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# “On the life of animals and independent things”. Giacomo Leopardi’s Ecophilosophy

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“Tout homme qui pense est un animal dépravé”, Giacomo Leopardi observes in French in his notebooks, on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1823 \*<sup>1</sup>. In 1819 he had written: “tout homme qui pense est un être corrompu, dice Rousseau” \*<sup>2</sup>. These are citations from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), in which we read that “L’état de réflexion est un état contre nature, et l’homme qui médite est un animal dépravé». Leopardi’s thought on nature is rooted in a Rousseauian land, marked by an obsessive familiarity with the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* \*<sup>3</sup> and, at the same time, by a rejection of the conceptual apparatus of the social contract.

Leopardi meditates insistently on Rousseau, concentrating on his critique of reason and civilization, from the *Zibaldone*’s earliest notes to the last period of his life \*<sup>4</sup>. The

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\*<sup>1</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri. Edizione critica e annotata*, Milano, Garzanti 1991, 3935; English translation edited by Michael Caesar and Franco D’Intino, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Revised edition, 2015.

\*<sup>2</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 56.

\*<sup>3</sup> Leopardi read Rousseau’s work in an Italian translation published in Venice in 1797. The book is listed in the catalogue on his family library.

\*<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Gaspare Polizzi, *Giacomo Leopardi. La concezione dell’umano tra utopia e disincanto*, Milano, Mimesis, p. 55.

animality and instinctivity of primitive humanity, the "accidental circumstances" that according to the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* have led man out of the state of nature, the illusions and imaginative power of natural man, the inseverable bond of reason and passions, the primacy of affections over thought, the superiority of bodily health over moral considerations, are all Rousseauian motives that constitute the hallmark of Leopardi's thought.

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The modern European subject cannot return to an originary state of nature. Simulacra of this primordial condition can be actualized only in the realm of poetry, in which the confluence of animality and savagery, antiquity and infancy nurtures an anti-modern sensibility and the scorn for Western modernity. In his social thought, Leopardi praises instead the virtues of a "middling civilization" (*civiltà media*), a condition in-between the primitive origins and the corruption of European civilization \*<sup>5</sup>. This principle is staged programmatically in his poem the *Broome, or The Flower of the Wilderness* (1836). Here Leopardi's contempt for the "magnificent and progressive fate" of European modernity sees in naturalism the chance to interrupt the expansive movement of the "large body of civilization":

[230] Nature has no more esteem or care/  
for the seed of man/  
than for the ant [...] ]  
[285] So, ignorant of man and of the age/  
that he calls ancient, and of the descendants/  
following their ancestors/  
nature stays evergreen; indeed she travels/  
such a long road she might as well/  
be standing still \*<sup>6</sup>.

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\*<sup>5</sup> "[...] the state of middling civilization, the happiest state of social and irredeemably corrupted man, the state in which as much is conceded to nature as is compatible with society", Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 408.

\*<sup>6</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti: Poems, a Bilingual Edition*, English translation by Jonathan Galassi, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.

At the root of Leopardi's natural state is the deep-time and non-human scale of life, the indifference of nature, as he clearly argues in a sketch for a literary project on woods:

A poem in didactic form on the woods and the forests, their utility, their uses for ships, buildings, all types of construction, the manner of keeping them and all the other real and economic and physical objects that have to do with them, handled by several more recent authors in particular studies. But above all, it ought to take advantage of the infinite poetic material provided by forests and woods. [...] the forests of America, never penetrated by man, on the other side of the world, their differences in different climates, isolated [...] the various maximal uses by far-off people living in the region, wild, the immensity of the forests in this or that country [...] Maybe this material could sustain a nice imaginative episode of the forest being felled – or better, penetrated for the first time perhaps since creation (about which see the Milan Gazette November 10, 1819, in the appendix, it claims there is a group of people who have never had dealings with the outside world), or instead, make use of what I said in my *Pensieri* regarding the life of animals and independent things, about man and what we call events, which are nothing if not for our lineage, but not for the world, which does not even notice us<sup>\*7</sup>.

