



Chapter I

The Catastrophe of Memory

Time of the Dialectic

September 1818: *To Italy*, Leopardi's first great canzone. A "civil Petrarchan canzone," according to the critics, that "among other things takes up the themes of a certain eloquent lyricism, that of the Scriptures, of Chiabrera, from Filicaia to Monti. . . ." Strange commentary, and for me the first lines of the canzone already raise a host of other problems.

My native land! I see the walls, the arches,
The columns, and the statues, and the lone
Ancestral towers;
But I do not see the glory. (ll.1–4)¹

A sharp disjunction appears: "But I do not see the glory." Is this "not seeing" a symptom of the poet's internal malaise [*malessere*] or the revelation of an objective rupture of the historical horizon? In any case, Leopardi is declaring a critical situation: memory clashes with the present, and its movement is discontinuous. Is this the originary condition of Leopardi's poetry? Perhaps. The sense of the canto certainly rests on this disjunction and on the rupture thus revealed. Can we say as much about Leopardi's entire early poetic production? I believe it is useful to undertake an inquiry from this perspective, for beyond the rhetorical question, I suspect that an important problem is foreshadowed here. We set out from the proposition that the relationship with memory is also a relationship with language and with a certain public. Yet since the poet's relationship with that public, with the aristocratic and cultivated elite that corresponds to his own universe of expressive values, is mediated by memory—in this precise case, the

tradition of classical culture and its revolutionary Jacobin translation (memory serving as the basis of universal understanding and the means of common research)—this is the sphere in which the young poet will stake his claim to glory, in the repetition of the rite and in the renewal of the event. Indeed, here he raises the problem of verifying his own language and his anxiety to communicate. “But I do not see the glory” is a strong, contagious declaration that suggests that the crisis of memory is inseparable from the poet’s current condition, the condition of his public and civil society. Whether it can open up to redemption or must close down in wretchedness is the theme that is being debated here.²

The first lines of the canzone *To Italy* open up a vast scenario, without which our line of questioning could not be proposed with such intensity. For it is in this disjunction that the specificity of the young Leopardi’s sensibility lies and begins to manifest itself. This specificity that we aim to interrogate is far from simple. It involves grasping Leopardi at the heart of the European cultural problematic, at the heart of its breadth and its crisis.³ Yet during the preceding thirty years and well beyond Recanati, the flux of historical memory was disorganized, and the sequences allowing a translation of current events into classical terms no longer appeared to be homogeneous.⁴ Crisis of the public? No doubt, but the stakes were more profound and substantial. In Europe between 1789 and 1815, memory went mad. In the theater of the public sphere [*Öffentlichkeit*], revolution and reaction had exchanged masks: the Jacobin was found to be a despot, and Brutus was made out to be Caesar. On the side of reaction, or simply restoration, the mutations were no less radical nor any less paradoxical and confused. The resistance to revolution, rooted in the old traditional and religious values, had ended up, in an unforeseen fashion, producing or upholding claims of individual and national autonomy; religious restoration flirted ambiguously with a robust sense of freedom of conscience and the cult of patriotic traditions with the birth of modern nationalist sentiment.⁵ But all this was in an indistinct and confused manner. The collective imaginary was subjected to a great epochal tension. Relayed by the unequivocal reports and virulent denunciations of unease that, beyond and through De Maistre and Chateaubriand, De Staël and Benjamin Constant, arrived in the newspapers and libraries of European cultivated society and in particular—with the speed of the telegraph—of Italian society, the crisis and the attempts to resolve it explicitly pose the problem of the continuity of values and of historical memory. The essential point concerns the translatability, in the continuity of classical memory, of the terms “reason,” “progress,” “enlightenment,” and “freedom”: the homology is broken, the alternatives are innumerable, and no synthesis is foreseeable.

A new climate is in the process of emerging, but in a hazy atmosphere, without reference points and without solid condensations of new values. In the old materialist jargon, these new tendencies would be said to be more noticeable to the sense of smell than to touch, perceptible in the weak sense rather than the strong sense. Therefore the tension is not transformation; it does not have the power [*potenza*] for that. It is low profile, as regards the French influences. The influence of the new German culture—gentler, certainly deeper—is still almost imperceptible in Italy. Although the first translations of Lessing, Kant, Goethe, and Schiller are at least beginning to appear in the catalogs, minor authors are widely distributed. These do not offer decisive determinations, but rather introduce, beyond German soil as well, a climate—Romanticism—that, at first glance, appears marked by an indistinct program and a sort of postmodern sensibility (which from the start is perhaps, as Leopardi denounced it a decade later, a pernicious “new creed”). What common point is there in this set of influences? Indisputably, it is the reaction to the age of Enlightenment. In more concrete terms, the banalization of the recent past of revolutionary transformation in the most worldly and moderate currents of restoration; in all of them, the destruction of the hegemonic determination of classical memory as revolutionary projection; lastly, the invention of a new model of memory and, in the extremist currents of political reaction, its exaltation as the indistinct, profound power [*potenza*] of the continuity of history. Where did this movement lead? We are at a central point here. Only an absence of opposition to this ideological redefinition of memory would have permitted the political restoration, the bald-faced reaction, to take on the appearances of hegemony. It was not so. The rupture of memory, its reactionary innovation, did not gain the upper hand.

