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Leopardi, Gilles Deleuze, and the Art the Philosophical Portrait

Alessandra Aloisi

1. Leopardi and Philosophers

At the beginning of the 20th century, Benedetto Croce voiced a well-known verdict according to which Leopardi was not a philosopher and could not be included within the philosophical canon¹. As if to disprove this judgment, during the 20th century Italian philosophers have consistently returned to Leopardi. After being a point of reference for thinkers such as Carlo Michelstaedter, Giuseppe Rensi, Adriano Tilgher, or Cesare Luporini, Leopardi has continued to play an important role in Italian philosophy. Giorgio Agamben, Emanuele Severino, Massimo Cacciari, Sergio Givone, Antonio Negri, Remo Bodei, and Roberto Esposito, among others, have all written on Leopardi, expressing different, sometimes divergent, philosophical interpretations of his thought and poetry². Leopardi's philosophy has been described as « materialist », « sensationalist », « nihilist », « ultra-nihilist », « Platonic », or « existentialist ». Despite their differences, what all these different readings have in common is the fact of presenting Leopardi not only as a poet but also as a philosopher, who is read alongside other philosophers, such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Plotinus, Machiavelli, Spinoza, and Kant, just to name a few. Furthermore, these readings do not shy away from also considering Leopardi's poetry, which is studied in its philosophical significance³.

In this essay, I would like to raise some questions concerning the interest that Italian philosophers have continued to have towards Leopardi, which has given rise to shifting uses and interpretations that vary according to the theoretical position of

¹ « Il Leopardi non offre se non sparse osservazioni, non approfondite e non sistematiche: a lui mancava disposizione e preparazione speculativa, e nemmeno nella teoria della poesia e dell'arte, sulla quale fu condotto più volte a meditare, riuscì a nulla di nuovo e importante, di rigorosamente concepito » (Croce, 1923, p. 105). [« Leopardi offers only scattered observations, lacking any in-depth analysis and organization: he did not have any philosophical disposition or preparation, and even in the theory of poetry and art, on which he meditated on several occasions, he did not produce anything new and important, or rigorously conceived »] (my translation).

² I have discussed some of these philosophical readings in Aloisi, 2017, 2019. On the same subject see also Fiorillo, 2023.

³ In particular, it is interesting to note that all these different readings invariably embark on the discussion of the same text, *L'infinito*, a poem that, more than others, appears as the touchstone of any philosophical approach to Leopardi.

each thinker. Why is Leopardi a recurring presence in Italian philosophy? And why this multiplicity of interpretations? Borrowing an image proposed by Gilles Deleuze, who compared the history of philosophy to the « art of portraiture », I would argue that these different readings are to be considered as possible « philosophical » or « conceptual portraits » of Leopardi. This would also allow me to make some methodological remarks on what it means to read Leopardi in a philosophical way.

In this essay, I am not interested in discussing whether these interpretations (or which of them) are correct or misleading, in the light of a supposed authentic meaning that would be found in Leopardi's work. Nor is it my intention to assess these different readings according to a rather moralistic logic that distinguishes between « good » and « bad » uses, between « uses » and « misuses », or between « interpretations » and « uses ». Instead, my aim is to contextualize these interpretations and to understand their conditions of possibility starting from Leopardi's texts⁴, which I propose to regard as a « multidimensional space », where many different discursive layers, coming from different sources, overlap and intertwine, opening up in multiple directions. As Roland Barthes suggested,

un texte n'est pas fait d'une ligne de mots, dégageant un sens unique, en quelque sorte théologique (qui serait le « message » de l'auteur-Dieu), mais un espace à dimensions multiples, où se marient et se contestent des écritures variées, dont aucune n'est originelle : le texte est un tissu de citations, issues de mille foyers de la culture.

a text is not a line of words releasing a single « theological » meaning (the message of the Author-God), but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture (Barthes, 1984, p. 65; trans. p. 146).

