

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65212-5 - The Poems of Leopardi

Edited with Introduction and Notes and a Verse-Translation in the Metres of the Original

by Geoffrey L. Bickersteth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

I

THE POET'S LIFE

Mi fa infelice primieramente l'assenza della salute....L'altra cosa che mi fa infelice è il pensiero. (Letter to Giordani, 8th August, 1817.)

I

COUNT GIACOMO LEOPARDI, the greatest Italian poet of the 19th century, was born on the 29th of June, 1798¹, at the Palazzo Leopardi in Recanati, a small country town situated on a hill between Civitanova and Loreto in the March of Ancona, which at that time formed part of the Estates of the Church. The town commands distant views of the Adriatic and the Apennines, and the surrounding country is of great natural beauty. Like Byron, to whom for more reasons than one he has often been compared², Leopardi was of noble birth and ancient lineage on both sides of his family. He was the eldest child of Count Monaldo Leopardi and his wife Adelaide, daughter of the Marquess Filippo Antici, both natives of Recanati. They had four other children, of whom Carlo and Paolina (the only daughter), born respectively one and two years after Giacomo, were the companions of his childhood and youth and the objects throughout life of his tenderest devotion and love. The same cannot be said of his parents, concerning whom the poet's biographers have long disputed which of the two must be held chiefly responsible for the ruin of their firstborn's health and happiness.

Count Monaldo, who was four years old when his own father died, after a neglected education had entered upon a rich inheritance at the age of eighteen. Three years later, in 1797, partly as a result

¹ He was thus the junior of Byron by ten, of Shelley by six, and of Keats by three, years. The year of his birth was that in which Wordsworth and Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads*, the little volume which inaugurated a new epoch in English literature. These dates will enable the reader to relate Leopardi to his English contemporaries.

² The closest parallel to him in our literature is rather Pope.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65212-5 - The Poems of Leopardi

Edited with Introduction and Notes and a Verse-Translation in the Metres of the Original

by Geoffrey L. Bickersteth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

INTRODUCTION

of the depredations of the French invaders, but chiefly owing to his own youthful extravagance, he found himself reduced to an income, of which almost the whole was required for payment of his debts or the interest thereon to Jewish moneylenders. He was faced with the alternative of declaring himself bankrupt or of amending his fortune by a wealthy marriage. He married; but, to the disgust of his mother and various dependent relations, he chose a wife from a family almost as poor as his own. The Countess Adelaide, however, turned out to possess all the practical business acumen that her husband lacked. In 1803, after he had all but irretrievably ruined what remained of the family estate by another wild speculation, she forced him, under Papal pressure, to come to an arrangement with his creditors by which the administration of his property was legally transferred to an agent of her own. From that time till her death in 1857 the Countess reigned supreme in the Palazzo Leopardi. "Somehow," wrote Paolina¹ in 1831, "when I was still a baby and perhaps before I was born, my father's legs got entangled in my mother's skirts, and he has never since been able to free himself." For in his humiliation, which he bitterly resented—though he could not help admiring his wife's efficiency—the Count endeavoured, and apparently with success, to conceal the true state of affairs from his children, with the natural result that he only drew down upon himself their dislike for treatment really due to the parsimony of their mother.

In the re-establishment of the family fortunes the latter saw her life-work. To this ambition she willingly sacrificed her husband's and her children's love. Her economies did not include the reduction, much less the abolition, of any of the externals of rank. Horses, carriages, the full staff of servants were retained. But she converted the home into a monastery, or rather a prison. Cold, hard and calculating by nature, her character was further rendered positively repellent by the narrow austerity of her religious principles in which she found the sanction for the severities of her domestic *régime*. In their nursery days, if her children ran to her for comfort in any little trouble, "Offer it to Jesus" was her only reply. As they grew up she discouraged them from making friends, for friends would "distract them from loving God." She forbade

¹ Paolina Leopardi, *Lettere a Marianna, etc.*, p. 53, quoted by Chiarini.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65212-5 - The Poems of Leopardi

Edited with Introduction and Notes and a Verse-Translation in the Metres of the Original

by Geoffrey L. Bickersteth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE POET'S LIFE