Resistance is at least as strong as reaction, and the play of equal and opposite forces prolongs the critical state. There are some who suffer the disaster of memory yet nevertheless refuse to renounce it. There are those who dream of reconstructing the new dimensions of values and the Enlightenment. In fact, whatever the modes of configuration of the new ideology, a great transformation of minds is confirmed. No reaction, however blind, no restoration, however intelligent, could get it right—although eclipsed, the revolution lived. The form of discontinuity of memory, more important than the contents of restoration that tried to filter through it, thus became, in an equivocal manner, the central element. The manner is equivocal precisely because the form of discontinuity could no longer become the hegemonic horizon. Indifference wins. So we have a reactionary springtime—but one that reproduced itself under the sign of negativity, of the low profile, the impossibility of subjectively assuming the objective catastrophe of historical memory. In short, nothing succeeded in breaking the impotent and vicious

conjunction of the sense of catastrophe of a revolutionary era and the attempt at restoration of a dehistoricized memory.⁶ The young Leopardi's demand for glory is measured against this climate of confusion and lassitude into which these divergent alternatives plunged Europe.

For it is precisely in the tiresome atmosphere of that reactionary season that the canto *To Italy* also takes shape. Let us attempt to compare it with Petrarch's canzone; the shock corresponds to what, in the same epoch, Leopardi describes so well in the *Zibaldone*: the clash of origins and repetition, of the heroic and the rhetorical, the living and the dead.⁷ And yet, in emphasizing the discontinuity of memory with respect to the ideological form that they want to impose on it, Leopardi's canzone achieves moments of great poetry.

Sooner shall stars, uprooted from the sky,
Hiss as they plunge extinguished in the deep,
Than will memory and our love for you
Be lost or extinguished. (ll.121–24)⁸

The irreducibility of historical experience is opposed to the ideological transformation of memory. It has a natural power [*potenza*]⁹—how could the rhetorical and the ideological, even diluted in nature, compel it to produce them? The elegy is the articulation of the catastrophe of memory.

While on Antela's hill, where by their dying
The sacred band withdrew themselves from death,
Simonides went up
And gazed upon the sky the sea the earth.

And with his cheeks streaming with floods of tears,
With his breast panting, and his foot uncertain,
He took in hand his lyre. (ll.77–83)⁹

This, therefore, is a mode of liberation of the true from the atrocious events of historical memory! Even when we are oppressed by historical memory, poetry in its immediacy can rejoin and sing the true. Is this, therefore, the sense of the discontinuity we are proposing? Perhaps. In fact, Leopardi experiences a difficult and common condition, that of the prisoner of a culture that, in contrast to the recent revolutionary past, wants an interpreter of ancient forms and reactionary contents—without being subjugated. But what is this residue of freedom good for? Aggravated by philosophical studies

carried out with a ferocious determination to the point of saturation, his condition is constructed within a sad horizon. The moments of poetry do not resolve that condition: they illuminate it. Whatever its connotations—low profile, indifference—memory remains a prisoner. At twenty, Leopardi experiences himself as memory.

And then it was the bitter recollection
Took root inside my breast, and closed my heart
To every other voice, to every image.
And a long sorrow searched my troubled breast,
As happens when Olympus rains without distraction
And melancholy washes all the fields. (*First Love*, ll.61–66)¹⁰

Certainly his is the normal condition of the intellectual at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This heavy, absurd content, this dense, indistinct memory weighs on everyone, and it can be grasped only in the confusion of its elements. In this historical concretization of memory, the world is experienced in images of unhappiness: “Even the love of glory was no longer/Heard in my breast” (*First Love*, ll.73–74).¹¹ The objective situation redoubles the subjective condition. Glory—that is to say, the transfiguration of memory into passion, the hope of its future collective efficacy—stays quiet. Hence memory is not practicable, nor can glory be. This explains how the two great civil canzoni of this period do not attain a high poetic figure.¹² Both are cut from the fabric of memory that does not allow any clear design to appear. The confusion of the contents of memory jumbles the discourse, which never stops seeking a substitute for the development of the poetic intention in the act of heroic will, in invective, or in parallel fashion in psychological, elegiac, and naturalistic withdrawal.

To arms, to arms: I'll fight
Alone, and fall face forward, I alone.
And may my blood, O heaven,
Become a fire to inspire Italians. (*To Italy*, ll.37–40)¹³

Here we have rhetoric, with a deaf, almost Ossianesque naturalism as complement.

The boreal desert places of their sorrow
Were witnesses as were the hissing woods.
They came to such a pass
Abandoned corpses no one came to bury,

Scattered across a horrid sea of snow,
Were torn by savage beasts. (*On the Proposed Monument*, ll.154–59)¹⁴

Some political themes are clearly evoked in these two canti, notably a rancorous anti-Napoleonic attitude combined with a sincere pity for the Italians who fell during the retreat from Russia. But these themes are developed without any real coherence. They do not support the work of clarification and, at best, play a contrapuntal role with respect to the rhetorical emotion of the canti. The historical question emerges nevertheless: “Why were we born into a time of such perversity?” (*On the Proposed Monument*, l.120).¹⁵ But this question finds no answer here. Vanishing into the confusion of memory, these civil canzoni contain passages that the ironic genius of the *Batracomiomachia* could appropriate in order to attribute them to crabs or mice.¹⁶ And the fact that these canzoni, upon their publication in 1819, had been welcomed, as Giordani testifies, with enthusiasm and described as “miracles” does nothing to modify this judgment. This “electric fire” remains a matter of eloquence and does not become lyrical. The moral invective and the classical sound do not succeed in disturbing the indifference of memory or in giving life back to the past; they constitute at best a tribute to the past, the basis for a monument and not for hope.