Few works reveal this intrinsic *textile* nature as a « tissue of quotations » like Leopardi's (just think of the *Zibaldone*). In this essay, I would argue that each of the different philosophical readings to which I have referred above do nothing but pull one of the many threads that compose Leopardi's work; in so doing, they also shed light on the *polysemic* nature of the name Leopardi, the meaning of which can reveal different nuances depending on the author or constellation of authors to which it is strategically compared and placed in dialogue with. But let's first see what a « philosophical portrait » is and how this idea can be applied to Leopardi.

⁴ For a methodological reflection on the importance of severing the link between the historical meaning that a text acquires through its different interpretations and the author's intention (itself historically constructed), see also Lærke, 2015, in particular p. 18-28. The historical meaning of a text is rooted in the intrinsic productivity of its reception and is independent from the author's intention. The task of the historian of philosophy is not so much to measure the distance between an author's intention and the historical meaning of a text as to understand the genesis and implications of the latter in context.

2. The History of Philosophy as an Art of Portraiture

The idea of the « philosophical portrait » can be considered as a landmark of Deleuze's philosophical method. Not only is this idea put into practice in the monographs that Deleuze devoted to specific authors, such *Nietzsche et la philosophie* [*Nietzsche and Philosophy*], *Le bergsonisme* [*Bergsonism*], or *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression* [*Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*], but it is also elucidated in several other texts, in particular *Différence et répétition* [*Difference and Repetition*], *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* [*What is Philosophy?*], or *Pourparlers* [*Negotiations*]. Here, in particular, Deleuze explains that the goal of a « philosophical portrait » is not to provide an exact imitation of the model, like copyists do – that is to say, it is not to repeat what the philosopher already said. On the contrary, the aim of a « philosophical portrait » is to test the power and reach of the concepts that a philosopher invented and employed. Only the best thinkers can undergo this practice – a practice which reveals precisely the philosophical scope and solidity of their thought and concepts, showing how they can be reactivated and continued in other contexts, as a function of new problems, without losing their effectiveness and cognitive value.

This vision presupposes and promotes a *creative* conception of the history of philosophy, which goes hand in hand with a practice of displacement, reinvention, and setting in motion, which for Deleuze is creative as much as it is also clarifying at the same time⁵. This is a vision that Deleuze derives, at least in part, from Bergson. In response to the criticism of having « bergsonifié » [« Bergsonified »] Ravaisson, Bergson acknowledged, as Philippe Soulez put it, that « tout portrait est aussi un autoportrait » [« every portrait is also a self-portrait »] (Soulez and Worms, 1997, p. 40) and that this is the only way through which a philosophical system could be properly understood and clarified – precisely by testing it in the light of the new problems that a philosopher is confronted with⁶.

In order to elucidate his creative approach to the history of philosophy, Deleuze also employs another image borrowed from the art of painting: that of « collage »⁷. The idea of « collage » suggests that, in philosophy, the creation of something new

⁵ See Deleuze, 1990, p. 185-186, Deleuze and Guattari, 1991, p. 66-67. For Deleuze's idea of the « philosophical portrait » see in particular Cherniavsky and Jaquet, 2013. For a discussion of Deleuze's interpretative strategies in some of his « philosophical portraits », namely in his monographs on Hume, Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Bergson, see Hardt, 1993.

⁶ See Bergson, « La vie et l'œuvre de Ravaisson », in Bergson, 2003, p. 253-291 (see in particular p. 253, footnote 1) and Cherniavsky, « Fidélité ou efficacité. Problèmes méthodologiques de l'histoire deleuzienne de la philosophie », in Cherniavsky and Jaquet, 2013, p. 18.

⁷ See Deleuze, 1968, p. 4-5.

always takes place through the combination and juxtaposition of older pieces borrowed from the tradition. This combination has a creative potential when, by connecting the texts to each other according to certain components and not others, it determines the emergence of new ways of perceiving the work of a specific philosopher as well as the tradition in which it is comprised. By producing the *defamiliarization* of well-known authors and texts, the technique of collage shows how they can take on new meanings depending on the constellation and concatenation in which they are included. This is why to the cautious and well-established connections promoted by canonical narratives concerning philosophical schools and legacies, Deleuze prefers the bold and unconventional combinations which follow those elective affinities that often remain hidden. Read alongside the idea of the « philosophical portrait », the image of « collage » proves to be particularly enlightening for understanding Deleuze's approach: it allows us to grasp how, in a history of philosophy understood as an art of portraiture, the relationship is not simply *binary* (every portrait is always a self-portrait) but *triangular* because, together with the artist and the model, other authors and texts also come into play in relation to the model⁸.

