

Introduction: Affinities

We began writing this Element not primarily to develop our own research enthusiasms – Beckett, for Boxall, Leopardi, for Nicholls – but rather because we were fascinated by the idea of a ‘conversation’ between two writers who seemed to have so much in common in terms of character and outlook. Beckett recalled that ‘Leopardi was a strong influence when I was young (his pessimism, not his patriotism!)’ (2014b, 136), and his humorous dissociation here shows how cleanly he could separate the aristocratic nineteenth-century poet, with his flamboyant nationalism and his fondness for archaic mannerism, from the mordant pessimist in whom Beckett quickly recognised an avatar of the ‘modern’ spirit. This Element, then, will have less to say about the question of influence as such – Beckett scholars have readily acknowledged that – than about the deep-seated affinities and shared preoccupations that might seem to place these unique bodies of work in a sort of reciprocal relation that is at once intellectual and affective. The writings of Leopardi (1798–1837) and Beckett (1906–89) seem to us increasingly to illuminate each other even as they also harbour similar opacities and areas of unresolved contradiction and impasse. To this end, we have divided this Element into two parts: in the first, we read Leopardi, while looking forward to Beckett; in the second, we read Beckett, while looking back to Leopardi.

On one level, of course, Beckett’s regard for Leopardi might be explained straightforwardly by the temperamental and philosophical pessimism the two men seem to have shared, though Daniela Caselli (1996, 2012) has helpfully questioned the simplicity of this assumption. Her conclusion is one from which the present Element takes its initial premise: both writers, she suggests, ‘refuse the totalizing power of an absolute negation, and for this neither of them can be labelled nihilistic, and even less pessimistic’ (Caselli, 1996, 4). Roberta Cauchi-Santoro (2016) begins her book-length study of the relationship with the same assumption, though, as the following pages will show, we are less persuaded than she that Leopardi and Beckett are primarily concerned with the need for compassion and recognition of the other.¹

Beckett read Leopardi during his student years at Trinity College, Dublin (1923–7), and there are allusions to the *Canti* throughout his early works.² In his first published essay, ‘Dante . . . Bruno . . . Vico . . . Joyce’, Beckett (1972, 17)

¹ Cauchi-Santoro’s approach differs from ours in her determination to read both writers through an amalgamation of Lacanian and Levinasian theory. On Beckett and Leopardi, see also Cortellessa (2006, 111–20), Bouchard (1999, 77–89) and Furlani (2024, 31–53).

² Unless otherwise indicated, the Italian edition of the poems used throughout is Leopardi (1987) and all English translations are by Henry Weinfield who has generously permitted us to use them here. All other translations when not attributed are by Peter Nicholls.

quotes from Leopardi's 'Sopra il monumento di Dante che si perparava in Firenze' ('On the Monument to Dante Being Erected in Florence', 1818) to celebrate Joyce ('il meonio cantor non è più solo', 'Homer doesn't stand alone'), and in a passage in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (Beckett, 1992a, 18) he plays on a phrase from Leopardi's 'Le ricordanze' ('The Recollections', 1829).³ Mark Nixon (2011, 200 n.36) observes that 'The *Watt* notebooks contain a further reference to the "unhappy writer" Leopardi and his poem "Night Song of a Wandering Asiatic Shepherd" (notebook 1, 31 r).⁴ and it has been suggested that the closing stages of *Endgame* echo the ending of the 'Canto del gallo silvestre' ('Song of the Great Wild Rooster') in Leopardi's *Operette morali* (Barnes, 1989, 45–6). Ruby Cohn (2005, 109) also notes that the protagonist of the *Ur-Watt*, James Quin, is an avid reader of the Italian poet, and Ackerley (2010, 211–12) reads the mention of 'a thicket flower unrecorded' in the 'Addenda' to *Watt* as an allusion to Leopardi's 'Broom' and Mr Hackett's 'hunch' as a nod to the deformity caused by the poet's excessive study in his youth.

