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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

Frontmatter

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AND A VERSE-TRANSLATION IN
THE METRES OF THE ORIGINAL

BY

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FRATRI MEO
STANLEIO MORRIS BICKERSTETH
ET UXORIS FRATRI
CAROLO HAMILTON SORLEY
QUI AMBO
MILITES
DULCES POSUERE VITAS
E MAGNANIMITATE
QUAE UNICA VIVENDI CAUSA PLACUIT
LEOPARDIO
VATIS NON ALIUD SPIRANTIS
EDITA CARMINA
DEDICO

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“Fruitful interpretation of a masterpiece of creative imagination will consist in showing the mind of its maker, and in so placing his creation before our own minds by means of some accompaniment or rendering—some parallel corroborative appeal to imagination and feeling—that it does for us in our age what it did for him in his age, making us pause in the midst of our workaday life, as he paused in the midst of his, filled
 With admiration and deep muse, to hear
 Of things so strange and high.”

J. A. STEWART: *The Myths of Plato*, p. 16.

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P R E F A C E

THE chief object of the present edition of Leopardi's *Canti* is to offer to English readers in general a "fruitful interpretation" (in the sense defined, and by the method described, on the opposite page) of a "masterpiece of creative imagination." On the other hand the Notes, which assume a working knowledge of the Italian language on the part of those who use them, are more particularly addressed to serious students of Italian literature, especially those reading for Honours in Italian at the University.

The text of the *Canti* here printed is that of Mestica modified in respect of accentuation and certain other details for the benefit of English readers. Leopardi's system of accentuation and his employment of initial capitals in certain words was peculiar to himself. He was at one with his contemporaries in using the grave accent only, but differed from them in omitting it in all homonyms where he considered the right reference to be already clear from the context. I have modernised the accentuation throughout, distinguishing between open and close vowels in the now customary way. On the other hand, as Kulczycki has recently pointed out, Leopardi systematically employs capitals to determine the signification of words with an equivocal meaning. Thus he writes *Soli* = suns, *solì* = alone: *Noti* = winds, *notì* = known: *Divà*, *Barbarì*, when nouns, *divà*, *barbarì*, when adjectives: *Terra* = città, *terra* = land: *Perse* = Persian, *perse* = lost: *Tutto* = God, *tutto* = *universo*: *Phebo* = Phoebus, *phebo* = sun, etc., etc. These distinctions (because, when understood, they are, to a foreigner, helpful) I have retained, as also certain apparently arbitrary differences in the spelling of the same word (often on the same page), e.g. *giovinezza*, *giovanezza*. Where such occur, careful reading of the verse aloud will always reveal that a sensitive ear insists upon the particular vowel selected.

The main purpose of the translation has already been mentioned. It only remains to add that in point of accuracy it aims at satisfying the demands of the most exacting scholarship. And by accuracy I mean faithfulness not only to the content (meaning), but also to the form (metre, cadence, rhyme, sound, accent, rhythm, tone,

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PREFACE

style, etc.) of the original, the two elements of the whole having been regarded for purposes of translation as an indivisible unity. Obviously, therefore, my version cannot be expected to be faithful in the sense that it might have been had I concerned myself with only the one or the other of these two elements, regarded as separable and separate. In one respect only have I departed—and that in the spirit of Leopardi himself—from my original. While always retaining Leopardi's rhyme-schemes, I have sometimes, where my ear demanded it, inserted extra rhymes. But I do not think my ear would have so demanded if the English tongue were by nature as musical as the Italian.

In the Introduction I have severely limited myself to “showing the mind” of *the poet*. I have not concerned myself with his life, his art or his philosophy except in so far as knowledge of each was required for appreciating his poetry. I have not attempted to go outside his thought, whether to criticise it or to relate it to that of other thinkers—a task for which, even if I had had the space, I should not have considered myself competent. I have merely tried to explain his meaning to myself, and then to my readers, always interpreting the poet, so far as I could, by himself. To Leopardi-scholars I venture to hope that my Introduction may prove interesting as a serious endeavour to treat, and to show conclusive reasons for treating, the *Canti* as one coherent work of art expressive of a mind fundamentally at one with itself, rather than as a series of independent poems full of inconsistencies and contradictions, which has been the usual way of regarding them hitherto. I have aimed, indeed, at performing for the *Canti* the service so brilliantly accomplished some years ago by Professor Giovanni Gentile for the *Operette morali*. I need scarcely add, what is obvious, how ill-equipped I was and am for tackling such a difficult and delicate task when compared with that eminent philosopher.

My obligations to previous commentators on the *Canti* and to critics of Leopardi, especially de Sanctis, Carducci and Professor Gentile, are very great and are constantly acknowledged throughout the book and, in general, in the Bibliography. The latter, while very far from complete, contains most works of importance and will, I hope, prove useful to the research student.

References in this work to the *Operette morali* are to Professor

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Gentile's edition: for Dante I have used throughout and refer to the *testo critico* of the complete works published for the Italian Dante Society by Bemporad, Florence, 1921. References to Petrarch are likewise to a modern text, though I worked myself with Leopardi's own edition of the poet.

I wish to thank two personal friends for the help they have given me. Professor W. Macneile Dixon of the University of Glasgow read about half the translations at an early stage of their existence and encouraged me to go on with them: he also read the Introduction in MS. and assisted me, by sympathetic discussion of certain difficult points raised therein, to clearer treatment of the same. To Professor Cesare Foligno of the University of Oxford I am more deeply indebted still. He read through all the translations in MS., permitted me with the greatest kindness to consult him on numerous problems where a fellow-countryman of the poet could alone be of help to me, and finally revised all the Italian portions of the book in proof. His learning and scholarship were at all times freely placed at my disposal, with the result that I have been saved from committing numberless errors. Those that remain are due, I need hardly say, to myself alone.

G. L. B.

THE UNIVERSITY,
GLASGOW,
March, 1923.

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“If we take an examination of what is generally understood by happiness, as it hath respect either to the understanding or the senses, we shall find all its properties and adjuncts will herd under this short definition, that it is a perpetual possession of being well deceived.”

SWIFT: *Tale of a Tub*.

“The more a man loves, the more he suffers. The sum of possible grief for each soul is in proportion to its degree of perfection.”

AMIEL'S *Journal*.

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ERRATUM

p. 34, l. 2 from foot. *For* Tozzetti-Targioni *read* Targioni-Tozzetti.