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ANTAGONIST AND ENVIRONMENT: THE DUALITY OF GIACOMO LEOPARDI'S
NATURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the characterization of nature as seen in the works of Giacomo Leopardi. Leopardi is often compared to renowned Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and John Keats, yet his approach to understanding nature remains quite different than his English counterparts. Leopardi characterizes nature in two ways: both as a sublime environment that man may never enjoy, and as a personified deity, able to destroy all humankind with no remorse. This paper seeks to understand the duality of nature in Leopardi's prose and poetry in the light of ecocriticism. By characterizing nature thus, Leopardi elevates its status far above that of mankind. In essence, nature becomes an entity that exists not for humanity's exploitation or pleasure, but in spite of humanity. As Leopardi exalts nature, he offers a more eco-centric commentary on the natural world that both rejects anthropocentrism and denies the role of nature as being subject to man.

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Introduction

If Romanticism, as understood by Donald Worster¹, can be defined as an attempt to extol “an emphasis on interdependence and relatedness in nature, and an intense desire to restore man to a place of intimate intercourse with the vast organism that constitutes earth,” then Italian poet and author Giacomo Leopardi cannot necessarily be designated a Romantic writer. Although often considered akin to poets such as Wordsworth and Keats², Leopardi understands the relationship between man and nature differently than his English counterparts, and therefore, his literary contribution to the realm of ecocriticism³ becomes equally distinctive. For Leopardi, nature exists in two differing, though interconnected, veins: nature as the sublimely beautiful environment in which man may never partake, and Nature as the supreme antagonist of man; in such a context, it may be more apt to utilize the definition of Romanticism set forth by literary critic and essayist Sebastiano Timpanaro, as a state of mind deeply dissatisfied with reality and a nostalgia for a happier past, or a world that does not exist (“The Pessimistic Materialism of Giacomo Leopardi”). This definition of Romanticism, characterized by both a sense of yearning and loss, serves Leopardi well. Obviously, scholars, critics, and poets alike assign the movement

¹ Donald Worster, Hall Distinguished Professor of American History Emeritus at the University of Kansas, is a leading figure in the field of environmental history and author of works such as *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination*, and “The ecology of order and chaos.”

² Analyses such as *The Artifice of Reality: Poetic Style in Wordsworth, Foscolo, Keats, and Leopardi*, by Karl Kroeber, “Leopardi’s Reception in England: 1837 to 1927,” by Peter Lecouras, and “Under the Volcano,” by Adam Kirsch, draw connections between Leopardi and his British contemporaries.

³ Ecocriticism, a relatively new field of analysis, is the interdisciplinary study of the connection between literature and the environment. This thesis will elaborate on this critical approach.

their own personal nuances; as understood in the Oxford Companion to English Literature, Romanticism signifies a general triumph of imaginative spontaneity, visionary originality, wonder, and emotional self-expression over the classical standards of balance, order, restraint, and objectivity (Birch). Each of these definitions will work to enhance a deeper understanding of Leopardi as a poet and writer, and his works in the wider scope of the time period.

Leopardi distinguishes himself from the most prominent writers of the age with his dual-characterization of nature; while he abstractly reviles Nature as humankind's adversary, he also indirectly praises "her," offering "luminous" descriptions of nature as environment (Casale and Dooley 45), all the while rejecting any form of anthropocentrism, an ideology of which Wordsworth himself has often been accused by Romantic and ecocritical scholars alike (Bazregarzadeh and Ramazani 1). For the purpose of this research, the term nature will be presented in two forms: nature, which represents environment, and Nature, which represents a specific character in Leopardi's prose and poetry. I will also utilize the writings of Wordsworth in the third chapter to emphasize by comparison Leopardi's own ideas.

In each depiction, Leopardi acknowledges what humankind, as a whole, does not: the inherent alterity of nature (Garrard 110). A distinct sense of 'otherness' pervades both Leopardi's prose and poetry, although nature, on his terms, still evokes the nostalgia for which many scholars and critics characterize Romantic writers. As environment, nature and all its beauty remains unavailable to man; in nature's otherness, a distinct disconnect exists that man cannot overcome. Poems such as "L'ultimo canto di Saffo" (Sappho's Last Song, 1822), "Alla Primavera" (To Spring, 1822), and "L'infinito" (The Infinite, 1819), emphasize such a disconnection, revealing how deeply Leopardi believes that nature dooms man to unhappiness. Within these descriptions, one can detect the distinct pessimism with which scholars and critics

often associate Leopardi as a thinker, poet, and author. However, this pessimism couples directly with some of the most sentimental and exquisite descriptions of nature existing in the Romantic literature today.

As a character, Nature remains one of Leopardi's most complex and well-developed personas, standing contrary to and above man in the grand hierarchy of existence. Works such as "La ginestra o il fiore del deserto" (The Broom or the Desert Flower, 1836), as well as prose from Leopardi's *Operette Morali* (*Moral Works*, 1824), depict Nature in such a way. When nature is not characterized as the idyllic world in which man may never partake, it is instead seen either as the destroyer of man, or contaminated by man's presumptuousness. Nature, in a general sense, is often written as if it were a deity, overtaking any traditional representation of God. The woes of man can be and often are blamed on Nature; in essence, Leopardi has "dethroned" God and installed another all-powerful entity worthy of man's censure and disappointment (Woodbridge 117). God does not threaten man with natural disasters such as volcanic eruption, as discussed in "La ginestra," but Nature does. It is to Nature that man must answer.

The most developed example of Nature in the role of character certainly can be found in Leopardi's famous poem, "La ginestra." In this poem, consisting of seven stanzas, Leopardi outlines mankind's mistake in the belief that it is anything but insignificant, and emphasizes that the humble acceptance of triviality is the most successful way for mankind to exist. The theme of insignificance is also espoused repeatedly in works such as "Dialogo di un Folletto e di uno Gnomo" (Dialogue Between an Imp and a Gnome) and "Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese" (Dialogue Between Nature and an Icelander), "Dialogo della terra e della luna" (Dialogue Between the Earth and the Moon), taken from Leopardi's *Operette Morali*, and represent

Leopardi's own philosophies on human life and existence, which will be expanded upon in each chapter.

Despite the duality with which Leopardi presents nature, both as an unreachable beauty and a destructive force, Leopardi's distinct pessimism is not the only theme one can glean from his works. With the separation of humankind from nature, and humankind's subordination below it, Leopardi elevates nature's status and expresses that nature must remain respected and cannot successfully be challenged. The poet disdains the human population not only for its condescending, exploitative tendencies, but also for that false sense of superiority and immortality. It is for such an anti-anthropocentric view that Leopardi and Wordsworth, though often compared stylistically and thematically, differ starkly. Some critics, such as Neil Sammells, view Wordsworth's nature poetry as irresponsible because of his depiction of nature as man's "moral gymnasium" (130). Although Wordsworth's view of nature could be considered more positive than Leopardi's due to his overall praise of it, it is the way in which man uses nature for his own purposes, in Leopardi's eyes, that becomes feckless and exploitative. This thesis will defend that assertion, and by contrast, will evaluate Leopardi's contribution to ecocriticism by analyzing his rejection of anthropocentrism and his ability to elevate nature to a higher level of dominance than man.

Chapter 1

Nature as Environment

Although Romanticism is vast area of study, many Romantic poets and authors often focus thematically on the return of man to nature, perceiving a unique, often nurturing connection between humanity and its complex surroundings (Worster 17). Since scholars often define ecocriticism, in most basic terms, as the study of the relationship between literature and nature, it is here where Romanticism and ecocriticism overlap consummately. The question then becomes: what does the relationship between man and nature mean? How do they interact, and why?

The roots of ecocriticism can be traced back to the most well-known Romantic poets of old, such as Wordsworth, Keats, William Blake, Lord Byron, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Such poets and writers stand as the true forerunners of ecocriticism for their desire and ability to contemplate humankind's role in relation to its environment, and Giacomo Leopardi must be counted among these. Leopardi's endless reflection of humankind's place in the hierarchy of existence, his delicate nostalgia, and his pessimistic yet vigorous desire to understand the world, places Leopardi among the most renowned Romantic writers. The stark difference between Leopardi and other Romantic nature writers, however, is the way in which he characterizes nature's relationship to man. Wordsworth's poetry often elevates man to a place of intercourse with nature; most specifically, "Lines Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey" (1798), a fluid, sprawling poem that seeks to understand memory and natural beauty, underscores an implied communion between man and nature. Imagery such as meadows, woods, and mountains, interspersed with the eyes, ears, language, and thoughts of humankind, draw inherent

connections between man and nature, emphasizing a loving, guiding, beneficent relationship. As

Wordsworth writes:

Therefore am I still
 A lover of the meadows and the woods,
 And mountains; and of all that we behold
 From this green earth; of all the mighty world
 Of eye and ear,--both what they half create,
 And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
 In nature and the language of the sense,
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my moral being (102-111).

