UNDER THE VOLCANO

Giacomo Leopardi's radical despair.

BY ADAM KIRSCH

When Matthew Arnold first published a collected edition of his poems, in 1853, he made a decision that can have few parallels in literary history: he refused to include one of the best things he had ever written, on the ground that it was too depressing. "Empedocles on Etna," which had appeared anonymously the year before, used the voice of the ancient Greek philosopher—who, according to tradition, committed suicide by leaping into the Sicilian volcano—to express Arnold's own, very modern feelings of alienation and despair. "For something has impair'd thy spirit's strength,/ And dried its self-sufficing fount of joy./ Thou canst not live with men nor with thyself," Empedocles declares, before beseeching the flames, "Receive me, hide me, quench me, take me home!" But Arnold decided that he did not have the right to inflict such images of hopelessness on his fellow-men. "What then are the situations, from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived?" he asked in a celebrated preface. "They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done."

What Arnold did not want, in short, was to write like Giacomo Leopardi. Leopardi, who had died in 1837, was already being acclaimed as the greatest of modern Italian poets. The inscription on his gravestone, outside Naples, where he spent the last years of his life, proclaimed him a "writer of the most elevated philosophy and poetry, whose only peers are the Greeks." In Arnold's view, Leopardi's "pure and sure touch, with his fineness of perception," made him "far more of the artist" than his contemporaries, the English Romantics: Leopardi had "wider culture" and "more freedom from illusions" than Wordsworth, a greater "power of seizing the real point" than Byron.

Yet if Leopardi's book of songs, the "Canti," was "one of the most influential works of the nineteenth century," as Jonathan Galassi writes in the introduction to his lucid and revelatory new translation (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $35), its influence was due in part to the amount of resistance it generated. For Leopardi is the supreme poet of passive, helpless suffering—a writer who constantly reiterated, in verse and prose, his conviction that in human life "there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done." The most concise statement of his world view can be found in an entry that he made in his vast notebook, known as the "Zibaldone," in 1826, at the age of twenty-seven:

Giacomo Leopardi

RICCARDO VECCHIO

> Everything is evil. I mean, everything that is, is wicked; every existing thing is an evil; everything exists for a wicked end. Existence is a wickedness and is ordained for wickedness. Evil is the end, the final purpose, of the universe. . . . The only good is nonbeing; the only really good thing is the thing that is *not*, things that are *not* things; all things are bad.

Even in these few sentences it is possible to hear the unremitting quality of Leopardi's pessimism, the crushing insis-

tence, which distinguishes it from the seductive melancholy of other Romantic poets. In several ways, Leopardi's life can be compared with Keats's: the Italian poet was born in 1798, the English poet in 1795; the former suffered from scoliosis, which probably caused his death, at the age of thirty-eight, the latter from tuberculosis, which killed him at twenty-five; both were constantly worried about money and moved restlessly from place to place. Yet when Keats writes, "Now more than ever seems it rich to die,/To cease upon the midnight with no pain," his language, like the nightingale's song, enchants death and turns it into "an ecstasy." In Leopardi's "Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia," by contrast, death is simply the last act in the pageant of pointless misery that is our existence:

> Little old white-haired man,
> weak, half naked, barefoot,
> with an enormous burden on his back,
> up mountain and down valley,
> over sharp rocks, across deep sands and bracken,
> . . . till at last he comes
> to where his way
> and all his effort led him:
> terrible, immense abyss
> into which he falls, forgetting everything.
> This, O virgin moon,
> is human life.

To find Leopardi's equal in nihilism, one would have to turn to philosophers like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, both of whom admired his work. No wonder Arnold, while praising Leopardi's artistry, finally decided that Wordsworth was the greater poet, because his vision of life is "healthful and true, whereas Leopardi's pessimism is not." Other critics were even harsher: to one Italian contemporary, Leopardi was "gratuitous, nauseatingly cold, and desolatingly bitter."

