

Looking at Infinity, Looking at the Sky: Virgil's *Eclogues* and Giacomo Leopardi's Bucolic Poems

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To speak of a 'bucolic Leopardi', and of Leopardi as a bucolic successor of Virgil's *Eclogues*, expresses both the simplest and the most daring of intentions.

On the one hand, it seems simple to attribute a bucolic label to the author of the most famous *Idylls* in the Italian poetical tradition. Nor does it seem difficult to identify more or less explicit references to Virgil in the work of a poet steeped in ancient poetry, who indeed made his relationship with the Greek and Latin worlds a presupposition of his own poetical and philosophical system, and who was certainly a voracious reader of Virgil, as well as a young translator of his poetry.¹

Still, once the veil of these prominent appearances is lifted, one soon discovers that, in fact, it is challenging to call Leopardi a truly 'bucolic' poet, in as much as it is almost impossible to establish a specific connection between his poetry and Virgil's bucolic collection. Within a lifelong relationship with Virgil, marked by admiration sometimes mixed with criticism, based on the notes in the *Zibaldone* and poetic allusions in the *Canti*, the *Eclogues* seem to

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Leopardi's texts are quoted from the following editions: *Poesie e prose*, 2 vols, ed. M. A. Rigoni and R. Damiani, Milan, 1987–8; *Zibaldone*, 3 vols, ed. R. Damiani, Milan, 1997. English translations from *Canti*, trans. J. Galassi, London, 2010; *Zibaldone*, ed. M. Caesar and F. D'Intino, New York, 2013. Translations from other works are my own. Virgil's texts are quoted from *Bucolica et Georgica*, ed. S. Ottaviano and G. B. Conte, Berlin / New York, 2013; English translations from *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I–VI*, trans. H. R. Fairclough, London / New York, 1916 (revised G. P. Goold, 1999).

¹ On Leopardi's translation of *Aeneid* 2 and its significance in his career as a poet, see Blasucci (1985) 9–30; Tixi (2012); Camarotto (2016) 123–42; La Rosa (2017) 245–73; Scafoglio (2018); Vallana (2021).

this day “the work of Virgil that Leopardi frequented least”.² It is not easy to find textual allusions to the *Eclogues* in Leopardi’s work. Even when detectable, the explicit references to bucolic Virgil barely seem relevant in his poems. However, it would be surprising if a poet who was so close to Virgil on many different levels did not have Virgil’s *Eclogues* in mind while writing the poems that he entitled *Idylls* (*Idilli*).

Whereas the majority of bucolic poets show that they did keep Virgil in mind and often flaunt it to highlight their ability to go beyond that extremely authoritative model, in Leopardi’s case we witness the opposite phenomenon. Bucolic Virgil is dissolved and wholly absorbed in a modern idyll with almost no memory of those ten eclogues that founded the western bucolic tradition.³

The research on Leopardi’s reception of bucolic Virgil, then, turns out to be implicated in a more complex picture, and the study of a ‘bucolic Leopardi’ becomes a challenge to the scholar of reception, as well as an exciting chapter in the history of the versatile pastoral tradition. A question that might have seemed rhetorical – can one who knew Virgil in early childhood, translated his work, and had an ongoing dialogue with the Virgilian corpus, not remember the *Eclogues* when preparing to write his own idylls? – resolves itself into a much broader set of questions, which can be summed up as follows: what are the bucolic features of Leopardi’s *Idylls*? How does Leopardi step into the pastoral discourse and elaborate his version of the pastoral mode?⁴ This paper aims to look more deeply into this issue and to suggest some traces of Virgil’s *Eclogues* in Leopardi’s literary memory. A deeper investigation of the subject seems appropriate, or rather necessary, to shed new light on the interpretation of Leopardi’s *Idylls* and, more widely, on the use of the pastoral repertoire throughout the Italian poet’s *Canti*.

A methodological premise is in order. Textual echoes of bucolic Virgil are rare in Leopardi’s *Canti*; there is no reason, then, to insist on finding any more, even if weak, just because of the prejudice that bucolic Virgil must be uncovered in Leopardi beyond what can be seen with the naked eye. I will proceed from a different assumption: a regulative idea of *literary genre* as a tool to interpret texts. In this sense, the fact that some of Leopardi’s poems are called *Idylls*, by their author’s choice, asks us to consider them in their ‘bucolic dimension’ – that is, to investigate how far their forms, contents, and mode are indebted to the tradition of bucolic poetry and how much can instead be attributed to an original interpretation by Leopardi.

² La Penna (1991) 257.

³ On Virgil’s crucial role in the foundation of the pastoral genre, see Cucchiarelli (2021).

⁴ On this concept as related to Virgil’s *Eclogues* as well as to the whole pastoral genre, see Alpers (1996), which relies on the theory of literary modes formulated by Frye (1969) 43–89.

Therefore, discovering a possible presence of Virgil's *Eclogues* will occur at this level. By considering Leopardi's *Idylls* through a bucolic lens and interpreting them according to the criteria of the pastoral tradition, we are necessarily impelled to measure their debt to Virgil, without whom that tradition would not exist. The same can be said of poems that, even though they are not explicitly called *Idylls*, contain elements of unquestionable relevance to the bucolic tradition, such as a shepherd who sings while tending his flock.

In this sense, I will bear in mind Charles Martindale's warning that "to have assigned a work to a genre does not *precede* interpretation, rather it is *already to have interpreted*".⁵ I assume that these poems belong to the tradition of pastoral poetry because of the title their author chose for them, in addition to some components of theirs that are highly recognizable as pastoral. Therefore, I will interpret them consistently and verify how Leopardi's poems *work* if and as meant as bucolic poems.

I will work on this hypothesis by reading two of the most famous among Leopardi's poems, *L'infinito* and *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia*.

But first, let's look at a line of Leopardi's *Disegni letterari* ("Literary projects"), which he wrote in 1828 and which is often quoted in discussions of what Leopardi meant by that problematic ancient word *idyll*: "Idilli esprimenti situazioni, affezioni, avventure storiche del mio animo" ("Idylls expressing situations, affections, historical adventures of my soul").⁶ In this definition, there is something that Schiller would call "sentimental". The bucolic space of idylls – *locus amoenus, silvae, fontes* – is taken away from the description of actual space, as well as from the allegorical meaning and the aesthetic concerns it has been filled with across centuries of pastoral poetry, and is instead explicitly related to the poet's feelings. The idyll's new goal is to express those feelings and the adventures of a soul. Even though pastoral poetry had already gone through a long journey of transformation and innovation from its Greek and Latin origins, Leopardi's definition of idyll still contains something deeply original.⁷

L'infinito is the first in a series of poems that Leopardi published for the first time in 1825–6 with the title *Idylls*,⁸ and it is probably the most striking example of the new lease of life that Leopardi gave to the idyll:

⁵ Martindale (1993) 14 (original emphases).