3

them the simplest pleasures and permitted them no recreation beyond what their own imagination could supply, no freedom and no companions of their own age. She confined them to all the restrictions of the schoolroom long after they were fully grown. Incredible as it may sound, Giacomo and his brother, when young men of over twenty, were never allowed to go out of doors unless accompanied by herself, her husband, or an attendant. She scouted as absurd the bare idea that they could wish to spend even one night away from home. She therefore gave them no allowance; nor did she ever regard her eldest son's literary genius in any other light than as a potential source of increase to the family income. It so happened that his premature death from a disease of which her economies were the originating cause, about coincided with the realisation of that ambition which in her eyes had so amply justified them. By 1837 she had restored the family estate to its former prosperity. To her famous son, because he had died an infidel, she never referred except with the prayer "God forgive him." Such was the Countess Adelaide, of whom the poet—though he always treated her outwardly with the most scrupulous respect—committed to his notebook¹ one of the most terrible indictments ever penned by a son against his mother.

Count Monaldo differed from his wife in being genuinely fond of his children. He resembled her in his religious bigotry.

The fatal evolution of human reason which has disgraced our age made me deem it ill-advised to send my children away to be educated: and in my devoted affection I could not bear to have them parted from me. I therefore educated them at home and taught them to the best of my knowledge and ability. I gave up to them the best years of my life. I shared in their recreations, competed with them in their studies and left nothing undone to make them happy and grateful².

All this was perfectly true; and so long as his children remained children he had no cause to complain of their duty and affection. In certain respects he was, indeed, an ideal father for Giacomo. Himself a keen student and antiquary, a voluminous author and collector of one of the finest private libraries in the peninsula, he eagerly encouraged, and was pardonably proud of, his eldest son's precocious genius. He supplied him in childhood with tutors who,

¹ *Zibald.* I, 411.

² *Autobiografia di M. Leopardi* (Appendix), p. 298, note.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65212-5 - The Poems of Leopardi

Edited with Introduction and Notes and a Verse-Translation in the Metres of the Original

by Geoffrey L. Bickersteth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

INTRODUCTION

if not good, were the best then procurable, obtained whatever books the boy asked for, submitted his earliest literary productions to competent outside critics, found him his first publisher, advertised his abilities at Rome (the seat of Government) with a view to his future advancement, did all, in short, that could reasonably be expected of a sympathetic father to develop the gifts of a brilliant son except watch over his health and allow him the right to a mind of his own in matters political and religious.

It was the Count's misfortune to be an anachronism. He should have lived before, instead of after, the Revolution. An aristocrat of the old school, he bore a grudge against the revolutionaries not only on theoretical grounds, but because of the personal danger and indignities to which he had been exposed by the French occupation of Recanati in 1797 and by the temporary establishment of a popular government there in the following year. To these "brigands" rather than to his own youthful extravagance he attributed his financial disasters and the hated dependence upon his wife in which they had issued. The words "liberty" and "nation" were banished from his vocabulary. "The foundations and bounds of true liberty are for me the faith of Jesus Christ and loyalty to my legitimate sovereign. Outside these limits there is no liberty, only licence¹." Inside these limits he was determined that not only himself but his whole family should live. His loyalty to Church and State—and for him, as subject of the Pope, the two were one—was carried to extremes which even the ecclesiastical authorities privately ridiculed. His definition of patriotism was parochial.

One's country is not one's nation nor even the state, which might however be more legitimately so named. One's true country is the district in which one was born and where one lives. This is the only kind of country which concerns the citizens. None but the lawful sovereign is patron and legislator of the state.

And, as a natural corollary, he held that "a prudent man should hold aloof from conspiracies and appreciate the convenience of submitting to the conqueror²." True to his own principles he himself

¹ Chiarini, *Vita*, p. 18.

² This maxim may be contrasted with *Canti*, xxxiv, 307:

non piegato insino allora indarno
Codardamente supplicando innanzi
Al futuro oppressor.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65212-5 - The Poems of Leopardi

Edited with Introduction and Notes and a Verse-Translation in the Metres of the Original

by Geoffrey L. Bickersteth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE POET'S LIFE

5

never left Recanati, if he could help it, even for a day; and he expected his children to be equally contented to spend their whole lives there. His eccentricities of thought were reflected in the furniture of his palace and in his dress and outward appearance. Provided it retained an external aspect of medieval grandeur, he cared little if his home lacked the modern comforts later so necessary to his invalid son. Though a layman, he invariably dressed from head to foot in black, while on the other hand he always wore a sword and prided himself on being the last nobleman in Italy to do so.