Beckett's direct allusions to Leopardi are well-known to critics, then, but there are other cases where the connection is less clear-cut. It is tempting, for example, to wonder if Beckett knew the autobiographical fragment 'Appunti e ricordi' ('Notes and Memories') that Leopardi rapidly drafted in 1819.⁵ This erratically punctuated, elliptical fragment with its slippages between first and third person pronouns might recall a similar oscillation in Beckett's *The Unnamable* (in, e.g., Beckett, 1994, 396–7), and several figures and phrases in Leopardi's text seem almost to foreshadow ones developed by Beckett. The comparison of the window of the ark from which Noah launched the dove with 'that window over the stairs' in the Palazzo Leopardi (Leopardi, 1988, 1193) might, for instance, have provided one prompt for the *mise-en-scène* of *Endgame*, a possibility which seems more compelling when we know that the first draft of *Fin de partie* made more extended reference to the story of the Flood (Knowlson, 1996, 336–7). Echoes of this kind are certainly suggestive but, as Caselli (2012, 136) has noted, the absence of any notebooks from the period 1928–30 means that we know little about the texts from which Beckett

³ Leopardi's 'alla fioca lucerne poetando' ('writing poetry by my faint lantern') there becomes 'alla fioca lucerne leggendo Meredith'.

⁴ Ackerley (2010) suggests several possible allusions in *Watt* to Leopardi's 'Canto notturno': 212.2 ('a fascio of white light'), 217.1 ('an encountered night song'), 222.6 ('universal splendour') and 225.4 ('night wanderer'). He also finds in the typescript of the novel possible allusions to 'La ginestra' ('Broom') (Ackerley, 2010, 211, 214). Byron (2022) considers the more extensive allusions to 'Canto notturno' in the manuscript of *Watt* and Beckett's way of connecting them with Wordsworth's 'Salisbury Plain'.

⁵ The fragment was first published in Leopardi (1906). After D'Intino (1995), the text has been referred to as *Vita abbozzata di Silvio Sarno*.

drew his first knowledge of the poet. A recent catalogue of his library as it remained at his death does, however, give us a little more information, showing that at some point (and obviously after the composition of his Proust essay) he acquired a 1936 edition of *I Canti* (edited by Ettore Fabietti) along with a copy of Leopardi's *Prose, con uno studio di Pietro Giordani*, undated but a reprint of the 1913 first edition of the same text (Van Hulle and Nixon, 2013, 276). Beckett's copies of these works are not annotated, as Caselli (2012, 146 n.8) ascertained, but they do tell us several things that may add significantly to the allusions we have already noted. First, the *Prose* contains the *Operette morali* which may well have provided Beckett with an introduction to Leopardi's satirical mode and to the pessimistic materialism that predicted the sentiments of the poem that was to remain of central importance to Beckett, 'A se stesso' ('To Himself'). The *Prose* also includes the *Pensieri*, the acerbic thoughts and maxims that at the end of his life Leopardi culled for publication from his voluminous private journal, the *Zibaldone*.⁶ Perhaps most importantly, though, Fabietti's *Canti* prints as a free-standing poem the 'Coro di morti' ('Chorus of the Dead'), which provided the epigraph to the 'Dialogue between Frederick Ruysch and His Mummies'; most subsequent editors would present the poem only as the epigraph to the 'Dialogue'. We shall suggest in Section 3 that the 'Chorus' might have contributed significantly to Beckett's thoughts on death and dying.

With these two editions of Leopardi's works in hand, it is tempting to assume that Beckett's knowledge of the Italian poet may have extended well beyond the texts indicated by his occasional allusions. Indeed, we shall propose in Section 2 that the more systematic use he made of Leopardi's 'To Himself' reveals the longer reach of the Italian poet's influence. For it was in this poem that Beckett seems to have discovered a certain kind of 'nakedness' – stylistic and experiential – that would define an outer limit of all his work to come. He quotes from 'To Himself' in his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*: 'All day he told the beads of his spleen. Or posa per sempre [Now you may rest forever] for example he was liable to murmur, lifting and shifting the seat of the disturbance, *stanco mio cor. Assai palpitasti* [worn-out heart. You've beaten long enough] . . . and as much more of that gloomy composition as he could remember' (Beckett, 1992a, 62). The poem is humorously recalled in the later *Molloy* (Beckett, 1994, 35–6), and phrases from it figure several times in Beckett's letters. Most frequently, the reference is to the lines 'Non che la speme, il desiderio è spento' ('Not only hope but even the desire / For sweet illusions is now spent in us'). Beckett invokes Leopardi's bleak statement at

⁶ The edition of the *Zibaldone* used throughout is Leopardi (2013a) and abbreviated reference is made to Z and, following usual practice, Leopardi's manuscript page number (e.g., Z1234).

times of his own self-doubt – ‘I feel I am further than ever from being able to write’ (2009, 509) – or when ‘the same old stupefying routine’ makes work ‘unthinkable’ (2016, 624). In another letter, Beckett recalls that a key phrase from ‘To Himself’, ‘e fango è il mondo’, and the world is mud, served as an epigraph for his 1931 essay on Proust (2014b, 136).