⁶ *Disegni letterari* XII, 1218; cf. D'Intino et al. (2021) 211–22.

⁷ On this line from the *Disegni letterari*, the genesis of Leopardi's idylls, and possible modern sources (in particular, Goethe's *Werther*), see Blasucci (2017) 13–51; Lonardi (2017) 45–104. For a recent reading, see Zanon (2021).

⁸ These poems were initially six and were published with the title *Idilli* in two issues of the journal *Il Nuovo Ricoglitore* between 1825 and 1826. They were published under the same title in the volume *Versi* in 1826. This title disappeared starting from the first edition of the *Canti* in 1831. On the writing and the publication of the *Idylls*, see Italia (2016) 147–83; Blasucci (2017) 33–44.

Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle,
 E questa siepe, che da tanta parte
 Dell'ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude.
 Ma **sedendo e mirando**, interminati
 Spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani 5
 Silenzi, e profondissima quiete
 Io **nel pensier mi fingo**; ove per poco
 Il cor non si spaura. E come il vento
 Odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello
 Infinito silenzio a questa voce 10
Vo comparando: e mi sovvien l'eterno,
 E le morte stagioni, e la presente
 E viva, e il suon di lei. Così tra questa
 Immensità s'annega il pensier mio:
 E il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare. 15

This lonely hill was **always dear** to me,
 and this hedgerow, which cuts off the view
 of so much of the last horizon.
 But **sitting** here and **gazing**, I can see
 beyond, **in my mind's eye**, unending spaces, 5
 and superhuman silences, and depthless calm,
 till what I feel
 is almost fear. And when I hear
 the wind stir in these branches, I begin
comparing that endless stillness with this noise: 10
 and the eternal comes to mind,
 and the dead seasons, and the present
 living one, and how it sounds.
 So my mind sinks in this immensity:
 and foundering is sweet in such a sea. 15

The poem starts with a statement of *consuetudo* (line 1). The place is well-known to the poet, who can connect his past, present, and future to the memory of the hill.⁹ The same *consue-*

⁹ The same sense of familiarity, connected to the hill, occurs again at the beginning of the idyll *Alla luna* ("To the moon"), lines 1–3: "O graziosa luna, io mi rammento | Che, or volge l'anno, sopra questo colle | Io venia pien d'angoscia a rimirarti" ("O graceful moon, I can remember, now | the year has turned, how, filled with anguish, | I came here to this hill to gaze at you").

tudo is one of the most emphasized features of the peaceful bucolic space of Tityrus in the description offered by the exiled Meliboeus: *non insueta gravis temptabunt pabula fetas, | nec mala vicini pecoris contagia laedent. | Fortunata senex, hic inter flumina nota | et fontis sacros frigus captabis opacum* (“Still, no strange herbage shall try your breeding ewes, no baneful infection from a neighbour’s flock shall harm them. Happy old man! Here, amid familiar streams and sacred springs, you shall enjoy the cooling shade”, *Ecl.* 1.49–52).¹⁰ Following a suggestion by Nicola Gardini, the “sieve” (the hedge) and the “ultimo orizzonte” (the “last horizon”) of lines 2–3 could also remind us of this celebrated description by Meliboeus of the *locus amoenus*: *hinc tibi quae semper vicino ab limite saepes* (“On this side, as of old, on your neighbour’s border, the hedge...”, *Ecl.* 1.53).¹¹

After defining his space of habit and peace, the poet sits (“sedendo”, line 4) in observation (“mirando”). For the first gesture, there is almost no need to mention how profoundly bucolic it is: the shepherd sitting on the grass and singing or watching his herd is an iconic image of the whole bucolic tradition, in the Greek poets as well as in Virgil. In Leopardi, this gesture occurs several times, often with intensely pastoral nuances, always related to some form of philosophical meditation.¹² The idea could have also been suggested by Servius: *sedet. non otiaitur, sed curat; apud antiquos enim “sedet” considerat significabat* (“Sits: not he is at leisure, but he applies care; for among the ancients ‘sits’ used to denote ‘considers’”, Servius *ad Aen.* 1.56).

For the second verb – “mirare” (“gaze”) – we may recall that Meliboeus in *Eclogue 1* uses the same verb three times, encompassing present, past, and future (*miror*, 1.11; *mirabar*, 1.36; *mirabor*, 1.69), firstly to express his amazement at Tityrus’ destiny and Amaryllis’ sadness, then to deny himself any hope of coming back from exile.¹³

While sitting and gazing, the poet starts making up (as expressed by the Latin term *fnngo*) “unending spaces, and superhuman silences, and depthless calm” with the power of his thought or, more precisely, of his *imagination*.

¹⁰ Cf. Gigante (1981) 68: “Poco importa se i *pabula* di Tityro siano *pinguia* o *laeta*, importa che siano gli stessi, i pascoli di sempre” (“It matters little whether the *pabula* of Tityrus are *pinguia* or *laeta*, it matters that they are the same, the pastures of always”). An early bucolic successor of Virgil, Calpurnius Siculus, significantly reverses the *consuetudo* implied in Tityrus’ *locus amoenus*, by making the shepherd Corydon sit *insueta statione* (Calpurnius 4.3).

¹¹ Cf. Gardini (2008) 86.

¹² Twenty-three occurrences of this verb can be counted in the *Canti*: cf. Primo (2003) xxxvii–xxxix. On their relevance as bucolic hints and the Virgilian parallels, see Albonico (2013) 181–2. Significantly, this verb occurs twice in one of Leopardi’s translations from Moschus (fr. 1 Gow) as an innovation introduced by the translator – that is, without a corresponding term in Moschus’ idyll: cf. Natale (2016) 288–91.

¹³ Davis (2012) 32–3 classifies this repetition of *miror* as a feature of the poor philosophical attitude of Meliboeus (“Virgil’s contra-positon of philosophical outlooks [sc. between Tityrus and Meliboeus] receives articulation through the repetition”). On the contrary, in Leopardi, this verb signals the start of philosophical meditation.

The bucolic construction of an alternative world through poetry, which started from the first line of Theocritus' *Idyll* 1,¹⁴ is now repeated by Leopardi in a completely introspective way. The thought fashions – *fingit* – a reality beyond the boundary of the *saepes*, and the poet's heart almost gets scared by that. Intellectual process (“pensier”, thought) overlaps with sentimental feeling (“cor”, heart), clarifying how the idyll can be intended as a soul's “historical adventure”. Moreover, it has been noted that the expression of fear in lines 7–8 (“ove per poco | il cor non si spaura”) is connected with Leopardi's translation of *Aen.* 2.755 (*simul ipsa silentia terrent*) which reads “silenzio pur l'alma spaura”.¹⁵ Through the memory of that translation, such an essential stage in Leopardi's path towards becoming a poet, Virgil's epic voice creeps into Leopardi's poetry when he starts singing his idyllic song and constructing his own pastoral fictionality. We may wonder to what extent this can be said about Virgil's bucolic voice – or Virgil's pastoral mode.

