ceases to mourn. His *Spettatore fiorentino* or flâneur is the witness of this loss.

The very name of the protagonist of the penultimate *Operetta*, the *Passeggere*, is by definition the passer-by, a stand-in for a flâneur. The dialogue from 1832 was likely composed for the first issue of the *Spettatore fiorentino*. The *Passeggere* is indeed the spectator of time, which unfolds year after year, and moment after moment. By observing the passing of time the *Passeggere* also follows a dream of beauty: “Quella vita ch’è una cosa bella, non è la vita che si conosce, ma quella che non si conosce; non la vita passata, ma la futura” (*PP*. ii:210). This is because each year only brings a renewed experience of death leaving behind the ruin of promised happiness. Thus, the passer-by relinquishes to the pattern of illusion and disillusionment to which he has become habituated, an habituation contracted in order to be able to enjoy the ephemeral of existence, to live life and flee it at the same time. Habituation has made him adaptable, capable of letting things glide away, resilient to the shocks of life. The flâneur or *Passeggere* has learned the ultimate secret that Plotino lays bare to Porfirio: “la vita è cosa di tanto piccolo rilievo, che l’uomo, in quanto a se, non dovrebbe esser molto sollecito nè di ritenerla nè di lasciarla” (*PP*. ii:208).

In more than one way Leopardi’s *Spettatore fiorentino* prefigures further human typologies: the visitor of World exhibitions and of the Parisian Arcades, whom Benjamin describes seduced by “the sex-appeal of the inorganic” (1999:79), and succumbing to the powerful allure of commodities’ display; Poe’s *Man of the Crowd*, who, in pursuit of the mysterious secret engraved on a man’s face, wanders through the metamorphosing phantasmagoria of the big city; more than anything else, however, he shares the features of Baudelaire’s *Peintre de la vie moderne*. Although rigorously alien from morals or politics, he is an “*homme du monde*” [original italics] (*ÆC*:689), like Poe’s *Man of the Crowd*. Immersed in the world, he merges with the reality of the painting he draws, becoming part of the present he paints. Baudelaire calls his painter “un génie d’une nature mixte [...] Observateur, flâneur, philosophe” (687). He is capable of relating to the different manifestations of beauty modernity is heir to, including the phenomenon of flânerie itself. In defining dandyism Baudelaire describes it as an attitude of indulgence in the pleasure of surprising by never being surprised, an attitude akin to the sad smile of Leopardi’s *Spettatore*: “Un dandy peut être un homme blasé, peut être un homme souffrant; mais [...] il sourira comme le Lacédémonien sous la morsure du renard” (*ÆC*:710).

Ultimately Leopardi and Baudelaire appear each to accentuate the opposite directions of the threshold of modernity on which they stand: the mourning for an irretrievable loss, the former, the excitement for a possible gain, the latter. For Leopardi the flâneur is the witness of the Decadence of modern times, Baudelaire sees in Decadence itself, and therefore the experience of the limit, the end, and death, the principle of the new (*ÆC*:320).

For Baudelaire the experience of the transitory, “le nombre, [...] l’ondoyant, [...] le mouvement, [...] le fugitif et l’infini” (*ŒC*:691), of which fashion was becoming the embodiment, is the essence of life and beauty: “Il s’agit [...] de dégager de la mode ce qu’elle peut contenir de poétique dans l’historique, *de tirer l’éternel du transitoire*” (694). Baudelaire celebrates Decadence, the flowers of evil, as a principle of beauty that the artist is called upon to eternalise, as opposed to the classical notion of beauty, which is associated with the religious and the heroic.

[...] il est beaucoup plus commode de déclarer que tout est absolument laid dans l’habit d’une époque, que de s’appliquer à en extraire la beauté mystérieuse qui y peut être contenue, si minime ou si légère qu’elle soit [...] *Cet élément transitoire, fugitif, dont les métamorphoses sont si fréquentes, vous n’avez pas le droit de le mépriser* ou de vous en passer. En le supprimant, vous tombez forcément dans le vide d’une beauté abstraite et indéfinissable [...] En un mot, pour que toute *modernité* [original italics] soit digne de devenir antiquité, il faut que la beauté mystérieuse que la vie humaine y met involontairement en ait été extraite (*ŒC*:694-95).

By emphasising the extent to which a commitment to the past causes the loss of the present, Baudelaire brings to its ultimate consequences the poetics of relativism and fragmentation that the aesthetics of Romanticism had inaugurated with Schlegel, and further developed through Vischer, Rosenkranz and Schleiermacher (Vercellone 1999:55-120). Modern art can equal the dignity of classical art only by becoming permeated with life, and finding beauty in the minutiae of the plain and despicable: “*il y a dans la vie triviale, dans la métamorphose journalière des choses extérieures, un mouvement rapide qui commande à l’artiste une égale vélocité d’exécution*” (*ŒC*:686). In *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* Baudelaire continues the polemic against the cult of ‘classical’ and ‘high art’ forged in the Poe essays. In the section dedicated to the *Éloge du maquillage*, this dispute acquires a very anti-Rousseauian, also at times anti-Leopardian tone. Baudelaire entirely subverts the Romantic notion of nature considering it the cause of the evil in man:

analysez tout ce qui est naturel, toutes les actions et les désirs du pur homme naturel, vous ne trouverez rien que d’affreux. Tout ce qui est beau et nobles est le résultat de la raison et du calcul. Le crime [...] est originellement naturel. La vertu, au contraire, est *artificielle* [...] Le mal se fait sans effort, *naturellement* [original italics], par fatalité; le bien est toujours le produit d’un art (*ŒC*:715).

The ultimate consequence of this tenet is that the artificial in art, of which fashion is a manifestation, is an aspiration towards the ideal, a pursuit of beauty and perfection, associated with love, seduction, and ends by legitimising even the excesses of art itself. The canon of artificiality, once considered ugly and distorted, takes the place of the sterile canon of nature:

La mode doit donc être considérée comme un symptôme du goût de l'idéal surnageant dans le cerveau humain au-dessus de tout ce que la vie naturelle y accumule de grossier, de terrestre et d'immonde, comme une déformation sublime de la nature, ou plutôt comme un essai permanent et successif de réformation de la nature (*ŒC*:516).

Fashion is a distortion; yet distortion is also the essence of modernity, part of the life of the civilized man. The bizarre, the violent and excessive is imbued with poetry; its fleetingness capturing "la saveur amère ou capiteuse du vin de la Vie" (*ŒC*:724). Baudelaire ends his portrait of the *Peintre de la vie moderne* with a Christian image, wine as a symbol of the supreme sacrifice of Christ: death to promise life anew. The rift between the atemporal and eternal beauty of nature in classical art, and the irruption of the excessive and the distorted into modern art is intertwined with the recognition of the temporal, the discontinuous, the fragmented essence of human life. Christ has brought passion, and suffering into culture, and made it an object of art. The figure of Christ has incorporated the limit (death) within life, in order to point at the possibility of transcending that limit, in a divine and eternal dimension which is not life. The flâneur is the modern man who witnesses and laments the impossibility of reaching out towards that dimension, accepting that he is part of a changing human reality, himself an incarnation of transience, forever barred from eternity. Like Leopardi who records the fleeting nature of the beauty of Anacreon's odes, the speaking I of Baudelaire's *À une passante*, wonders if he will ever encounter again the beauty which, like a shooting star, has flashed in the middle of the noisy Parisian crowd: "Un éclair... puis la nuit! – Fugitive beauté / Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître, / Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l'éternité?" (1950:111).

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