The narrator, who represents humanity, allows himself to be guided and nursed by nature, and invites the interaction. However, while Wordsworth relegates man to this role of inferiority—to a position of one in need of guidance and healing—he also articulates that man has a certain power over his own environment through interpretation; one’s eyes and ears provide the power to “create,” in a sense, the surrounding world; therefore, man can never have a pure encounter with nature, since man’s own mind always controls what he experiences from his own perspective. It is a paradoxical yet intimate understanding of man and nature, playing on patterns of inferiority, superiority, communion, and control.

For Leopardi, there is no connection to be had between man and nature and no control for man to possess. The nostalgia to which he often resorts remains much different from the beautiful, inspired nostalgia Wordsworth offers. Nature, as environment, represents one distinct

characterization within Leopardi's prose and poetry; it is a beautiful, idyllic domain, but it represents melancholy and suffering, as humankind will always lament its inability to forge any sort of bond with nature or experience happiness. Three of Leopardi's poems, "L'ultimo canto di Saffo," "L'infinito," and "Alla Primavera" represent most poignantly the unreachability of nature, and its vast immortality in comparison to man. The divide between man and nature seems in direct contrast with many of the writings of contemporary Romantic poets, who assert either that man should commune with nature for his own sake, or as demonstrated in the previous lines quotes from Wordsworth, that man constitutes a small but meaningful fraction of the whole of nature. I contend, instead, that Leopardi's purposeful separation of man and nature emphasizes his disapproval of the anthropocentric, and in doing so, negates a world in which man may abuse nature or exploit it for his own purposes.

L'Ultimo Canto di Saffo

In his 1822 poem “L’Ultimo canto di Saffo,” Leopardi writes in the guise of the Greek poet Sappho⁴. The poem is, in essence, a beautiful lament, for “Sappho” stresses a theme to which Leopardi returns many times in his prose and poetry: the hopelessness of human existence and the inability for mankind to partake in nature’s beauty. The poem’s four stanzas brim with arrestingly vivid descriptions of the natural world: “tranquil night, and bashful light / of the fading moon, and you, emerging / from the quiet woods above the cliff, / herald of day” (1-4, Galassi 85)⁵. Throughout the poem’s four stanzas, Leopardi describes in luminous detail the world around him, but in direct contrast, he also expresses the despondency of Sappho. This sense of hopelessness arises out of Sappho’s perception that none of the limitless beauty on earth is meant for her:

Your cloak is lovely, divine heaven,
and you are lovely also, dewy earth.

Alas, the gods and pitiless fate
saved none of this endless beauty for poor Sappho.

In your proud kingdoms I am worthless, Nature,
an uninvited guest, an unloved lover.

Bello il tuo manto, o divo cielo, e bella

⁴ Sappho, who lived during the sixth century BCE, was a lyric poet born on the Greek island of Lesbos.

⁵ To distinguish clearly between varying poetic translations, citation format throughout the text will cite line numbers from the original Italian work, followed by the name of the translator, then the page of the translation.

Sei tu, rorida terra. Ahi di cotesta
 Infinita beltà parte nessuna
 Alla misera Saffo i numi e l'empia
 Sorte non fenno. A' tuoi superbi regni
 Vile, o natura, e grave ospita addetta,
 E dispregiata amante (19-25, Galassi 85)

Leopardi implies not only Sappho's characteristic unsightliness,⁶ but a general disconnect between Sappho and nature. A few points become apparent here: Leopardi's unique identification with Sappho as someone who believes herself to be ugly and therefore undeserving of nature's blessing or mortal happiness, the fluidity with which nature flows between environment and character, and Sappho's familiarity in her address of nature.

Literary critics such as Adam Kirsch have discussed the extent to which Leopardi's physical issues outwardly affected his ability to live and thrive, as well as his style and manner of writing: "...Leopardi's deformity and physical pain are unavoidable presences in his work. The hump came from his scoliosis.... His deformity effectively barred him from having any sort of romantic life" (Kirsch). Kirsch goes on to specifically mention "L'ultimo canto di Saffo," remarking how the ancient poet becomes a vessel for Leopardi's own feelings of exclusion from life's beauty. Leopardi's afflictions certainly weighed on him and caused him grief; in fact, Leopardi writes in his *Pensieri* (*Thoughts*, 1831) on the subject of life's injustice towards those whom society deems unattractive:

⁶ Leopardi perpetuates the idea of Sappho as an unattractive woman, drawing on ancient texts such as the Oxyrhynchos biography that have described her as such. The truthfulness of such an assertion is questionable at best, as others, such as Plato and Plutarch, have described her as beautiful (Mendelsohn).

A man who has imagination, enthusiasm, and feeling but does not have an attractive body is, with respect to nature, pretty much what the ardent and sincere lover – whose love is not returned – is with respect to his beloved. He rushes fervently toward nature, feels her power, her spell, her beauties, her many attractions profoundly, loves her to distraction; but like one whose love is not returned, he feels he can never be part of that beauty he loves and admires, that he must forever remain shut out, like the lover who is denied the heart, the tenderness, the company of his beloved (Bergin and Paolucci 48).

Leopardi makes a connection between the example of the unattractive man experiencing rejection from the object of his love⁷, despite his decent intrinsic qualities, and the unreciprocated love of man towards nature. The poet summarizes in the above passage his broader understanding of nature in relation to the human self. An unsightly man will feel his disconnection from nature most acutely, as Sappho does, and will be doomed to unhappiness in the face of nature's beauty, of which he may never be a part.

The third stanza especially distinguishes itself from the whole of the poem with its dark, desolate language, underscored most readily in the original Italian. Unlike the other stanzas, which Leopardi peppers with phrases of exquisite imagery (“bello il tuo manto, o divo cielo, e bella / Sei tu, rorida terra” 19-20), this stanza encapsulates both Sappho's and Leopardi's feelings of wretchedness:

What failing was it, what heinous excess
 marked me before my birth, so heaven
 and the face of fortune were so stern with me?

⁷ Leopardi writes from experience on this matter; he harbored a deep, unrequited, and unreciprocated love for Fanny Targioni-Tozzetti, a young Italian noblewoman. Leopardi wrote “Aspasia” (1833) with her in mind.

Qual fallo mai, qual s'è nefando eccesso

Machiommi anzi il natale, onde s'è torvo

Il ciel mi fosse e di fortuna il volto? (37-39, Galassi 87)

Leopardi strings such words as *fallo*, *nefando*, *misfatto*, *dolore*, *negletta*, and *pianto* together, fashioning a devastating lament that builds to crescendo through the previous two stanzas.

Sappho acknowledges her own faults did not give way to her sad state, but that a higher power deemed it so. This theme pervades Leopardi's writing, as he often names some higher being, whether it is nature, fortune, or destiny, as the decider of man's destiny. Regardless of the source of humanity's misery, such misery is unavoidable, especially for the least beautiful. This point, Leopardi feels deeply. For him, life constituted suffering that only increased with age, until each human eventually faced *l'altra notte*⁸—death.

Another point to accentuate, as alluded to above, is the fluidity of nature's depiction between environment and character. The term environment, as understood in this research, does not refer to specific biological or ecological systems, but instead recognizes nature in more broad, visual terms as the environment surrounding humanity. In "L'ultimo canto di Saffo," Leopardi discusses the most basic features of the landscape, such as woods, valleys, and rivers; the poet even remarks on birdsong, characterizing animals as a part of nature, an idea that will be expounded upon in a later chapter.⁹ In doing so, Leopardi emphasizes the idyll that is nature without imbuing in it any human characteristics. However, in nearly all of Leopardi's prose and poetry, examples exist where the author then turns to personify nature. Even within "L'ultimo

⁸ From line 73 of "L'ultimo canto di Saffo."

⁹ Specifically, in chapter 3, the role of animal vs. the role of humankind will be analyzed, as animals are more closely associated with nature by Leopardi.

canto di Saffo,” which for the purpose of this research exemplifies the splendor of nature as environment, and man’s subsequent separation from it, Leopardi again turns to personification, as Sappho speaks directly to Nature as character, pondering the reason for her unhappy fate. Leopardi constantly returns to a humanized or deified version of nature, despite that fact that identifiable examples exist of nature as environment.

An intriguing aspect of “L’ultimo canto di Saffo” that exists in the original Italian but does not emerge in translation is Sappho’s use of the informal *tu* when addressing Nature, the character, throughout the poem: “A’ tuoi superbi regni / Vile, o natura, e grave ospite addetta” (23-24). The use of the informal *tu*, instead of any formal form of address, implies a level of intimacy. With this simple choice, Leopardi affirms a specific idea about the relationship between Sappho and Nature that does not seem to coincide with the characterization of man’s severance from the natural world; in fact, it suggests a sense of warmth or familiarity. How can a deep divide exist, as I have asserted, between Nature and Sappho, who stands as a microcosm for humankind, when she speaks to Nature with such intimacy?

