

THE POET WHO LOST HIS HEAD:

Giacomo Leopardi's pathographies

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Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) is one of the greatest and probably the most widely read poet of 19th Century Italy. Besides his celebrated poems, he is the author of fascinating prose works: the *Zibaldone*, a mixture of a diary and a commonplace book, and the *Operette morali*, short novels and dialogues mixing classical erudition with science fiction¹. His works displays an ambivalent admiration – accompanied by a sharp critique – of his own times, from the years of the Revolution to the Restoration. They may also be read as expressing striking «anti-Italian» features: he mercilessly dwelled upon the national propensity to rhetoric and lack of intellectual rigour. At the same time, Leopardi was an early proponent of an Italian «Risorgimento», the political movement that opened the way to the unification of the country. He enjoys a place of excellence in the Italian pantheon of *letterati*; together with Dante Alighieri and Alessandro Manzoni he has posthumously contributed to the creation of a national (literary) identity. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, he has been admired and re-assessed in turn by Positivist and Idealist critics, by Fascists – who despised his physical frailty, while appreciating his critique of the Enlightenment –, as well as by Marxist theorists of literature. Leopardi's materialistic notion of man and nature was shaped by Enlightenment writers – mostly French – such as Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the *Idéologues*. Critics have recently called attention upon his debts towards John Locke². Leopardi cultivated a keen interest in the sciences, albeit erratic and somewhat outdated (Buffon was one of his main sources, though in the early 19th century he was in good company in still appreciating the French naturalist). Yet, he was probably better informed on contemporary developments than currently asserted. Despite the claim that has been advanced, namely, that

¹ On the English translation of the *Zibaldone*, see the «Zibaldone project» at Birmingham University, directed by Franco D'Intino:
<http://www.leopardi.bham.ac.uk/zibaldone/englishedition.htm>.

² Martinelli 2003.

he had no awareness of the «transformist» trend in European thought, his very interest in geology and «biology» rather points to the contrary. He was a skilled philologist, and some of his ideas – even scientific ideas – derive from late antiquity writers (e.g. Lucretius or Epictetus). Leopardi had also formed his own vision of medicine – through personal experience, friendships, and reading³.

I will first briefly deal with Leopardi's perception of his own bodily life, and with the long and tormented afterlife his body underwent after his death in 1837. However, the focus of this paper are the numerous pathographies of Giacomo Leopardi written by Italian physicians in the period that broadly goes from the last decades of the 19th century to the 1930s⁴. I shall argue that despite the clear-cut positivism of these medical narratives, Leopardi's ability at hiding his real physical self defied all contemporary and posthumous attempts at drawing a clear image of his illnesses. I will thus argue that his own autobiographical discourse generated a peculiar effect – namely, the idea of a strong relationship existing between his diseases (real or fictitious) and his poetry. This was in fact, in part at least, Leopardi's own opinion, and – during his life – one that he imposed upon his medical friends, from whom he expected diagnoses or medical opinions. But while he was constantly referring to his own ailments, with an inconsistency that played a significant role in his literary success, he dismissed their relationships to his work as superficial, if not insulting⁵.

I will further argue that Leopardi's pathographies help understanding some features of the rhetorical strategies of self-legitimation of Italian medicine in the age of Positivism, as well as its effort towards a medical interpretation of poetry and creative thought through 'posthumous diagnoses' of exceptional individuals. Many of the biographical contributions we will examine, such as, for instance, the seminal work by M.L. Patrizi (1896), were written by distinguished neurophysiologists, pathologists, comparative anatomists and psychiatrists. All of them shared the opinion that Leopardi's state of health must have had an influence on his poetic achievements; but most of them also refuted the materialistic implications of this assumption. Lay perceptions of literature, and influences by contemporary Italian literary criticism also played a role in shaping the writing of the poet's bodily history. Leopardi's body has been an object of contention between two different learned communities – the literary critics and the medical scientists.

³ Forlini 1997, Conforti 2001.

⁴ A discussion of the term «pathography» in Sirotkina 2002, 1-5.

⁵ E. g. Leopardi to Luigi De Sinner, Firenze, 24 Maggio 1832: Leopardi 1997, vol. I, 1416.

1. Hide-and-seek: pathologies in the mirror of autobiography

Leopardi was born in 1798 in Recanati, a diminutive town in the Marche region (at the time in the State of the Church). His was a family of small nobility and small wealth, proud and politically reactionary. Despite a quiet childhood – no serious health troubles are recorded in the otherwise richly documented Leopardi family life – in his adolescent years he was physically ungainly and easily ill. At about fifteen, he developed a *gobba* (hump) that was to become integral part of his *silhouette* and one of his greatest personal problems. At the same time, due to hard study and little exercise – this was his idea and that of his closest friends and relatives – he developed some minor health problems. He had serious problems with his eyes – in fact, in his last years he was hardly able to read. He suffered badly from exposure to daylight and to cold weather. Leopardi's daily habits were one of his friends and relatives major concerns. He would suffer no imposition by physicians, and he decided by himself what to eat and when, what kind of exercise he could and would take – a major infringement of the rules regulating the *diaeta litteratorum* as well as the relationship between patient and physician. His habit of sleeping by daytime, while staying awake at night, turned into a legend.