Yet next to Leopardi's frank soul-sickness—"I feel my heart break, and I'm totally/inconsolable about my fate," he writes—Arnold's praise of the "healthful" begins to sound specious and self-deluding. "As to myself, my judgment is that I'm unhappy; in this I know I'm not wrong," says a character in the "Operette Morali," Leopardi's book of philosophical dialogues and fables. "If the others are not unhappy, I congratulate them with all my heart." And, while reading Leopardi, it is hard to feel that you are really happy—that you have not simply been ignoring the hard truths he faces, about mortality, oblivion, and the futility of human endeavor. To the English critic Cyril Connolly, whom Galassi quotes, Leopardi was a "Grand Inquisitor" determined to "break down our alibis of health and happiness."

Both in Leopardi's lifetime and since, one of the most common defenses against the inquisition his work represents has been to wonder whether the poet denied the existence of health and happiness simply because both were foreign to him. To Alessandro Manzoni, the author of the classic Italian novel "The Betrothed," Leopardi's philosophy could be summed up as "I am hunchbacked and ill, therefore there is no God." Naturally, Leopardi objected strongly to this kind of ad-hominem criticism. When a German magazine published a review of his work that made a similar suggestion, he wrote, "I wish to protest against this invention of weakness and vulgarity, and beg my readers to try to controvert my remarks and my arguments, rather than to accuse my ill-health."

Yet Leopardi's deformity and physical pain are unavoidable presences in his work. The hump came from his scoliosis—a curvature of the spine, which began in adolescence and gradually pressed against his lungs and heart. In addition, he suffered from poor eyesight and mysterious nervous maladies. A friend who saw him in the late eighteen-twenties remarked, "Everything harms him: wind, air, light, every sort of food, rest or movement, work or idleness." His deformity effectively barred him from having any sort of romantic life, except for the few unrequited loves recorded in his poems, and he probably died a virgin. In "Sappho's Last Song," he invokes the ancient tradition of the poet's ugliness in order to channel his own feelings of exclusion:

> 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.

His body, however, was only one source of his misery. Leopardi hated the small town he was born in, Recanati, which he called "the deadest and most ignorant city of the Marches, which is the most ignorant and uncultivated province of Italy." His father, Count Monaldo, who had a nobleman's pride without the money to support it, was authoritarian and overprotective to a degree that now seems almost unbelievable. Until the poet was twenty years old, he was not allowed to leave the house without a tutor, and his father continued to cut his meat for him until he was even older. In a letter that Leopardi wrote to Monaldo but never sent, he complained, "In the interest of something that I have never known, but you call home and family, you have required from your children the sacrifice not only of their physical welfare, but of their natural desires, their youth, their whole life."

His mother, Adelaide, was more dreadful still, thanks to her religious fanaticism. "Not only did she refuse pity to those parents who lost infant children, but she deeply and sincerely envied them, because the children had soared to a safe paradise," Leopardi wrote. "She was most solicitous in the care she gave those poor sick children, but deep in her heart she hoped it would be useless, and even confessed that the only fear she had in consulting with doctors was to hear of some improvement." It is impossible not to see the son as following in his mother's footsteps, with his hatred of this world and his longing for death's release—though the atheist Leopardi could not look forward to a reward in Heaven. Certainly, when maternal images appear in his poetry they are always terrible. In a late poem, "On an Ancient Funeral Relief," he addresses nature as "mother feared and wept for/since the human family was born,/marvel that cannot be praised,/that bears and nurtures only to destroy."

Given so many sources of trauma and suffering, perhaps the most remarkable thing about Leopardi is that he was ever happy. By 1817, when he wrote his first letters to Pietro Giordani—a freethinking ex-monk who was his earliest friend and patron—Leopardi was already complaining of "the stubborn, black, horrendous, barbarous melancholy that wears away and devours me." But, in his poetry, what makes the torment of adult life complete is the contrast it offers to the happiness of childhood, which for Leopardi is the one enviable time of life. In "To Silvia," an elegy for a dead child, he recalls his own youth:

> What light thoughts,
> what hopes, what hearts, my Silvia!