It is a complex problem. Although mankind is disconnected from the beauty of nature, mankind’s inherent connection to Nature as a maternal deity figure accounts for such an address. Leopardi implies that Nature is in some way responsible for Sappho’s sorrow, as evidenced by Sappho’s direct address of Nature. Though not explicitly stated, the idea of Nature’s responsibility can be observed and understood more clearly in the poet’s other works, and specifically in a dialogue from Leopardi’s *Operette Morali*, titled “Dialogo della Natura e di un’anima” (Dialogue between Nature and a Soul, 1824). This dialogue captures in prose what “L’ultimo canto di Saffo” does in verse: the destiny of humanity to suffer at the hands of a higher

power. The dialogue occurs between Nature and a newly-born soul, as Nature is completely personified:

Nature: Go, my chosen daughter, for such you will be considered and called for many centuries to come. Live, and be great and unhappy.

Soul: What sin did I commit before birth, that you should condemn me to this punishment?

Nature: What punishment, little daughter?

Soul: Do you not ordain me to be unhappy?

Nature: But only because I want you to be great, and you cannot be the one without the other. Besides which, you are destined to give life to a human body; and all men of necessity are born and live unhappy (Creagh and Leopardi 65).

Nature, who chooses what form a soul will inhabit in life, explains that since the soul is destined to reside in a human body, it will automatically face misery. Nature claims it is not her fault, but simply the way the world functions, though the soul begs for a solution. Sappho uses nearly the same language when speaking to Nature, asking “what failing was it, what heinous excess marked me before my birth, so heaven and the face of fortune were so stern with me?” (37-39, Galassi 87). The same difficulty plagues both the newborn soul and Sappho, even though Leopardi never mentions whether or not the newborn soul will inhabit an unsightly body. As discussed by poet and translator Patrick Creagh, Leopardi understood a man’s spirit to be a vessel of his suffering. The greater a man’s spirit and the more intellectually gifted he is, the more he will demand from life, and the more acutely he will feel inevitable disappointment (65). Sappho’s address of Nature, therefore, not only signals a sense of general misery, but also a

maternal familiarity that turns to disappointment, as Nature denies Sappho the intimacy she so desperately desires.

The comparison of “Dialogo della Natura e di un’anima” to “L’ultimo canto di Saffo” frames more clearly Leopardi’s understanding of man’s fate in the realm of nature. Humankind will always suffer from life’s inevitable disappointment, and Sappho feels such disappointment even more pointedly because of her lack of beauty, something that the author, too, feels deeply. Sappho’s relationship to Nature exists as a filial one, and yet as one that also contains very little love; Sappho, as a representative of humankind, loves the natural world and all its beauty, but a lack of reciprocity damages that love, for Sappho believes nature fashioned her to be ugly in order to suffer. In the most basic terms, a steadfast divide exists between humanity and the natural world; men can seek nothing from it, cannot constitute a part of it, and will not gain happiness because of it.

L'infinito

Nature frames the human mind in Leopardi's relatively brief poem, "L'infinito."

Thematically, brevity also pervades the poem, as Leopardi contemplates the ephemeral nature of human life. As the narrator sits solitary upon a hill, looking out over the landscape, with awe and fear he comes to perceive his own mortality, and the unending spaces, superhuman silences and depthless calm that characterizes it (5-6, Galassi 107). At line twelve, Leopardi mentions nature in the form of the seasons:

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.

Io quello infinito silenzio a questa voce
vo comparando: e mi sovvien l'eterno,
E le morte stagioni, e la presente
E viva, e li suon di lei (9-13, Galassi 107)

The cycle of the seasons, just like the lonely hill and the hedge that blocks his vision, gives the narrator pause about death. However, unlike the narrator, whose life will eventually extinguish, a living season will always exist in nature. A contrast can be made between human life, which races always forward towards death, and the cycles of nature, which have no true end and no true beginning. Nature's beauty inspires in the narrator a dichotomy of feeling, a sweet sense of pain, which Leopardi characterizes as like shipwreck (15, Galassi 107). The sublime beauty around

him, the deafening silence and nature's unending, cyclical patterns confound the narrator, a mere mortal.

Despite the complexity that arises with the broad question of mortality and immortality, Leopardi's precise use of language and repetition suggest another complex theme within "L'infinito." Before Leopardi even delves into hierarchy, he first avers the idea of separateness—one that many English translations often obscure, and a theme already heavily discussed in "L'ultimo canto di Saffo." Throughout the fifteen lines of "L'infinito," Leopardi repeats the words *questo* and *quello*, offering a distinctive sense of isolation and demarcation between the poet and his environment. This subtle use of language says much about Leopardi and his ideas on the natural world; he draws parallels and disconnections between the hills, horizon, branches, seasons, and himself. Even the hedge Leopardi mentions in the second line of "L'infinito" plays an important role in emphasizing such a separation. It is a boundary which cuts off and obscures the view of the narrator from the rest of the world. The poet, by emphasizing "this hedgerow" and "that endless stillness," begs the question of boundary versus interdependence in nature. Interdependence returns often to the forefront of ecocritical analysis; many Romantic poets, scholars, and literary critics alike have and continue to emphasize this facet of the relationship between man and his environment. Leopardi, however, without even explicitly discussing humanity's division from his environment, implies it tactfully through the use of vocabulary.

Alla Primavera

Leopardi's "Alla Primavera" deals with many similar themes as the other poetry analyzed in this section; language choice, in addition to the actual subject matter of the poem, becomes crucial in deciphering the poet's ideas on the natural world. As with "L'infinito," a prevalent sense of separation between man and nature characterizes the poem, although in following the style of "L'ultimo canto di Saffo," the language and imagery darkens progressively until Leopardi finally offers his true view of nature.

The first stanza takes the form of a beautiful ode to nature's healing power:

Now that the sun is working to repair
the damage in the sky,
a breeze is freshening the sickly air,
and the clouds' dark shadow, chased away, dispersed,
fades in the valley; now the birds
are trusting their defenseless breasts
to the wind, and daylight brings
a new desire for love

Perché i celesti danni
Ristori il sole, e perché l'aure inferme
Zefiro avvivi, onde fugata e sparta
Delle nubi la grave ombra s'avvalla;
Credano il petto inerme
Gli augelli al vento, e la diurna luce

Novo d'amor desio (1-7, Galassi 67)

Leopardi resorts to hope, imbuing with such beautiful descriptions of nature the reassurance of better times to come. With nature's healing force, the world can become lovely once more, and birds will trust the wind again as they take flight. The second stanza continues on this path, referring to nature's "materna voce" (23). Not only does Leopardi paint a maternal image of nature, but a holy or deified one as well; each stanza is characterized by a different Roman god or goddess, corresponding to certain aspects of nature, such as Diana, often associated with wilderness and animals. In the context of Roman gods and goddesses, and with the address of nature's voice as maternal, Leopardi implies a characterization of the goddess Gaia. The poet also crosses over once more from nature as environment to Nature as character, addressing her directly yet also describing the natural systems of the environment, such as clouds, sunlight, and plant growth. This technique also mimics that of "L'ultimo canto di Saffo," and will recur again in later analyses.

It is in stanza three when the poem begins to shift, and subtle changes appear. One simplistic yet thought-provoking point to note is the switch from the present to the past. The first stanza demonstrates nature's direct beauty. According to Jonathan Galassi's 2010 translation, the sun "is working," the breeze "is freshening," and the birds "are trusting" (1-6, 67). It offers a sense of immediacy and energetic dynamism, and this pattern continues until the third stanza, when Leopardi begins writing in the past tense, discussing how "flowers and herbs bloomed once," and woods "were green" (39-40, Galassi 69). No longer does Leopardi present nature's beauty in the present moment; it becomes a fleeting one—a time only to be remembered.

By the fourth and fifth stanzas, the narrator grows accusatory. Leopardi outlines the sad story of Echo,¹⁰ speaking directly to Nature and accusing her of being aware of Echo's "human suffering" (58, Galassi 71). Although Nature knows of Echo's pain, she essentially turns a blind eye to it. By the last stanza, all of the hopefulness to be found in nature has been cast away, and only suffering remains.