The indistinctness of memory petrifies the past; that is to say, it establishes the impossibility of traversing it, of making discriminations within it, of articulating it. It blocks and fetishizes the past. In other poetic works of the same period, these perverse effects immediately become evident. In the two fragments *The ray of daylight*¹⁷ and *Still walking up and down outside this door*¹⁸ the naturalistic outburst annihilates the recollection, and the “I” is confused with the storm. The irruption of natural elements (“O precious clouds, O sky, O earth, O trees”)¹⁹ is transformed into an inventory of meteorological lamentations. The storm, the artificial representation of which exaggerates the drama of memory and exasperates its motif (the departure of the beloved), does not form a Giorgionesque tableau of chiaroscuro, planes, and contrasting expressive determinations. Everything falls flat. “Silence all round, and she had turned to stone” (*The ray of daylight*, l.76).²⁰ The single dramatic development of these compositions—“Serene and happy hours, how soon you vanished!/Nothing down here that pleases ever lasts,/Or even makes a pause, except hope only” (*The ray of daylight*, ll.25–27)²¹—is suddenly, forcibly overwhelmed by the naturalistic image. The natural catastrophe is not an atmosphere, a process, nor an occasion for human counterpoint. It is stone. The argumentative profusion and stylistic care of *First Love* do not modify the harshness and the difficulties that mark this first Leopardian poetic condition; but, on the contrary, they

allow them to be better understood. The insistence here on the concept of “imago” (“that wholly pure/and shining imago I have kept inside me” and “in my thought still breathes the lovely imago” [*First Love*, ll.88, 101, and *passim*])²² does not alter the canto’s elementary tones of naturalism. The intimate intermingling of sensations—of sight, of hearing, of the nocturnal tremors of the soul—does not abolish the indistinct and otherwise predictable connection with the states of nature. It is more an ecological than a lyrical condition, more an immersion in indifference than an impassioned tension: the dramatic character of the dialogue is annulled in cold description. On the other hand, the imago, isolating itself and offering almost the illusion of a lyrical tension, presents itself there to be seized, though only slightly. Not even this succeeds, and the imago does not manage to shape the canto, which is also static, repetitive, and stony. If it sometimes has the glitter of crystal, it also has its geometrical coldness. The imago is stylized memory, perhaps the effective symbol of the determinations of Leopardi’s memory, of memory as density of closed states of mind, nature, and history. The more this density takes shape and accumulates, the more it demands an articulation, and the more the lack of a secure poetic methodology manifests itself. The development of a poetics of the imago fixes rather than sets in motion the ensemble of heroic, naturalistic, and psychological contents of the poetic will. The imago is the reductive form of a confused memory.

If our inquiry were confined to these first of Leopardi’s compositions, we could style ourselves Croceans and note the substantial failure of the poetry. But the genesis contains the paradigm of development—it is in this sense, then, that we can emphasize how aware Leopardi is of the limits of his poetic making [*fare*], his making truth [*fare verità*].²³ Consequently he strains against these limits. We will see in the letters and the *Zibaldone* (which he began to compose at that time) how violently and systematically the limits are transformed into obstacles to surmount. Leopardi knows how to begin. Genius appears as a vocation. These compositions are only an outline, but one dense with problems. These compositions constitute the problem, give it shape, offer it to us to analyze, offer it to Leopardi to solve. The poetic difficulties do not eliminate the will to art [*Kunstwollen*]. Let us make the point for the first time. Despite everything, we are faced with a marvelous apparition of poetic genius, and we are also faced with a first, vague but decisive problematization of memory. The fact that it is presented here as “stony” or as a “monument” does not prevent the poetic labor from taking the measure of this world with this vast intentionality. On the basis of this first block of problems, we must therefore see how Leopardi proceeds, how he develops the problem of memory, and how, through this singular

intersection of poetry and culture (congealed in memory and its crisis), he succeeds in opening up a new possibility for poetic creation.

There is a first series of elements to take into account. The theme of memory, however obtained, is posited at the center of the poetic making, permitting the emergence of time, its concept and its problem.²⁴ Through memory, time becomes poetic material. If memory here presents itself as stone, it remains nonetheless a temporal constitution—a time without hope, a time of petrification, but time nevertheless. This indication seems to me to be worthy of insistence: whatever the definition of memory in these first verses by Leopardi, and despite the indistinctness that characterizes them, this centering of the discourse in itself brings about one of the great innovations that Leopardi's thought both experiences and produces. Time is posited as the argument and the exclusive fabric of poetry. And this time is also posited as a category that transcends every immediately psychological given: that is to say, it is posited more as the form than as the content of poetry. This functional complexity, evident in the civil poetry, appears equally clearly in the elegiac poetry, the naturalism of which, by means that are still experimental (in this very early poetics), has the effect of detaching the psychological elements from the form, expelling them from the poetic web [*trama*], and exhausting them. It is not by chance that the subject of *The ray of daylight*, the "I" of the first draft, becomes "the lady" in the definitive version.²⁵ Nor is it by chance that in the civil canzoni a certain refining of the subject beyond any purely psychological characterization takes place through the insistent forms of eloquence; that is, by means of an argumentative and dialectically structural figure. The fact is that time, woven and shaped by this advance of Leopardi into the world, is immediately ontological time—that is, the dynamic and transformative dimension of being—being in its entirety. The historical time of memory is immediately ontological time. Thus the static and paralyzing density of memory and its crisis that appear to the young Leopardi as the dimension of poetic creation illuminates his thought beyond every possible or effective perverse effect and plunges it into temporality. From here on we must be able to grasp this position and see how the different scansiones of the poetry derive from this centrality of time. The discovery of the time of memory as ontological time unleashes numerous variants that lead poetry onto a properly practical terrain. The first of these variations or scansiones is that which constitutes, in ethical thought, the temporal dimension of Leopardi's poetry and his search.