Deleuze's approach to the history of philosophy has often been contrasted with an idea of objectivity and true interpretation. The main objection that is usually raised against his vision is that it would promote a strategic appropriation and falsification of the philosophers in question – an appropriation aimed at deliberately turning them into supporters or partisans of a specific philosophical vision in line with the author's beliefs and theoretical orientations. This criticism, however, misses the point in so far as Deleuze is the first to acknowledge that his approach implies a strategic appropriation and even distortion of authors and texts⁹. Deleuze does not hide the fact that this strategy is indeed an essential part of his method, in the belief that also the ideas of « objectivity » and « true interpretation » are actually constructed and presuppose a specific philosophical stance. What they presuppose is a vision of philosophy as a consensual framework of reference that is oriented by specific interests and systems of values and that decides what to read and how, with the ultimate aim of establishing what a good or bad use might be¹⁰. This means that, in the history of philosophy, even the claim to objectivity, impartiality, and true interpretation are, at the end of the day, forms of appropriation and strategic use – that is to say, « falsifications » or *productions of an original*. The difference with

⁸ See Cherniavsky, « Fidélité ou efficacité », in Cherniavsky and Jaquet, 2013, p. 19-22.

⁹ See Deleuze, 1990, p. 15 and Bouaniche, « Un bergsonisme se faisant. Deleuze lecteur de Bergson », in Cherniavsky and Jaquet, 2013, p. 123-138, who speaks of « déformation contrôlée » [« monitored deformation »].

¹⁰ See for instance Deleuze and Guattari, 1991, p. 99, Deleuze, 1990, p. 14-15, and Cherniavsky, « Fidélité ou efficacité », in Cherniavsky and Jaquet, 2013, p. 15-17.

respect to Deleuze's method is that, by hiding their strategic nature, these approaches repress other creative forces:

Je suis d'une génération [...] qu'on a plus ou moins assassinée avec l'histoire de la philosophie. L'histoire de la philosophie exerce en philosophie une fonction répressive évidente, c'est l'Œdipe proprement philosophique : « Tu ne vas quand même pas oser parler en ton nom quand tu n'auras pas lu ceci et cela, et cela sur ceci, et ceci sur cela ». Dans ma génération, beaucoup ne s'en sont pas tirés, d'autres oui, en inventant leurs propres méthodes et de nouvelles règles, un nouveau ton.

I belong to a generation [...] that was more or less bludgeoned to death with the history of philosophy. The history of philosophy plays a patently repressive role in philosophy, it's philosophy's own version of the Oedipus complex: « You can't seriously consider saying what you yourself think until you've read this and that, and that on this, and this on that ». Many members of my generation never broke free of this; others did, by inventing their own particular methods and new rules, a new approach. (Deleuze, 1990, p. 14, trans. p. 5-6)

It follows that, if we want engage with a Deleuzian view of the history of philosophy, the problem becomes not so much establishing which interpretations or uses are correct or misleading, but determining whether these interpretations/appropriations produce a clarification of the texts and authors in question: a clarification that, by opening up and renovating their understanding, does not separate nor sacralize the texts, but makes them available to new possible uses. After all, who can really be the judge of what constitutes a good or bad use? Then one gets the impression that to avoid misuses and misappropriations, books should be kept prisoners in libraries and universities for the sake of their own protection – as may be ironically suggested by Alain Resnais in his film *Toute la mémoire du monde*, which emphasizes the architectonical parallels between a library and a prison. Perhaps, the protective apparatus that we build around books (architectural, interpretive, and moral) is ultimately not so much a way to conserve and protect them, but a way to defend ourselves from the destabilizing danger of their free circulation, when, as Jacques Rancière puts it, they can meet a reader they are not intended for.