But your race is not the same as ours.
 Suffering doesn't shape your changing notes,
 and hidden in the dark valley, you sound guiltless
 and therefore that much less beloved by us. ...
 blind thunder echoes in the black clouds and the mountains,
 shattering evil and pure hearts alike

Ma non cognato al nostro
 Il gener tuo; quelle tue varie note
 Dolor non forma, e te di colpa ignudo,
 Men caro assai la bruna calle asconde. ... cieco il tuono
 Per l'atre nubi e le montagne errando,
 Gl'iniqui petti e gl'innocenti a paro (77-84, Galassi 73)

Two issues arise with the final stanza. First, a shift in language, as observable in "L'ultimo canto di Saffo," characterizes the bitter disappointment of the poet and emphasizes a thematic change from the beginning of the poem. Words such as *dolor*, *colpa*, *cieco* and *iniquo* signify a stark about-face from the first stanzas, and paint a very dark, pessimistic portrait of the world: one of

¹⁰ Echo, a nymph of Greco-Roman mythology, loved the beautiful Narcissus. His devastating rejection of her advances caused her to eventually waste away into nothingness, only her voice remaining.

pain, guilt, blindness, and wickedness. Second, Leopardi returns to an idea that he will espouse often: nature's indifference towards humanity.

Nature can be beautiful just as easily as it can be devastating and unfair. Just as lightning strikes blindly without a target, both the virtuous and the amoral can be cast down at any time by Nature's will. At the close of the poem, the narrator only asks to understand why humanity suffers the way it does, since it is apparent that Nature does not pity humanity. This lack of pity is the result of indifference—a fate worse than cruelty for humanity, since cruelty at least implies a sense of engagement. Humanity, as the child of Nature, remains ignored by its mother, the “spettatrice” who stands by but never intervenes. This characterization, along with the intermingling of Leopardi's nature descriptions and personification, as with “L'ultimo canto di Saffo” and “L'infinito,” emphasize a divide between humanity and nature that cannot be overcome. “Alla Primavera,” therefore, slowly decays from a song of praise into a bitter lament, marked by a sense of longing that can never be satisfied.

Chapter 2 Nature as Character

In Leopardi's second characterization of nature, there exist no sunny shores, brightly colored birds or trembling fields¹¹; the poet steps away from the sublime, and instead paints Nature as a character who maintains a complicated and somewhat negative relationship with humanity. This take, again, is unique in comparison to other Romantic poets and writers of the period who often proclaimed the need for man to commune with his environment and perceived a "unity of purpose" inextricably intertwining the natural world and human life together (Rosengarten 91). Leopardi rejects this assertion, and works such as "Dialogo di un Folletto e di uno Gnomo," "Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese," and "Dialogo della Terra e della Luna," from his *Operette Morali*, as well as one of Leopardi's most famous poems, "La ginestra o il fiore del deserto," reveal an entity that Leopardi understands as either as humanity's most profound and highly dangerous antagonist, or as the vain and exploited victim of man, corrupted by his arrogance. In either context, Leopardi makes a point of condemning anthropocentrism by showing Nature to stand against humanity with capricious violence, or to depict Nature as perverted by humanity's greed, selfishness, and savagery.

The overarching dichotomy in the characterization of Nature—by other Romantics as welcoming, benevolent entity, and by Leopardi as an often destructive force—represents two vastly different views in Romantic nature literature. In her text *Chaos and Cosmos*, Professor Heidi C. M. Scott discusses each generally; the first view, which she refers to as the "classical"

¹¹ Leopardi uses such imagery in the first and second stanzas of Leopardi's "L'ultimo canto di Saffo," 1822.

ecological view of nature, paints the environment as a balanced and nurturing whole—almost motherly¹² (1). This view aptly describes the way many Romantic writers and poets perceived nature in Leopardi's time, by focusing on man as an integral part of Nature's whole; as literary critic Thomas McFarland writes of Wordsworth, nature becomes a source of strength and love for the poet, and he attached to the natural world a sense of motherhood that a child might feel for their own mother (149). Such connections between nature and the maternal can be seen in his works "Lines Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey," analyzed previously, and "Tables Turned" (1798), which will be dissected in the third chapter.

The second ideological portrait of nature that Scott outlines, however, stands in direct contrast to the first and encapsulates Leopardi's complex view. Scott refers to the second as a "postmodern" ecological view of nature, which offers up a nature that is chaotic and unstable. This is the nature of Leopardi's world. As with the former view, which some scholars criticize on the belief that it objectifies nature, Leopardi also makes a commentary on such objectification; he asks that man acknowledge his place in the world in comparison to the superiority of nature, such as in "Dialogo della Natura e di un'islandese" and "La ginestra," or he demonstrates how the Earth will be afflicted by man's greed and corruption, as with "Dialogo di un Folletto e di uno Gnomo" and "Dialogo della Terra e della Luna" (Bazregarzadeh and Ramazani 3). In essence, the only solution is for man to defer to the natural world.

Again, Leopardi becomes relevant in the eyes of ecocriticism for his decision to view nature in such a "postmodern" way. In the instances where humankind effectively corrupts Nature, humankind eventually destroys itself. Generally, Leopardi affords Nature power, and therefore, our world becomes one that is focused on "her" cycles, and not on the small

¹² The question of motherhood and ecofeminism will appear in greater detail in the third chapter of this research.

achievements of man; however, though he again rejects anthropocentrism by championing Nature as an entity to which man must yield, Leopardi still subscribes to a sense of hierarchy and demarcation, assigning humanity little value in the scope of the wider cosmos, and rejecting any sense of fluidity in terms of the boundary between man and nature. The moments where Leopardi paints man as having any sort of control or stake in nature ends only in desolation and extinction. In such instances, Leopardi urges that men recognize their failings and concede to the natural hierarchy of existence; man is not above Nature, nor is he necessarily a part of Nature—in fact, he is far below it. Only when he recognizes his insignificance and mortality in the face of her power will man have the ability to live respectably.

Dialogo di un Folletto e di uno Gnomo

Though often given the title of poet, Leopardi's efforts in the realm of prose represent great skill and accomplishment in comparison to his poetic works. One of his most thoughtful works, the *Operette Morali*, recounts dialogues between different allegorical characters such as Death, Fashion, and particularly relevant for this discussion, Nature. Three dialogues in particular become pertinent to this theme: "Dialogo di un Folletto e di uno Gnomo," "Dialogo della Natura e di un' islandese," and "Dialogo della Terra e della Luna." In each of these, Leopardi mounts some sort of attack on the anthropocentric view of the universe, and paints Nature, often also understood as part of the Earth, as an entity that is altogether mistreated, vain, and sometimes even cruel (Creagh and Leopardi 70). Nature, in essence, is a complex character, and Leopardi goes to great lengths to present a fully-developed, multi-faceted being.

"Dialogo di un Folletto e di uno Gnomo," as with many of Leopardi's works in *Operette Morali*, takes place between two fantastical entities: an imp and a gnome. The dialogue begins when the imp informs the gnome that humans have essentially died out; thanks to internal war, cannibalism, suicide, and idleness, no human remains alive on earth (Creagh and Leopardi 59). They have destroyed themselves thanks to their own savagery and stupidity, and among their greatest faults, it is humanity's vast sense of entitlement that the imp considers worst:

Is that so surprising [that humans took your property]? when they not only persuaded themselves that the things of the world had no purpose other than to serve them, but reckoned that everything else put together, compared with the human race, was a mere trifle? (Creagh and Leopardi 60).

Though relatively short, “Dialogo di un Folletto e di uno Gnomo” forms the basis for one of Leopardi’s most fully-developed critiques of anthropocentrism. Leopardi uses the imp and the gnome to express his own pessimistic and disapproving thoughts about humanity in relation to the outside world; man’s relationship to the Earth is one of greed, and humanity believes that it has a right to the Earth and all that exists upon it. Leopardi presents a vicious condemnation of mankind’s self-perceived centrality and importance. In fact, the Imp comically remarks that men even believed that mosquitos and fleas were made to benefit them by teaching them patience (Creagh and Leopardi 61). Therefore, men’s egoism knows no bounds. The gnome hardly believes what has come to pass, but the imp reassures him that mankind deserve such an eternal punishment, and that the earth is improved without their presence:

But now that they’ve all vanished, the earth does not feel she is lacking in anything, the rivers are not weary of flowing, and the sea, though it no longer has to serve for traffic and navigation, does not seem to be drying up. (Creagh and Leopardi 61)

By the imp’s account, the Earth remains indifferent to humanity, and feels nothing in regard to their total annihilation. In fact, since no humans remain to subjugate the Earth’s systems, the rivers and seas feel much less weary. The characterization not only emphasizes how humanity took advantage of the Earth, but also presents ideas to which Leopardi returns many times in his writing: the overlap between Nature as character and nature as environment, and the indifference of Nature in regards to humankind. The imp describes nature’s systems as seeming less taxed, and in the same sentence, reveals the fact that Nature believes she lacks nothing in the face of man’s extinction. Therefore, nature becomes both the natural world and a figure within Leopardi’s work capable of only feeling indifference at man’s disappearance from the face of the

earth. Nature's indifference towards humanity remains an important issue since it is this indifference that humanity fails to comprehend. Man has died out through no fault of Nature; she neither hates nor loves humanity, but instead exists in spite of it.