Before digging deeper into the latter motif and trying to understand how ethics is capable of organizing poetics and thereby transforming the ontology of time, let us try to understand the fundamental importance of Leopardi's accession to an ontology of time, which consists in the fact that it permits

the poet to immerse himself in the lively course of a European problematic. Let us repeat: memory is the fabric of poetry, but memory is time or, more precisely, it is time problematized. Monument or “stone”: in any case the time that constitutes it cannot be arrested, for it is vital matter, duration, and continuity. At the European level, in the crisis of revolutionary development in the fallout from the Napoleonic disaster, memory represents the critical element—and the element of innovation—since time increasingly makes itself evident as the web of memory. Submitting to a corrupted memory means being constrained to problematize time. The crisis of memory, the confirmation of the impotence and indifference of its concept, delivers us over to (or rather hurls us) into the ontological dimension of time. By placing the problem of memory and time at the center of his properly poetic advance, Leopardi inserts himself into a European process. His poetry at once has this impulse.

During those same decades, Hegel accomplishes the same operation: time becomes the center of the philosophical scene.²⁶ The metaphysics of time, whether philosophical or poetic, becomes the thread of the search for the true. Thus for Hegel, the discovery and exaltation of the centrality of the concept of time also derives from the crisis and the problematization of memory. He aims to liberate the spirit of the past and make what has been consumed in time become the property of substance, a process by which spirit frees itself in time; and “reminiscence” is nothing other than the sleep of a true, otherwise absolute movement, a “Bacchanalian revel.”²⁷ This function of the restoration of time to the philosophical scene at the basis of the dialectical invention must not be attributed to Hegel alone. Indeed, the entire genesis of grand German idealism and the philosophy of the era can be found in the effort of the critique of memory and the discovery of the ontological function of time. Starting in 1796, among Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin, the problem is posed;²⁸ the crisis of memory is apprehended and resolved in the distinction between the mechanicism of nature and the freedom of the true—an aesthetic philosophy, a mythology of reason, in order to relight the flame in the deconsecrated temple of metaphysics. A new time, a utopia, and an ethics.²⁹ All this constitutes an articulation that deserves a moment’s pause; and it is also good to recall at this point that the presence of and the alternative proposed by Hölderlin to this imbroglio of problems will become, for those of us who study Leopardi, very important in what follows of our inquiry. For the moment, it suffices to conclude this theme by recalling that Leopardi’s operation, aimed from the heart of memory and its crisis toward an ontological dimension of time as the basis for poetic making, has a great force of innovation. We soon see how Leopardi’s labor is not situated solely within a European problematic but also represents a decisive alternative to it.

Let us return to the points whose development was set aside in order to follow the track of the European dimension. We have indicated how the theme of time opens up to an ontological characterization of poetic making. Let us add that in Leopardi, the ontology of time is immediately ethical, which means that the time in which we are immersed is the time of making. Over and against the crisis of memory, which constitutes the condition of Leopardi's first poetic creation, the potentiality of time is the horizon of innovation of the making—certainly not a technical, mechanical making but instead an action to which we are destined and which represents the very problem of the foundation and significance of living. Anticipating the moment of a deeper discussion, we can emphasize here the absurdity and complete vacuity (if it is not simply bad faith) of all the oppositions between one Leopardi, the lofty lyric poet, and another Leopardi, the mediocre civil philosopher.³⁰ Leopardi's poetry is fully civil because it is, in its totality, a metaphysical questioning of the significance of action. So we follow our course. We have already seen that the question "Why were we born into a time of such perversity?" remains for the moment without an answer. But this does not prevent us from remarking that just as this question situates the canto at a temporal limit, it also confronts it with a transcendental ethics. The question has no answer, but it is certain that the answer, if there were one, could only be practical. And already, in the absence of any perspective, consciousness reacts practically: "For grief without disdain by now is stupid" (*On the Proposed Monument*, l.14).³¹ The remark is all the more valid with regard to the canzone *To Italy*.

And there is much more proof of the validity of this assertion. For example, let us read the *Essay on the Popular Errors of the Ancients*³² (1815) and the *Principle for a Recasting of the Essay*³³ (1817). Among the many interesting motifs, there is one that I consider essential both to the definition of the philosophy of the essay and to the demonstration (or at very least to a first illustration) of my thesis. It seems to me in fact that the immense mass of philological labor, intended to clarify the 'pseudodoxia' of the ancients, indicates less a moralistic-pedagogical intention than, as the *Principle for a Recasting of the Essay* demonstrates, a practically determined metaphysical intention. The world of illusion, Leopardi tells us, is terribly effective, concrete, and potent. The deception of reason is a reality. "A large part of truth, which the philosophers have had to establish, would be useless if error did not exist; another part of it remains useless by reason of the many errors that still persist" (*Essay*, 770). That being the case, how do we demystify it? The philosophy of the Enlightenment sets truth in opposition to deception, which presupposes a reality principle with which to compare the work of critique. But where is this reality principle? In some Platonic region? No, the reality

principle of demystification consists in critique itself, in the critical labor. “Inasmuch as errors are enemies that are vanquished as soon as they are discovered, and minor errors are discovered only when we look for them” (*Principle*, 908). A new illusion? Perhaps, but it is an illusion that forms one body with the positive ethics of time, that is measured against the material difficulties determined by time, the life of illusions, and the effectiveness of their power [*potere*]. The moralistic component, scornful and pedagogical, here becomes inessential.