After some years of trying to flee from Recanati in search of literary fame – he lived in Pisa, Florence, Bologna – and humiliating returns to his *natio borgo selvaggio* (native savage village), Leopardi found a stable and more peaceful abode in Naples, with the family of a close friend, Antonio Ranieri (1806-1888), who became one of the poet's earliest biographers – as well as pathographers. Leopardi died in 1837, apparently of a heart attack, in the midst of the cholera epidemics that at the time ravaged the city and the rest of Italy.

Throughout the whole of his adult life Leopardi bitterly complained of his poor health. He narrated at length the story of his diseases in the *Zibaldone* and in his correspondence. His descriptions – some of them detailed to the point of indelicacy, even for the standards of his time – are quite difficult to interpret. All his biographers – and even simple readers – did and do become an easy prey to Leopardi's desire to expose his own symptoms, whereas, in truth, he kept them jealously hidden or purposely vague. His repeated reference to what he terms *mali* (diseases, illnesses – but also, at large, moral sufferings) is indeed tricky. This strategy of ambivalence in hiding and disclosing he also used with his contemporaries, as well as with the many physicians who treated him. It is well known that Leopardi did not want to have his portrait taken (this happened only once – the many portraits of him are all posthumous,

including one that was commissioned by Ranieri and painted from the poet's death mask⁶. He also loved to eat alone – what he called *monofagia* – and refused to be seen undressed even by his closest friends or relatives. There is a heartbreaking and probably false anecdote by Ranieri in which the poet finally agrees to take off his dress in front of him, and seeing his friend's distress grimly comments that nature had been stingy to him, only providing him with a functioning brain⁷. As a result, an obsession with the poet's body and bodily impairments pervades his biographies and biographers.

The physicians who have imagined posthumous diagnoses for Leopardi's illnesses were obviously the first to be trapped in the poet's autobiographical devices. The self-representation he offered was couched in the correct medical terms of his time – as already said, he had a strong interest in scientific medicine. In fact, he went through several medical visits and consultations, and was visited by some of the best physicians active in Italy at the time – in Florence, Rome, Pisa, and Naples. Throughout his life he also cultivated friendships with physicians – among them two outstanding figures of 19th Century Italian medicine, Francesco Puccinotti (1794-1872) and Giacomo Tommasini (1768-1846)⁸. Up to now, though, the very cause of his death is discussed, and while at times he was certainly seriously ill, it is not easy to tell how much of a hypochondriac he was, or to decide how much his participation to active life was hindered by psychological problems. Apart from his own remarks, testimonies as to his poor state of health are easily found. People who met him or lived with him were aware that he was suffering from some kind of chronic illness, and nobody seriously doubted that his life would be a short one. He did, however: to his very last minute he believed he would have a long life.

This was more than an understandable self-delusion. With the help of his friend Puccinotti, he had convinced himself that he suffered from 'nervous' illnesses, and that the very weakness of his *diathesis* (constitution) meant that his life would be a long one. Puccinotti, like Leopardi born in the Marche, was to become a distinguished academic physician, prominent in the generation that took its distance from Brownism and other vitalistic systems, represented in Italy by Giovanni Rasori's (1766-1837) theories. Puccinotti's scientific work was in turn strongly influenced by Leopardi's notions and views; he developed an interest in

⁶ Damiani & Romano, 1993.

⁷ «Che vuoi... la natura mi ha succhiato tutto al cervello». The anecdote can be found in almost every pathography devoted to Leopardi: e.g. Zuccarelli 1907, 597.

⁸ Forlini 1997, 148-155.

Hippocrates – one of Leopardi's favourite authors. Neo-hippocratism was indeed an influential theory at the time, especially in reaction to Rasori's views, but it is noteworthy that Puccinotti gave a pessimistic turn to one of its central notions, *vis medicatrix naturae* (nature's ability to cure). Puccinotti, who was also an historian of medicine, apparently wrote a medical biography of Leopardi after his death, or so he said⁹. But he never published it, and until now this very first of Leopardi's pathographies has not been found.

2. The body of an Italian poet

Leopardi's life was a troubled one, from a physical and a psychological point of view; but death did not stop his troubles. The story of Leopardi's burial and of the transformations it underwent is long and complicated. It is also fascinating, in that it runs parallel with Leopardi's becoming one of the literary icons of the newly founded (1861) Regno d'Italia. The vicissitudes of Leopardi's bodily remains were involved in a central issue in the life of the new country, namely, the relationship between political power on the one hand, and religious power and beliefs on the other. Connected with the poet's burial, a polemic had in fact gone on for decades – beginning in the 1840s –, regarding the last hours of his life, and especially the religious conversion many would have liked the notoriously unreligious poet to undergo on his deathbed. It should be remembered that the young Italian state took a strong anti-Catholic stand, in that it had been created by literally «conquering» Rome (1870), the seat of the papacy. Consequently, the Pope lived confined in the Vatican territory and had no relationship whatsoever with the political power in Rome; in fact, Vatican authorities repeatedly tried to delegitimize it. Catholics faced a difficult situation, in private as in public issues. Jesuits, and their journal *Civiltà Cattolica*, headed a campaign for a sort of «re-christianization» of Italian culture, at the time dominated by Positivism and by a somewhat naive faith in science and progress.