That world which Leopardi also described in his *Operette morali* as ‘a handful of mud’ (‘un pugno di fango’; Leopardi, 1982, 417–19) would arguably provide one instigation for the setting of Beckett’s *How It Is* (1961), as we suggest in Section 6, and also perhaps find an echo in his description of the world as a ‘muckball’ in *Krapp’s Last Tape* (Beckett, 2006, 222) and *Dream’s* ‘Cartesian earthball’ (1992a, 134). Used as the epigraph to his essay on Proust, and unaccountably withdrawn when it was republished in 1965, the phrase proleptically associates the Italian poet with Schopenhauer and Proust. As Beckett remarked in an early letter of 1930 to Thomas MacGreevy, ‘I am reading Schopenhauer. [. . .] An intellectual justification of unhappiness – the greatest that has ever been attempted – is worth the examination of one who is interested in Leopardi & Proust rather than in Carducci & Barrès’ (2009, 33). Leopardi is quoted several times in the essay, with the line from ‘To Himself’ about the extinction of hope and desire exemplifying, Beckett says, ‘the wisdom of all the sages, from Brahma to Leopardi, the wisdom that consists not in the satisfaction but in the ablation of desire’ (1965, 18). Later in the essay, Beckett quotes part of those lines again to characterise the wisdom that ‘consists in obliterating the faculty of suffering rather than in a vain attempt to reduce the stimuli that exasperate that faculty’ (63). ‘Ablation’: excision, removal, erosion – this grimly surgical word emphasises the deliberateness of an intellectual operation by which the objects of human hopes, beliefs, and desires might be ‘obliterated’, so leaving the subject painfully exposed but at the same time liberated from illusions of truth and satisfaction. Beckett’s early fascination with Leopardi’s ‘justification of unhappiness’ is inflected, of course, by his own temperamental pessimism but, as we shall see in the next section, it is the sceptical temper of the Italian poet’s thought that suggests the imaginative conditions of Beckett’s art. The distinction here goes deep in each writer’s work, a distinction between, on the one hand, a recurring emotional state that accepts a limited horizon in advance and, on the other, a habit of intellectual inquiry that, as Leopardi puts it, ‘essentially consists in doubt, and whoever doubts knows, and knows as much as one can know’ (Z1655).

While the pessimistic posture acknowledges its own disability and passivity but assigns blame for these elsewhere, scepticism promises a kind of imaginative power, a dynamism defined above all, as we shall see, by its curious

persistence. We could put this distinction another way, as poet Yves Bonnefoy does in his study of Leopardi: while pessimism is reducible to a discourse of generalities about humanity's unhappy condition, its separation from nature and so forth, a deliberately doubtful thinking may transport us into the 'unending spaces' of Leopardi's 'L'infinito' where ambiguity and uncertainty perform a ritual hesitation 'between the words of desiring imagination and those of conceptual thought' (Bonnefoy, 2001, 17; 2012, ix). Bonnefoy here supplies a succinct statement of his own poetic aims, but he also contributes to a debate about Leopardi that the philosopher Benedetto Croce had initiated back in 1923. Croce admired Leopardi as a great lyric poet but he cautioned against regarding him as a philosopher of any significance. Pessimism does not amount to an authentic philosophical stance, in his view: 'Philosophy, in so far as it is pessimistic or optimistic, is always in itself pseudo-philosophy [...]. Frank and serious philosophy neither weeps nor laughs but pauses to investigate the forms of being, the working of spirit' (Croce, 1923, 105). When Croce thinks of 'philosophy', of course, he thinks of the pursuit of truth and essence; Leopardi's focus is significantly different, and his conception of what he calls on one occasion 'ultra-philosophy' is based on 'neither philosophy nor reason [...] but on] virtue, illusions and enthusiasm'; it is not an attempt to grasp God or the Hegelian Idea but rather a thinking that 'brings us close again to nature' ('ci ravvicini alla natura'; Z115). But, for Croce, when Leopardi is not writing pure, 'idyllic' poetry, he is producing 'non-poetry', with lyric ambition undermined by 'oratory, an indictment, a series of questions', and poetic style becoming 'dry and compressed' and, finally, 'rhetorical' rather than poetic or dramatic (Croce, 1923, 114, 117). Bonnefoy does acknowledge a 'discursive' tendency in Leopardi that risks the reduction of lived experience to the generalities of pessimism (Bonnefoy, 2001, 18), but he observes there a compensatory evocation of a non-conceptual 'presence' that derives from the musicality of the verse. For Bonnefoy, Leopardi is the first definitively modern poet because he is 'the first truly lucid poet' (15), meaning by this that he was the first whose atheism freed him from the lingering transcendental hopes indulged by other writers of the period. At the same time, though, lucidity of vision is not in itself enough: Leopardi, says Bonnefoy, knew that concepts have a material foundation in sound, and so he 'interiorised this music in his poems, allowing them to detach themselves from the negative vision which a too intellectual lucidity encourages, and to produce another kind of vision of beauty and the good' (25). That music is, too, the vehicle of memory, and Bonnefoy reminds us that the Italian word 'ricordanza' ('remembrance') contains within it the word for 'heart' ['cor'] that, for both Leopardi and Beckett, would express the unresolvable contradiction between

