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Thinking the Future in Giacomo Leopardi's *Zibaldone*

Sabrina Ferri

In revealing its utopian vocation, modernity undertook to redefine temporal categories and, in the process, endowed the future with new meaning and significance. In his biography of Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), Jean-Paul Sartre declared that the Romantic poet “lived in a period which had just invented the future [...]. After the seventeenth century which rediscovered the past and the eighteenth century which made an inventory of the present, the nineteenth century believed that it had discovered a fresh dimension of time and the world.”¹ This was the immeasurable dimension of progress.

The tale is well known. As Michel Foucault tells it, the last decades of the eighteenth century were marked by a discontinuity that inaugurated a new epistemic era.² While empirical forms of knowledge such as philology, biology, and economics defined their disciplinary boundaries, the ways of understanding, organizing, and representing the objects themselves of knowledge changed radically. Principles of succession and analogy replaced the interpretive and descriptive tools of nominalization and contiguity which had been at the basis of the post-Renaissance episteme. Once static or topological, the new order of things became dynamic; it was temporalized.³ Critics such as Reinhart Koselleck and, more recently, François Hartog have drawn attention precisely to the temporal dimension of this reordering of conceptual categories.⁴ Modernity coincided with a temporalization of human experience. Time became the defining element in the way in which people in the modern world perceived, understood, and conceptualized social and technological transformations. This shift was accompanied by a recalibration of the values and reciprocal relations of past, present, and future. The modern regime of historicity placed its emphasis on the future and on the forward-moving horizon of progress. While the past lost its primacy as a repository of experience and exemplarity, the present, as Renato Poggioli put it, became “valid only by virtue of the potentialities of the future, as the matrix of the future.”⁵

Modernity, then, presents itself as a challenge to established temporal categories—a challenge that entails a reconfiguration of the human experience of time. Together with the invention of the future, the modern regime of historicity brings with it a series of demands that fall upon the modern subject and compel her to adopt a new critical stance vis-à-vis the world

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire*, trans. Martin Turnell (London: Horizon, 1949), 158–59.

² Foucault sees the transition from the classical episteme to the modern episteme as a process that took place in distinct phases between the late eighteenth century and the second decade of the nineteenth century, but he singles out the years 1795–1800 as the pivotal moment. On the emergence of the modern episteme and the distinct phases of this transition, see Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002), 235–329.

³ Modernity, according to Foucault, begins with the “age of history,” which he defines as a progressive establishment of the historicity of knowledge. See Michel Foucault, *The Order*, 237.

⁴ See, for instance, Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Koselleck, “The Temporalisation of Concepts,” *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 1 (1997): 16–24; and François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁵ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 73.

and her experience of it. These demands involve a rethinking of the fundamental notions that define not only social, political, and economic conditions, but also and especially psychological states and social attitudes. With this re-elaboration, a new cultural and intellectual habitus emerges that characterizes those who, to use Gustave Flaubert's words, find themselves "précipités dans l'avenir," or "thrown into the future."⁶ Baudelaire, according to Sartre, took up the challenge of modernity by swimming against the tide and turning the idea of progress into its opposite—that of decadence.⁷ His critical stance consisted of a rejection of the future as well as its values and categories, which he overturned and emptied of any positive meaning. The counterweight to this fear and hatred of the future was what Foucault would define as Baudelaire's effort to "heroize" the present—that is, to transfigure it and reinvent it artistically. In "What is Enlightenment?" Foucault insisted on this "problematization" of the present—and the type of philosophical interrogation that it entailed—as the main trait of an attitude that, according to him, expressed the essence itself of modernity.⁸ Rejection of the future and heroization of the present are no doubt two faces of the same coin. The question of the future is indeed at the very core of modernity. The invention of the future leads to an age-opening reformulation of thought and practices in all fields of knowledge and experience, whether this future-orientedness finds expression in terms of utopian thinking, theories of social and political progress, biological evolution, or aesthetic revisionism. Modernity is futuristic.