Ranieri was deeply involved in politics as a Member of Parliament for the Left. The memories of his friendship with Leopardi, *Sette anni di sodalizio con Giacomo Leopardi*, caused an uproar when they first appeared in 1880. They contained clumsy reference to Leopardi's bodily habits, as well as the details of his illnesses – Ranieri was no doctor, but a lawyer – and they were perceived by the literary and cultivated com-

⁹ Patrizi 1896, 4.

munity as a belittling of the poet's greatness¹⁰. Notwithstanding the defence of Leopardi's coherence on the point of religious beliefs, appreciated by many, Ranieri's attitude towards his dead friend was seen as scarcely appropriate. His exposure of Leopardi's physical shortcomings was considered to be in a very bad taste, violating explicit and implicit rules of delicacy and discretion. There was even the suspicion – fuelled by members of the Leopardi family – that he had exploited his friend's money and social position. When it appeared, Ranieri's book was harshly criticized by almost everybody in the learned and polite community¹¹. To a modern reader, the book very strongly conveys the sense of a living body, of its affections and problems. The scandal caused by the description of the poet's gluttony (he was extremely fond of ice-creams) or of his scarce propensity to washing and having his dresses cleaned, seemed indeed rather hypocritical, considering the physical and moral sufferings he was enduring, not least because of the almost total indifference of the literary community towards his work – an indifference that turned in admiration in a few decades.

On Leopardi's death in June 1837, Ranieri obtained to have his body placed in a subterranean crypt in the church of S. Vitale, in Naples, in order to save it from cholera mass graves. After seven years, in 1844, he had the body exhumed and transferred to a memorial in the church 'vestibolo' (a porch near the entrance). The liminar position of the tomb is explained by Leopardi's unbelief, prohibiting his burial *within* the church. Ranieri deals with the transfer of the body in a letter to Leopardi's friend, the philologist Luigi De Sinner: «I had the coffin brought to me... I wanted it opened, and for a couple of hours I dumbly contemplated the skeleton of the man I had loved and admired most in the world»¹².

In the 1880s, Leopardi's bodily remains became the focus of public attention and of a debate at different levels, eventually reaching the Senato, the Italian Upper House. A proposal was made to transferring the remains to Recanati – or, best of all, to S. Croce in Florence, where «great» Italians were buried¹³. The debate that followed shows, among other things, how much geographical divisions and borders could still be full of pregnancy in the «Italia unita». The city of Naples fiercely

¹⁰ Ranieri 1880; Ridella 1897.

¹¹ This also resulted in a «pathography» of Ranieri himself, in the form of a psychiatric expert opinion: Limoncelli 1890, *Parere freniatrico sul defunto senatore Antonio Ranieri*.

¹² Quoted in *Nuovi documenti* 1892, 301.

¹³ Antona Traversi 1884. On the whole story of Leopardi's burial see Mazzatinti Menghini 1931, 110-115, 408-411.

opposed this proposal, and eventually it was abandoned. In 1897 – in the wake of the celebrations of the centennial of Leopardi's birth – a law was passed, promoted by Senatore Filippo Mariotti, concerning the restoration and preservation of the tomb¹⁴. In July 1900, the tomb was opened – with the permission of Leopardi's family – and a solemn autopsy was executed by Angelo Zuccarelli, professor of Criminal Anthropology at Naples University. One of the most striking results of the autopsy was that the head was found missing¹⁵. One of the dangers most dreaded by the literary community – namely, the scientific scrutiny of the poet's skull – was thus avoided¹⁶. There is obviously no evidence that his skull may have been kept for 'scientific' purposes. Nonetheless, as it is well known, during the first decades of the Nineteenth century an interest in skulls and in the bodily and skeletal features of geniuses was fuelled by the adoption of Gall's phrenology – or of other similar notions¹⁷. The works and doctrines of Gall and Spurzheim were well known and admired within the Neapolitan scientific *milieu*¹⁸.

In 1939, in the years of Fascist triumph, Leopardi's body – or, the body in the monumental tomb that had 'outgrown' the scanty remains it was meant to preserve – was solemnly transferred in a picturesque grotto in the hill of Posillipo, where it can still be visited today. The ceremony was a late product of the poet's birth centennial, celebrated in 1937. The church of S. Vitale itself was demolished and rebuilt, in rationalistic style.

The history of Leopardi's burial and memorial, lasting a century, is a complex one, involving public discussions on the relationship of literature with religion and science, as well as on the intellectual identity of the young Italian state. But it is to be seen against the background of contemporary discussions over the medical and anthropological characteristics of genius.

3. Degenerate genius: Lombroso, Patrizi, Sergi

Pathographies – the 'expert opinion' on the medical and bodily lives of great poets and writers – or of other creative individuals, as scientists – derive from one of the great genres of historical writing, biographies.

¹⁴ *La legge* 1897.

¹⁵ Zuccarelli 1907.

¹⁶ In 1884, Alessandro D'Ancona already envisaged the danger of «cranioscopists» declaring Leopardi «un matto o un mattoide»: Moretti 1998, 354.

¹⁷ Hagner 2003.

¹⁸ On the diffusion of phrenology in Italy, Villa 1989.