the indefatigable demands of ‘existence’, on the one hand, and the always elusive release from them, on the other.

The limits of interpretation, in both writers, have been marked by this unresolvability. In finding itself stranded between the demand to be and the demand not to be, the demand to continue and the demand to cease, the critical faculty exhausts itself. Such blank aporias lead to the famous dead end at the close of *The Unnamable* (‘I can’t go on, I’ll go on’; Beckett, 1994, 418) and to its excruciating extension in *Texts for Nothing*, where the narrative voice acknowledges that ‘it can’t speak, it can’t cease’: ‘And were the voice quite to cease at last, the old ceasing voice, it would not be true, as it is not true that it speaks’ (1995, 154). In what follows, we do not claim to have overcome this contradiction, or to have resolved the chiasmic antinomy that shapes the attitude of both writers to hope and to despair (in which, as in *Waiting for Godot*, salvation and damnation cancel each other out; 2006, 14). But in imagining a dialogue between Beckett and Leopardi, we suggest that one can approach a ‘region’, to use a word important to Beckett, located within the poles of that contradiction.

This is a region that we can find in the work of both writers – it is also a region that stretches between them, and that it is our aim here to map. In Part I, we lay out the forms in which Leopardi’s species of poetic pessimism lays the ground for Beckett’s. Section 1 characterises what we call here Leopardi’s ‘sceptical poetics’, giving an account of the way that his poetry fashions a particular ‘ground’, a form of materialist politics that emerges from his sceptical disavowal of the political. Section 2 focuses on the poem ‘To Himself’, to which Beckett most insistently returns. This poem, in addressing the beating heart as a kind of mechanical object, lays out the forms of self-estrangement that power both Leopardi’s and Beckett’s poetics. Section 3 then focuses on the posthumous voice, fashioned in Leopardi’s ‘Chorus of the Dead’, a voice which echoes throughout Beckett’s work, from *Dream* to *Ghost Trio*. In Part II, we reverse the direction of our reading, looking back from Beckett to Leopardi. In Section 4, we find the region shared by Leopardi and Beckett as it is manifest in Beckett’s early novella *First Love*, which we see as a reworking of Leopardi’s two texts ‘Il primo amore’ (‘First Love’) and *Memorie del primo amore* (*Memories of First Love*). In Section 5, we explore this region, composed at once of life and death, of something and nothing, as it develops in Beckett’s prose, from *Watt* to *The Unnamable*. And finally, in Section 6, we find this region given its fullest articulation in Beckett’s most difficult and excruciating work *How It Is*. The mud of this text, we argue, is drawn in part from the line in ‘To Himself’ that Beckett admired, ‘e fango è il mondo’, ‘The world is mud’. It is a kind of *stuff* that Beckett and Leopardi between them fashion, and that is the very ground of their imagination.