What is central, on the contrary, is the ethical fabric of the critical function.³⁴ Ethics is the force that controls and even organizes the ontological dimensions of time: time of demystification, time of critical labor, and time of truth. From this perspective, the very insistence with which this pedagogical inclination is expressed has a function that is not solely negative. It sometimes appears, precisely because it is subordinated to the critical labor, as a minor form—incomplete, in certain respects unconscious, undesired, and yet necessary—of Leopardi’s warning about the crisis of memory and its progress on the terrain of the ontology of ethics. If ethics is rendered banal in pedagogy, the latter nevertheless demonstrates the urgency of the former. We are able to make analogous remarks regarding the function of irony in Leopardi in what follows: pedagogy and irony are, in his poetic making, the younger sisters of prophecy and sarcasm, of metaphysical lucidity and historical realism. In this very early Leopardi, the pedagogical tone is the still coarse form of the mediation between the perception of the ethical dimension of ontological time and the attempt to make this dimension live within historical time. This is a practical mediation that intends to confer distinction and sense on a historical memory that is now without signification. If the sinking of memory into crisis restores to us the dimension of time, the positioning of ethics seeks to define the sense of time and confer a dialectical distinction upon the development of historical time and historical memory.

This, therefore, is the time of the dialectic. German philosophy in that period is preoccupied, as we have already indicated, with elaborating the grand scenario in which everything will be at stake, positively or negatively, in the centuries that follow. The reconquest of time by philosophical thought constitutes the central point of this veritable innovation, in the strong sense, of the European metaphysical paradigm, a common fabric to which our Leopardi belongs up to this point. But in him the concept of time adopts a singular figure that renders it not merely irreducible but an alternative to the founding and definition of the dialectical project. Before showing this alternative in action, we define the other particular characteristics of the temporal category in Leopardi. Different elements

come into play here, elements already perceptible in that very first poetic period.

Concerning the characterization of Leopardi's conception of time, two elements, which form one body with his youthful work and with the solitary and artisanal aspects of the construction of his genius, are primary. To begin with, one finds a philological conception of time: the long, palpable time of classical philology. To assert here that the philological tradition emerging from Vico (and that ontological dimension of time that governs the particular form of his 'historicism') constitutes a first chromosome could seem an exaggeration. But nevertheless it is so. At the end of the Enlightenment, the renewal of historical-philological studies (not only in Italy but above all there) is for Leopardi a kind of privileged terrain of culture: a culture that, through philology, opens up to life. Study of the *Zibaldone* demonstrates this, but the exceptional range of his youthful philological studies already provides the proof.³⁵ Leopardi could have been an Italian Niebuhr. If he was not, it is because the dimension of historical time immediately became a critical conception and was developed within an ontological perspective. When I refer to ontological time, I am also referring to physical time: a specific conception of physical time is indeed the other element that Leopardi immediately draws from the tradition. A second chromosome.

This is the conception of time that we already find in the *History of Astronomy from its Origins to the Year 1811*,³⁶ written during his earliest youth, and in the *Dissertation on the Origin and Early Progress of Astronomy*.³⁷ It matters little that these are purely, indeed massively, works of compilation. What is fundamental, on the contrary, is the manner in which the young Leopardi never ceases, in the course of this labor, to transform himself from classical philologist into modern *philosophe*: physics, the great astronomical measurements, and scientific naturalism are inherent in his work—and perhaps even more in his mind than in his work. This balance between philological activity and naturalistic application is, nevertheless, not strange. Indeed, physical philosophy historically constitutes one of the fundamental terms of the construction of the historical and philological spirit.³⁸ Galileo is as important as Descartes in Leopardi's history of astronomy, and both are as valid as the most ancient figures, from Ptolemy to Copernicus; this current of thought is integrated into the unity of a knowledge [*sapere*] that becomes human to the extent that knowledges [*conoscenze*] are unified beyond any distinction of disciplines. This thought is absolutely secular, not because it refuses theological totalitarianism, but because it effectively opposes itself to a theoretical totalitarianism of the opposite sign. On the side of the historical dimensions, the concept of time takes on the physical figure that is its own. Here too Leopardi follows the spirit of his age. It is

not by chance that Herder, to take one example, is situated at the genesis of modern historicism alongside the philologist Winckelmann and the philosopher Hegel.³⁹ The naturalism of the Enlightenment and Romantic historicism do not come to occupy different pigeonholes of an idealist dialectic of history, but together they experience the genesis of a new ontological conceptualization of human time. Paradoxically, this is equally true of the early texts by other authors of classical idealism—certainly in Schelling and even in Hegel. Who could doubt it after a simple glance at Schelling's first notes on natural philosophy or Hegel's *Jenenser Realphilosophie*, and after having attempted to understand the metaphysical intensity and conceptual complexity of the "ether" and to confront the use Hölderlin made of it?⁴⁰

Two further elements contribute to the singular determination of the concept of time and therefore to Leopardi's intervention regarding the dialectic, regarding the time of the dialectic. These two elements appear in the poetic pages that we have already begun to read. Indeed, despite the abstract character of the transcription in terms of the imago or of a furious and impotent voluntarism, it is obvious that the concept of time is presented, as much in the elegies as in the civil canti of this earliest period, as a fluid movement of consciousness, of an absolute consciousness. I mean that psychological, internal time is analyzed with the aim only of making it flow back into the dimension of objective being. It is taken up only for structural purposes. The operation can certainly miscarry, the abstract can win, and the canto beat a retreat; but this in no way reduces the demand to show states of consciousness as concrete structures, *Sachsverhalten*, "states of things." From this perspective, the verses from *To Italy* ("Sooner shall stars, uprooted from the sky,/Hiss as they plunge extinguished in the deep") or from *The ray of daylight* ("Nothing down here that pleases ever lasts,/Or even makes a pause, except hope only") take on a different meaning from that which was previously indicated. They present a consolidated figure of ontological time, filtered by consciousness but not enclosed within it. They present a time that comprehends everything and that is open to the sequence: nature-being-humankind, objectivity-metaphysical structure-action. In short, they present a structural time. Such is the third characteristic of the concept of time in Leopardi. But let us pursue and grasp a new element.