Dialogo della Natura e di un'islandese

The theme of indifference prevails in “Dialogo della Natura e di un'islandese” as well, another work of prose from Leopardi’s *Operette Morali*, which emphasizes perhaps even more clearly Nature’s indifference by painting her decidedly in the role of character, and specifically, as adversary to man. Somewhat more serious in tone than Leopardi’s other dialogues, “Dialogo della Natura e di un'islandese” occurs between a traveler known in English as the Icelander, and Nature, and represents some of Leopardi’s harshest critiques of humankind, as well as his understanding of the universe as a place of perpetual production and destruction, instead of a pleasure ground for man.

The Icelander is in the midst of traveling the world when he stumbles upon an enormous figure that he first perceives to be made of stone, but later discovers is living—it is Nature herself. Leopardi, in this instance, does not just personify Nature, but actually gives her a body, and an imposing one at that: the Icelander compares her to the colossal figures of Easter Island, and describes her as both beautiful and terrifying (Creagh and Leopardi 99). As Nature addresses the Icelander, asking him why he has come, the Icelander reveals his true motivation for traveling the world; his whole life has been a flight from the cruel machinations of Nature. Nature, in response, compares his discovery of her to a prey stumbling upon its predator:

Nature: This is how the squirrel flees from the rattlesnake, until he falls into its mouth of his own accord. I am the very one you flee from (Creagh and Leopardi 99).

Leopardi presents a most sinister characterization by comparing Nature to that of the rattlesnake; unlike the Nature of “Dialogo di un Folletto e uno Gnomo,” where Nature behaves more passively and acknowledges that she lives better without man, in this dialogue, Nature actively

typifies herself as a predator, with humanity as the prey. It is a strange dichotomy, since Nature names herself a predator, but also espouses her feelings of indifference towards man; often, predators are not indifferent towards their prey, but actively seek to devour them for their own survival. Nature's predatory description, however, does not characterize the relationship between Nature and man—Nature feels indifferent towards man, but like a predator, has the power to destroy man.

Nature then asks why the Icelander has fled for so long, and the Icelander obliges her, launching into a lengthy tirade. He explains his acknowledgement of the vanity and folly of men, and so he decided to live a peaceful and unobtrusive life where he would bother no one. Leopardi's characterization of the Icelander sets him apart from other humans; being more intelligent and aware than the average human, the Icelander perceives the imperfections of man and strives to be nothing like the rest of the population. It is a common theme in Leopardi's work that the most intelligent of humans are also destined to live the most miserable lives—knowledge leads to awareness, and awareness leads to understanding how the world is not made for the pleasure of men, but in spite of him. A noble life, in Leopardi's eyes, is the recognition and acceptance of life's futility.

The Icelander seems to grasp the idea that men are destined to unhappiness, yet in the face of Nature, he still rebukes her harshly, naming nature's unpredictable systems as tormenting him, along with the other humans of earth:

...I have been seared with heat between the tropics, shrivelled with cold near the poles, afflicted in the temperate zones by the changefulness of the air... Many are the places I have seen where not a day goes by without a storm....you assault and do regular battle against the inhabitants of those places, who are guiltless of any

injury to you.... Many wild beasts, unprovoked by the least offence on my part, have wished to devour me.... In short, I do not remember having spent one day of my life without some suffering. (Creagh and Leopardi 101-102)

It is curious to note that Leopardi counts animals in with Nature in this dialogue; instead of enduring suffering like humans, they act as an extension of her and torment mankind by her will. This characterization, I would suggest, comes from Leopardi's unique understanding of mankind's spirit and intellect, as highlighted in the discussion of "L'ultimo canto di Saffo" and "Dialogo della Natura e di un'anima." In fact, in Leopardi's dialogue between Nature and the soul, the soul grieves its sad fate and asks Nature to place her in the body of a "brute beast" so that she might feel more happiness (Creagh and Leopardi 69). Unlike humans who possess complex souls and intellects, and therefore perceive the world and its disappointment more fully, animals, in their simplicity, cannot experience discontent as a result of the world around them.

The Icelander continues on, eventually stating that he cannot remember a day in which he did not suffer in some way at the hands of Nature. Nature's succinct reply encapsulates Leopardi's greatest critique of humankind, as well as his most prevalent understanding of Nature's role in the universe:

Did you perhaps imagine that the world was made for your benefit? Let me tell you that in my handiworks, in my arrangements and my operations, except very seldom, I always had and always have had a mind to things quite other than the happiness of men or their unhappiness. When I hurt you in some way... I do not even notice it... just as normally, if I please or benefit you, I do not know it; And finally, if I happened by chance to blot out your whole species, I would not be aware of it (Creagh and Leopardi 103).

Nature freely admits that she has no care for humanity; just as Nature sears man uncomfortably in the tropics with heat or freezes him at the poles, so too is she responsible for the delicate warm breezes, rays of sunshine, and quiet woods that often appear in Leopardi's other works of poetry that bring man pleasure. Nature provides beauty or destruction, but not with man in mind. Such a concept, again, remains one that the Icelander seems unable to grasp. Unconvinced, he continues questioning Nature, pointing out that he did not ask to be born, and wondering if Nature's duty should be to at least prevent the suffering of all creatures, even if she cannot ensure their happiness, since it was from her "own hands" that man and beast were brought into the world (Creagh and Leopardi 104). The Icelander specifically mentions animals once more at this moment, emphasizing that all living creatures feel as he does and desire Nature to take responsibility for her actions. Leopardi, through the voice of the Icelander, underscores a sense of solidarity among the creatures of the earth in response to Nature's devastating power.

However, this assertion of solidarity remains unconvincing. Although Leopardi characterizes the Icelander as vastly more intelligent and aware than the entirety of the human population, even the Icelander seems subject to the egoism and anthropocentric views of men; his declaration that all beasts hold the same view as humanity is presumptuous and challenges the way he depicts animals only a few paragraphs earlier, counting them as a part of Nature that seeks only to torment him. Nature gives one final reply and instead of chiding the Icelander, merely explains in broad terms the cycle of the universe, stating that life is a "perpetual" cycle of production and destruction, and that each serves the other in order to preserve the world (Creagh and Leopardi 104). Therefore, suffering is a necessary part of life, and humanity cannot avoid it.

The Icelander only responds once more, poignantly questioning who benefits from such an arrangement, when Leopardi abruptly ends the argument—ironically, at the hands of Nature.

Utilizing some satisfyingly dark humor, Leopardi states the end of the story remains unclear, and that either two lions hungrily devoured the Icelander, or that a massive wind blew him away and buried him beneath a mound of sand, drying his body and effectively transforming him into a well-preserved mummy. Whether Nature specifically decided to do away with the Icelander, or whether the cycles of the natural world were in motion and happened to intervene at that moment, the fact remains that Nature reigns supreme. It is paradoxical, playful ending to a rather powerful dialogue, but asserts what the Icelander could not grasp and eventually fell prey to: nature. Humanity may exist in the natural world, but he constitutes no special part of nature and needs no intimate communion with the world around him to thrive. Life, as a constant cycle of birth, suffering, and death, represents the apex of that which man can achieve.

Dialogo della Terra e Della Luna

“Dialogo della Terra e della Luna” is a rather unique passage in *Operette Morali* because Leopardi steps away from the characterization of Nature as a dangerous or indifferent entity, and instead paints her as corrupted and beset by man. In Leopardi’s other works of prose, and especially in his poetic masterpiece “La ginestra,” which will be analyzed in the next section, the character of Nature stands high above man; mankind, though it lives in Nature, is not an integral part of Nature’s hierarchy. This dialogue, instead, poses the question: if humanity were given power over the Earth, what would be the end result?

The dialogue begins with the Earth addressing the Moon, something she¹³ has not attempted in the past. Her inhabitants—humanity—have kept her so busy that she had no time to speak, but now, as poet and translator Patrick Creagh notes, the modern world is “dead” in comparison to the ancient world, and the Earth has more time to spare as a result (242). The Earth poses many questions, eventually asking after the Moon’s inhabitants, arms, and war; the Earth automatically assumes that men populate the face of the Moon, and therefore, the conditions of her planet are identical to that of the Moon, yet she corrects the Earth, even politely scolding her for her vanity in thinking that all parts of the universe mimic hers in every way. The Earth attempts to be more open-minded, as they discuss the tides, the sun and other topics, but in the end, she cannot stop herself from discussing men, and the Moon becomes chastising:

Still harping on men! And in spite of the fact that madness, as you say, never

leaves your confines, you aim to drive me mad in every way, and to deprive me of

¹³ Leopardi characterizes the Earth as female, coinciding with the characterization of Nature generally as female in his works, and with the Greek goddess Gaia. Less clear is the characterization of the Moon as male or female. As Creagh notes, Leopardi asserts that the Moon has been referred to in the masculine in ancient times. However, as the Moon refers to itself as the “serving-maid,” (72) it can be assumed that Leopardi too classifies it as female. Further supporting this idea is the fact that the moon is grammatically feminine and in Greco-Roman mythology is associated with the goddess Diana.

my own good sense, by seeking after theirs (Creagh and Leopardi 74).