In Leopardi's *L'infinito*, we have a shepherd-poet who imagines another world in his mind, trying to look beyond the hedge with the power of his imagination. It is not made explicit that he is a shepherd, but he is the main character of an idyll, and he sits on the grass in what seems to be his *locus amoenus*, the Arcadia of his heart. We can definitely say that Leopardi's idyll immerses us in the clearest possible “spiritual landscape”, as is Virgil's Arcadia according to the definition given by Bruno Snell.¹⁶ The real world and the imaginative-poetic world interact, in the middle of Leopardi's idyll, just as the unreal Arcadia of Virgil¹⁷ interacts with the real world of war and exile.

This interplay is realized through another poetic tool which belongs to Virgil's pastoral mode: comparison through the bucolic use of deictics. In lines 9–11, the wind blowing through the trees seems to awaken the poet from his entirely imaginative world. But, instead of bringing him back to the actual world on this side of the hedge, it leads him to a startling comparison between ‘here’ and ‘there’, as if these two worlds were much more connected than they initially seemed to be. From the very beginning of the idyll (“quest'ermo colle”: “this lonely hill”) right up to its conclusion (“questo mare”: “such a sea”), the piling up of demonstrative adjectives and pronouns mixes the concrete world of the experience (“this hill”) and the fictional world of imagination (“that endless stillness”).¹⁸

¹⁴ On fictionality as the main component of pastoral poetry, cf. Iser (1993) 22–86; Payne (2007); Kania (2016). For analysis see Martindale (2019) 177–8.

¹⁵ Cf. Blasucci (2019) 318.

¹⁶ Cf. Snell (1953) 281–309.

¹⁷ I refer here to Virgil's bucolic world as “Arcadia”, because of the suitability of the term to talk about the fictional-literary setting of the *Eclogues* as a whole. I am aware, however, that this name has given rise to controversies and debate: see especially Kennedy (1987); Jenkyns (1989); Connolly (2001).

¹⁸ On Leopardi's employment of deictics, see Raimondi (1994) 507–21; Mengaldo (2006) 71–4; Zublena (2010); Mengaldo (2011) 71. On comparison as the key feature of *L'infinito*, cf. Cacciari (2021).

As readers of bucolic poetry know, the wide use of demonstrative adjectives and pronouns, as well as adverbs of place, is common in the bucolic language and generates an effect of immediacy that contributes to the construction of the pastoral space.¹⁹ At the same time, the comparison (implicit or explicit) between the pastoral world and the reality outside of it is a remarkable component of Virgil's *Eclogues*. To stay within *Eclogue* 1, Tityrus' trip to Rome – that is, to the non-pastoral world – allows him to come back and enjoy the leisure admired by Meliboeus; in *Ecl.* 1.19–25, Tityrus admits his naiveté in comparing the small world of the shepherds with the magnificent reality of the city. On the other hand, Meliboeus' vision of the external world in *Ecl.* 1.64–6 takes the shape of a hyperbolic distance to which he, as an exile, is destined.²⁰ The eclogue concludes, then, with the invitation of Tityrus to spend one last night in the pastoral space, where the stress is again put on the opposition between *hic* ("here", *Ecl.* 1.79) and *procul* ("over there", 1.82).²¹

By comparing the close, tangible reality of the trees around him with the endless space imagined beyond the *limes* of the hedge, Leopardi implements the opposition between ontologically different worlds that informs Virgil's *Eclogues* from their very beginning. Moreover, he makes it happen through the careful use of bucolic deictics.

The ending of the idyll, with the ambiguous image of a "sweet shipwreck", could break the atmosphere of conciliation between the opposites we invoked. In an essay entitled *Idillio con naufragio* ("Idyll with shipwreck"), Gilberto Lonardi wrote that Leopardi takes the form of the idyll apart, depriving it of its ontological basis. In other words, the appearance of a quiet 'idyll' is presented at the beginning of Leopardi's poem to show its inconsistency and to generate an unexpected disorder within it.²² If it is true that the final shipwreck of *L'infinito*, even though "sweet", does not suggest a full peace in the *locus amoenus* as much as a hint of anxiety, this would also be a Virgilian bucolic move. Virgil's Arcadia is by definition "impossible", as La Penna reminds us;²³ its construction reveals that its opposite is always immanent, and the poem keeps working on this contradiction without ever finding a permanent solution.

¹⁹ Significant examples in Theocritus, *Id.* 5.31–4, 5.45–6, 11.45–8; in Virgil, *Ecl.* 1.53–6, 1.70–2 (with pessimistic, rather than idealizing, tones), 7.49–51, 9.40–1, 9.60–2, 10.42–3. Cf. Putnam (1970) 46–7: "From the first eclogue to the last, the use of the word *hic* and its kindred *hinc* [...] signals the beginning of an idealized vision of the countryside".

²⁰ On the typological quality of the places described by Meliboeus here, see Flintoff (1974) 818: "It seems that in the citing of these places there is a considerable element of the typological. Not merely are they far away from the scene of the Bucolics they are also thought of as qualitatively unlike it – perhaps even diametrically opposite to it and possessing the evaluative associations, that are surely negative".

²¹ On Virgil's construction of an imaginative-intellectual space in *Eclogue* 1 which contrasts with the cogent space of history, see Putnam (1982) 243–66; Leach (1988) 148–55.

²² See Lonardi (2017) 73–104.

²³ See La Penna (2005) 3–66.

The “suspension” that informs the end of *Eclogue* 1, which Charles Segal identified as the most significant component of the atmosphere of Virgil’s *Eclogues*,²⁴ is the same suspension on which Leopardi’s idyll *L’infinito* concludes. Between the most profound peace and silence of an imaginary world and the blowing wind of actual reality there exists a form of communication, realized through the power of poetry and art. However, this connection finally results in a “sweet shipwreck” of thought, which cannot resolve the contradiction between these two worlds, and is probably not supposed to do so, either.

About ten years later, between 1829 and 1830, Leopardi wrote another bucolic poem, the *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell’Asia*. First, we have to point out that this is not precisely an idyll, since it does not belong to the group of poems entitled *Idylls* by the author, all written between 1819 and 1821. However, a long critical tradition has attributed to this poem and five others the label of “Major Idylls”, because of their affinity with the first group of *Idylls*. Whatever we want to call it, even if we do not use the term ‘idyll’ on the grounds that Leopardi never called it that, this poem inevitably draws our attention because of its prominent bucolic features. Indeed, the poem’s protagonist is a shepherd, placed in a remote and desolate land of Asia, who sings to the moon and wonders about the destiny of human beings, comparing and opposing himself to his quiet flock, which sleeps without thought, utterly immune to boredom and unaware of sorrow.