Part I Leopardi/Beckett

1 Leopardi's Sceptical Poetics

One way of approaching Leopardi's scepticism is by gauging its effect on his later admirer Friedrich Nietzsche. In a well-known passage in his *Will to Power*, for example, Nietzsche (1968, 221) complains of philosophers that 'they have trusted in concepts as completely as they have mistrusted the senses: they have not stopped to consider that concepts and words are our inheritance from ages in which thinking was very modest and unclear'. 'What is needed above all', Nietzsche continues, 'is an absolute scepticism toward all inherited concepts' (221). This scepticism is necessary not just because concepts become outworn and unreliable, compelling us to create new ones, but also because philosophers, in cleaving to their concepts, have shown themselves to be 'prejudiced against appearance, change, pain, death, the corporeal, the senses, fate and bondage, the aimless' (220). Nietzsche's list of excluded themes that a properly sceptical attitude should re-engage also provides, of course, a rich catalogue of poetry's traditional topoi. Indeed, Nietzsche's list also evokes the major interconnected themes of Leopardi, the writer he called 'perhaps the greatest stylist of the century' (qtd in Murphy, 2012, 136), and whose very name was already a byword for a radical scepticism.

Leopardi may not figure prominently as an originator of modern poetry on our current cultural maps where he is almost wholly, and perhaps unfairly, eclipsed by Baudelaire, but it is nonetheless worth asking what the story of modernism's emergence might look like if we took the hint from Beckett's epigraph to his essay on Proust and located its inaugural moment in Leopardi's poetry rather than in Baudelaire's. It would begin not with a sense of innovation – with Walter Benjamin's emphasis on the *first* appearance of gas lighting, the *first* use of iron as a building material and so on (Singh, 2012, 415 n.8) – but rather with a chilling sense of modernity as something already ruined by the failure of Enlightenment values and the French Revolution (Sanguinetti, 2000). Like Baudelaire, Leopardi pours scorn on the new religion of 'progress', but unlike Baudelaire he finds no promise of intoxication in modernity, which he dismisses in his poem 'Ad Angelo Mai' ('To Angelo Mai', 1820) as a 'dead century' (Leopardi, 1987, 16) in which nature stands starkly revealed both as indifferent to humanity and as a source of its constant suffering. The life of modern man is, for Leopardi, perpetually shadowed by death, an affliction memorably described in his *Zibaldone*: 'I am, pardon the metaphor, a walking sepulchre, and inside me I carry a dead man, a once very sensitive heart that feels no more, etc.' (Z4149).

Leopardi's negativity does not, however, fully explain the nature of his reception in the twentieth century and beyond. Indeed, in Italy his writings have proved a generative source for new formulations of the political. Works by prominent figures on the Left such as Antonio Negri, Roberto Esposito and Massimo Cacciari represent what Esposito calls a 'non-philosophical' strand in Italian thinking that runs counter to the mainstream of European philosophy with its gestures of abstraction and exclusion, and attends instead to what Esposito calls 'life, in its material grain' (2012, 108). Leopardi's materialism has proved an important point of reference for this kind of 'realism' or 'immanence', inviting some interesting questions about the relation of poetry and poetics to this new political thinking. To the Anglo-American eye, this praise of Leopardi by some of Italy's best-known public intellectuals is perhaps a little unexpected. Leopardi may be, with Petrarch and Dante, one of the country's three foundational poets, but he has been consistently caricatured by non-Italians as a melancholy romantic marooned in the stagnating papal state of the Marche and far removed from all those exciting provocations of *modernité* to which Baudelaire was so subtly and ambivalently attuned. When the young Beckett spoke of 'To Himself' as a 'gloomy composition', he was doing little more than echoing a cliché that came as easily to T. S. Eliot as it had done to the Victorians.⁷ The latter, of course, had acknowledged Leopardi as a sublimely lyrical poet, but they also tended to see him as a damagingly pessimistic one; when his philosophical scepticism was acknowledged, by William Gladstone and other early readers, it was generally with regret for the dangerous atheism that accompanied it (see Singh, 1968). Swinburne's regard for him as a powerful civic poet was an honourable exception, though advocacy from Swinburne would not help Leopardi's reputation much in the longer term. It would take critics of a more analytic temper to look beyond the limiting view of Leopardi as merely a pessimist – Walter Benjamin, for example, who wrote in 1928 that 'In this poet, the contemplative and resigned type of the pessimist is contrasted by a different one – that of the paradoxical pragmatist, the ironic angel' (qtd in Rennie, 2005, 140 n.46). As a critic of modernity, Leopardi was by this time coming to seem the very type of the alienated modern; as Antonio Gramsci observed,

In Leopardi we find, in extremely dramatic form, the crisis of transition to modern man; the critical abandonment of all transcendental conceptions without having found a new moral and intellectual *ubi consistam*, which imparts the same certainty that has been forsaken. (1994, 206–7)

⁷ See Eliot (2019, 688) where he describes Leopardi as 'a gloomy cuss' in a letter to Ezra Pound.