There were thinkers who, like Baudelaire, remained skeptical of such an enamored with the future—and thus provided a sobering counterpoint to the chorus of modernity—but who were equally critical of the present, which they divested of all heroism. The strength of their thought resides in their ability to analyze the present lucidly without being completely determined by their historical period. Giacomo Leopardi is a paradigmatic example of such a thinker. Yet he is all the more significant, inasmuch as his cautious response to modernity anticipated those of authors such as Baudelaire and Flaubert, whom he preceded by a generation. Born at the turn of the nineteenth century, in 1798, Leopardi was a modern despite himself. Modernity for him was, to a certain extent, a category of feeling. It was associated with reason, culture, and sentimentality, in the same way that antiquity was associated with the imagination, nature, and naïveté. In spirit and disposition, he felt he belonged to antiquity.⁹ His acute historical awareness, however, made him alert to the unique position of his contemporaries, the men and women who lived in the post-Enlightenment era. As much as he was a pupil of the Classics and an heir to the materialist tradition of the eighteenth century, he was able, like no other, to read the ferments of the new century, becoming a dispassionate observer and tireless

⁶ Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, 6 vols, ed. Jean Bruneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 1: 679.

⁷ Sartre, *Baudelaire*, 159–62.

⁸ Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 32–50, 40–42, 49.

⁹ For Leopardi, the difference between the ancient and the modern is first and foremost a difference in style and attitude associated with nature and thought respectively. See Mario Andrea Rigoni, *Il pensiero di Leopardi* (Milan: Bompiani, 1997), 128. This does not mean that Leopardi fails to historicize modernity. In chronological terms, he often connects the inception of the modern age with the analytical and critical mode that emerges during the Renaissance. But in his philosophical reflection and especially in the *Zibaldone*, he consistently identifies the moderns with his contemporaries and modernity with his own time. See Anna Cerbo, "Una ricognizione del 'moderno' attraverso lo *Zibaldone*," in *Leopardi: Poeta e Pensatore / Dichter und Denker*, ed. Sebastian Neumeister and Raffaele Sirri (Naples: Guida, 1997), 337–356, 337. On the tension between the ancient and modern in Leopardi's thought, see also Elio Gioanola, "Sentimentale romantico e sentimentale leopardiano," in *Psicanalisi e interpretazione letteraria* (Milan: Jaca, 2005), 51–70, 54; and Fabio A. Camilletti, *Classicism and Romanticism in Italian Literature: Leopardi's Discourse on Romantic Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2016).

critic of modern life. Contemptuous of any easy theory of progress, Leopardi nonetheless placed futurity at the center of his writings, both in verse and in prose, whether he focused on the individual experience of time or on the collective destiny of humanity. His concern with the future was linked mainly to a desire to expose the reality of the present and reform it. But while keeping his gaze firmly fixed on his own contemporaneity, Leopardi also wrote for posterity, aware of the fact that the future can only be constructed by acting upon the present.

In this essay, I aim to situate Leopardi's reflections on the future in the context of the establishment of the modern regime of historicity and to frame his vision of futurity by taking into consideration the constellation of meanings that clusters around the concept of future in the *Zibaldone*, the writer's encyclopedic miscellany of notes and thoughts. This investigation of futurity proceeds through a series of interconnected questions: What defines the modern individual's experience of time and specifically her relationship with the future according to Leopardi? What kind of responsibility does he think that a society must have toward generations to come? How does he imagine literature's engagement with future readers? In responding to the first two questions, I will show how some of the fundamental concepts that define individual experience and social life, such as happiness, freedom, heritage, and legacy, are resignified within the context of a modernity "thrown into the future." It will become clear how Leopardi's philosophy of the future provided both a critique of modernity and an answer to its challenges. The answer to the third question, about literature's engagement with future readers, raises the parallel issue of an author's contemporaneity—especially that of a poet—by which I mean the capacity to fully belong to one's period and, at the same time, to transcend it, addressing posterity and speaking earnestly to future audiences. This essay, thus, will unfold in two apparently antithetical directions: while resituating Leopardi's temporal reflection within the epochal changes that took place between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I will also try to unhook the texts and their messages from their historical period, in order to investigate Leopardi's relevance beyond the limits of his present.