Some years ago, Simone Albonico proposed an attempt to investigate the literary tradition behind Leopardi’s shepherd.²⁵ As Albonico asserts, the immediate source from which Leopardi took the inspiration for his poem, the article by Meyendorff from the *Journal des Savans* about Kyrgyz shepherds singing to the moon in the remote lands of Asia,²⁶ has been for a long time in the foreground, so much so that it has almost obscured the literary components of the poem. Therefore, Albonico gives some valuable suggestions for work on the bucolic elements of the *Canto notturno*, with a focus on the echoes of Virgil’s *Eclogues*.²⁷

I will follow this lead and continue to concentrate on the Virgilian-bucolic components of Leopardi’s *Canto notturno*. In particular, I will focus on the theme of a shepherd looking

²⁴ See Segal (1981) 278: “This atmosphere of suspension amid contraries, of rest amid disturbance, sets the tone for the *Eclogues*”.

²⁵ See Albonico (2013).

²⁶ The importance of this reading in the genesis of the *Canto notturno* is indubitable. Leopardi explicitly quotes it in *Zib.* 4399–400 and then recalls those pages of the *Zibaldone* in the literary project of a “Canto notturno di un pastore dell’Asia centrale alla luna” (*Disegni letterari* XII, 1219). Finally, he wrote the passage again in a note on the autograph of the poem: see Bronzini (1979); Dionisotti (1988).

²⁷ De Robertis and Martelli (1972) 304–7 already suggested looking at the bucolic tradition to read the *Canto notturno*.

at the sky and singing to the moon which, at first sight, seems to be a step away from the tradition of ancient pastoral poetry. But in fact, we can collect several clues which suggest that ancient pastoral models played a crucial role in the birth of Leopardi's shepherd and that Virgil's *Eclogues* were central to this process.

In the first place, we should wonder about the poet's choice to put in the mouth of a shepherd philosophical questions – as well as some hurtful doubts – about human destiny and sorrow. In his essay on pastoral poetry, Paul Alpers suggested that shepherds became representative of humanity starting from Virgil's *Eclogues*, and that this is somehow the quintessence of Virgil's pastoral mode.²⁸ In this sense, Leopardi's choice to identify himself with a shepherd and declare through his voice the weakness of humanity when faced with the cosmos is indebted to the pastoral tradition as shaped by Virgil. But we will come back to this point later; now, let's take a closer look at the poem.

At the very beginning, the shepherd addresses his song to the moon, in an admirable *incipit* that sets the interrogative tone which will continue throughout the whole poem (lines 1–10):

Che fai tu, luna, in ciel? dimmi, che fai,
 Silenziosa luna?
 Sorgi la sera, e vai,
 Contemplando i deserti; indi ti posi.
 Ancor non sei tu paga 5
 Di riandare i sempiterni calli?
 Ancor non prendi a schivo, ancor sei vaga
 Di mirar queste valli?
 Somiglia alla tua vita
 La vita del pastore. 10

What are you doing, moon, up in the sky;
 what are you doing, tell me, silent moon?
 You rise at night and go,
 observing the deserts. Then you set.
 Aren't you tired 5
 of plying the eternal byways?
 Aren't you bored? Do you still want

²⁸ See Alpers (1990) and (1996).

to look down on these valleys?
 The shepherd's life
 is like your life.

10

This “silent moon” is not a usual interlocutor for Virgil’s bucolic shepherds, while it is, of course, a frequent point of reference for the poet Leopardi and almost a ‘character’ in the *Canti*. The bucolic overlap between the poet and the shepherd, the confusion which generates those shepherd-poets whose identity and meaning are among the great puzzles of the pastoral tradition, starts here from the very first line – that is, from the choice of addressee, which is the favourite one of the poet *and* the shepherd. It should be stressed, in other words, that while reading the article in the *Journal des Savans*, Leopardi found an overlap between his poetic favour for the moon and the Kyrgyz shepherds’ songs in the Asian night. That overlap had a specific literary form that Leopardi – the author of *Idylls* – knew very well, namely bucolic poetry.

Luigi Blasucci recalls in his commentary a couple of precedents for the silence of the moon that may be relevant to our purpose.²⁹ On the Virgilian side, it is almost impossible not to think of an echo from *Aen.* 2.255, *tacitae per amica silentia lunae* (“amid the friendly silence of the peaceful moon”), a verse which certainly had impressed the young translator of Virgil. On the bucolic side, it reminds us of a line by Bion, which Leopardi translated “spargi tua luce tacita” (“you scatter your silent light”): τὸ δίδου φάος (Bion, fr. 11 Gow, line 5).

However, we should consider a longer line of bucolic references here. At the beginning of the fourth chapter of his *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* (“Essay on popular errors of the ancients”, 1815), entitled “Della magia” (“On magic”), Leopardi dedicates a long section to the connection between magic and the moon. To start his exploration of this subject, conducted through a massive quantity of ancient sources (as is usual throughout the *Saggio*), Leopardi’s first quotation is from Virgil, *Ecl.* 8.69–70: *carmina vel caelo possunt deducere lunam, | carminibus Circe socios mutavit Ulixi* (“Songs can even draw the moon down from heaven; by songs Circe changed the comrades of Ulysses”).³⁰ A few lines later, Theocritus’ *Idyll* 2 pops up in a double reference to lines 10–11 (ἀλλά, Σελάνα, | φαῖνε καλόν: “Nay, shine bright, O Moon”) and to the bucolic refrain occurring several times from line 69 onwards (φράζεό μευ τὸν ἔρωθ’ ὅθεν ἵκετο, πότνα Σελάνα: “Mark, Lady Moon, whence came my love”).³¹ On this refrain, it is remarkable that the translation of Theocritus’ text

²⁹ See Blasucci (2021) 110.

³⁰ This passage of the *Ecloques* impressed Leopardi’s imagination. In *Zib.* 158 he again quotes *Ecl.* 8.71 while contesting the idea that human songs can charm beasts.

³¹ Text and translation from Gow (1952).

given by Leopardi reads “O santa luna, | *Intendi* l'amor mio perchè si accese”, where the verb “intendi” (“understand”) will significantly be referred to the moon again by the shepherd in the *Canto notturno*, lines 61–4: “Pur tu, solinga, eterna peregrina, | Che sì pensosa sei, tu forse *intendi*, | Questo viver terreno, | Il patir nostro, il sospirar, che sia” (“Yet you, eternal solitary wanderer, | you who are so pensive, | *understand* this life on earth, perhaps, | what our suffering and sighing is”). Furthermore, the metrical structure of the *Canto notturno*, its repetitive words and rhymes, which have been connected to the features of popular songs,³² are revealed to be particularly indebted also to the bucolic mode of the refrain,³³ which marked both Theocritus' *Idyll* 2 and Virgil's *Eclogue* 8, and which is often related to magical powers too.