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Critics have been often misled by the overtly negative connotations that Leopardi attributes to nature after 1822, understanding them as a rejection of his former naturalism. If in the *Discourse of an Italian on Romantic Poetry* (1818) and up to the pages of the *Zibaldone* preceding 1823, Leopardi underlines nature's paradisiac features, in his following writings, most famously in the *Moral Tales*, nature becomes an evil mother, the source of all evil, displaying an implacable violence and a merciless indifference, and Leopardi's pessimism seems to dispel all traces of natural happiness. Whereas in the *Hymn to the Patriarchs. Or: The Beginnings of the Human Race* (1822) Leopardi recalls the "time/ when this poor earth was friendly and pleasant/ and dear to our race" and celebrates the savage "Californi" – the "happy race" that "still lives in the vast/forests of California" – the *Moral Tales* stage the corrupted habits of degenerated

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\* 7 Giacomo Leopardi, *Tutte le poesie e tutte le prose*, Roma, Newton Compton 2007, p. 1110 (my translation).

barbarians.

Let's take *The Wager of Prometheus*, one of the dialogues of the *Moral Tales*: after a contest among the gods about which of their inventions is best – Bacchus's wine, Minerva's oil, or Vulcan's cooking pot – Prometheus, who has been excluded from the final challenge, wagers with Momus that humanity is the best invention and travels to the Earth in order to prove that "man is the most perfect creature of the world." The first encounter takes place in the New world, where, in the northern area of the country of Popaian (in southwestern Colombia), they meet a group of anthropophagites sitting around a large fire and eating the flesh of slaves captures from nearby village. The next encounter is in Asia, near Agra – not far from New Delhi. Here Prometheus and Momus see a "young woman wearing extremely sumptuous ornaments," ready to "voluntary offer herself up in sacrifice for her country [...] since this was the custom among the widows of her group" \* 8.

Most academic readers of Leopardi have interpreted this shift, from a benevolent to a ruthless nature, from the Edenic Californians to the barbarian savages, as the abandonment of his naturalism. For Cesare Luporini, Leopardi's initial vitalism gives way to a more mature "existential nihilism", finally replaced by a constructive mode of civil materialism \* 9; and for Gaspare Polizzi \* 10, the stanzas of the *Hymn To The Patriarchs* portraying the primordial happiness of the Californi represent the last remnant of a naturalistic myth overcome by Leopardi's subsequent meditations, which elaborate – under the influence of new readings and meditations – a "negative anthropology" and speculative disenchantment. Such accounts register a weakening of Leopardi's idealization of the state of nature and ascertain the waning of Leopardi's youthful vitalism and the rise of a more mature materialism \* 11.

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The problem with these interpretations is that they contain the complexity of Leopardi's thought and repress the scandalous power of his unconditioned naturalism

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\* 8 Giacomo Leopardi, *Moral Tales*, English translation by P. Creagh, Manchester, Carcanet Press, 1983, p. 143.

\* 9 Cesare Luporini, *Leopardi progressivo*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1996.

\* 10 Gaspare Polizzi, *Giacomo Leopardi. La concezione dell'umano tra utopia e disincanto*.

\* 11 See also by Marco Balzano, *I confine del sole. Leopardi e il nuovo mondo*, Venezia, Edizioni Marsilio, 2008.

and anti-anthropocentrism \* 12. Even in *The Wager of Prometheus* Momus argues sarcastically against Prometheus's anthropocentrism: "I fail to understand why being extremely imperfect in one's nature, as man appears to be, should be valued as a greater condition of perfection than that of all other creatures" \* 13. Leopardi does not abandon after 1822 his relentless natural philosophy, but adds new dimensions to his concept of the natural state. As in Rousseau, reason and civilization are for Leopardi fortuitous and unhappy natural outcomes, "more the work of accident than of natural development" \* 14. But more radically than Rousseau, Leopardi insists on a reversal of the "great alliance of intelligent beings against nature and against anything devoid of intelligence" \* 15, and excludes social contract theories and the reinvention of any form of natural law.

In his satirical poem *The War of the Mice and the Crabs*, a comic-heroic poem of eight stanzas written between 1831 and 1835, learning is openly described as a process of de-schooling:

[3] And I believe that learning most of the time is nothing else, if one were to consider it seriously, but the perception of foolish beliefs contracted by the mind from carrying them around a long time and the painful recovery of the knowledge, which age took away from us, of the child, who indeed nothing knows nor sees more than we but does not believe that he sees or knows \* 16.