The ontological dimension presents itself forcibly, as power [*potenza*], every time that consciousness collides with present history. The fact that the confrontation remains unresolved does not tell us much. The ethical determination of the collision tells us little more. This fourth definition of the relationship to ontological time is (taking everything into account) perhaps the most important. Indeed, it rivals the determination of historical time, memory and its indistinctness. The dramatic character of the confrontation

makes possible the catastrophe of memory. The experience of historical time does not withstand that of ontological time. However, to the extent that ontological time is revealed as ethical activity, all the elements that characterize it are led back to unity. The lack of awareness of this youthful phase does not detract from the importance of the ethical founding: this will appear right away.

Here we come back to the essential point. This time is that of the dialectic, which means that the first problem is that of historical memory, the dialectic constituting an attempt to establish discriminations in its indistinctness. But in order to discriminate, it must commit itself. Yet during those years that inaugurate the nineteenth century, revolution and reaction sleep under the same blanket. It is not a game—although everything exchanges roles. The dialectic is entangled in this imbroglio of the real. And Leopardi is affected by the confusion; as a provincial he is immersed in it. In *To the Italians: An Oration on the Liberation of Piceno*,⁴¹ hatred for the tyrant cannot be distinguished from an exaltation of preservation accompanied by a certain demagogy. Nevertheless, the attitudes on display in this oration are not reactionary; they are only retrograde conservative banalities. In effect, beyond the rhetorical tones and exhortations, the oscillation between anti-French nationalism and ideal nationalism in imitation of the ancients is resolved in an ethical key. Despite everything, the oration moves onto a realistic terrain, and the anti-French resentment does not eliminate the specificity of the problems that belong to the Italian illusion. The ferocious judgment on the Napoleonic experience does not ooze hatred; it only pledges to resolve the fallout the experience will have for Italy. The lassitude of memory and the denunciation of the historical present are traversed by the will to act adequately. The discriminating action of memory is realistic, or at least it tries to be. The engagement is positive, and the radicalism of the position taken is ultimately less ideological than practical. This is the essential point. This time of the dialectic is that of discrimination of the real in which we are immersed, following in the tracks of a concept and a method that articulate its time and forms. Yet classical idealism tries to construct a logical key for the reading of time and to reformulate ontology in terms of a logic of time. It withdraws the time of freedom and imposes the being of logic. It is not worthwhile to trace the long history of this new logical overdetermination of being here. Elsewhere we have already done an analysis of its *Krisis* and what follows from its perverse effects.⁴² Faced with the same problem, Leopardi begins to travel a different path. Still in confusion, immersed in the inextricable complexity of the problem, he tries to avoid regarding the situation from the hypostatic level of an eventual solution, but instead to grasp it by the middle, with an intention to resolve

it determined by ethics (with a will that is not logical but ethical). It is an ethical path. How deep into the genesis of modern metaphysical thought does Leopardi's choice take us! "*Eine Ethik*": again we find an identity with the program of the earliest German idealism, the program that Schelling and Hegel betray through dialectical logic, but that is preserved by Hölderlin.⁴³ And so what of Leopardi?

In Leopardi's comportment is something that makes him a singular character for the era: the insistent Jacobinism of his expressions.⁴⁴ This singularity is not explained by his exemplary positions on nascent Italian nationalism, nor by the grandiloquent form of his heroic voluntarism: both of these determinations are broadly present in the culture of the era. Nor is it explained by the fact that in the lyrics and orations of this period (with or without Giordani's solicitation: we see soon enough), he dons classical costumes in the triumph of Plutarchian reminiscences. In reality, the application of the classical model permits stylistic and ideological variants that are much wider in range than a simple travesty behind some masks of Brutus.⁴⁵ On the contrary, the Jacobin characterization is theoretical: it unfolds from the assumption of the primacy of practice and from the will as capacity for learned representation and construction of the true. Here the reality principle of Jacobinism manifests itself: the true as need for action, as hypothesis of transformation. It could be objected that the model of Enlightenment and Jacobinism is antiquated. This is true for France, but it is not true for Italy, where a significant cultural delay (in relation to the eighteenth-century maturity of the Enlightenment revolution) manifests itself. Paradoxically, the effects of this revolutionary process arrive together with the counterrevolution in Italy as in Germany (by different means).⁴⁶ One could also object that the picture we are sketching risks becoming confused under the weight of these determinations. Indeed, it tends, through singular intersections and slips, to superimpose the Enlightenment and idealism and to obscure any distinctions. It is not our fault if this time (but it happens often) the traditional hermeneutic categories quite obviously don't correspond to reality. In all Leopardi's writings between 1815 and 1820, that is to say on the verge of the explosion of his mature poetic and metaphysical activity, this accumulation of diverse influences and different problematic strata is perfectly verifiable. But in his work, on all terrains, the movement of the Jacobin theoretical instance is also fully verifiable. The sense of the practical struggle against illusion, against the theological and mythical deceptions of astronomy, and against the mystifications of common knowledge [*sapere*] is Jacobin. Even more than the heroic fervor, the will to truth is Jacobin. So too is the literary proposition that Leopardi explicitly announces during this period in the *Letter to the Compilers of the*