What human life and fate
were to us then!
When I remember so much hope
I'm overcome,
bitter, inconsolable,
and rage against my own ill luck.
O Nature, Nature,
why don't you deliver later
what you promised then? Why do you
lead on
your children so?

Yet he would come to believe that it was not just his "own ill luck" that made adulthood such a miserable sequel to childhood. His work in verse and prose—comprising the "Canti," the "Operette Morali," and the "Pensieri," a collection of aphorisms—rests on a vision of human life and history that gave this decline a syllogistic inevitability. Reason, Leopardi argues, is always a faculty of diminution and disillusion, so that whatever we understand rationally ceases to seem valuable or significant to us. "Reason is the enemy of everything great; reason is the enemy of nature; nature is great and reason is small," he writes.

It follows that we are best off when we understand things least, because "a tiny *confused idea* is always greater than a vast one which is *clear*." In an individual life, the time of happy illusion is childhood; in historical terms, the happiest people were Leopardi's beloved Greeks, who still believed in the gods and in eternal glory. On the other hand, a modern, educated European, who sees the world through the cold lens of reason, is the unhappiest person imaginable. "This is the terrible human condition and the barbarous teaching of reason," he wrote when he was just twenty-one years old. "Since human pleasures and pains are mere illusions, the anguish deriving from the certainty of the nothingness of things is always the only true reality."

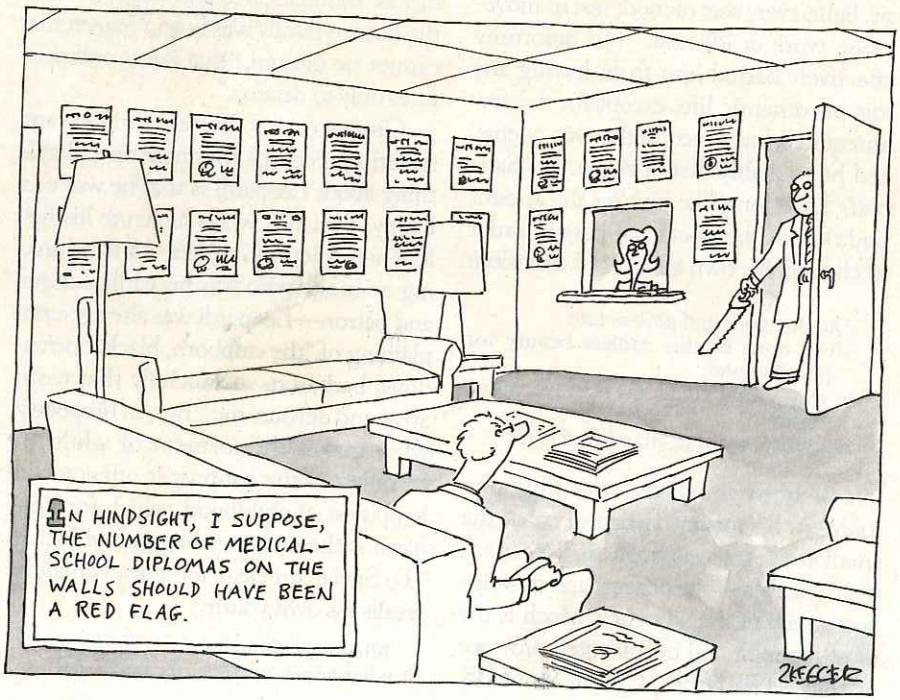
In this way, Leopardi constructs a metaphysical prison, from which escape is impossible; and reading him sometimes feels like being locked in a cell with him. It is not an experience for the fainthearted. Anyone acquainted with depression will find Leopardi dreadfully plausible: another name for his "reason" could be depressive lucidity, and his works communicate an apathy and an anhedonia that are almost contagious. He himself was certainly prey to what would now be called acute depression, as is clear from his letters to Giordani: "If in this moment I were to go mad, my madness would consist of sitting always with my eyes staring, my mouth open, and my hands between my knees, without laughing or crying, or even moving except for sheer necessity. . . . I no longer see any difference between death and this my life."