Biographical writing has a noteworthy medical past – all early histories of medicine, from Humanism to the late 18th century, were in fact biographical collections. The practice of conducting autopsies on the corpses of illustrious physicians – an honour traditionally bestowed upon their best pupils – had been going on for centuries before this time. Positivistic historiography and literary criticism may have encouraged the attempt at tracing a relationship between poetry and bodily life, but in the minds of doctors the relationship between creativity and bodily temperaments had always existed. In late 19th century Italy the discussion on the physical features of genius – especially skull and brain characteristics – reached the dimension of a scientific frenzy, thanks to works by Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) and his school¹⁹.

Ranieri's book, while lively conveying the sense of medical practice in Leopardi's days, did not aspire to the status of a scientific work. On the contrary, when Mariano Luigi Patrizi (1866-1935) published in 1896 his *Saggio psico-antropologico su Giacomo Leopardi e la sua famiglia* (Psycho-anthropological essay on Giacomo Leopardi and his family), he claimed having written a book that was scientific in character, while being written to be accessible and to popularize scientific concepts²⁰.

Patrizi's essay heavily and overtly relied on the well-known Lombrosian thesis of the strong connection existing between genius, epilepsy and degeneration. Lombroso was one of the most influential Italian psychiatrists of his time – indeed, he was one of the few Italian scientists who enjoyed an international reputation. Under constant attack throughout his intellectual life, he had nonetheless been a respected member of the scientific community and a successful academic. Lombroso cultivated a strong interest in literature and art, and his works influenced literary production and criticism both in Italy and abroad. His main book on the subject, *L'uomo di genio* (first published, with the title *Genio e follia*, in 1864) enjoyed enormous success in Italy and abroad. When in Russia, he went so far as to pay an unsolicited visit to Lev Tolstoj in Jasnaja Poljana, in order to test his own theories on the intrinsic derangement of creative geniuses²¹. Lombroso repeatedly examined Leopardi's case, identifying the pathological character of his genius in his tendency to vagrancy, as well as in his lukewarm affection towards his parents, relatives, and motherland²². He also considered Leopardi's case as a good

¹⁹ On Lombrosianism, Pick 1989, Frigessi 2003. Many of the authors of Leopardi's pathographies have been dealt with by Picchi, 1990, especially 259-266.

²⁰ «d'indole prevalentemente scientifica sotto veste popolare»: Patrizi 1896, 3.

²¹ Mazzarello 1998.

²² Lombroso 1894, 22, 30, 141.

illustration of his own thesis of the irrepressible character of geniality (as well as of criminality): Leopardi's genius triumphed over adverse conditions²³. This meant that heredity prevailed over nurture in determining the characteristics of genius.

Patrizi's essay was considered as the work of a direct follower of Lombroso: it was published two years after the sixth and most complete edition of Lombroso's essay, and by the same Turinese publisher, Bocca. Nonetheless, Patrizi's analysis – and his long scientific career – can not be wholly reduced to Lombroso's theories. He had been educated as an experimental physiologist, and he was the pupil of two outstanding Italian physiologists of the time – Jacob Moleschott (1822-1893) and Angelo Mosso (1846-1910). Both Moleschott and Mosso were radical materialists. The first was a Dutch physiologist fired from Heidelberg University for his harsh critique of Justus von Liebig's providentialism. In 1861, Moleschott had been called to teach in Turin by Francesco De Sanctis (1817-1883), Minister of Education in the early years of the new Kingdom. De Sanctis, an influential scholar and literary critic, had been educated in Naples, where he had met Leopardi in the 1830s. He had written celebrated works on Leopardi's poetry, written and published from the 1840s onwards, that had proven crucial in the critical reassessment of Leopardi's literary importance. Mosso, a physiologist and a follower of Moleschott, moved from a 'hard' version of materialism towards milder positions, embracing a kind of Kantian philosophy²⁴.

Himself a successful academic, Patrizi had established family ties with the scientific aristocracy of the time by marrying Moleschott's daughter, Emma, who shared her husband's interest in Leopardi's life. The *Saggio* was significantly dedicated to Moleschott's memory. Patrizi's psychiatry was rooted in experimental neurophysiology. He had devoted his thorough laboratory research to measuring physiological phenomena such as memory, fatigue, attention, and the influence of music on brain circulation, using instruments he himself devised and built²⁵. Nonetheless, after teaching Physiology for some years, from 1910 onwards he moved to the chair of Criminal Anthropology, first in Turin (where he succeeded Lombroso), then in Bologna. The connection between physiology and criminal anthropology embodies and resumes a specific turn in Italian scientific medicine, leading from research in experimental physiology of the kind undertaken by Moleschott and Mosso to the furthering of Lombroso's theories.

²³ Lombroso 1894, 243.

²⁴ Cosmacini 1980, Pogliano 1994.

²⁵ Baglioni 1936, Patrizi 1902.