Already in his 1824 footnote to the *Hymn to the Patriarchs, or on the Origins of the Human Race*, written when the *Moral Tales* and their supposed "negative anthropology" were well underway, Leopardi's predilection for the mythical population of the "Californi" was framed in the context of his conceptualization of the state of nature:

It should be noted that California is at the farthest western edge of the continent. This nation of Californians (for so the travelers call them) live in a state of nature that seems to us – I won't say plausible, but possible for the human species. It is certain that work is underway to reduce these natives to social life, and there is little

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\* 12 Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 2434.

\* 13 Giacomo Leopardi, *Moral Tales*, p. 147.

\* 14 Giacomo Leopardi, *Moral Tales*, p. 145.

\* 15 Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 4280.

\* 16 Giacomo Leopardi, *The War of the Mice and the Crabs*, English translation in prose by Ernesto G. Caserta, Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, 1976.

doubt that in time this project will fail. But what is certain is that no other nation has demonstrated such a lack of interest in our European 'school' \* 17.

The anti-colonial inspiration of the *Hymn to the Patriarchs*, originally conceived as a religious hymn, is reinforced by its conclusion \* 18. Here the original project gives way to a celebration of the Californi, immediately followed by a bitter denunciation of European expansion:

[105] So in the boundless California forests  
a blessed race is born, whose breast  
is never nursed by pallid care, whose body  
implacable disease does not destroy;  
and with the woods for food, the hidden crags for nests,  
and the irrigated valley giving water,  
[110] the day of dark death hangs over them unseen.  
Oh kingdoms of wise nature, undefended  
from our evil greed! Our boundless rage  
storms her shores and caves and peaceful forests,  
drives her assaulted natives to strange labor  
[115] and desires they never knew,  
and hunts down fleeting, fragile happiness  
till the sun sets \* 19.

In a draft in prose of this poem, Leopardi returns to the Californi, the philosophical protagonists of his state of nature, and offers a clear account of the political-aesthetic potential of the savage condition. It is an extraordinary text, which has never been translated into English:

*On the pastoral life of the Patriarchs*

Even today, in the forests of California, amongst the rocks and the torrents, live a

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\* 17 Giacomo Leopardi, *Tutte le poesie e tutte le prose*, p. 471.

\* 18 On Leopardi's anti-pedagogy, see Michele Zedda, *Note sull'"antipedagogia" in Leopardi*, "Studi sulla formazione", 2, 2012, pp. 121-138.

\* 19 Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti: Poems, a Bilingual Edition*.

people free of baseness, who (as visitors have testified) loathe above all other things that miserable corruption that we call culture. Happy people for whom the roots of the grass and the animals are a nourishing torrent to be drunk in, and the shelters are made by one's own hand, with the tree tops for a ceiling and caves to protect against the rain and windy storms.

At the summit of their mountain, they freely contemplate the broad vault of heaven without desires or fears, and they take in the open fields, unencumbered by either cities or fortifications. They hear the uninhibited roar of the flood as it echoes through the valley, and the songbirds, free and unburdened, and, for all they know, masters of earth and air. The tempest disturbs them for a moment; they flee to the caves; with the returning calm they rejoice and take comfort. The time of youth is robust and joyous; old age is tranquil and without pain. Their eye is bright and lively (this in particular travelers have noted); neither sadness nor boredom dwell among them. The uniformity of their life is not tedious; so bountiful is nature, when she is obeyed and followed.

Why do we envy them the bliss they enjoy, which they have achieved without hurting anyone, which they maintain without oppressing or robbing their fellows of happiness, a joy that was freely given to them by the mother of them all, nature, and to which they have every right not only because of their innocence, but for the very reason that they live? What great wellbeing, what great happiness, what great virtues give birth to this civilization in which we so deeply want to participate, and which we mourn not to be part of? Are we ourselves so happy that we should feel sorry for their state if it differs from ours? Indeed, since, through our own sins, we have lost the happiness intended neither more nor less for us by nature, will we be so barbaric as to want ramparts even for those who are kept out by them, to make them participate in our well-known and all-too certain miseries? What right have we to do this? And what worries, what furies compel and invite us to drive happiness away from all human kind, to flush from every remotest corner, from what little remainder of contentment is still conceded to our kind -- in short, to eliminate forever the name of human happiness? Is it not enough that our reason has persecuted and extinguished it for all eternity from such a large part of humankind? (The Missionaries are extremely anxious to civilize California. They have not succeeded for some time. Now they are bringing force to bear to constrain the Californians to gather (I don't know whether they do this every day, or on particular days) in order to pray [...] Some keep the natives close at hand, seeking to instruct

and civilize them. But these quickly waste away, losing their color, their eyes become dull, and at the first opportunity they take refuge in the forests and mountains, where they regain their health and spirits. I do not believe they have any language, just a few gestures, and little else). With this digression we can perfectly well conclude \* 20.