If Leopardi's poetry was merely the expression in verse of this state of mind, however, it could hardly have become so beloved. Leopardi was not often moved to write verse—the "Canti" includes only thirty-six finished poems, along with a handful of shorter or fragmentary pieces—and there were periods of years when he wrote no poetry at all. But, when he did write, it was usually because something had temporarily broken up his misery—not to the extent of producing actual happiness but enough to permit him to contemplate the dreadful facts of existence in a creative light. In his very earliest poems, this factor is patriotism, which allows him to imagine that the fallenness of mankind is merely the fallenness of an Italy subjugated by French and Austrian occupiers. "O my country," Leopardi begins in "To Italy," "I can see the walls/ and arches and the columns and the statues/ and lonely towers of our ancestors,/but I don't see the glory." He is still young enough to believe that the glory can be restored, by acts of heroism like those of the Greeks at Thermopylae.

These first poems brought Leopardi the fame of a patriotic poet, the bard of the Risorgimento, but he quickly lost faith in politics. Seeing human nature as he did, he could hardly help disdaining the progressive, activist certainty of so many Italian literary men as a shallow delusion. One of his last poems, "Recantation for Marchese Gino Capponi," is a mock apology for his quietism, which turns into a blunt satire on the nineteenth-century belief in progress, the age of "universal love,/ railroads, expanded commerce, steam,/ typography and cholera." The reasons for human suffering were innate and individual, not accidental and social, and it was absurd to hope to make "a joyful, happy race" from "many wretched and unhappy persons."

In his great "idylls," a series of six poems written from 1819 to 1821 (around the time Keats was producing his Odes), Leopardi finds a source of pleasure, instead, in the very voluptuousness of his suffering. This is the period of "Infinity," perhaps the archetypal Romantic poem in any language, with its closing embrace of death: "So my mind sinks in this immensity:/ and foundering is sweet in such a sea." In "To the Moon," Leopardi again achieves an apotheosis of the vague, bittersweet longing of adolescence:

Yet it helps me, thinking back, reliving
the time of my unhappiness.
Oh in youth, when hope has a long road
ahead



and the way of memory is short,
how sweet it is remembering what
happened,
though it was sad, and though the pain
endures!

This is a Romantic's revision of Dante, who wrote that the worst suffering is to recall happy times when you are miserable. To Leopardi, remembering the miserable times is its own kind of happiness. It is lines like these that George Santayana must have been thinking of when he wrote that "long passages" of his verse "are fit to repeat in lieu of prayers through all the watches of the night."

