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R. C. TREVELYAN

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PREFACE

IN this book of translations from Leopardi I have translated fourteen out of the forty-one poems of the *Canti*. The poems that I have chosen are in the main those that I like the best; but I have omitted a few of the finest, because I have found them very difficult to translate adequately. It seems, for instance, impossible to do justice in English verse to the elaborate riming stanzas of *Il Risorgimento*, although it is one of Leopardi's most important poems. Elsewhere fortunately Leopardi makes a very sparing use of rime, though, perhaps for that reason, always with consummate felicity. But in translating poems such as these, where the precise meaning of every word and phrase, and the relations between them, are of paramount importance, it would seem impossible to retain the riming system in English without doing serious damage to the accuracy and the delicate simplicity of the Italian. Such a sacrifice is all the more unfortunate, because Leopardi uses rime with great skill, not only as musical ornament, but to emphasize and punctuate his phrasing and the structure of his stanzas. But in poetry so perfect as this, it is better to pay whatever price is necessary in order to represent the meaning and the design as faithfully as possible. Whatever method be used in translating poetry, much must always be lost.

I would here like to acknowledge my debt to the interesting translation of the whole of Leopardi's *Canti* by G. L. Bickerseth, and to the scholarly Introduction to his book, which contains a very valuable discussion of the poet's art and thought. In his translation he has with wonderful ingenuity succeeded in retaining Leopardi's rime-schemes, including even his medial rimes; but I do not find the result entirely successful, either in diction or in phrasing, if the translation is

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PREFACE

to be regarded as English poetry. This must be my justification for attempting a new unrimed translation of my own.

I have appended a translation of Leopardi's Dialogue between Tasso and his Familiar Spirit, which is one of the most attractive of his prose works, and explains with some elaboration his theory of *Noia* or Tedium, to which he so often alludes in his poems.

R. C. TREVELYAN

1940