The Earth eventually begins to speak of other concepts with which the Moon can identify, such as fashion, vice, crime, misfortune, sorrow, old age, and evil, but it is her commentary on humanity, and the Moon's reaction to it, that makes this dialogue so pertinent to the question of Romanticism and ecocriticism. For as Creagh aptly explains, "[Earth] has been contaminated by the manic self-importance of mankind, and is obsessed with the doings and opinions of men as if they were all she had to offer" (23). In other words, she is not the adversary of man, as Leopardi paints her in other works, nor is she indifferent towards man; the characteristics of humanity have become the characteristics of Earth, and just as modern society is culturally and socially dead, so is she. She can no longer appreciate or even understand the greater cosmos around her, taking on the anthropocentrism that Leopardi believes defines humanity. Mankind has diminished her to nothing more than a "dull-witted gossip" (Creagh and Leopardi 70). In this scenario, the populace of Earth has ruined her by infecting her with its own faults. This observation then begs the question: are the Earth and Nature one and the same, or should we consider them two separate entities? How does Leopardi consider them? To Leopardi, after all, nature wears many faces; it is the natural world and its systems, the indifferent deity, and even the mother-destroyer. This vision of the Earth as a vapid, self-absorbed entity establishes a new representation. Here, I argue that the Earth is not the same character as Nature that Leopardi often presents in other dialogues; instead, Earth becomes the place where Nature lives.

In the end, it is not Nature's power that vanquishes man, but man's own arrogance. Leopardi disapproves of this arrogance so acutely because of how petty humankind truly seems in comparison to the vastness of the universe (Creagh and Leopardi 23). Among the millions of

planets, stars and solar systems in space, Leopardi emphasizes that fact that the Earth represents just a small fraction of it. Therefore the Earth—and by default, humankind—are not the center of the universe as some had once believed. This idea represents a mode of thought scholars often refer to as Leopardi's 'cosmic pessimism,' in which the poet stresses the smallness and insignificance of man in the face of the wider macrocosm.

Leopardi seemed to take a specific interest in science and the cosmos; born near the end of the eighteenth century, he entered the world just as the curtain began closing on the Enlightenment era—that of Descartes, Voltaire, Rousseau, and other influential thinkers, many of whom had great influence on Leopardi. At the age of fourteen, Leopardi wrote one of his first works, titled *Storia dell'astronomia* (*The History of Astronomy*, 1813), and included in his *Operette Morali* a dialogue titled "Copernico," written as a conversation between Copernicus and the sun. It stands to reason that Copernicus' heliocentric ideas would interest and even inspire Leopardi; not only did it feed into Leopardi's own interest in the cosmos, but it also challenged the idea of geocentrism, and therefore, anthropocentrism—a pertinent theme in Leopardi's writings. Copernicus' modern understanding of the universe and his displacement of the earth, by default, displaced humanity and challenged modern Christian doctrine of the time period. This scientific viewpoint provided inspiration for Leopardi and certainly encouraged the further development of his cosmic pessimism.

In this light, Leopardi turns from nature and instead focuses on a characterization of the Earth, one that remains rather damning. He imbues her with the attributes and properties of man: vanity, egoism, and self-obsession. In doing so, Leopardi emphasizes how man's faults infect everything with which they come into contact—once more, we return to the evils of anthropocentrism. Nature, in this instance, remains unseen, but the Earth does not escape

Leopardi's poetic vision unscathed. Man's selfishness will always corrupt where it has the power to do so.

La ginestra

“La ginestra o il fiore del deserto,” often simply referred to as “La ginestra,” remains one of the most extraordinary works of Giacomo Leopardi’s career for its harsh discussion of the faults of man, its vivid contemplation of the universe, and its personification of Nature.

Throughout its seven stanzas, “La ginestra” offers an extremely developed and adversarial view of Nature in comparison to Leopardi’s other poetry, which often highlights nature’s melancholic beauty, but does not overtly threaten humanity in any way.

Leopardi opens with a stark comparison of the scorched earth of Mount Vesuvius in contrast with the delicacy of a single flower, which has somehow managed to bloom amid the desolation of the volcanic slopes. Vesuvius has wiped away all traces of the human settlements that once thrived there, such as Pompeii, and Leopardi invites anyone who believes in the power of man to come and ascertain with how little regard Nature views the human race (39-42, Bergin and Paolucci 137). In this stanza, Leopardi mockingly refers to the power of mankind by asserting that it has none. As easily as man erects his gardens and mansions and cities, Nature tears them down again through the devastating eruptions of Vesuvius. Man foolishly builds monuments to himself and for his own pleasure, but in the end, it is Nature that retains all control. Leopardi uses an extremely apt metaphor to describe this type of relationship in stanza five of “La ginestra”:

As a small apple, falling late in
autumn from its tree, brought down
by nothing other than its own ripeness,
in a second crushes, lays waste and
covers the precious shelters of a whole

nation of ants, scooped out of the soft

earth with great effort

Come d'arbor cadendo un picciol pomo,

cui là nel tardo autunno

maturità senz'altra forza atterra,

d'un popol di formiche i dolci alberghi,

cavati in molle gleba

con grande lavoro (202-207, Bergin and Paolucci 145)

The apple, which falls and destroys an entire hill of ants, does not fall for the sole purpose of causing destruction, but falls because of its own ripeness; it is a result of the cycles of Nature and her seasons, and the fact that the ant colony was obliterated is a mere consequence. Leopardi elaborates further, explaining that Nature has no more care or concern for man that it has for the ants, and if disaster less frequently harms mankind, it is only because more ants live in the world than men (Bergin and Paolucci 147). Again, Leopardi emphasizes the postmodern view of nature that Heidi C. M. Scott outlines—one that is rife with chaos and instability.

In the poetic world of “La ginestra,” Nature stands at the top of the existential hierarchy, and this is where Leopardi’s commentary on Nature can be understood in the light of ecocriticism. By painting Nature in such a way, Leopardi professes that mankind is lowly and weak in comparison to the world around it; Nature is the all-powerful, not man, and when man finally accepts that his immortality is a myth, he can live nobly. Nature does not exist to be built upon by man; just as nature cycles eternally through the seasons, so too will the generations of

man. The fourth stanza of “La ginestra,” which mimics the reflective opening of “L’infinito”¹⁴, continues to demonstrate the smallness of humankind, as the narrator looks out to the stars, delving into yet another discussion of cosmic pessimism by contemplating not only how small humanity seems on earth, but how much smaller he becomes in the context of the universe:

Often, I sit at night on these deserted
 slopes which the hardened flood
 clothes in a black that seems to undulate...
 and once my eyes have focused on those lights,
 which seem a tiny point to them,
 though they’re enormous, so that next to these
 the earth and sea
 are in truth no greater than a speck
 to which not only man
 but this globe where man is nothing
 is totally unknown

Sovente in queste rive,
 Che, desolate, a bruno
 Veste il flutto indurato, e par che ondeggi...
 E poi che gli occhi a quelle luci appunto,
 Ch’a lor sembrano un punto,
 E sono immense, in guisa

¹⁴ In “L’infinito” Leopardi begins the poem itself with a discussion of the landscape, which the narrator surveys from the solitary spot upon which he sits.

Che un punto a petto a lor son terra e mare

Veracemente; a cui

L'uomo non pur, ma questo

Globo ove l'uomo è nulla,

Sconosciuto è del tutto (158-160; 167-174, Galassi 143)

Humanity is neither the master of the earth nor the universe, and though humanity may view itself as a false master when Nature is treated as a resource for human ends, or when her significance and value are understood through human interests, humanity will always remain subject to Nature's cycles, whether it is the rising and setting of the sun, or a devastating eruption that kills everyone in sight. (Plumwood 147). Leopardi subscribes to such a mode of thinking; the poet damns those who let the search for happiness and pleasure guide them, and even provides models within "La ginestra" on how humans should strive to live in Nature, since true human happiness is unattainable.

Leopardi specifically presents two examples: the old man, described in stanza three, and the desert bloom itself, whose imagery pervades the poem, and for which Leopardi names it. Stanza three illustrates the character of the old man in relation to the rest of mankind, of which Leopardi disapproves. He deems an impoverished, unhealthy man who acknowledges his place in the world as more valuable than those who believe they are "made for pleasure" (101, Galassi 295). The idea of what it means to live nobly interests Leopardi, and in his eyes, to live a noble life constitutes the understanding that although Nature lives perpetually in cycles, humans will eventually meet their death. Finding beauty in Nature is not inherently evil, however; only when one reduces Nature's sanctity by limiting it to the role of pleasing or nourishing, does it become objectification (Kuo 193). Leopardi does not support such an idea.