The speculative ethnography of Leopardi cannot be reduced to an immature articulation of nature and civilization; the poetic rendering of the Californi's life is a "little remainder" of the "contentment [...] still conceded to our kind"; it is a naturalistic hallucination, which serves as an anchor point for Leopardi's critique of European political modernity and colonial matrix of power \* 21.

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Leopardi's conceptual articulation of nature and reason does not rely on his early vision of natural happiness and therefore it is not abandoned after 1822, replaced by a dry materialism or tragic ontology. Happiness and desperation, as joy and sadness in Spinoza, are the affective dispositions of the subject's relation to nature; and nature and civilization are the structural limits of humanity's experience of life. The relation between these ideas needs to be preserved: his poem *The War of the Mice and the Crabs* will focus again on the state of nature, dedicating the entire fourth canto to the confutation of the spiritualistic and idealistic attempts to Christianize and humanize the naturalness of the state of nature:

[9] Consequently it is believed that the rough and savage life is corruption, not the natural state, and that insulting his destiny man falls here from a great height, I mean from the civilized level, where divine wisdom was careful to place him: because if we don't want to outrage heaven, he is born civilized and later becomes savage \* 22.

In defending Rousseau's ethnographic approach to savagery and the state of nature against counter-revolutionary, De Maistre-like returns to the Aristotelian thesis of natural

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\* 20 Giacomo Leopardi, *Tutte le poesie e tutte le prose*, p. 471 (my translation).

\* 21 See Lionello Sozzi, *Le californie selve: un'utopia leopardiana*, "Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa", III, 15, n. 1, 1985, pp. 187-232.

\* 22 Giacomo Leopardi, *The War of the Mice and the Crabs*.

sociability<sup>\* 23</sup>, Leopardi claims the materialistic roots of his radical naturalism, opposing it to the spiritualism and humanism of post-Kantian philosophy:

[10] This conclusion [the original perfection and sociability of human nature, NdA], which however nice will seem to you unusual and strange, derives from no other source but that straight-forward and healthy form of reasoning which in the schools is still called a priori, besides which every other nowadays appears vain, which poses as certain some principle and bend and arranges everything else to fit it [···] [15] I mean that philosophy which reigns uncontested in our century and which with relatively little struggle had no less fortune in the other centuries, except in the one previous to this, when, if my thought is whole I dare say, each faculty of ours progressed to those heights from which soon it must incline towards the bottom<sup>\* 24</sup>.

In opposition to the liberal-mice and the frogs of the Restoration satirically portrayed in *The War of the Mice and the Crabs*, Leopardi envisions an articulated naturalistic strategy. He replaces the idyllic echoes of his early primitivism with a gnomic tone of materialistic desperation; the dreamy visions of a happy state of savagery become rarer, and nature's power is seen as the "persecutor and mortal enemy of all individuals of every genus and species to which she has given life"<sup>\* 25</sup>. But these choices are not an abandonment of the state of nature apparatus. On the contrary, making "nature guilty of everything and excusing men completely"<sup>\* 26</sup> is the main strategy of Leopardi's de-Westernization. Since humanity has no centrality in nature, man's natural innocence comes at the price of challenging any subjective claim.

Leopardi's early primitivism, still resonating with the Erasmian myth of the golden age, with Christian utopianism and the exoticization of nature's pleasures<sup>\* 27</sup>, gives way to an aggressive a-theological naturalism. The fourth canto of the *The War of the Mice and the Crabs* reaffirms the strategic importance of the state of nature, while contesting the

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<sup>\* 23</sup> Joseph De Maistre, *Against Rousseau: On the State of Nature and On the Sovereignty of the People*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996.

<sup>\* 24</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *The War of the Mice and the Crabs*.

<sup>\* 25</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 4485.

<sup>\* 26</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 4428.

<sup>\* 27</sup> "My system of regarding man and everything else as entirely, or almost entirely, the work of nature, and scarcely or not at all the result of reason, or the work of man or any other creature, is not incompatible with Christianity", Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 393.