As his hero, Patrizi was born in Recanati, in a family of humble origins. He thus knew enough of the history and habits of the poet's family to exactly evaluate their importance²⁶. In fact, his book often relied on oral testimonies – if not on the gossip typically going on in a small town. He also benefited from a comparatively easy access to documents and to the poet's memorials. He even provided an impressive description of his first measuring of Leopardi's death mask, his hands shaking with emotion (the mask was in fact the only *memento* left to anthropometry)²⁷. Following Lombroso's example, Patrizi deals at length with the poet's family, thus suggesting that Leopardi's illness had a hereditary character. In fact, Patrizi argued that both Leopardi's paternal and maternal ancestors were «degenerated», showing evidence of specific psychic disorders – among them, Patrizi pointed at the many cases of avarice and of unusual religious fervour documented in the family history (indeed, one of Leopardi's ancestors had been proclaimed Saint by the Catholic church). As to Leopardi's individual development following his hereditary background, he advocated the opinion of a neurasthenic origin of Leopardi's pessimism. The only serious organic disease Patrizi believed the poet suffered from – rickets – could not, in his opinion, be blamed for it.

In tracing a map of European pessimistic philosophies of the 19th century, Patrizi argued that they derived from physical or nervous weaknesses, thus implying that they should be analyzed by physicians – physiologists as well as psychiatrists²⁸. Leopardi's case, Patrizi surmised in a somewhat defensive fashion, could and should be examined from a medical point of view, precisely because it helped to shed light on pessimism and on the influence of fatigue – which he had repeatedly researched in his laboratory activity²⁹ – over artistic and philosophical creation. Patrizi showed no particular awareness of the debate over Darwinian theories, though he claimed that pessimists have difficulties in participating in active life: adaptability («adattabilità») was necessary for activity, so

²⁶ A remark in Patrizi's book underlines the social differences in Recanati and a peculiar feature of Leopardi's poetry, his lack of compassion for fellow sufferers: «se l'orizzonte della cognizione del dolore era vasto quanto il mondo, limitato quanto la sua persona era l'orizzonte della compassione per il dolore. Il palazzo Leopardi in Recanati domina un mucchio di casupole, che col solo aspetto esteriore narrano la povertà...»: Patrizi 1896, 128.

²⁷ Patrizi 1898.

²⁸ Among his sources on the European diffusion of pathologically pessimistic theories and notions Patrizi quotes Jean-Etienne Esquirol, Max Nordau, Paolo Mantegazza and Albert Deschamps: Patrizi 1896, ch. I, 10-14.

²⁹ Patrizi, 1896, 17.

that geniuses – like criminals – were unable to adapt themselves to the competition for life («concorrenza della vita»)³⁰. In a curious way, this passage echoes some of the opinions Leopardi himself voiced more than fifty years earlier. One of the central notions in Leopardi's philosophy is that of «assuefazione», namely, the capability of organisms and generally of organic structures (including peoples and nations) to maintain flexibility and to modify habits in order to survive. In Leopardi's views, this is a characteristic of bodies that are young, healthy, or both – but with a seeming inconsistency he also held the view that 'assuefazione' is a result as well as a cause of civilization, and that too much of it means the death of individuals and species³¹.

Patrizi thoroughly examined the bodily life of the poet – from the point of view of anatomy, physiology, and pathology. Leopardi was born from young parents, and undoubtedly some of his diseases can be traced down to his intra-uterine life: an innuendo to the supposed lack of femininity of Leopardi's mother, Adelaide Antici. Apart from exploiting a recurrent topic in Leopardi's posthumous diagnoses – details of his 'mysterious' sexual life – Patrizi discussed at length the problem of the impairments of Leopardi's vision, using the scant documents available at the time, and especially the style and literary meaning of images in Leopardi's poetry. He concluded that hearing had prevailed on visual perception. In fact, the chapter where Patrizi discusses the «sensations and aesthetic reactions» of the poet is one of the finest of the book, and probably the reason of the partial attention he gained from the literary audience. He admired Leopardi's conscious effort not to hide his 'defaults and deformities', and he underlined his unconscious hope to be a «spiritual being that could resplend without projecting the shadow of his body»³². He described one peculiar feature of Leopardi's, namely, his obsession with the contrast between dimensions – he was equally attracted by, and afraid of, gigantism and smallness – as deriving from impairment in movement and from the fatigue it causes.

Despite his uncommonly strong literary background, Patrizi did not mean to write for what he called «literary people» (gente letteraria). He was very cautious in placing his book on the proper shelf – not among works of literary critique, but among scientific works – more properly, among books devoted to the popularization of science, a genre much

³⁰ Patrizi 1896, 22.

³¹ *Zibaldone*, in Leopardi 1997, vol. II, *passim* and especially 1444-45; 1450-51; 1508-9; 1764-65.

³² Patrizi 1896, 133-135: «si ostinò a raffigurare la sua personalità intellettuale in un essere spirituale che risplendesse senza proiettare l'ombra del suo corpo».

practised at the time by Darwinians, Positivists and authors of more uncertain lineage³³. In a list of his publications, Patrizi placed the book under the heading «Special publications on psychology» (Pubblicazioni speciali di psicologia)³⁴. His book may be rather seen as an attempt at applying self-styled scientific methods to interpret a literature whose increasing realism and social involvement was perceived as difficult to harmonize with Positivistic «optimism». Patrizi's work, not surprisingly, was praised by the whole group of positivistic scientific writers: by Cesare Lombroso, Enrico Morselli and – in a more lukewarm fashion, by Paolo Mantegazza, who remarked «You are a bit too much of a Lombrosian»³⁵.