Instead of humans imposing their mansions and gardens on the hills of Vesuvius, the poet contends that humankind should remain humble as the desert bloom, following its submissive and deferential example as it faces annihilation on the slopes of the volcano:

[you will bend your head,] but not bent so low
 as to seem cowardly begging, in vain,
 the oppressor soon coming; but not reach
 in foolish pride towards the stars...
 but wiser, but much less weak than man, since you never
 believed your delicate shoots, through
 fate's doing or yours, to be immortal

ma non piegato insino allora indarno
 codardamente supplicando innanzi
 al futuro oppressor; ma non eretto
 con forennato orgoglio inver le stelle...
 ma più saggia, ma tanto
 meno inferma dell'uomo, quanto le frali
 tue stirpe non credesti

o dal fato o da te fatte immortali (307-310; 314-315, Bergin and Paolucci 151)

In essence, the only communion with Nature that Leopardi predicts is one in which the creatures of earth accept the frailty of their existence, and then gracefully face death, just as the bloom does on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius. Leopardi does not shy away from the violence or terrors that Nature has to offer; he acknowledges openly Nature's power and ability to destroy. It is in

the recognition of this duality—Nature as both majestic and devastating—that provides a fuller, truer portrait of the natural world. Nature can be many things, but above all, Nature does not belong to man; she has her own will, and humanity cannot tame her for any shallow purpose.

Chapter 3

Leopardi in the broader scope of ecocriticism

Based on the examples and analysis of the previous two chapters, Leopardi has much to say about nature, both as environment and as character. He laments his surroundings, expresses their beauty, and then turns on Nature the character, vilifying her. Yet this complex relationship between Leopardi and Nature did not always exist as such. In fact, in Leopardi's early work, *Lo Zibaldone* (*The Notebook*, 1817), he praises her, as many other Romantic poets have done, stating that Nature is a "benign mother," although he still recognizes that the natural order of life is a cycle of "destruction [and] reproduction" (Leopardi 712). Leopardi acknowledges Nature's power, but he characterizes her much differently than in his later works. While many scholars speculate on the shift in Leopardi's view, some pointing to the circumstances of the poet's life as a reason for his change in thinking and his increasing pessimism, the fact remains that Nature, for Leopardi, took on a new role. For the purpose of this chapter, I will use William Wordsworth's poetry, as I have intermittently throughout the previous chapters, to serve as a foil against Leopardi's own body of work. Through these comparisons, I will emphasize in more detail what Leopardi's poetry means in the light of ecocriticism.

As mentioned, Leopardi's pessimism played a crucial role in shaping his poetry and prose. Many scholars, such as Sebastiano Timpanaro, identify two distinct types of pessimism that dominated Leopardi's life and literature. Historical pessimism constituted the first, and in this phase, according to Timpanaro, Leopardi worked under the direct influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, understanding human unhappiness as a result of man's withdrawal from Nature, the

“beneficent Mother” (“The Pessimistic Materialism of Giacomo Leopardi”). The desire for man’s return to the natural world, I would argue, establishes the basis for what many critics and scholars today understand as Romanticism; the question of man’s unhappiness in the face of nature pervades much Romantic writing with persistent yet subtle nostalgia. While Leopardi, too, remains linked to this nostalgia as a result of man’s disconnect from the natural world, Leopardi does not continue in this thinking for the majority of his life, and instead turns to his cosmic pessimism, a concept outlined and discussed in the previous chapter. Such cosmic pessimism, which asserts mankind’s smallness and insignificance in the face of the wider universe, forms the basis for Leopardi’s own thoughts on nature’s systems, human existence, and the cosmos, and sets him apart from the other Romantic writers who emphasize an overall positivity in nature or who encourage a communion between man and his surroundings.

Nature, according to the duality I afford the term in reference to Leopardi’s works, stands as sublimely beautiful in the abstract and powerfully superior in her relationship with humanity, taking the place of a traditional deity figure. The nature of Leopardi’s world represents a complex, multi-faceted entity that other Romantic writers often fail to recognize. It is interesting to note Wordsworth’s rejection of nature’s ‘dark’ side in comparison to Leopardi:

“[Wordsworth]... closed his eyes to the many aspects of the physical world which are unpleasant or which do not fit in with his preconceptions. We have seen that he ignored sudden, cataclysmic changes...and dwelt upon the permanence, moderation, and regularity of nature” (Havens 114).

The nature of Wordsworth’s world is pleasant and beautiful—never destructive, let alone unbalanced or shifting. In fact, it can even be a healing, vitalizing force, one that offers man more wisdom than any text could:

Books! ‘tis a dull and endless strife:

Come, hear the woodland linnet,
 How sweet his music is! On my life,
 There's more of wisdom in it.

And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
 He, too, is no mean preacher:
 Come forth into the light of things,
 Let Nature be your Teacher....

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
 Our meddling intellect
 Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:--
 We murder to dissect (9-16; 25-28)

In tone, alone, Wordsworth's "Tables Turned" (1798) differs greatly from the works of Leopardi for its bouncing optimism. Mankind, in Wordsworth's eyes, can always turn to Nature's constancy for true wisdom, goodness, and understanding. She offers it all to him, and she welcomes him in as his teacher. For Leopardi, Nature, as a dark, apathetic entity, does not embody any sort of regularity; in fact, the unpredictability of Nature and her indifference becomes a central theme to works like "La ginestra," "Dialogo della Natura e di un'islandese," and "Alla Primavera." While this grim view of the natural world seemingly contradicts Wordsworth's conception of the good, as Dr. D.J. Moores writes in his text *The Ecstatic Poetic Tradition*, Nature should not be reduced only to its seeming indifference or its ability to destroy:

Nature is sometimes horrible to human beings, but it is also frequently beautiful, and people across the globe still find sustenance in it.... [Wordsworth] was likely not uttering a naive belief in nature's benevolence but pointing out that nature in its beautiful, non-threatening aspects can teach human beings to revere beauty (99).

Moore avers that Wordsworth recognizes Nature's ability to devastate and destroy, yet chooses to focus on her beautiful aspects that can teach humanity to be better. Whether Wordsworth intentionally ignores Nature's destructive powers or chooses merely to overlook them, the fact remains that his writing remains vastly different from that of Leopardi.

That is not to say that Leopardi only paints Nature in a negative light in comparison to Wordsworth. While Wordsworth focuses specifically on the good of the world surrounding man, Leopardi instead chooses the perilous and the pessimistic, yet beauty and destruction do not exist in mutual exclusivity in Leopardi's eyes—they simply represent two characteristics of a greater entity. As discussed in the first chapter, Leopardi can and often does acknowledge Nature's sublime beauty, though it remains separate from man; works such as "L'infinto," "Alla Primavera," and "L'ultimo canto di Saffo" each attempt to reconcile Nature's beauty with her indifference or her ability to destroy. Unfortunately, as we have seen through Leopardi's eyes, no such reconciliation can be had. Here lies the difference between the way Wordsworth and Leopardi view nature; while Wordsworth recognizes Nature's beauty, especially in terms of what humans can learn from her, Leopardi's recognition of Nature's beauty becomes a sad fact, since he asserts that man can never commune with the outside world.

Despite variation in their modes of expression and divergence in their ideologies, it would be incorrect to characterize Wordsworth as some sort of antithesis to Leopardi, and even

worse, it would be irresponsible to assert that Wordsworth sees no problems or negativity in the relationship between Nature and mankind; in fact, one of his most famous works, “The World is Too Much With Us” (1807) espouses many of the same themes that Leopardi does—namely, man’s folly: “The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;-- / Little we see in Nature that is ours; We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!” (1-4). Men’s egoism becomes a corrupting force, as it does in Leopardi’s “Dialogo di un Folletto e di uno Gnomo” and “Dialogo della Terra e Della Luna.” Since humanity finds nothing it deems useful in Nature, it turns from her, effectively selling its soul in the process.

Though Leopardi often dwells on the theme of man’s egoism, Wordsworth’s idea does not truly coincide with Leopardi’s own. Upon closer examination, each poet’s conceptions and beliefs widely diverge. Wordsworth sees humanity’s abandonment of the natural world for selfish reasons as a disruption of the accepted order of existence: unity between man and the natural world. Because humanity no longer sees Nature as useful, it turns its back on both her and the benevolence she offers. Leopardi, in contrast, denies any sort of unity—man could never turn from Nature because man never stood with her at all, and in fact, continues to remain invariably separated in isolation. Therefore, while Wordsworth chides us and tells us we need nature, Leopardi instead suggests we should only try to emulate the lowly broom flower that grows on the slopes of Vesuvius in “La ginestra”: existing with humility and facing mortality head-on. Such actions will result in a life well-lived for humans who cannot achieve any true form of happiness.