Thus, the double bucolic reference in the *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* points to a relationship between ancient pastoral and the moon in Leopardi's poetical imagery, in connection with the theme of magic as a fascinating “ancient error”. But that is not all. Shepherds looking at the moon and stars are more relevant in Leopardi's bucolic poetry than one might think at first sight.

It is worth recalling, for instance, that in the poem *Odi, Melisso*, one of the *Idylls* written in 1819–21,³⁴ Leopardi really ‘draws down’ the moon, as Virgil suggested in *Ecl.* 8.69–70. Again, this happens through the voices of two shepherds, Alceta and Melisso. The former tells the latter about a scary dream he had,³⁵ in which the moon fell and landed on the lawn. We can detect here a significant memory of Theocritus' *Idyll* 21, which Leopardi quotes four times in the *Saggio*, in the fifth chapter “*Dei sogni*” (“On dreams”). However, while the dream in Theocritus' idyll was about marvellous fishing, Leopardi's shepherd's dream is much scarier and retrieves the image of a falling moon that had already been mentioned in the previous chapter of the *Saggio*, introduced through the quotation of Virgil's *Eclogue* 8.³⁶

In the *Canto notturno*, we may suggest that Leopardi's shepherd is somehow applying a bucolic trick he learned from Virgil. Even more than in *Odi, Melisso*, indeed, the song of

³² See Fubini and Bigi (1964) 181; Savoca (1996).

³³ Cf. Martelli (1982).

³⁴ For analysis of this poem and its relationship with Greek models, see Peruzzi (1987) 75–138; Sandrini (2014) 119–33. The poem was first included in the original group of *Idylls* (see n. 8 above), then excluded from the first edition of the *Canti* in 1831, and finally reintegrated in the second edition of the *Canti* (1835) in a separate section entitled *Frammenti* (“Fragments”); see Pelosi (2013).

³⁵ The idyll was originally published with the title *Lo spavento notturno* (“Nocturnal fear”); the manuscript bears the title *Il sogno* (“The dream”).

³⁶ All commentators on the idyll also recall the autobiographical background of this subject, attested by Leopardi's note “Luna caduta secondo il mio sogno” (“Fallen moon as in my dream”); see *Argomenti di idilli*, 636. The intersection and mixture of autobiographical and literary memories is a frequent and fascinating component of Leopardi's relationship with the ancients: cf. Peruzzi (1987).

the shepherd tries here to ‘draw down’ the moon by comparing its wanderings to his own life (“Somiglia alla tua vita | La vita del pastore”: “The shepherd’s life | is like your life”, lines 9–10).³⁷ As the continuation of the poem will make clear, this bucolic charm will not be completely effective. The power of poetry will not erase the radical difference between the moon’s and the shepherd’s knowledge and destiny. However, imagination, the never-ending engine in Leopardi’s poetry, is still working in this shepherd’s song, at least at its beginning, and is playing again with daring comparisons between the eternal and the limited, as it already did in *L’infinito*.

Moreover, we can maintain that *Eclogue* 8 was particularly present in Leopardi’s memory. Antonio La Penna has noted another passage from this eclogue, indeed, among Leopardi’s reminiscences of bucolic Virgil, that again has to do with the sky and the stars. It is Damon’s invocation to Lucifer in *Ecl.* 8.17 (*Nascere, praeque diem veniens age, Lucifer, alnum*: “Rise, O morning star, heralding genial day”), which Leopardi probably recalled while writing *L’ultimo canto di Saffo*, which begins with a similar invocation to the “nunzio del giorno” (“herald of day”).³⁸ On the one hand, this memory of the *Eclogues* belongs to a different area of the *Canti*, the *Canzoni* group written between 1818 and 1823, where Leopardi notably exploits a rich Virgilian repertoire.³⁹ On the other hand, this brings us back to Bion’s idyll, translated by Leopardi, which was indeed addressed to Hesperus, the ‘other face’ of Lucifer,⁴⁰ and in which the moon, even if technically absent, ended up playing a crucial role in Leopardi’s version of the idyll.⁴¹ This is the poem that Blasucci recalls as one of the sources for the “silenziosa luna” of *Canto notturno*, line 2, and that we mentioned before.

We have gone from Bion to Theocritus to Virgil, and to Bion again. The shepherd looking at the moon in Leopardi’s *Canto notturno* is definitely indebted to the complex texture of his bucolic ancestors. Still, there is more.

As Andrea Cucchiarelli recently suggested, Leopardi’s *Canto notturno* could also be reminiscent of the atmosphere of Virgil’s *Eclogue* 9, in particular the passage about *Caesaris astrum* in which the shepherd is described as *pura solum sub nocte canentem* (“singing alone beneath

³⁷ On the poetical and philosophical assumptions of this comparison, see Ficara (1996) 91–114; Ficara (2018).

³⁸ *L’ultimo canto di Saffo*, line 4; cf. La Penna (1991) 331–4.

³⁹ As La Penna notes, in Leopardi’s *Bruto minore*, lines 65–6, we find another allusion to (almost a translation of) a line of Damon’s song (*Præcepta aërii specula de montis in undas | deferar*, *Ecl.* 8.59–60): see La Penna (2005) 24. *Bruto minore* is always associated, for the affinity in themes and tones, with *L’ultimo canto di Saffo*.

⁴⁰ Lucifer and Hesperus, the morning and the evening stars, are actually the same *sidus*, Venus, as the ancients knew: see Pliny, *NH* 2.36.

⁴¹ I have tried to bring it to light by analysing Leopardi’s translation of this Greek idyll in a forthcoming contribution for the *Atti del XV Convegno Internazionale di Studi Leopardiani* (Recanati, 27–30 October 2021).

the cloudless night”, *Ecl.* 9.44).⁴² In the Virgilian context, the nocturnal setting of the scene is strictly connected with the celebration of Caesar – that is, of his star and the promises it brings to the (not only) pastoral world. If we read Virgil’s lines in this light,⁴³ Leopardi’s shepherd looks far away from that message of hope and triumph. On the other hand, Leopardi’s poem is attuned to the melancholic tone that characterizes Virgil’s *Eclogue* 9, where – despite the fragmentary attempts of Lycidas and Moeris – the pastoral song never comes to an actual start, and is finally forced into silence by *quod nunc instat* (“the task in hand”, *Ecl.* 9.66). If the hopeful message of the *sidus Iulium* could not be of any interest to Leopardi (unless through an antiphrastic use), what Moeris asserts a few lines later about the irresistible power of time (*Omnia fert aetas, animum quoque*: “Time robs us of all, even of memory”, *Ecl.* 9.51) surely was: Leopardi’s shepherd echoes it in line 72 (“Del tacito, infinito andar del tempo”: “and the silent, endless pace of time”), where the idea of time restlessly passing is joined to silence, as it was in Moeris’ lament (*nunc oblita mihi tot carmina, vox quoque Moerin | iam fugit ipsa*: “Now I have forgotten all my songs. Even voice itself now fails Moeris”, *Ecl.* 9.53–4).