It is impossible to over-emphasise the effect of his parents' limitations upon the development—mental, moral and physical—of their eldest son. The outstanding fact of Leopardi's life was his perpetual ill-health, yet, apart from a slight tendency to weak eyesight, he was born, and until his tenth year remained, a perfectly healthy child. And, so long as he was well, he was happy. "The boyhood of Giacomo," said his brother Carlo in later years, "was divided between games and romps and studies: the latter, owing to the amazing quickness of his perceptions, incredible for his age¹." Though small of stature and delicately made, he was, as a boy, straight-limbed and vigorous in frame, high-spirited and masterful in disposition: "Giacomo il prepotente" (James the domineering) his brother and sister called him. By nature affectionate and sympathetic beyond the ordinary, he craved affection and sympathy from those around him. He was therefore easily wounded by the slightest appearance of neglect and quick to shrink into himself. "My face," he tells us, "when I was a little boy, and even later, had about it something sad and serious, which, being without any affectation of melancholy, gave it a peculiar charm²." He possessed an acute sense of his own dignity and that of the family and flew into a passion if he thought either touched³; that he was a "nervous" child he showed by his fear of the dark and dislike of sudden noises⁴. An ambition to become famous by great *actions* and an intense love of liberty characterised him from his very earliest years⁵. In playing at Roman history he always took the part of the victorious general; on the other hand, he preferred the rôle of Pompey, making Carlo

¹ *Epist.* III, 424 (12).³ *Epist.* III, 424 (13).⁵ *Epist.* III, 424 (12).² *Mestica, Stud. leopard.* p. 521.⁴ *Zibald.* VI, 1.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65212-5 - The Poems of Leopardi

Edited with Introduction and Notes and a Verse-Translation in the Metres of the Original

by Geoffrey L. Bickersteth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

INTRODUCTION

act Caesar¹. And in later years none of his numerous friends ever seems to have for one moment doubted that it was only physical infirmity which prevented him from living a life of adventurous action².

The poet himself attributed “all the physical evils” of his life to the fact that he anticipated by four or five years the normal age of puberty³. His tenth year was certainly critical. Up till then his education was entirely supervised by his father and a resident tutor. The children’s lessons were ordered by a strict time-table and there were periodical family “examinations,” over which Count Monaldo presided, when poems were recited and essays read, those of Carlo and Paolina being often the secret production of their elder brother. But at the age of ten Leopardi, according to his own account⁴, borne out by Carlo’s, began to study “independently of his tutors.” The last of these, a Jesuit priest by name Sanchini, of whom the children were very fond, did not however leave the palace till 1812; and by “independent” studies the poet is evidently referring to the study of Greek, a language of which his father and Sanchini were ignorant and which he started to teach himself in 1808. To Greek he soon added English⁵, French, Spanish and Hebrew, in all of which languages he very early became proficient.

The real significance of the change consisted in this: that for seven years following the date he mentions Leopardi was permitted to outrage Nature by reversing her normal process, by which in a growing child the development of bodily physique and of the

¹ Chiarini, *Vita*, p. 26.

² Cp. for instance the opinion of Luigi Stella, the publisher’s son, who got to know Leopardi well in 1825 and who says that in spite of the poet’s debility “io lo riconobbi a molti e chiarissimi indizi veramente dotato di grande fortezza d’ animo, e impedito di operare fortemente non da altra cosa che da debolezza del suo corpo” (*Mestica, op. cit.* p. 431).

³ *Epist.* III, 424–5 (15): “Provò funestamente precoce la sensibilità della natura. Anticipò quattro o cinque anni l’ età dello sviluppo. Indi, com’ egli mi confessò poi, tutti i mali fisici della sua vita.”

⁴ Letter to Pepoli (*Epist.* II, 173).