The choice of the *Zibaldone* as the focus of my investigation is not an arbitrary one. The more than 4000 pages, written between 1817 and 1832, record the writer's vivacious intellectual life and cover topics as diverse as the human love of pleasure, the differences between the ancient and the modern, and even the possibility of a future civilization of animals. One of the quirks of publishing history consigned the *Zibaldone* directly to its posterity. The book was published for the first time more than fifty years after the author's death, in 1898. Its editorial destiny made it contemporary not only with the thinkers that Leopardi had anticipated, but also with those readers whom he had hoped to reach, his sympathetic future audiences. Just recently, in 2013, the text appeared in its first full English translation, which, as Robert Pogue Harrison has noted, permits "Anglophone readers [to] discover for themselves why" the *Zibaldone* "is as important as the Notebooks of Coleridge, the Journals of Emerson, the Diaries of Kierkegaard, and the posthumous notes of Friedrich Nietzsche."¹⁰ The *Zibaldone* contains a passionate and relentless analysis of modernity, but it is also a book about time and the many ironies of temporality, which mark individual and social life.¹¹ The *Zibaldone* is therefore ideally suited for

¹⁰ Robert Pogue Harrison, "Review: Giacomo Leopardi's *Zibaldone*," review of *Zibaldone*, by Giacomo Leopardi, *Financial Times*, August 23 (2013): <http://www.ft.com/content/ae962862-03fc-11e3-8aab-00144feab7de>.

¹¹ Franco D'Intino notes that "time is the primary matrix" of the *Zibaldone*. See Michael Caesar, Franco D'Intino, and Elisabetta Brozzi, introduction to *Zibaldone*, by Giacomo Leopardi, ed. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino, trans. Kathleen Baldwin, Richard Dixon, David Gibbons, Ann Goldstein, Gerard Slowey, Martin Thom, and Pamela Williams (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013), xiii–lxvii, xv–xvi.

an inquiry into Leopardi's philosophy of the future, which explores his commitment to being a critic of the present and to making his work relevant beyond its time and place.

Leopardi's ideas on temporality and on how we experience the passage of time are rooted in a materialist understanding of organic life which finds the limits of the human built into the biological makeup of the body. An attentive reader of the ancient materialists and their eighteenth-century heirs, Leopardi thinks of the body as a delicate and beautiful machine but also as the principal vehicle of experience and knowledge. Just as ideas, thoughts, moods, and passions are expressions of corporeal states or depend on sensorial perceptions, so the passage of time is experienced first and foremost through the body. The physical dimension of existence, according to Leopardi, places us within the confines of chronology, or domesticated time: as mortal beings, we are biologically determined and live linear lives in which the succession of past, present, and future is clearly ordered. This temporal progression is marked by physical changes: over time our bodies get older and weaker, and this slow decline is a biological reality we cannot escape. In a *Zibaldone* entry from 1825, Leopardi compares the unending cycles of nature with the limited span of animal life and, with scientific detachment, notes that "in the life of any animal its decline and wearing down or in other words its getting old (which begins in man even before he is thirty) occupies more space than all the other ages put together."¹² Like Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon before him, Leopardi places death, and the idea of a daily withering away, at the center of his understanding of human physiology, accepting the determinist perspective that as soon as the body stops developing, it begins to die.¹³ The sense of the precariousness of life and the fragility of our physical being permeates Leopardi's reflections on the character of human existence. This view of embodiment foreshadows the modern turn where human life, and paradoxically death, becomes a matter of biology. But as much as he thinks that we are limited and constrained by our physical natures, exposed to suffering and conditioned by material needs, weakened by the physiological decline of our organisms, he still insists that it is not so much death that is to be feared—a continuous and imperceptible process that we constantly experience—as much as the emptiness of our future.