*Italian Library*⁴⁷ and the *Letter in Response to That of Madame the Baroness de Staël*.⁴⁸ Leopardi reacts against overwhelming imitation; that is to say, against Madame de Staël's proposal to dip the Italian pen into the Seine or the Rhine. On the contrary, the dignity of the classical tradition can be transmuted into that of Italian literature—since the Italian language is the one that has the most affinity with Greek and Latin, it is the most natural, indeed the only natural one. The revolution is making itself an empire, the empire of the Seine and the Rhine, and becoming complexity, confusion, and domination. Italian literature, therefore, opposes itself to domination as well as to the imperial eclecticism of Madame de Staël, or more precisely, it has the power [*potenza*] to oppose itself because its language is natural, living, organizing the nation, and in short, more true. What ingenuity, what strength! The historical lag of Italian thought in relation to French thought is not experienced as a disadvantage. On the contrary, this difference plays out positively since it permits the revolution to be understood as an alternative experience to the historically effective conclusion of its unfolding, and thus as an experience that is adequate to the proposition of a new theme of transformation. Here we witness an incessant, wearying excavation. The linguistic thematic remains inconclusive, just as do all the other themes, but instead poses and opens up problems. The entire development of Leopardi's thought tends toward their solution.⁴⁹

Conversely, Hegel frees himself rapidly from Jacobinism. Like Madame de Staël, he classifies the reaction as the conclusion of the revolution and absolute spirit as *Aufhebung*—the realization and overcoming of the subjective will. He sees the dialectic working and logic leading Jacobin anxiety and utopia back to 'Reason.' The dialectic shatters the confusion of historical time, intervenes in the catastrophe of memory, and with Hegel, reorders everything. The initial cultural and political lag with respect to the French situation is also marked for the German philosopher. But he resolves the difference by means of a sublime overdetermination, under the sign of reason, of the totality of development. The historical delay allows Hegel to conceive philosophy as the "owl of Minerva" that explores, reorganizes, and sanctifies historical effectiveness. The confusion and deception of memory become the logic of history.⁵⁰

Leopardi's delay in relation to the French Revolution has a completely different meaning. The defeat of the revolution, the confusion of memory, the tower of Babel of significations of historical time reveal the absence of conclusion of the event and the absence of solution to a problem. Of course, the historical delay imposes a displacement of viewpoint, a dislocation onto the metaphysical terrain—for Leopardi as already for Hegel. But in Leopardi this translation of the event leaves the problem open and

indicates, within the time of the dialectic, not a logical solution but an ethical opening. The historical delay in relation to the central current of European thought here reveals an extraordinary wisdom: a return to the origins of the Enlightenment in order to avoid falling prey to defeat. The continuity of reference therefore becomes discontinuity with respect to the historical course of the European intellectual adventure. And it is at this point that Leopardi's experience intersects that of Hölderlin. Within the time of the dialectic, confronted with the necessity of discriminating in the chaos of memory, they both refuse the logical solution and the idealist foundation of science. Hölderlin refuses Hegel. Leopardi, as the *Zibaldone* repeatedly confirms for us,⁵¹ has an intuition of the metaphysical miracle that develops in Germany. He is unfamiliar, nevertheless, with the theoretical conclusions drawn there and thus can confront it only at the level of that real history that German metaphysics interprets. This confrontation comes to bear not on representations but on facts. And here Leopardi rejects the dialectical conclusions for he knows the real problem that the dialectic itself reflects. The revolution cannot be cancelled, cannot be surmounted, and cannot be subsumed. Like Hölderlin, Leopardi grasps the discontinuity of memory and the irreducibility of the revolution-event. Rupture is the natural element of the development of mind towards the true and of poetic making. Like Hölderlin, Leopardi seeks in the classics a profound origin from which it would be possible to bring forth both the sense of life and the transformation of history at the same time—an ontological foundation for a practical making. For us, accentuating and insisting upon the manifest differences between the poetics of the two great authors are of no interest here. Whereas in Hölderlin, poetry renews myth, Leopardi deploys mythology as the content of practical experience, and to Hölderlin's fantastic he opposes the suffering of the true. While for the German poet the Jacobin determination radically expresses the verticality of the poetic universe, for the Italian writer, poetics leads to a multidirectional horizon of metaphysical knowledge [*conoscenza*]. We are not interested in the respective specificity of the forms through which the two poets determine and describe the rupture of ontology and history and thereby confront it—forms that are singular and different. The only fact that interests us here is the fact that both establish the impossibility of establishing a foundation beyond the rupture.

Such is the time of the dialectic. Thus from the beginning, Leopardi travels a path of mediation between ontological time and historical time, which wants not logic but practice. He also develops, at a certain distance from and yet within the mysterious community of a European problem and metaphysical project, the practical outline of the first systematic fragment of classical idealism. But a dialectic without a logic to direct it, a mediation

that can root itself only in the ontology of ethics, an ever-revolutionized foundation—do these things deserve the name or epithet of dialectic?

Experimenting with the Infinite

Everything that we have said up to now constitutes a hypothesis or more precisely, signs or traces of a tendency and a possible future. Only that. Thus it is necessary to take our relationship with Leopardi to a deeper level and grasp, in a symptomatic context, the singularity of his path. We must see how, during the brief period of his metaphysical initiation between 1817 and 1819, he poses the dialectical problem and at the cost of what suffering he explores its field, thereby succeeding in solving it through the definition of an ethical alternative.

We can begin with a reading of the letters to Pietro Giordani, dated 21 March and 30 April 1817.⁵² In the first, which constitutes a kind of literary program, the confrontation with memory is immediate, objective. The denunciation of the wretchedness of Recanati is articulated in the denunciation of the state of Italian letters; the personal motif is transfigured and incarnated in a situation of objective crisis. The questioning of the present thus weaves the fabric of a response which, drawing on reference materials, establishes a strong logical contrast; namely, that the excellence of the literary tradition and the wealth of the history of the language are opposed to the current poverty of Italian letters. To rediscover life against the dead present, one must turn to the classics. This is the path of glory: “I have a huge, perhaps immoderate and insolent, desire for glory.”