⁵ He probably learnt it from Carlo, who specialised in English, as Giacomo in Greek. The poet did not learn German till later (the summer of 1824, when he was studying philosophy). When writing the Dialogue of *Raysch and his mummies*, he learnt German (and English) during the periods that each page of MS., as he finished it, took in drying. He kept a German grammar beside him for this purpose, and never used sand. (The anecdote is related in *Epist.* 440–1 (44).)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65212-5 - The Poems of Leopardi

Edited with Introduction and Notes and a Verse-Translation in the Metres of the Original

by Geoffrey L. Bickersteth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE POET'S LIFE

7

imagination precedes that of the purely intellectual faculties. Until the age of ten Leopardi's imagination—for his earliest "poems" are mere school exercises—had chiefly revealed itself, like Goethe's, in a "Lust zu fabuliren." He used to regale his brother in bed of a morning with endless tales of his own invention. But from the first his most outstanding characteristic had been a passion for knowledge. And this passion, from 1808 onwards, he was apparently allowed to indulge without the slightest restraint. Child as he was, he began to treat his mind as if, for the purpose of purely scientific research, it was a fully grown man's. Discovering to his delight that, far from rebelling against this treatment, his intellect responded to it with enthusiasm and was seemingly capable of any effort, however severe, which he cared to demand of it, he permitted it unconsciously to absorb the whole of his vital energy, so that no residue was left over for any other activity whatsoever. He lived all day in his father's great library and slept with Carlo in one of its alcoves, and the latter in after life recalled as the most vivid recollection of his childhood falling asleep night after night with the picture of Giacomo on his knees by the bed poring over folios he was scarcely strong enough to lift.

Count Monaldo, when discerning relatives pointed out to him what was bound to be the result of the boy's over-studious habits, replied that he was always urging him to take proper exercise, but that nothing would induce him to leave his beloved books. The truth is, that the child, as the Count was well aware, only developed these habits because so heartlessly denied by his mother all means for indulging in the normal recreations of childhood. But the Countess held the purse-strings; and the Count, who hated family quarrels, feared his wife and was genuinely proud of his son's precociousness, found it convenient on all accounts to acquiesce against his better judgment in a policy of *laissez-faire*.

But Nature could not be thus defied with impunity. She had in any case safeguarded herself by endowing Leopardi with an imagination even more powerful than his intellect. And it was not long before she called to her defence this potent ally. In her endeavour to save the boy's health she pitted the poet in him against the scientist, and, with the slightest assistance from his parents, her efforts would have been successful. As it was, his imagination awoke

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65212-5 - The Poems of Leopardi

Edited with Introduction and Notes and a Verse-Translation in the Metres of the Original

by Geoffrey L. Bickersteth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8

INTRODUCTION

too late to do more than just enable him to survive adolescence with a body crippled beyond repair by the abnormal exercise of his intellect: and the conflict, which need never have arisen between these two activities of his mind, was destined to continue throughout his whole career and to constitute its tragedy. From the age of ten to seventeen—a period, during which, had he been born in England, he would have been enjoying life at Eton—this extraordinary boy, buried in his father’s gloomy library, turned himself into scientist pure and simple. The library was quite literally the grave of his youth. He walked into it a healthy, happy lad: he came out of it a melancholy, diseased hunchback. And, once inside it, he doubly severed himself from life. He was isolated from the world outside, not only the great world of Europe, but even the little world of Recanati. The seasons came and went upon his native hills, kingdoms rose and fell, a continent was plunged in chaos; it mattered not to him, “egli nol vede,” he lived in his books alone. Yet even this world of letters was a world of *dead* letters. The ancient Greek and Latin literature over which he pored night and day, and which his imagination could have made, and one day was to make, throb with a life far more congenial to him than that of the modern world was ever destined to be—this ancient literature he for years regarded as merely so much material for grammatical and philological research. It is scarcely surprising that, when at last, by Nature’s imperious command, his imagination awoke and led him forth from this prison within a prison, he should ever afterwards have identified Science with death and Poetry with life.

But, for the time, he was absorbed and happy in his studies, proud of his accomplishment and complacently anticipating a distinguished future in the world of pure scholarship. It is to this period that he later (1820) referred in his notebook in the following terms:

The greatest happiness possible to a man in this world is when he lives quietly in his calling[†] with the sure and certain hope of far greater happiness in store; a hope which, just because it is sure and because he enjoys his present state, does not make him uneasy or impatient to enjoy the imagined delights of the future. This divine state I myself experienced when I was sixteen and seventeen years old for a few months at intervals, a period when I found myself occupied in my studies without other dis-

[†] See note to *Canti*, XIX, 1–2.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65212-5 - The Poems of Leopardi

Edited with Introduction and Notes and a Verse-Translation in the Metres of the Original

by Geoffrey L. Bickersteth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE POET'S LIFE

9

tractions and with the certain and tranquil hope of the happiest future. And I shall never experience it again, because hope of this kind, which alone can make a man contented with the present, can only be felt by a youth of this age or, at least, of this amount of experience¹.”