Embracing a Stoic view of death, Leopardi thinks that no fears of it are warranted. Dying should be seen as a relief from pain, a biological event that puts an end to all the physical and emotional trials of life. The lack of prospects or hopes for the future, on the contrary, is the most fearsome thing and can render life even more unbearable by plunging us into mortal despair.¹⁴ The emptiness of the future, according to Leopardi, is more distressing and more fearful than aging or the disappearance of our strength unto death, because it is the future that holds for human beings the only promise of happiness, even when this happiness has the uncertain and vague contours of an illusion. As he writes in one of his *Operette morali*, or moral essays, the "Dialogue between an Almanac Peddler and a Passer-by" (1832), "The life that's beautiful is not

¹² Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino, trans. Kathleen Baldwin, Richard Dixon, David Gibbons, Ann Goldstein, Gerard Slowey, Martin Thom, and Pamela Williams (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013), 4130. Citations from Leopardi's *Zibaldone* indicate Leopardi's original pagination, which is consistently used in all modern editions of the work.

¹³ See Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, "De la Vieillesse & de la Mort," in *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du Cabinet du Roy. Tome II (1749)*, 12 vols., ed. Stéphane Schmitt and Cédric Crémère (Paris: Champion, 2008), 2: 564–609. Leopardi cites this part of Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* in *Zibaldone* 4092, where he discusses the relation between happiness and life span.

¹⁴ Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 277–80.

the life we know, but the life we don't know; not the past life, but the future."¹⁵ In equating the loss of the future with a state of utter despair, Leopardi places the emphasis on a different aspect of our experience of time, one that transcends the linearity of biological processes. The future of which he speaks is not a chronologically situated moment in life, but an imagined and desired state that coincides with our happiness. Leopardi suggests that the dissolution of one's expectations and aspirations is an evil that matches and surpasses the deterioration of the physical organism. In so doing, he alludes to that recalcitrant part of human existence which transcends the constraints of biology and overlaps with the temporal unfolding of a life's arch. Outside of chronological time, there is a time that we can remember or imagine mentally, a time that does not progress linearly and that is often at odds with chronology.

Beyond our material existence, Leopardi suggests, we are much more complex beings; we are cognitive, affective, and social individuals who have memories, relationships, hopes, anxieties, fears, and desires. Because of this emotional and historical complexity, and thanks to memory and the imagination, we live in the present but are never entirely disconnected from the past and always capable of projecting ourselves into the future, where we find comfort in the image of a possible happiness. Moreover, unlike animals, while we live knowing that we will have to die, we are also aware of the fact that life will continue after us, that there are other generations to come just as there were many generations that preceded us. Each one of us is situated in time, as old or young to a certain degree. At the same time, each of us transcends the moment and lives in a multichrony of situations. That is, we have the consciousness of a simultaneous overlapping of temporal planes. The sum of these observations leads Leopardi to conclude that human existence is not "finite within this temporal space,"¹⁶ but that it is the very nature of human beings to have an inclination toward infinity that pushes them beyond the boundaries of the present moment. One of the main paradoxes of the human condition, for Leopardi, lies in the temporal contradiction that defines us: the fact that we are at once finite beings, who will one day cease to exist, and infinite beings, who are able to project ourselves across multiple temporalities thanks to our ability to imagine and remember.

This paradox is at the heart of Leopardi's theory of pleasure, which reframes the human search for fulfillment, or complete satisfaction of desire, in terms of a temporal experience. The temporal logic at work in the psychology of desire, as we shall see, gives a central role to the individual's conception of the future. Part of our inclination to infinity, Leopardi explains, is linked to the fact that our lives are characterized by a relentless pursuit of pleasure. This pursuit, however, is never fully satisfied and always leaves us yearning for more. This mechanism is illustrated in a long note from the *Zibaldone*, from 1820, in which Leopardi starts by taking the example of a specific and quite concrete desire: "If you desire a horse, you have the impression that you desire it as a horse, and as *such and such* a pleasure, but in fact you desire it as an unlimited and abstract pleasure" (165). Leopardi goes on to explain that the possession of the horse does not coincide with an abatement of desire because what human beings desire is never a specific pleasurable object, but rather pleasure as such—absolute, indefinite, and infinite.