The *Saggio* was not the only work Patrizi devoted to Leopardi: in fact, he went on publishing – and giving public lectures: he is remembered as a brilliant speaker – on this subject throughout his whole life. Leopardi was not his only artistic victim: he applied his «scientific» style of analysis to the Goncourt brothers (in 1897), to the painter Caravaggio (in 1914) and also to other outstanding personalities, such as the famous bandit Musolino (in 1904) and, in his later years – that is, in the 1930s, when Lombrosian views had become rather unpopular – to Lazzaro Spallanzani and Leon Battista Alberti³⁶. Patrizi's untiring efforts thus contributed to popularize some basic concepts of the «notion of genius, on which the Italian school is successfully working» – that is, of Lombroso's theories on art and literature³⁷.

Despite the rather sharp negative reaction voiced by a section of the «literary people» (prominently Alessandro D'Ancona), Patrizi gained favourable attention and praise from Arturo Graf (1848-1913), the head of the «scuola storica», a current of literary criticism inspired by Positivism. In 1895 Graf addressed Patrizi a very warm letter, and a rather colder and more measured approbation in his essay of 1898 (*Foscolo Manzoni Leopardi*), where he proclaimed that «history, biography, and literary criticism need from now on the enlightenment and help of nor-

³³ On popularization of science, and especially on Paolo Mantegazza, Govoni 2002.

³⁴ Patrizi, 1902, 28.

³⁵ Letter January 9th, 1896, quoted in Patrizi 1902, 30.

³⁶ The essay on Alberti was left incomplete at Patrizi's death.

³⁷ Patrizi 1896, 7: «Il far cadere da un uomo geniale il drappo della leggenda perde il significato di irriverenza quando, come nel caso nostro, giova a studiare al nudo un fenomeno di grande importanza psicologica e sociale, come il pessimismo, e se può portare un modesto contributo a quella dottrina del genio, intorno a cui con successo s'affatica la scuola italiana. Le conclusioni di questo libro, dove è messo in dubbio il perfetto equilibrio mentale del poeta recanatese, non sorprenderanno molto oggidi che la teoria lombrosiana è diffusa».

mal and pathological psychology, and, more generally, of biology»³⁸. In fact, it was not as easy to dismiss Patrizi's work as it had been the case with Ranieri's biography, which Patrizi himself considered as offering interesting information³⁹. Ranieri's scientific interests were erratic enough to allow criticism for having exposed a friend's bodily secrets. Moreover, Ranieri's book was written by an elderly man, who had been for a long time under attack from the literary establishment. Patrizi, on the contrary, was a respected member of the medical academic establishment. He shrewdly constructed a correct genealogy for his work, referring to two previous, lost attempts of the same kind: the one by Francesco Puccinotti we have already mentioned, and the other by Alfonso Corradi (1833-1892), a medical historian and a pharmacologist. These two respected figures of the Italian learned community could not be seriously charged of pursuing an easy fame by gossiping on Leopardi's physical frailty.

Patrizi's book was published in 1896, and it was a timely choice: Leopardi's birth centenary was solemnly celebrated two years later, in 1898. On this occasion physicians and anthropologists obtained a good deal of public attention: both Patrizi and Giuseppe Sergi (1841-1936) read papers in a lecture series on Leopardi held in a location remarkable for its symbolic meaning, the Collegio Romano. Formerly the headquarter of the Jesuit educational system, from 1873 onwards the Collegio housed the Biblioteca Nazionale, the National Library meant to be one of the centres of the new Italian intellectual identity. While Patrizi's speech was a sort of *résumé* of his book⁴⁰, Sergi presented the main ideas of yet another pathography devoted to Leopardi he published in 1899⁴¹.

Sergi was an anthropologist and a psychologist, holding the chair of Anthropology at Rome University from 1884 to 1916. A theorist of degeneration, Sergi had taken his distance from Lombroso and had become the advocate of a eugenic solution to the threat posed to society by degenerate individuals. In his book on Leopardi, Sergi complained about the poor state of scientific education in Italy. Remembering the attacks against his interpretation of Leopardi by Graf, Sergi claimed he had found an unexpected ally in Francesco De Sanctis – who had died in 1883 and could no more comment on this. Boldly stepping over the boundaries Patrizi had not dared to cross, Sergi fastidiously underlined the points of agreement

³⁸ Graf 1898, 186: «la storia, la biografia, e la critica letteraria non possono d'ora in avanti far di meno dei lumi e degli ajuti della psicologia normale e patologica, e, più in generale ancora, della biologia».

³⁹ Patrizi, 1902, 4.

⁴⁰ Patrizi 1898.

⁴¹ Sergi 1898.

between himself and the Neapolitan critic – even if he conceded that De Sanctis had been quite at odds with Lombroso's theories, and had expressed an indignant reaction against the latter's description of Leopardi as a classical example of degenerate genius. The central thesis upheld by Sergi was that Leopardi was totally lacking in phantasy, and that his perception of reality was blundered by a poor activity of the senses. Contrary to Patrizi, he considered Leopardi's hearing as poor as his sense of vision; this induced an «imperfect representation of nature» (Sergi 1899, 80) and isolation and lack of sociability ensued as a consequence. While Patrizi had followed a narrative strategy that reminded of Lombroso, and had organized his data by subject, Sergi attempted a true pathography – he arranged the poet's life and poetry according to alleged psychological turning points, thus dividing the poet's life in 'eras'.