There is not here the space to catalogue² the long list of learned works which he wrote while still, so to speak, in the schoolroom. It is enough to remark that, though their mere quantity amazes, the high standard of scholarship and massive, if pedantic, erudition they display are for so young an author simply staggering³. When, in addition, it is remembered that he was his own instructor, that he was cut off from the great centres of learning, and that with the finished article he was concurrently creating, as it were, the machinery for its manufacture, it is no marvel that such famous scholars as Niebuhr, Akerblad, Creuzer, Thilo and others, when later shown his work, pronounced him a prodigy. Nor must Leopardi's fame as a poet blind us to the fact that while the science of philology, as yet an undiscovered country, was being painfully explored by the industry of countless plodding Germans, this young Italian boy was already penetrating its dark mazes with the brilliant intuitions of genius. With the will, the time and the health he could have beaten the Germans in their own special field, and, like Goethe, have left to posterity a name as familiar to scientists as to men of letters.

II

Leopardi leaves us in no doubt of the exact date when the process of his disillusionment set in, or of the manner of its occurrence and accomplishment. It began consciously to himself in the first months of 1816 with what he calls his “literary conversion”; it was greatly accelerated by his correspondence with Giordani which started at the beginning of 1817: and it was completed by his first real passion

¹ *Zibald.* I, 187.

² But see Bibliography, E.

³ Thus, to quote one example, Gladstone noted the *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* (written in 1815) as “remarkable not only for the amount of erudition, classical and patristic, which he had even then accumulated—his editor has appended a list of nearly four hundred authors whom he cites—but for the facility with which he handles his materials and philosophises upon them”: a “sapere,” to quote de Sanctis, “condensato ed assimilato.”

The influence of his father, who from the first destined Leopardi for an ecclesiastical career, can be traced in the authors whom the boy selected as material for his researches. They are almost all late Greek and Latin, or Fathers of the Church.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65212-5 - The Poems of Leopardi

Edited with Introduction and Notes and a Verse-Translation in the Metres of the Original

by Geoffrey L. Bickersteth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

which occurred at the close of the same year. By the end of 1819 his thoughts and emotions were finally settled in the mould which shaped them for the rest of his short life and gives to his poetry its characteristic form.

Concerning his “literary conversion,” of which more must be said later, and of its enlightening effects upon his mind, it will be enough to quote here the following passage from the most famous of his letters to Giordani, that dated 30th of April, 1817; he is referring to a period anterior to 1816 and writes:

At first my head was full of modern maxims. I used to despise, nay, trample under foot, the study of our own tongue: my own despicable productions were translations from the French¹: I used to despise Homer, Dante and the Classics: I had no desire to read them, and wallowed in a kind of reading which I now detest². Who made me change my taste? The grace of God: but no human being certainly.

God, he goes on to say,

has made this world of ours so beautiful, men have made so many beautiful things in it, there are so many men whom any but a fool would wish to see and know: the earth is full of wonders, and am I, at eighteen years of age, to remain buried in this cavern? Am I to die where I was born³?

The earliest effects of the first stirrings of his poetic imagination are to be seen in that impulse, unconscious doubtless to begin with, which made him turn from mere annotation to translation of the Greek and Latin poets; and his first true poem was not an original composition but a version of one of the *Idylls* of Moschus, whom he edited and translated in 1815. To a born poet the next step was inevitable. The reproduction of the beauties of others no longer satisfied him. He was fired with the spirit of emulation; he would write poetry himself. But to express oneself one must know oneself — “*Che sono io?*” To the answer of that fateful question he now bent the whole force of his intellect, self-trained by this time to be an instrument of extraordinary subtlety and power. It did not take him long to discover the truth, which burst upon him with a shock all the more shattering for his hitherto unshaken confidence in both himself and his future happiness. Indeed so dreadful was the truth,

¹ Leopardi was brought up (in the prevalent fashion) to detest the French politically and to admire their language and their literature. He later became as critical of the latter as of the former.

² *I.e.* philological.

³ *Epist.* 1, 56.