Our love of pleasure, for Leopardi, is but another expression of self-love, or *amor proprio*, an almost primordial instinct that we share with animals and that directs us in all our actions. Spurred on by a limitless self-love, human beings desire above all their own happiness. Pleasure, thus, coincides with happiness, which is not the mere gratification of one's desires, or the

¹⁵ Leopardi, *Operette Morali: Essays and Dialogues*, ed. and trans. Giovanni Cecchetti (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 481.

¹⁶ Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 40.

complete satisfaction of needs, but rather an inner sense of plenitude and fulfillment. Such an ideal state is never reached, however, because self-love prompts us to desire always to be in a better condition than that in which we find ourselves. In this respect, it is a positive passion, that urges us to strive for self-improvement and self-preservation, but as much as it drives us to pleasure and away from pain, self-love is a motive of perpetual dissatisfaction. For Leopardi, in fact, we are never fully happy, but constantly dissatisfied with ourselves and with our present condition. To be happy, he explains, would mean to be content with one's present state, but this is not compatible with the principle of self-love, which constantly pushes us forward. Thus, we always find ourselves in an unfulfilled state of desire. In such restlessness, with our infinite object of desire forever eluding us, we let the mind roam and we start to think either that we were better off in the past or that there is something better lying just ahead. Memory and imagination play a primary role in relocating temporally the object of our unlimited desire.¹⁷ The imagination offers us a mental representation of happiness, which we conveniently place far enough in the future that it is still desirable and seemingly reachable. At the same time, our memory gives us access to past moments whose beauty and sweetness are transfigured and intensified by the distance of the event. Because of this, according to Leopardi, human beings live with a constant sense of being displaced in time or outside of the limits of chronology. We exist biologically in the present, but we are also constantly drawn in our minds either toward the past or, especially, toward the future.

Our innermost natures, then, link us inextricably to the dilation of time. We experience the present in nostalgia or in anticipation. Consolatory memories of the past and projections of future fulfillment make the present livable. Memory offers us the possibility of retrieving sensations and moments of our childhood. We gain access to distant images of the past that are blurred and vague and thus in and of themselves pleasant. We also remember trying moments that have temporarily ceased, making the present seem more bearable. The imagination, on the other hand, makes it possible for us to leap ahead of the present and figure our future satisfaction or fulfillment.¹⁸ What Leopardi seems to describe is a difficulty—almost an impossibility—of ever being content in the present. In his book on the poetics of time in Goethe, Leopardi, and Nietzsche, Nicholas Rennie associates the problematization of the temporal notion of the moment, especially in relation to its transitory nature, with modernity. Rennie suggests that the decentering of the self which defines the individual experience of the modern subject is linked to a challenge represented by the “present moment”: How do we give meaning to the impermanent present? How do we ground ourselves in the here and now?¹⁹ We have seen how Foucault defined the modern attitude as “one that simultaneously problematizes man's relation to the present, man's historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous

¹⁷ Discussing the rhetorical affinity between poetic language and desire in Leopardi, Margaret Brose has called attention to the intrinsic temporality of the Leopardian mechanisms of desire and has noted that, for Leopardi, pleasure is either proleptic or metaleptic. See Margaret Brose, *Leopardi sublime* (Bologna: Re Enzo, 1998), 140.

¹⁸ This stance on human happiness is the subject of several of Leopardi's *Canti* and *Operette morali*, such as the two poems “The Calm after the Storm” (1829) and “Saturday in the Village” (1829), and the prose piece “History of the Human Race” (1824). Rigoni, for example, has established a direct connection between the theme of “Saturday in the Village” and Leopardi's theoretical reflection on the temporality of pleasure and the idea of a systematic dislocation of pleasure into the future or, secondarily, into the past. See Rigoni, “Commento e note” to *Poesie*, by Giacomo Leopardi, ed. Rigoni (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), 899–1102, 971–72.