4. Novecento: the decline of degeneration

We will now briefly deal with selected works on Leopardi's life and illnesses written in between his two centennials, the first one celebrated in 1898, the second – the death centennial – in 1937. As it has been recently shown by Paola Govoni, in the 1880s and 1890s the materialistic and Positivistic turn in Italian culture had already begun to fade away⁴². And as we have seen, this was also the 'golden age' of the popularization of a medical and scientific approach to the problem of artistic creation. In subsequent decades, while the Positivistic mood gave way to Idealism, pathographies did survive and indeed flourished. In late 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th, pathographies were undoubtedly a minor episode in the history of Italian science: they did nevertheless contribute to the positive social perception of medicine, as well as, albeit indirectly, of medical history. With a conscious reference to times long gone by, medicine in this period was often perceived and depicted – by lay people as well as by professionals – as a «humanist» science, dealing with texts and with philosophical conceptions as much as with bodies. Independently of the struggle between Positivism and Idealism, the old Christian ideal of the physician taking care of body and soul was still alive. Consequently, medical history, albeit often criticized as anecdotal, was perceived as capable of enlightening events in cultural history; and a medical approach to intellectual life enjoyed no mean support even from outside the most extreme Positivistic *milieux*.

⁴² Govoni 2002.

Medical works on the poet were written during the 1910s and 1920s, some still following the Lombrosian line of «degenerate genius», though markedly showing a defensive attitude. Writing in 1913, the psychologist Giuseppe Impallomeni conceded that yet another analysis of Leopardi's psychology could appear as a 'melancholic' attempt, after the attacks levelled against Lombroso, Patrizi and Sergi⁴³. Impallomeni improved upon the biographical and chronological approach privileged by Sergi through a more nuanced perception of the complex interaction between poetry and «affettività» (affectivity), and showed awareness of contemporary psychological research, especially German.

In a conference delivered in 1925, Crescenzo Pavone, a rather prolific Neapolitan author of works on pediatrics, again dealt with Leopardi's state of health, flatly refusing the thesis of the hereditary origins of the poet's illness, and insisting on the importance of the environment and life habits in his *mali*⁴⁴. Pavone also referred to the heated discussions on Leopardi's bodily constitution and religious beliefs that during the 1910s animated the Accademia Pontaniana (one leading institution in Neapolitan intellectual life)⁴⁵. The preface to Pavone's conference – and its presentation to the Accademia – was by Antonino Anile (1869-1943), a professor of anatomy at Naples University and a Minister of Education in the years preceding Fascism. Anile, in the years of Idealism *triumphans* and in a city dominated by it, shrewdly presented Pavone's attempt as respectful of the literary and the artistic sphere, well aware of the difference between the spiritual and the corporeal⁴⁶. Physicians were no more supposed to offer interpretations of the relationship between «spirit» and «body»: as a result, pathographies slowly evolved into works dealing with posthumous technical medical diagnoses.

A group of ophthalmologists, prominent among them Giuseppe Ovio (1863-1957), who also published works on medical history, thoroughly examined Leopardi's visual problems, on the line privileged by Patrizi and Sergi in their discussion on the influence of perception impairments on poetic production. At the same time, and rather inconsistently, they opposed the conclusion of a deterministic influence of bodily characters

⁴³ Impallomeni 1913, *Prefazione*. Impallomeni also refers to Paul Julius Möbius' seminal work on pathographies.

⁴⁴ Pavone 1925, 12.

⁴⁵ Pavone 1925, 29.

⁴⁶ Pavone 1925, 3-4: «Altri medici e fisiologi che han discorso delle malattie di lui, hanno avuto torto di interloquire in questioni di arte e peggio ancora se hanno preteso, dallo studio del corpo, far derivare i caratteri di quella produzione ideale, che ci resta dinanzi come un miracolo».

on art⁴⁷. In 1938, relying on the results of the 1900 autopsy conducted by Zuccarelli, the celebrated Roman physiologist Silvestro Baglioni (1876-1957) produced for Leopardi a diagnosis of spinal tuberculosis, that has not been seriously challenged ever since⁴⁸.

Arturo Castiglioni (1874-1953) was one of the last physicians – in fact, he is a well-known historian of medicine – who wrote on Leopardi. The Idealist Giovanni Gentile, official philosopher of Fascism, had helped Castiglioni to obtain a formal teaching of history of Medicine at the Padua university, in 1937⁴⁹. In the same years a politically powerful network of physicians-historians of medicine had been able to obtain university posts and public consideration in Italy. In 1938 Castiglioni, who was a Jew from Trieste, was forced to leave Italy because of the racial laws. His *Visita medica a Giacomo Leopardi* (A medical visit to Giacomo Leopardi) was published in the same year. Castiglioni read Leopardi's memories in a somewhat psychoanalytic fashion: but he also insisted on the levity and paucity of his neurasthenic weaknesses, when compared to the physical suffering he endured because of tuberculosis⁵⁰. The paper was read in a series of lectures at the Florentine Lyceum designed to celebrate the poet's death. Lectures had been given, among others, by Giovanni Gentile, Ettore Bignone, Attilio Momigliano, Alberto Savinio. As remarked by the convenor, Jolanda De Blasi, Castiglioni had been invited to 'touch with a respectful gesture' upon the sufferings of the poet⁵¹. Physicians were now expected to offer their contribution to the construction of the literary icon of the suffering poet, but they were implicitly asked to avoid direct reference to «disgusting» details, as well as to dangerous assumptions about the relationship between «le physique et le moral». Medical history itself was accepted and encouraged in that it seemingly contributed to the apologetic history of «Italian genius», as well as to the vision of medicine as a humanist science.