Christian and humanist attempts to civilize savagery and natural life.

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In opposition to the transcendentalism of his century, Leopardi introduces a subtle distinction between the natural and artificial use of reason. By distinguishing in the *Zibaldone* between the actual "qualities" and the potential "dispositions" of the human animal, between "needs" closer to nature and "artificial needs" produced by civilization, Leopardi attributes the genesis of human sociability to a dysfunctional event occurred to biological nature:

Mankind grows away from nature, and therefore from happiness, by means of every kind of experience he should not have, and which nature had not expected him to have [...] by means of coincidence, traditions, conversations etc. [...] barbarity produced a life less removed from nature and less unhappy, more active etc. than our century's not moderate, but excessive civilization produces \* 28.

Contemporary civilization has to be blamed for its conscious attempt to take advantage of the exposure of human vitality to the demands of artificial needs. The wickedness of European society is rooted in an aberrant relation of human nature with itself, in a perverse interpretation and then exploitation of human desires, which can be modified only by introducing an alternative vision of nature and its dispositions, based on a naturalistic account of the structure of illusions and pleasures. Otherwise, the growth of civilization will lead to a new form of barbarianism, the final corruption of the natural constitution of the human animal.

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Leopardi's uncompromising naturalism, which assigns to nature also the aberrant course of human civilization, is the epistemic kernel of his vision of the state of nature. "Politics should not consider exclusively reason, but instead nature, I mean real nature, not nature after its artificial alteration" \* 29 comments Leopardi in July 1820. And similar thoughts are repeated insistently in the *Zibaldone*, often with a materialistic, anti-theological connotation: "Nature, as I have said, is great, reason is small and enemy

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\* 28 Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 446.

\* 29 Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 194.

of those great actions nature inspires" \* 30; "Nature is the same as God." "Even though discouraged and weakened beyond belief, nature is strong enough to conquer her enemy, reason [...] It is no more possible for man to live completely separated from nature (from which we continually move further away) than for a tree cut at the roots to flower and give fruit" \* 31; "What is the world except nature? [...] The heart can imagine itself loving the spirit or feeling something immaterial, but it absolutely deceives itself" \* 32; "He who does not love nature knows nothing and is unable to reason, as reasonable as he may be" \* 33; "Among all the ancient and modern religions, Christianity is the only one that either implicitly or explicitly, but certainly in its essence, institution, character, and spirit, considers bad what naturally is, was, and always will be good (even in animals), and its opposite always bad" \* 34.

Leopardi challenges the premises of European social and political thought from the perspective of alternative forms of politicization of life, without seeking a retreat in a subjective nature. Since human sociability in general, and modern European life-forms in particular, are dysfunctional mechanisms, we must look for correctives before and away from us, in order to arrest and redirect the "foolish century".

As Friedrich Nietzsche, Leopardi regards the instinctive memory of the animal as the most effective antidote to the detachment of civilization from its genetic source, animal life \* 35. Against the course of European civilization, which is sustained by an alliance between socio-technological ideologies and Christian-humanistic anthropocentrism, Leopardi opposes a politics of animalization and de-anthropization \* 36.

We see this principle at work in the *Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia* (1831), a poem inspired by the travel account of the Baron Meyendorff on the Asiatic

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\* 30 Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 37.

\* 31 Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 217; 393.

\* 32 Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 1694.

\* 33 Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 1833.

\* 34 Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 2456.

\* 35 See Giacomo Leopardi, In *Praise of Birds*, in *Moral Tales*.

\* 36 See Giacomo Leopardi, *Dissertazione sopra l'anima delle bestie e altri scritti selvaggi*, edited by Gino Ditali, Pistoia, Isonomia, 1999. On Leopardi's relation with life and animality, see Roberto Esposito, *Pensiero vivente. Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana*, Torino, Einaudi, 2010, pp. 111-123. See also Roberto Esposito, *La negazione innegabile. Intervista a Roberto Esposito su Leopardi e l'Italian Thought*, "Il cannocchiale. Rivista di studi filosofici", XLIV, 1-2, 2019, pp. 213-219.

lullabies of the Kirghiz nomads<sup>\* 37</sup>. In this poem, Leopardi affirms naturalism through a shamanic technique, a ventriloquism of cosmic nature (the wanderer moon) and animal life (the errant flock) that transforms his verses into cosmic instruments of incantation:

[O] 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.  
[···] [105] O resting flock of mine, you blessed beings,  
who don't, I think, know your own misery!<sup>\* 38</sup>

Also Leopardi's theory of pleasure, the philosophical cornerstone of his thought, is connected with his state of nature epistemology. Initially exposed in the *Zibaldone* in the same context of his conception of the middling civilization, Leopardi's theory of pleasure ascribes the pathology of the Romantic subject, his boredom and unhappiness, to a "very simple an material" cause<sup>\* 39</sup>: the weakening of imagination and socio-political illusions, which Leopardi conceives as the only possible antidotes to the intensification of rational and utilitarian imperatives.

As a consequence of "accidental causes", human nature finds itself imprisoned in a biological niche, ruled by the "material infinity" of an unlimited desire for pleasure and happiness, a condition that has no spiritual or theological implication<sup>\* 40</sup> that is a mere by-product of man's unbalanced vitality and need of self-conservation. In the savage and "median" state of human social life, and now only in children and poetic fantasies, the natural corrective of imagination provides fictional compensations to this handicap, "conceiving things that do not exist, in a way in which real things are not"<sup>\* 41</sup>.

The political autonomy of the human species, in which for Leopardi consists European civilization, has neutralized the ancient naturalistic myths, and replaced the vital conflicts and disorders of the savages and the republics with the social order of the modern nation

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<sup>\* 37</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 4399-4400.

<sup>\* 38</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti: Poems, a Bilingual Edition*.

<sup>\* 39</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 165.

<sup>\* 40</sup> "... nothing important or infinite can be inferred [from this condition] to the advantage of human spirit", Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 180.

<sup>\* 41</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 167.

states<sup>\* 42</sup>. Leopardi suggests instead a return to nature guided by his "ultra-philosophy", the deconstruction of European modernity from the standpoint of a middling civilization: "our regeneration depends upon an ultra-philosophy, one could say, which knowing things completely and profoundly, brings us closer to nature"<sup>\* 43</sup>.

"The life of animals and independent things" must be recognized as the source, norm and goal of social reality. In the context of contemporary global environmental change and debates on biopower and geopower, Leopardi's thought can now be rediscovered as a radical ecophilosophy<sup>\* 44</sup>.

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\* 42 Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 163.

\* 43 Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, 114.

\* 44 See Patrizio Ceccagnoli e Franco D'Intino, "Eco-Leopardi". *Visioni apocalittiche e critiche dell'umano nel poeta della natura*, "Costellazioni", IV, 10, 2019, Emanuela Cervato, *Ending the Ancient Covenant: Leopardi and Molecular Biology*, in *Ten Steps. Critical Inquires on Leopardi*, edited by Fabio A. Camilletti and Paola Cori, Bern, Peter Lang, 2015 and Rossella di Rosa, *From Nature to Matter: Leopardi's Anti-Anthropocentrism and Inchoate Proto-Ecological Thinking*, in *Mapping Leopardi. Poetic and Philosophical Intersections*, edited by Emanuela Cervato, Mark Epstein, Giulia Santi and Simona Wright, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019.

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**Federico LUISETTI**

Giacomo Leopardi’s uncompromising naturalism, which assigns to nature also the aberrant course of human civilization, is the epistemic kernel of his vision of the state of nature. Leopardi challenges the premises of European social and political thought from the perspective of alternative forms of politicization of life, without seeking a retreat in a subjective nature. Since human sociability in general, and modern European life-forms in particular, are dysfunctional mechanisms, we must look for correctives before and away from us, in order to arrest and redirect what he calls his “foolish century”. The wickedness of European society is rooted in an aberrant relation of human nature with itself, in a perverse interpretation and then exploitation of human desires, which can be modified only by introducing an alternative vision of nature and its dispositions, based on a naturalistic account of the structure of illusions and pleasures. The political autonomy of the human species, in which for Leopardi consists European civilization, has neutralized the ancient naturalistic myths, and replaced the vital conflicts and disorders of the savages and the republics with the social order of the modern nation states. Leopardi suggests instead a return to nature guided by his “ultra-philosophy”: “the life of animals and independent things” must be recognized as the source, norm and goal of social reality. In the context of contemporary global environmental change and debates on biopower and geopower, Leopardi’s thought can now be rediscovered as a radical ecophilosophy.