¹⁹ Nicholas Rennie, *Speculating on the Moment. The Poetics of Time and Recurrence in Goethe, Leopardi, and Nietzsche* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005), 141.

subject.”²⁰ The idea of a dissociation with the present is also at the basis of Koselleck’s and Hartog’s analyses of the modern regime of historicity. The emphasis on the future that characterizes modernity, along with the conviction that man can compress and shape time to bring the future closer, produces a distinctive form of acceleration of history. This acceleration can be observed at a macro-level in the growing rhythm of technological innovation, the increased pace of social change, and the succession of political revolutions. On the micro-level, it affects the modern individual’s sense of time, especially her awareness of and rootedness in the present. As the pace of life grows progressively faster, the acceleration becomes such a part of the everyday experience that the modern subject feels that she can only establish a tenuous link with the present. Hartog describes the experience as a destabilizing “loss of bearings.” If the present is “ungraspable,” the future, which seems to get closer faster than ever before, remains “unknowable,” despite all attempts at making it concrete and present.²¹

Leopardi’s theory of pleasure takes shape as a way of thinking about and responding to this temporal maladjustment, which he sees as a universal human characteristic that is nevertheless made more extreme by the modern condition.²² Let us follow Leopardi’s reasoning. The theory of pleasure carries with it an implicit question: Would we not be happier if we lived in the present moment, concerned only with present affairs, rather than always living exhaustingly in relation to our own future selves? Leopardi turns to Blaise Pascal for an answer. Throughout the *Zibaldone* we find echoes of the French philosopher’s meditations on the subjective experience of time. In a long entry dedicated to the issue of pleasure, Leopardi refers to *Pensée 172*, in which Pascal calls attention to a characteristic human dissatisfaction with the present: “‘The present,’ says Pascal, ‘is never our goal; the past and the present are our means; the future alone is our object: thus, we do not live but hope to live.’”²³ The issue for Pascal is not only that we are never satisfied with the present, but also that we scarcely ever think of it, since our thoughts are always “occupied with the past and the future,” and our “object” is never the present, as it should be, but only and exclusively the future. In doing so, Pascal warns us, “we never live, but we hope to live; and, as we are always preparing to be happy,” we are in fact never happy.²⁴ In evading the present, according to Pascal, we lose the possibility of understanding the only reality that is within our grasp. Our being out of joint with the present condemns us to unhappiness and ultimately points to our reluctance to entrust our lives to divine providence.

For Leopardi, our capacity to rethink the way in which we relate to the future determines our relation to the present and the possibility of our ever being happy and satisfied with what we have in the immediacy of the moment. Leopardi agrees with Pascal that we tend to displace happiness into the future and that we do not realize that such happiness lacks substance. “Happiness and pleasure,” Leopardi writes, “are always future; that is, non-existing, or being able really to exist, they exist only in the desire of the living being, and in the hope, or expectation that follows from it” (*Zibaldone*, 648). His conclusion, though, is different from Pascal’s. If for Pascal the self-deception of diversion is ultimately a way of avoiding God, and

²⁰ Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” 42.

²¹ Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*, 80.

²² In Antonio Prete’s account of Leopardi’s modernity, for instance, pleasure and a distinctive experience of time are inextricably linked. According to him, Leopardi, as a modern, cannot but see pleasure as “the site of perpetual dissatisfaction” and, like Faust, is unable to find lasting value in the finite instant. See Prete, *Il pensiero poetante. Saggio su Leopardi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1996), 37.

²³ Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 649. On Leopardi’s knowledge of Pascal, see the first note to *Zibaldone* 649 at 2164.

²⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Blaise Pascal: Thoughts, Letters, and Minor Works*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1910), 65.

thus a self-defeating pursuit,²⁵ for Leopardi “The happiest creature possible is the one who is most distracted from the mind’s tendency toward absolute happiness.”²⁶ It is important to understand what has changed in the time between the two authors. Leopardi shared with Pascal the belief in the unsettling and consuming nature of desire, but not his faith in God. In Leopardi’s world, as Friedrich Nietzsche would proclaim a few decades later, God is dead. What, then, can fill the void left by this absence? Distraction, Leopardi suggests, offers the only possibility of happiness for modern individuals by temporarily suspending their sense of un-fulfillment. This feeling of emptiness, which nurtures our nostalgia and imaginative desire, can be numbed by drugs, sleep, or even death, which all reduce our sensitive beings to mere dull matter and thus put an end to desire, temporarily or permanently. Leopardi, in particular, thinks that continuous activity is the most effective form of distraction. Keeping oneself occupied and attending urgent and pressing needs is “the surest *possible* means to happiness” [original emphasis] (*Zibaldone*, 649). This commitment to activity might have the same mind-numbing effects of a drug, but it can also be an effective solution if grounded in the implementation of a precise strategy—a plan for the future.

Several entries in the *Zibaldone* take this practical approach and insist on the importance of intense occupation in view of a concrete future goal. For instance, in an entry that Leopardi indicates as a note for a “Manual of Practical Philosophy,” he proposes creating for oneself a schedule of daily commitments as a way to manage our “natural, necessary, and perpetual desire for a future which is better than the present, however good the present might be” (4249–50). In particular, he emphasizes “the great benefit of knowing how to propose day by day a future that can be obtained easily or with certainty, or benefits that arrive hour by hour, daily pleasures that are provided or attainable unconditionally” (4250). The remedy that Leopardi suggests here for assuaging our constant desire for happiness consists in dividing one’s time into a series of tasks that can be easily and swiftly accomplished so as to guarantee a constant sense of advancement and improvement of one’s state. Leopardi’s emphasis on the importance of keeping oneself occupied in order to stave off the malaise of self-discontent is not strikingly new. Robert Burton warned against the dangers of idleness and declared that by being busy he avoided melancholy. Leopardi, though, sees the self-deceiving and mind-dulling nature of this incessant *negotium*, but also the rational purposeful approach to time that will transform modern activity into productivity. Planning, according to Leopardi, helps alleviate the suffering caused by desire in the present, because, in a certain way, it makes the future present for us. It is a strategy of anticipation that relies on a very rational approach to a situation of perceived instability—an approach that aims at reducing the degree of uncertainty with which we face the future. The partitioning of time, and assigning of each portion to a specific and tangible task, is in fact an attempt at regaining control over time and grounding ourselves in the present while engaging with the future in a concrete and immediate way. Like many human efforts to control the outside environment, the distraction provided by organized activity is above all a way of controlling our internal state.

While Leopardi explains that this desire for future happiness, which leaves us vulnerable and dissatisfied, is a characteristic shared by all human beings at all times, he also thinks that it torments modern man especially. The ancients, for him, were better equipped to face the demands of life and to act effectively in the present because of their capacity to feel wonder at

²⁵ William Wood, *Blaise Pascal on Duplicity, Sin, and the Fall: The Secret Instinct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 42–50.

²⁶ Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 649.