3. Leopardi and Philosophy

Like the philosophical portraits theorized and put into practice by Deleuze, the different philosophical interpretations of Leopardi which I mentioned above could be regarded as strategic readings and uses, whose purpose is not simply to repeat what Leopardi already said, but to highlight and emphasize some possible

philosophical directions opened up by his thought and poetry; this means taking certain concepts to the extreme in order to measure their philosophical reach in the light of new problems. As such, these uses and interpretations are also ways to think *with* Leopardi and *through* Leopardi, to test the philosophical significance of his thought by establishing a relationship with the present. After all, as Nietzsche observed, philosophy, not unlike literature, has always had an *untimely* aspect, thanks to which it is capable of entering into a constitutive and unexpected relationship with the present. But this present is not that of the chronological series of facts and polemics: the *chronological carousel* of current events, which transforms literary criticism into a « *perpetuo circuito di produzione e distruzione* » [« perpetual circuit of production and destruction »¹¹] and makes us talk of Leopardi and the Cognitive Sciences, Leopardi and Eco-criticism, Leopardi and Gender Studies, Leopardi and Disability Studies, Leopardi and Fascism, Leopardi and Communism, Leopardi and Media Studies, or (why not?) Leopardi and Artificial Intelligence. On the contrary, the present with which philosophy and literature from the past are always able to enter into a relationship is the present that, as Walter Benjamin would say, reveals or brings about their *moment of legibility* (*das Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*), in a short-circuit between past and present.

However, the questions that I have raised at the beginning still remain unanswered. Why is Leopardi the philosophical name of so many different things? Why can this author, perhaps more than others, be the object of such a multiplicity of philosophical interpretations? These questions can certainly be raised for other authors as well, but I believe that there is a possible explanation that is specifically related to the case of Leopardi.

According to this explanation, which I propose to define as « archeological », the different philosophical readings of Leopardi (readings that present him either as a nihilist or as an existentialist, either as a materialist or as the supporter of a critical form of Platonism, etc.) are all legitimate, that is to say justified and justifiable on the basis of Leopardi's writing, a type of writing which, in its fabric, contains their possibility. Even though Leopardi cannot be reduced to any of these categorizations, each one of them does nothing but highlight and develop one of the manifold discursive possibilities that are indeed made possible by his texts. This is not because we are dealing with an extraordinary individual, a forerunner of his own time, but more simply because Leopardi is a thinker placed in a historically strategic position. As the study of the *Zibaldone* and its different cultural stratifications reveal, Leopardi is at the crossroads of the main traditions of thought that are constitutive of our modernity (materialism, sensationalism, vitalism, religious thought, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, natural and medical sciences, psychology, etc.). More

¹¹ This expression is taken from Leopardi's «Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese», in *Operette morali*.

precisely, Leopardi is an author that traverses the different discursive practices that were taking shape in Europe between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the 19th century: practices that Leopardi adopted and also contributed to formulating and making possible. Thus, for instance, Maurizio Ferraris is certainly right when he defines Leopardi as a « fossile del sensismo » [« fossil of sensationalism »] (Ferraris, 2011, p. 80). However, sensationalist psychology is only one of the many cultural stratifications that can be found in his thought.

Passing through Leopardi, these discursive practices will also spread outside Italy, for example via Nietzsche, thanks to whom Leopardi's intellectual legacy has been ensured a lively and anonymous after life in European culture, above all as a hidden and ghostly presence. It is not surprising then, in the many discursive echoes that regularly occur, philosophers as different as Antonio Negri or Emanuele Severino have felt the need to return to Leopardi. If Leopard is a constant and recurring presence in Italian (and not only Italian) philosophy, it is perhaps because we have not yet exhausted the philosophical possibilities opened up in multiple directions by his thought¹².

Furthermore, as a crossroads of different cultural traditions of thought, Leopardi proves to be a philosopher that *responds* and *reacts* differently depending on the author he is compared to, depending on the constellation within which he is placed. Just as colors, as Benjamin put it, have no fixed value but gain their meaning from their surrounding colors¹³, so Leopardi's concepts reveal a different meaning according to the context within which they are placed.