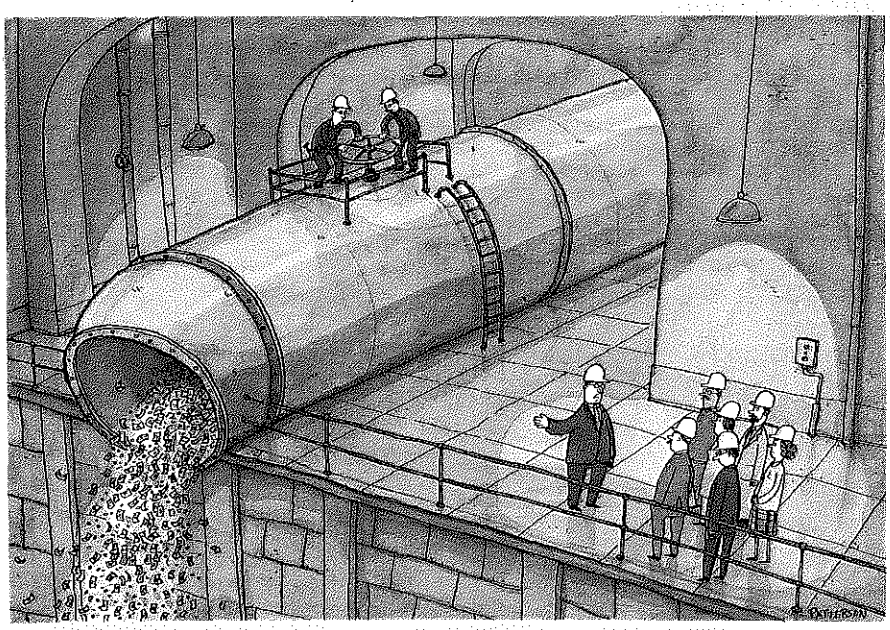
Because the bitterness of the thoughts in Leopardi's poems is redeemed primarily by the sweetness and purity of the language—what Galassi calls his "impenetrably perfect, sonorous expressiveness"—he presents an unusual challenge for the translator. He is one of those poets who are often said to be untranslatable, and it is remarkable how little he figures in the consciousness of English readers, compared with, say, Baudelaire or Hölderlin. (The standard English-language biography of Leopardi, by Iris Origo, appeared in 1935.) In the face of this challenge, Galassi—who, in addition to being a poet and a translator, is the head of Farrar, Straus & Giroux—has taken the tactful and intelligent approach of translating primarily for sense, "a close approximation of the poem's literal thrust," rather than trying to re-create Leopardi's metres and rhymes. By using unaffected words and a natural movement in his English versions, Galassi loses the acoustic density of the Italian (which appears in the edition as a parallel text) but, by the same token, preserves Leopardi's classical directness—what one Italian critic has referred to as the "sublime poverty" of his style. The effect is evident throughout his work, as in "To Silvia":

Silvia, do you remember still
that moment in your mortal life
when beauty shimmered
in your smiling, startled eyes
as, bright and pensive, you arrived
at the threshold of youth?

Between 1823 and 1828, as Leopardi moved from Milan to Bologna to Florence to Pisa in search of an affordable city with a tolerable climate, he wrote almost no verse. It says something about the nature of his genius that it was only when he returned to his loathed Recanati, and to the family home that suffocated him, that he was inspired to return to poetry. Once again, his theme was the way "youth's beloved moment flies, more dear/than fame and laurel, dearer than the simple/light of day and breath." But now youth was receding into memory, and his reflections become more impersonal and elegiac. Nothing could be more characteristic than the way Leopardi compares the period of youth not, as we might expect, to the rising sun but to "The Setting of the Moon," the title of one of his last poems. Even at the age Leopardi believes to be the prime of life, there is no real sunlight, only the "thousand lovely/insubstantial images and phantoms" cast by the moonlight. When this moon sets, all that is left is the pitch-blackness of adulthood, when "life is forlorn, lightless."

There is, of course, a certain perversity in this metaphor, which refuses to allow that any part of human life takes place in the daytime. It is on the level of metaphor, in fact, that Leopardi's pessimism shows itself to be most oppressively partial. His comparison of human life, in the "Wandering Shepherd," to the journey of a weak old man over harsh terrain is unforgettable. And yet mountains and deserts can function as images of difficulty only because the earth also contains valleys and meadows and other pleasant environments, just as the moon seems poetically pale only because we can contrast it with the bright sun.

But Leopardi never allows his despair to be surprised by the logic of his own metaphors. In his last poem, "Broom," he offers his grandest statement on human fate, comparing mankind to the tenacious shrub, *la ginestra*, that springs up in the volcanic ash around Mt. Vesuvius. This inevitably leads to a reflection on Pompeii, whose inhabitants the poet compares to a colony of ants crushed by a falling apple: "Nature has no more esteem/or care for the seed of man/than for the ant." That the fall of the apple is part of the reproduction of the tree, that ants feed on fallen fruit—in short, that his own metaphor offers images of growth and regeneration as well as destruction—of all this Leopardi refuses to take account. For him, death does not just end life; it nullifies life, and the fact that we are going to die is the only fact that matters. The key to the terrible power of his work is that we can never totally banish the suspicion that he might be right. ♦



"And this is where we adjust the interest rate."