Paradigms of Leopardi's Nature

Within Leopardi's broad understanding of nature, there exist many tropes and paradigms that pertain to various veins of ecocriticism, such as the role of the animal in nature, the idea of apocalypse, and Nature, the character, as mother. Within his various works of prose and poetry, Leopardi offers strands of commentary that compound and overlap to produce complex ideas about the natural world. For example, the role of animals appears often in association with the view of Nature as a malevolent, though indifferent, entity or as a part of the sublime beauty of nature; for instance, "Dialogo della Natura e di un'islandese" underscores aptly the way in which Leopardi isolates man from beast just as he separates man from nature. Not only does the Icelander discuss in the dialogue how animals, along with the climate and weather of the earth, torment him endlessly, but at the close of the dialogue, it is even suggested that two ravenous lions devoured the Icelander before he was able to finish his discussion with Nature. In "L'ultimo canto di Saffo," Leopardi includes birdsong among the images of nature's beauty, tying animals to a wider understanding of nature. These examples paint a fluid picture of the interconnection of animals and the natural world.

Leopardi not only implies an inherent cooperation between nature and animal that man lacks, and even goes so far as to say that animals, in fact, are nature. In doing so, he dictates that only man can suffer at Nature's hand—animals, in their simplicity, not only do not suffer as humans must, but become an extension of her will, tormenting the Icelander anytime he comes into contact with earth's creatures, or demonstrating nature's untouchable beauty with the lilting melodies of birds. With the drawing of a distinct connection between the natural world and animals, Leopardi mounts an argument that largely diminishes the creatures of earth apart from humans, who in reality interact in a "great, complex dance" with each other and the larger natural

world (Coetzee 53). Leopardi ignores this idea, negating any form of intricacy on the part of animal existence. He instead chooses to paint humanity both as the most intellectually gifted creatures, and yet the most self-serving and unhappy ones. It is man who suffers in this scenario, since intellect begets dissatisfaction, while animals escape unscathed as servants of the natural world. Leopardi all at once elevates the status of nature and diminishes the status of animals, relegating them to a level of intellectual lowness, destined to be controlled by the Nature, the supreme enemy of man, or nature, the beautiful realm that isolates humanity.

Another intriguing facet of modern ecocritical study that Leopardi begins to develop is that of an apocalyptic view of the post-human world, as specifically outlined in his work “Dialogo di un Folletto e di uno Gnomo.” As underscored in the second chapter, Leopardi imagines a world where humans have destroyed themselves, leaving the earth free of their burden. As Moores writes, it seems necessary to acknowledge that the earth would certainly be better off without a human presence, as Leopardi asserts; however, most nature-minded poets are slow to “betray their own species” or privilege the natural world above all else (98). Interestingly enough, Leopardi, by Moores’ standards, partakes directly in that betrayal by acknowledging humanity as the earth’s most troublesome burden.

Leopardi offers a critique of the human race that almost begins to turn in the direction of environmental accountability, especially through his chiding commentary on the way man overburdens the earth’s waterways. The imp and the gnome, taking on the ideas of Leopardi, describe a natural world that seems less encumbered—more free. Yet this critique falls short of any ‘green’ agenda since it focuses most pointedly on the mistakes of man, ignoring the implications of those mistakes in nature. While some critics and scholars view an urgency in apocalyptic ecology that demands people come together in “collective responsibility” for the

sake of the earth, Leopardi's notions do not stretch so far (Schatz 20). Leopardi never calls for such solidarity, except when he urges mankind to recognize Nature as their truest, most powerful enemy; certainly, he does not view nature, the environment, as something that needs saving. Still, his vision of the apocalypse should force us, at the very least, to start asking the right questions, and his decision to paint a world without the egoism of man reveals the poet's deep displeasure with his own species. To Leopardi, we are the problem, but he does not go so far as to recognize that we must also strive to be the solution. Nature stands not as a primary concern, therefore, but as a character of indifference who benefits from man's extinction.

One final archetype that Leopardi questions is that of Nature as mother. Though Leopardi distances himself from the idea of Nature as a "benign mother," by demonstrating his belief in Nature's chaotic power, the role of the maternal is still one that remains present in his works, and in the works of his contemporaries. The theme of the mother is also prevalently analyzed in ecocriticism, and specifically, in ecofeminism.¹⁵ Though Leopardi often elevates Nature to the position of mother, it often comes with a sense of irony, or with the recognition of Nature's lack of maternal care and love. In stanza three of "La ginestra" specifically, Leopardi uses two titles to characterize Nature, the character, within the poem. All at once, she is the birth mother of mortals, giving them life, as well as their "step-mother in intent," implying that Nature feels no real love for her progeny and stands responsible for their suffering (125, Bergin and Paolucci 141).

While both Leopardi and his contemporaries use "mother" imagery in certain instances, it is Leopardi who turns it on its head, and in effect, liberates the natural world. As ecofeminist scholar Gwendolin Huey-jen Kuo writes, the metaphorical connection between nature and

¹⁵ Ecofeminism is a social movement that combines elements of feminism and ecology, regarding both as reactions to and remedies for male societal domination.

maternity, in effect, limits nature's role to that of the reproducing and nursing role of the mother; in fact, Kuo goes on to claim that Wordsworth's personification of nature in this way reflects a wholly subjective appropriation of it (190; 216). Leopardi, too, personifies nature, but Wordsworth earns Kuo's disapproval because of his decision to imbue nature with simplistic, maternal qualities that transform her into a conduit for human pleasures and needs.

Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," as introduced earlier to emphasize the stark differences between Wordsworth and Leopardi, again becomes relevant in the discussion of nature as a nurturing force for man. Again, Nature becomes a guide, a guardian, an anchor, and a nurse to the speaker, encompassing an incredibly benevolent force that ushers man towards improved self-realization and understanding (109-110). As professor Elizabeth Fay writes in her text *Becoming Wordsworthian: A Performative Aesthetic*, Wordsworth pushes Nature to the "woman's traditional place as praised or blamed object," around which the poetry structures itself (40). The question then becomes: if Wordsworth falls prey to this maternalistic trope by praising her as an object, does Leopardi fall prey to the same by blaming her for man's suffering?

It seems that Leopardi does not necessarily make the same mistake, for although he blames Nature for the suffering of humanity, the poet acknowledges that suffering constitutes life. If Leopardi does reduce Nature to an object, it is only in the way she becomes an instrument through which men can recognize their insignificance. When the poet feminizes Nature, therefore, he does so in way that neither renders Nature a resource for men, nor reduces her to tropes of nourishment or reproduction; while she is personified, she remains a deified force, purposefully imbued with a sense of danger and looming superiority over the human world. In recognizing this version of Nature's maternity, Leopardi underscores her power and essentially

elevates the status of the natural world; he looks with shame upon the egoism of humanity, urging us to understand our faults and to recognize our own insignificance. Nature, therefore, becomes both an entity and a place deserving of respect, not for what she can provide man, but for how she stands above him.

In light of such depictions of the natural world, Leopardi presents a rather complex portrait of nature, both as environment and as character. By raising questions about maternity, apocalypse, and the role of animals in comparison to the role of humans in nature, Leopardi begins to tackle issues that remain crucial in the wider scope of ecocriticism. In both his works of prose and poetry, Leopardi provides a nature that readers would not likely find in other Romantic works of the period; as environment, nature turns from humanity, and as character, Nature stands deified above the world of mankind. Leopardi asserts a depiction of nature as elevated, powerful, and deserving of human respect, and in doing so, suggests more broadly how humans should strive to live while constantly being challenged by the natural world.

Conclusion

Giacomo Leopardi's distinct view of nature, both as sublime environment and antagonistic entity, differ greatly from other Romantic characterizations of the period. With his exquisite yet forceful works of poetry, along with his direct, often dark-humored prose, Leopardi offers a nature that overpowers, maims, ignores, devastates, or even kills; it neither stabilizes mankind nor offers reassurance, and therefore, remains both separate from the human world and far superior to it. Leopardi, whether he imagines a world without humanity, an earth overtaken by humanity, or an environment that dominates or isolates humanity, the fact remains that nature always stands as an incredible force. Though written in the early nineteenth century, Leopardi's ideas help to frame our most modern ecological questions: how should we view nature? Does nature deserve our respect? In Leopardi's eyes, it does and it must. In a time that seeks to understand "green" living, ecological accountability, climate change, and natural disaster, Leopardi begins to move towards these questions in his own works, begging the human race to recognize how small we remain in the face of the wider cosmos. Nature, according to Leopardi, can be devastating, beautiful, cruel, or powerful—it can be the world around us, or it can be the mother-destroyer. Yet there is one thing it cannot truly be: ours.

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