Adopting a perspective of this kind in the case of Leopardi (a perspective that reduces the role of the author in favor of greater attention to the discursive practices that he helped to put into circulation and make possible) presents a series of theoretical and methodological advantages: not least the advantage of allowing us to get rid, perhaps once and for all, of an idea that continues to resurface, in more or less disguised forms, and which makes Leopardi's work and his vision of

¹² For a possible contextualization of the meaning and circulation of Leopardi's philosophy outside Italy, see for instance recent studies by Clemente, 2020 and Tognocchi, 2022. I take the opportunity to address here, even though only briefly, a question concerning Leopardi and female philosophers that was raised during the conference. All the philosophers who have written on Leopardi are male philosophers and a feminist reading of Leopardi seems to be missing. Is Leopardi a philosopher (and a poet) that only speaks to men? This is a question that certainly would deserve further investigation elsewhere. My tentative answer here is that, by distinguishing between Leopardi's explicit *legacy* and the hidden *afterlife* of his thought, at the intersection between the different discourses and cultural traditions which are constitutive of our modernity, the archaeological perspective that I propose to adopt could perhaps provide us with the tools for going beyond binaries and for challenging the misleading equation between gender and a specific literary or philosophical corpus (see Grosz, 2005). Among the female writers and poets who appreciate Leopardi, just think of George Eliot, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, Cristina Campo, and Antonella Anedda.

¹³ Caygill, 1998, p. 12-13.

the world an emanation of his biography, an expression of his very personal condition. This vision, which continues to be the most effective exorcism against the recognition of the philosophical relevance of his thought, can be considered as the negative extreme of a certain romantic conception of the relationship between author and text: a conception according to which a text is supposed to entail a causal and exclusive relationship with the person of its author and is seen as an expression of their individuality. According to this conception, which is « tyranniquement centrée sur l'auteur, sa personne, son histoire, ses goûts, ses passions » [« tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions »], « l'explication de l'œuvre est toujours cherchée du côté de celui qui l'a produite, comme si [...] c'était toujours finalement la voix d'une seule et même personne, l'auteur, qui livrait sa confidence » [« the explanation of a work is always found in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were, in the end [...] the voice of a single person, the author "confiding" is us »].

This quotation is taken from Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1984, p. 62, trans. p. 143), but in a famous polemical essay against Sainte-Beuve, Marcel Proust had already contested this biographical method, which does not separate the work from the person of its author and explains it through the private life and biography of the writer (their habits, idiosyncrasies, vices, social behaviors, illnesses, etc.). In this text, Proust notoriously argued that the self who writes – and who manifests itself only through writing – is broader than the personal self¹⁴. This statement, though, could be read in different ways and could mean different things. One is that, even more than the personal self, the self who writes is multiple because it is capable of hosting within itself a multiplicity of subjects, voices, and discourses coming from different sources and pulling in different directions. Writing, it has been said, implies a *depersonalization* – not so much, however, I would argue following Deleuze, a depersonalization by *deduction* as by the *addition* and *multiplication* of subjects and identities; a depersonalization that has to do not so much with the *impersonal* as with the *more than personal*¹⁵.

Whether we are dealing with a poet, a writer, or a philosopher, this multiplicity of the self who writes – a multiplicity that is diachronic and synchronic at the same

¹⁴ Proust, 1954, p. 121-147.

¹⁵ See Deleuze, 1990, p. 15-16, trans. p. 6-7. Here Deleuze points out that becoming a writer or a philosopher, becoming able to speak or write for yourself or in your own name does not mean seeing yourself as an ego or a person or a subject: « Au contraire, un individu acquiert un véritable nom propre, à l'issue du plus sévère exercice de dépersonnalisation, quand il s'ouvre aux multiplicités qui le traversent de part en part, aux intensités qui le parcourent » [« Individuals find a real name for themselves, rather, only through the harshest exercise in depersonalization, by opening themselves up to the multiplicities everywhere within them, to the intensities running through them »]. This is « l'opposé de la dépersonnalisation opérée par l'histoire de la philosophie, une dépersonnalisation d'amour et non pas de soumission » [« the opposite of the depersonalization effected by the history of philosophy; it's a depersonalization through love rather than subjection »].

time – is perhaps what makes possible the richness and diversity of our possible readings, uses, and interpretations, inside and outside the canon.

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