In any case, even if the moon knew anything about the secret of silent time, Leopardi’s shepherd concludes that he does not. As he does not know the answers, his questions get wider, and so does his gaze at the sky (lines 77–89):

Mille cose sai tu, mille discopri,
Che son celate al semplice pastore.
 Spesso quand’io ti miro
 Star così muta in sul deserto piano, 80
 Che, in suo giro lontano, al ciel confina;
 Ovver con la mia greggia
 Seguirmi viaggiando a mano a mano;
E quando miro in cielo arder le stelle;
Dico fra me pensando: 85
A che tante facelle?
 Che fa l’aria infinita, e quel profondo
 Infinito seren? che vuol dir questa
 Solitudine immensa? ed io che sono?

⁴² See *Ecl.* 9.44–7; Cucchiarelli (2022). Cucchiarelli also points out another possible echo of *Ecl.* 9.65 (*ego hoc te fasce levabo*) in *Canto notturno*, line 23 (“Con gravissimo fascio in su le spalle”: “with an enormous burden on his back”).

⁴³ A more ironical and pessimistic reading would also be plausible, based on the echo of the exiled Meliboeus’ words (*Ecl.* 1.73) in Moeris’ song (*Ecl.* 9.50): cf. Putnam (1970) 319–21.

You know and understand a thousand things
that are hidden to a simple shepherd.

Often, when I watch you
 standing still above the empty plain 80
 whose last horizon closes with the sky,
 or moving with me step by step
 as I wander with my flock,

or when I see the stars burn up in heaven,
I ask myself: 85
Why all these lights?

What does the endless air do, and that deep
 eternal blue? What is the meaning of
 this huge solitude? And what am I?

Like an astronomer, Leopardi's shepherd is amazed by the immensity of the sky. Even in this case, the overlap between the bucolic character and the author is easy to see if we recall that in 1813, when he was fifteen, Leopardi wrote a *Storia dell'astronomia* ("History of astronomy").⁴⁴ The shepherd's (and Leopardi's) amazement is well summarized at the beginning of the tenth chapter of the *Saggio sopra gli errori* ("Sugli astri": "On stars"): "Lo spettacolo di un cielo stellato colpisce ogni uomo riflessivo. Esso avrà forse sorpresi e gettati in una dolce estasi i primi uomini" ("The spectacle of a starry sky strikes every thoughtful man. It may have surprised and thrown the first men into sweet ecstasy").⁴⁵

Along with the range of bucolic and Virgilian references that we have detected so far, we could at least mention Virgil's *Eclogue* 3, which explicitly hints at astronomical content and which Leopardi quotes twice in the *Saggio* and once – even if implicitly – in the *Discorso sopra Mosco* ("Discourse on Moschus"), written in the same year.⁴⁶ With less lyrical potential, while more intertwined with scientific themes, this eclogue could have influenced, to some extent, the genesis of a shepherd who is both "simple" ("semplice pastore") and invested in substantial scientific and philosophical questions.

⁴⁴ On Leopardi's scientific knowledge, see Polizzi (2003). For an interesting reading of Leopardi's work by a scholar in astrophysics, see Bersanelli (2021).

⁴⁵ *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi*, 737.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi*, 646, 823. In the *Discorso sopra Mosco* the memory of this eclogue is implied in an almost proverbial reference to Mevius and Bavius, taken for models of bad poetry as they were in *Ecl.* 3.90 (see *Discorso sopra Mosco*, 484). On astronomy in Virgil's *Eclogues*, see Dion (2006); Saunders (2008) 41–50. On the "cosmic inspiration" of the *Eclogues*, especially in the three central poems (4, 5, 6), see Scafoglio (2013). In considering Leopardi's imagery of shepherds looking at the sky, the pre-bucolic example of Homer, *Il.* 8.555–9 must always be borne in mind: cf. Peruzzi (1979) 35–7.

Some suggestions on how to enact an ancient shepherd in a modern version of pastoral undoubtedly came, however, from reading Alexander Pope's *Discourse on Pastoral Poetry* (1717), which Leopardi had read just a couple of years before writing the *Canto notturno*, in 1827.⁴⁷ While explaining that, in pastoral poetry, shepherds should not be represented as *actual* shepherds, but more as we can *imagine* they were at the beginning of time, Pope says that “[t]o carry this resemblance yet farther, it would not be amiss to give these shepherds some skill in astronomy, as far as it may be useful to that sort of life”.⁴⁸ He then suggests creating variation within the eclogues “by frequent comparisons” and “by interrogations to things inanimate”. The numbers “should be the smoothest, the most easy and flowing imaginable”.⁴⁹

In many ways, Leopardi's approach looks relatively consistent with Pope's instructions. As we have seen, his shepherd interrogates an inanimate thing (plus an animate one that still can't answer him, i.e. his flock in lines 105–32) and works with comparisons as with a sort of bucolic ‘alphabet of analogies’. Furthermore, he shows an interest in astronomy that does not deny his simplicity. Simple rhymes and verbal repetitions try to make the song as smooth as possible, as a shepherd would be likelier to sing. The complexity of the contents is often translated into a flow of questions that make them seem much more straightforward than they are.

However, there is a point on which Leopardi's shepherd radically differs from Pope's ideal of pastoral, and indeed from most modern interpretations of bucolic poetry.⁵⁰ Pope says that “[w]e must [...] use some illusion to render a Pastoral delightful; and this consists in exposing the best side only of a shepherd's life, and in concealing its miseries”.⁵¹ This is not the case in Leopardi's *Canto notturno*, where the miseries of the shepherd are actually the core of his whole song. Of course, it has to be noticed that these miseries have very little to do with what we may expect from the harsh life in the countryside, and much more with the doubts and sufferings that can affect every human being. But the same can be said of the miseries that Virgil's shepherds suffer. The exile of Meliboeus (*Ecl.* 1), the pangs of love of Corydon (*Ecl.* 2), Damon (*Ecl.* 8), and Gallus (*Ecl.* 10), the melancholy of Moeris (*Ecl.* 9) all prove that sorrow is not at all banned from Virgil's pastoral world. Leopardi's shepherd inhabits the same bucolic environment as those characters of the *Eclogues*; his miseries are not “concealed” – as Pope would recommend – and firmly stand against the modern concept of pastoral as Golden Age or delicate description of rural leisure.

⁴⁷ See *Elenchi di letture*, 1237.

⁴⁸ Pope (1961) 25–6.

⁴⁹ Pope (1961) 28–9.

⁵⁰ To stay within what Leopardi certainly read, cf. the works of Fontenelle and Rapin, quoted in the *Discorso sopra Mosco*, who both recommended the description of an idealized version of shepherds' life in pastoral poetry.

⁵¹ Pope (1961) 27.