In the second letter, the tone changes radically. The themes at the heart of the rhetorical contrast between wretchedness and glory, which are outlined in a rather academic and yet strongly programmatic manner, are fortified by the accent placed on interiority. The alternatives and indistinctness of memory are revisited in personal, almost confessional terms. Passion opens up a dialectical context. Once again the recurrent theme, almost an obsession, is always Recanati, its wretchedness and the wretchedness of current memory. But presently the dialectical gaze and suffering, as they react and rise toward liberation, potently excavate interiority, a non-psychological interiority, the psychological states here becoming representations of the world. The letter thus manifests the relationship between a violent, passionate, pathetic *lamentatio* on Recanati and the description of the poetic vocation—its genesis, its development. In this relationship, nature and history become a kind of springboard for glory, traversing despair, sickness, the creeping, damp sense of death—right up to the moment of the catastrophe

marked by the contradiction to which the poet is prey, between “barbarous melancholy” and “sweet melancholy,” between the “study that kills” and the “violent longing to compose,” which creates a state of mind between abandon and despair, to the point that one feels “carried away.” Carried away from Recanati. Flight is poetic movement. The necessity of flight is the immanent result of the poetic experience. Away, away from wretchedness, away from study, away from Recanati, away from memory. Away, as only poetic rupture could bring it about.

Pride, the desire for glory, becomes flight. The practical model opposes the rhetorical model. Poetry is this experience of being carried away from oneself, this heroism which has nothing of the aristocratic virtue prescribed by tradition and customs, and which, on the contrary, is no more than ontological displacement. Infinite. The dialectical context is thus posited: a positive and wretched existence and, on the other hand, protest, the negative that creates. Recanati is posited as the condition of an operation of surmounting. Heroism is this act of positing and surmounting, the constitution of the catastrophic dimension of critique—an innovation, something strongly constructive, Fichtean.⁵³ Thought is pushed toward the infinite that the heroic desires and wants to understand. This is the way that the problem is introduced.

But let us look more closely at this path towards the infinite. It takes shape on the basis of two fundamental elements: the relationship with memory and the necessity of expressing its surmounting in classical, poetic, effective forms. Let us consider in the first place the relationship with memory. Leopardi insinuates himself into it through an elementary act of reflection on existence. Recanati is the monstrous mirror of the nightmare of memory, of an unlivable historical time that manifests the effective impossibility of existence, its potential annihilation. This gives rise to great suffering. Indeed, from the beginning, the question of knowing what memory is receives no answer—the question is not commensurate with the answer, nor unrealistic in its claim, nor wretched in its resentment. It is instead a question charged with expectation, the defenseless revelation of an ingenuous feeling, true ethical and metaphysical innocence. The horror that characterizes the climate of the answer is thus not due to prejudicial idiosyncrasies nor to a literary game. It is merely the objective result of the fact that a candid question obtains a treacherous answer. The violence of the conclusion is unbounded and yet, paradoxically, it remains commensurate with the disposition, with the openness of the questioning. Leopardi wishes to construct knowledge [*sapere*] through “intercourse with scholars.” “Intercourse with scholars is not merely useful to me, but necessary for me, and I will seek in each of my studies to profit from the instruction that I will

receive from them.”⁵⁴ How could a more innocent request be imagined? This request for scholarly intercourse expresses the will to participate in the society of scholars. This intercourse is in no way episodic, but corresponds to a vocation, to a constitutive experience: it is the hope of participating in the foundation of a new intellectual community. Yet to the same extent that this relationship of participation in memory is demanded, to the same extent that Leopardi suggests to his tormented humanity the hope of a socially important collaboration, the limits of the request and the obstacles to the hope become evident. Memory is not community but rather it is wretchedness, separation, confusion. The letters provide ever more proof of this. The confidence in an active recuperation of memory through the participation in the society of scholars vanishes within a few years.

Pietro Giordani, with his benevolence and his Paduan bonhomie, seeks a mediation internal to historical memory and civil society, thereby pursuing the reformist experiment of certain intellectual strata of the Enlightenment. He proposes this mediation to Leopardi in the form of a project for reconstructing classical, patriotic, and modern eloquence. According to Giordani, tradition, both present and future, can be inserted into a linear process of the modernization of civil society.⁵⁵ Leopardi adopts Giordani’s proposition, but only with the aim of testing and exhausting it. He notes that “your capacity to take possession of history is highly exceptional,”⁵⁶ but nevertheless memory cannot be put into practice; there is no possibility of using this political faculty.⁵⁷ “I’ll only say that the more I read the Latins and Greeks, the smaller our own writers become, even those of the best centuries, and I see that not just our eloquence, but our philosophy, and our prose—in every respect, inside and out—must be created. A large field.”⁵⁸ The radicalism of this declaration must not be underestimated. Italy does not have eloquence, or prose, or philosophy. And to paraphrase Hegel, a country without metaphysics, a temple without a shrine,⁵⁹ is a society without human community, without a community of ends, and it expresses this deficiency. Whoever seeks the infinite runs up against this vacuity of the real. Reshaping it is impossible. Memory is empty.

But it constitutes a prison, “this prison of ours.”⁶⁰ The very young Leopardi’s perception is that of the effectiveness of deception. It matters little that reality is mystified: it is no less real for that. Consequently, only a practical condition can escape the weight of the deception. Only escape frees one from prison. But in real terms, how does one construct a dialectic of flight, of surmounting? Reading Leopardi’s correspondence during these years allows us to follow his increasingly extreme search for a solution: the desire for suicide, withdrawal from the family, and the great psychological ruptures. The almost unbelievable fact that emerges from this development