Castiglioni's admiration of Leopardi, though, was far from complaisant. In 1944 Henry Sigerist – who in 1938 had offered a post to Castiglioni at Johns Hopkins University – quoted Leopardi's *All'Italia* as a homage for his friend's 70th birthday: «O patria mia, vedo le mura e gli

⁴⁷ Ovio 1926-7.

⁴⁸ Baglioni 1938.

⁴⁹ A correspondence between Gentile and Castiglioni in *Archivio Gentile*, Biblioteca del Centro Interdipartimentale di Filosofia, Università di Roma «La Sapienza».

⁵⁰ Castiglioni 1938, 9-10.

⁵¹ «per toccare con abile, esperto gesto di pietà e di rispetto la dolorante umanità fisica di Giacomo Leopardi, suggellata di male e di bene, rogo di sofferenze, fonte di poesia»: De Blasi 1938, xi.

archi / E le colonne e i simulacri e l'orme... ma la gloria non vedo, / ... Or fatta inerme / Nuda la fronte e nudo il petto mostri. / Oimè quante ferite, / Che lividor, che sangue!» (Leopardi 1997, vol. I, 68)⁵². The poet's words seemed appropriate for the feelings of two exiled, one German and one Italian, confronting Europe's catastrophe.

Conclusions

To what extent did Leopardi's autobiographical discourse shape his later pathographies? In Leopardi's times, the notion of a strict connection between 'le physique et le moral de l'homme' was expressed in terms that relied on the notions of the French *idéologues*. Leopardi himself repeatedly quoted Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis in the *Zibaldone* as one of his «authors». He was a more coherent materialist and believer in science than many of his late Italian patho-biographers, who preferred to adopt a mild form of 'scientism', ready to give it up when Idealism prevailed. Even if expressing strong commitment to the notion of a scientific interpretation of «moral» suffering, men of science finally agreed to pay homage to the 'superior force' of poetry as being able to overcome the pettiness, misery and *mali* of everyday life. Leopardi, with his ferocious sense of humour, would have probably laughed at this improper mingling of technical details about his bodily impairments with the amateurish celebration of the spiritual heights he could attain in his poems (Leopardi's prose works were seldom considered by his medical biographers).

Leopardi's pathographies thus point at a broader ambiguity in Italian cultural life. Despite the fact that literary and medical communities were on different and often conflicting sides, nonetheless they agreed – with obvious and noteworthy exceptions – on a notion of literature as devoid of technical features, such as the research on language, for instance, that played such an important role in Leopardi's poetry (as indeed in any poetical work). It should be pointed out that the same attitude often guided the appreciation of «scientific genius», thus leaving aside issues such as disciplinary boundaries and traditions, international cooperation or competition, and so on. The «sentimentalization» of Leopardi's life and works, already described and criticized by Patrizi in 1896, was a product of the same attitude, also apparent in many popularization works⁵³. The texts we have taken into account, irrelevant if not unsavoury as they

⁵² Sigerist 1944.

⁵³ Patrizi 1896, 122.

may at times appear, have had no small place in the construction of Leopardi's icon: the image of the great poet haunted by his *mali*, as pessimistic and neurasthenic as ill, has been universally accepted – even by those who sneered contemptuously at Lombrosian pathographies.

Why did Leopardi become so easily the privileged object of pathographers in 19th and 20th Century Italy? The obvious answer is that this happened because Leopardi's health conditions were that poor, and he insisted so much on them – they were largely public during his life, and even more so after his death. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that almost all the pathographers we have referred to were also scientifically, academically and even politically involved in a much more sinister issue, namely, the debate on the ends and means of eugenics⁵⁴. Concerns for the physical and moral *regeneration* of the motherland and of its population were in fact the other side of the analysis of «degeneration» and of its ambivalent connections with artistic and literary genius. Thus, for instance, Zuccarelli, Pavone and Sergi published works insisting on the responsibilities falling upon mothers in the amelioration of the race: if frail geniuses could be accommodated, frail soldiers could not. Needless to say, all insisted on the responsibilities of Adelaide, Leopardi's mother, for the illnesses of her child.

At a deeper and almost unconscious level, the poet's weak body, accompanied by too much «brain» and consequently by too many neuroses, seemed to mirror the frail body politic of the newly born country. And this in spite of the fact that Leopardi had been one of the strongest critics Italy ever had of its never-ending tendency to self-delusion. The reiteration of the medical discourse on his body did not protect Italian physicians and scientists from the temptation to finding shortcuts (eugenics, or racial and social hygiene) for the country's many problems. Had they tried to analyze in depth the severe analysis of Italian society and history Leopardi developed in several texts, the country as a whole would have learned a lesson far more important than the airy speculations on the connection between humps and verses.

⁵⁴ See Mantovani 2003: see e.g. 54-65 for Sergi; 52-54 for Zuccarelli; Pavone published in 1908 a booklet with the meaningful title *Appello alle madri per la salvezza della prole*.

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