Speaking of sorrow, existential doubts, and philosophical issues, a very Virgilian-bucolic question comes to mind: who is speaking here? To what extent does the shepherd's voice overlap with Leopardi's?⁵² As we noticed at the start of our reading of the *Canto notturno*, the confusion between shepherd and poet is an element of bucolic that Leopardi surely relies upon. However, just as in Virgil's *Eclogues* it is impossible to define if and where the author is concealed behind the bucolic mask,⁵³ so we find the same intermittent relationship between Leopardi and his shepherd. Indeed, Leopardi is not at all 'simple'. He is a nineteenth-century Italian poet who has assimilated an impressive amount of reading and knowledge. At the same time, a "simple shepherd" is exactly what he would have liked to be, ever since he was a young thinker who envied the illusions of the ancients, their possibility of living *away from the truth* that human reasoning had unveiled to the moderns.

The shepherd of the *Canto notturno* reflects a further stage of this theory. He represents, indeed, a more profound truth which is the truth of simple people, who know just a few things and in this way know the most, as Leopardi asserts in a page of the *Zibaldone* dated 31 March 1829 (*Zib.* 4478):

Gli errori de' saggi, antichi e moderni, sono innumerabili. **Il popolo ha pochi errori, perchè poche cognizioni, con poca presunzion di conoscere.** Oltre che la natura, voglio dir la ragione semplice, vergine e incolta, giudica spessissime volte più retta-mente che la sapienza, cioè la ragione coltivata e addottrinata. **E però non è raro che le genti del volgo e i fanciulli abbiano di molte cose opinioni migliori o più ragionevoli che i sapienti [...]**

The errors of the wise, ancient and modern, are innumerable. **The people have few errors, because they know few things, with little presumption to know.** What is more, nature – by which I mean simple, virgin, and uncultivated reason – is very often a more reliable judge than wisdom, that is, cultivated and learned reason. **And therefore it is not uncommon that the opinions of ordinary people and children upon many matters are better or more reasonable than those of the wise [...]**

⁵² On the problem of the "voice" in Virgil's *Eclogues*, see Breed (2006).

⁵³ Cf. the well-known note by Servius (*ad Ecl.* 1.1) on the allegorical reading of the *Eclogues* which should be used *tantum ubi exigit ratio* ("only where reason requires"). On the "intermittent mimetic element" in the *Eclogues*, which joins the intermittence of allegory, and generates a sort of "poetics of fragmentation" that finds its peak in *Eclogue* 9, see Martindale (2019) 187.

In other words, in Leopardi's view, the knowledge of the shepherd consists here in an open question that, even if unanswerable, still contains more truth than modern philosophers' answers do.⁵⁴ The highly learned man Giacomo Leopardi could not be a shepherd singing in an Asian land, so he could not completely identify with his character. Still, he could lend him some of his cosmic doubts, which would be emphasized and brought to the moon and the stars by the wonderful simplicity that was the privilege of bucolic shepherds.

It is worth remembering at this point that in 1828 Leopardi had ranked drama as the lowest kind of poetic genre because of the mediation and the affectation it entails, as opposed to the ὄρμη ("impetus") which characterizes lyric poetry.⁵⁵ Significantly, on the page of *Zibaldone* which immediately precedes the one with the information about Kyrgyz shepherds, we read (*Zib.* 4398–9):

L'imitazione drammatica non può essere spontanea e veramente secondo natura, se non [...] in alcune scene, cioè in quelle che corrispondano alla situazione attuale dell'animo del poeta. Ma qui è sempre il poeta egli stesso che si dipinge, o piuttosto parla, sotto altro nome; **e quella non è veramente imitazione, ma quasi un travestimento.** [...] Del resto, tali scene, dove il poeta esprimesse i suoi sentimenti, passioni ec. attuali sotto nome di qualche personaggio storico, se si componessero staccate, potrebbero esser buona poesia: **il poeta può aver buone ragioni per nascondersi sotto nome altrui;** può trovarvisi, se non altro, più a suo agio; **ed è anche poetico in qualche modo quel rapporto trovato ed espresso fra la propria situazione attuale, e quella d'alcun personaggio storico** ec. (28. Sett. 1828)

Dramatic imitation cannot be spontaneous and truly in accordance with nature, except [...] in certain scenes, namely in those which correspond to the actual situation of the poet's spirit. But here it is always the poet himself who portrays, or rather speaks, under another name; **and that is not true imitation, but almost a disguise.** [...] In any event, such scenes, in which the poet expressed his present feelings, emotions, etc., under the name of some historical figure, could be good poetry if they were composed as separate scenes: **the poet may have good reasons for hiding behind another name;** he may feel more comfortable, if nothing else; **and the relationship which he discovers and describes between his own situation and that of some other historical figure is, in a certain way, poetic,** etc. (28 Sept. 1828)

⁵⁴ Cf. Bigi (1967) 126–31; Ficara (2018) 9–10.

⁵⁵ Cf. *Zib.* 4357.

Looking at the *Canto notturno* and at the unquestionable form of mediation it implies between the character and his author, it seems that Leopardi found in the pastoral mode a convenient way to be hidden – and not to be so – behind a character: that is, behind a ‘pastoral mask,’ or a ‘pastoral disguise.’⁵⁶ If pastoral corresponds to putting “the complex into the simple”, according to Empson’s incisive formula,⁵⁷ Leopardi stuck to this rule by putting the most complex questions about human destiny in the mouth of his “semplice pastore”. If doing so through a shepherd who somehow becomes representative of all humanity is proper to the Virgilian pastoral mode, as Alpers suggests, then Leopardi’s pastoral mode is indebted to Virgil too.

Moreover, it should be recalled that philosophical hints already appeared in the mouth of Virgil’s shepherds. This is the case, for instance, with the two Epicurean statements by the *rusticus* Corydon in *Ecl.* 2.27 (*si numquam fallit imago*: “if the mirror never lies”) and 2.65 (*trahit sua quemque voluptas*: “each is led by his liking”). The former line significantly substituted the superstitious gesture of Theocritus’ Cyclops in *Id.* 6.39–40,⁵⁸ in an attempt to elevate the shepherd from his popular origin through a philosophical motto (with some irony, of course, towards this lover and his attempt to impress the urban Alexis).⁵⁹ The latter has been criticized starting from Servius’ commentary, where it is noted that Virgil made his shepherd say something *supra bucolici carminis legem aut possibilitatem* (“beyond the rules of bucolic poetry or even of possibility”, Servius *ad Ecl.* 2.65).

More than the cosmological and broadly philosophical themes within the *Eclogues*,⁶⁰ this subtle contrast between rusticity and philosophy in the song of *miser* Corydon probably drew Leopardi’s attention.⁶¹ Without any detectable irony between the lines of his song, the

⁵⁶ It should not be overlooked that two of the few attempts at drama by the young Leopardi, probably designed in 1818–19, were pastoral dramas entitled *Erminia* and *Telesilla*: see Favaro (2007) 155–70. At that time, Leopardi still had not formulated his final ranking of poetic genres which would relegate drama to the lowest level. However, it is interesting that pastoral setting and themes already presented themselves to Leopardi’s eyes as a good way of ‘poetic mediation’, strongly related, of course, to the Italian tradition of pastoral drama (first of all, Tasso’s *Aminta* and Guarini’s *Il pastor fido*).

⁵⁷ See Empson (1966) 25.

⁵⁸ “But to cheat the evil eye, thrice I spat into my bosom as the hag Cotyttaris taught me” (trans. Gow); cf. Cucchiarelli (2012) 188.

⁵⁹ On Epicureanism in the *Eclogues*, see Traina (1965); Rundin (2006); Davis (2012); Kronenberg (2016). The debate about Epicureanism and pastoral poetry was kickstarted by Rosenmeyer (1969). On *Ecl.* 2 and its connections with Theocritus’ *Idylls*, see Du Quesnay (1979); the irony of this particular scene is highlighted by Clausen (1994) 74.

⁶⁰ See discussion in Braund (2019).

⁶¹ The memory of this eclogue occurs in the *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi*, at the beginning of the seventh chapter “Del meriggio” (“On midday”). Some clues make me think that Corydon’s pangs of love were present in Leopardi’s mind while writing another of the *Idylls* of 1819–21, *La sera del dì di festa*. A slight textual trace of this could be found in the underlining of the lack of hope, which characterizes both Corydon’s and Leopardi’s painful loves. See *La sera del dì di festa*, lines 19–21: “e quanti | Piacquero a te: non io, non già, ch’io spero, | Al pensier ti ricorro” (“and those who charmed you, too; but I don’t come to mind, | not that I hoped to”); *Ecl.* 2.2: *...nec quid speraret habebat*.

shepherd in the *Canto notturno* also dares to conclude with a philosophical *sententia*, although it is tempered by a final, delicate doubt expressed by the adverb “forse”, “maybe” (lines 139–43):

O forse erra dal vero,
 Mirando all'altrui sorte, il mio pensiero: 140
 Forse in qual forma, in quale
 Stato che sia, dentro covile o cuna,
 È funesto a chi nasce il dì natale.

Or maybe my mind's straying from the truth,
 imagining the destinies of others. 140
 Maybe in whatever form or state,
 be it in stall or cradle,
 the day we're born is cause for mourning.

A shepherd-poet, a shepherd-philosopher – but first and foremost, a “simple shepherd” whose song and thoughts are attuned to the primordial questions and reasonings of a man faced with the mysteries of the cosmos. In this sense, the pastoral disguise does not seem to Leopardi just an excuse to convey philosophical thoughts or to construct a more or less complex allegory, as was common in many Renaissance pastoral works.⁶² On the contrary, the process Leopardi is engaged in is a form of regression, in which the poet learns from his character how to look at the world, and the sky, through a shepherd's eyes. Virgil's pastoral mode was an appropriate point of reference to reach this goal.

The inquiry into Virgil's *Eclogues* and Leopardi's poetry looks to be just at its beginning. For now, however, let us close with a final note and try to draw some provisional conclusions.

Almost at the end of the *Canti*, after *Il tramonto della luna* and *La ginestra*, Leopardi chose to put his translation of Antoine-Vincent Arnault's *La feuille*, with the title *Imitazione* (“Imitation”):

Lungi dal propio ramo,
 Povera foglia frale,
 Dove vai tu? **Dal faggio**
Là dov'io nacqui, mi divide il vento.

⁶² There is criticism of Renaissance Italian poets' practice of describing shepherds who are no longer shepherds so much as philosophers and men of the court, in Fontenelle's *Discours sur la nature de l'éplogue*, which Leopardi knew and quoted in the *Discorso sopra Mosco*.

Esso, tornando, a volo 5
 Dal bosco alla campagna,
 Dalla valle mi porta alla montagna.
 Seco perpetuamente
 Vo pellegrina, e tutto l'altro ignoro.
 Vo dove ogni altra cosa, 10
 Dove naturalmente
 Va la foglia di rosa,
 E la foglia d'alloro.

Where are you going,
 tender little leaf,
 so far from your bough?
The wind tore me away
from the beech where I was born. 5
 Whirling as he flies, he spirits me
 from wood to meadow
 and from hill to valley.
 I wander with him endlessly,
 disregarding everything. 10
 Where all else goes I go,
 where by nature rose
 and laurel leaf go, too.

The words that the poet addresses to the leaf, which must abandon her tree because the wind tore her away from the branch, and the answer of the leaf itself, follow with general faithfulness the original French text, in a delicate Italian version by Leopardi. However, a relevant detail draws our attention: the tree from which the leaf is parted is not the oak of Arnault's poem but a Virgilian *fagus*. So far, the reason for this modification has been found in prosodic and phonic effects,⁶³ or in the origin of the beech tree on high mountains, which would suggest distance and loneliness.⁶⁴ But for a reader of bucolic, who is also aware of the

⁶³ Cf. Monteverdi (1959) 59–74; Mengaldo (2011) 213.

⁶⁴ Cf. Bacchelli (1960) 91. De Robertis (1978) 491–2 underlines the literary connotation of the beech, mentioning Petrarch and (just in brackets) Virgil. Lonardi (2019) 236–7 analyses both the phonic and the symbolic reasons for this choice, noting Virgil's *Eclogue* 1 as an important literary precedent for the beech; however, in his view, the concrete connotations (an ordinary tree on the mountains) leave the literary ones in the background.

many Virgilian components that enrich Leopardi's poetry, the pastoral memory expressed by this choice cannot be ignored. In a short poem that tells the story of a leaf forced to leave her home and be delivered to the uncertainties of destiny, the memory of the dialogue between Tityrus and Meliboeus in *Eclogue 1* suddenly appears as a Virgilian bucolic signature at the conclusion of the *Canti*.

This is a hidden signature, of course. But many hidden traces of the *Eclogues* in Leopardi's work may suggest that he did not neglect Virgil's bucolic collection as much as we have been accustomed to think. Virgil's shepherds and their unattainable Arcadia were so deeply assimilated in his poetical memory that they worked as tropes rather than within an interplay of textual allusions. Furthermore, the long history of the pastoral tradition after Virgil, and many interpretations of it which Leopardi had the chance to know, such as that of Pope, added new layers to his reading of the *Eclogues* and interacted with every reference he meant to make to the world of Tityrus and Meliboeus. Leopardi never forgot Virgil's bucolic lesson and, on the contrary, seems to have borne it well in mind whenever he wondered about human destiny and the impossibility of finding any real, peaceful Arcadia. Owing to the vastness of his literary concerns, he could not help but be reminded of the bucolic shepherds when looking at infinity, or at the sky. Therefore, gestures and thoughts that Virgil's shepherds had introduced into the bucolic world for the first time would become part of his own pastoral mode.

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