the world, to embrace sublime ideals, and to believe in inspiring visions. They had a capacity for what he calls *illusioni*, or “illusions,” a term that suggests that these ideals and visions are in fact products of the imagination, the very faculty that gives us access to pleasure. But whereas the moderns think of the imagination as a deceptive faculty, for the ancients, Leopardi explains, the imaginative and the cognitive faculties were combined and interdependent, so that the imagination was but a way of knowing and engaging with reality, and its “dreams” were thought of as “real things” (*Zibaldone*, 168). Illusions such as justice, beauty, poetry, religion, glory, and *amor patriae* thus gave true meaning and purpose to the lives of the ancients who could securely rely on them to make sense of their world and to find their place in it.²⁷ According to Leopardi, however, the ascent of rationalism that marks the beginning of the modern period weakened this imaginative capacity. Illusions, he thinks, were largely replaced with schema to interpret the world based on reason and science. Long before Max Weber talked about the disenchantment of the modern world,²⁸ borrowing the expression from Friedrich Schiller, Leopardi associated modernity with widespread processes of rationalization and a worldview free from myths and illusions. He equated the dominance of reason with an impoverishment of human experience and of the world itself, since reason “annuls greatness, beauty, and so to speak existence itself” (*Zibaldone*, 2942). The natural discontent of human beings is thus radicalized in modernity, to the point where Leopardi can say that “the individual unhappiness of men is, so to speak, the character or mark of this century” (*Zibaldone*, 3160). It is as a remedy to this unhappiness that he proposes the development of a series of practices that redirect one’s attention to daily life, anchoring the self to the present and assuaging the anxiety of expectation. Purposeful activity and a clearly forward-looking prospect serve as an antidote for the modern condition by helping the individual rethink the way in which she relates to the future. Without surrendering to disillusionment, the moderns are to engage in projects that bind present and future together in meaningful ways. This practical art of living, based on a Stoic ethic of virtuous occupation, gives depth and significance to the present, but it also forces the individual to commit herself to the future by directing her activity toward a desired goal.²⁹ Acting on behalf of the future is not the same as looking to the future with apprehension and anticipation, as Leopardi writes, “anxiety is very different from labor and occupation” (*Zibaldone*, 4259).

If an art of living can save the individual, what kind of engagement with the future should modern society have? In Leopardi’s reflections on the modern predicament, the individual condition of human beings is never disjointed from their social condition. Personal disillusionment is the result of a hypertrophy of reason, but also of different forms of disengagement—from the imagination, from the future, and, above all, from society. Leopardi’s social theory is informed by the way he understands individual behaviors in anthropological, intergenerational terms: each one of us is related to others by supertemporal and transhistorical obligations. We are not simply bound by a social contract that has alienated us from nature, nor are we brought together solely by a tragic biological destiny; rather, we are linked to each other

²⁷ Early in his career, Leopardi sought to imitate the ancients by trying to recreate such illusions for modern Italy, especially in terms of *amor patriae*. See Joseph Luzzi, *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 192–94, for an analysis of how, in his poem “To Italy” (1818), Leopardi proposes examples from antiquity as models for the political present and future of Italian civilization.

²⁸ Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1991), 129–156, 155.

²⁹ Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 268–69. On the importance of Stoic philosophy for Leopardi, especially in connection with the development of a practical philosophy, see Anna Dolfi, “Lo stoicismo greco-romano e la filosofia pratica di Leopardi,” in *Leopardi e il mondo antico* (Florence: Olschki, 1982), 397–427.

by memories, expectations, and promises. We are connected by the way in which we commit to the other person a part of our past or a part of our future. These connections also link together one generation and the other, strengthening the fabric of society and ensuring the continuity of culture. Leopardi's understanding of a transgenerational commitment to the future in ethical terms is not too far from Edmund Burke's notion of the social contract. Both authors revise Rousseau's eighteenth-century version of the social contract to adapt it to a post-revolutionary world that they have compelling reasons to criticize. Indeed, despite the ideological differences,³⁰ Leopardi would have likely agreed with Burke's extension of the social contract: "society [...] is a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born."³¹

In a thought recorded in the *Zibaldone* in December 1826, Leopardi describes two opposite and complementary ways in which people relate to the future depending on their biological age. His observations shed light on how he thinks collectivities should situate themselves toward their descendants. He begins by noticing that "it seems that children and young people have a natural inborn inclination to destroy, and adults and elderly people to preserve" (*Zibaldone*, 4231). "Young people are confident," he explains, "and give little thought, nor are they concerned about the future, whereas old people are timid, cautious, and always anxious about the future" (4232). It is preordained by nature that while young people destroy as if to make room for themselves, aging people preserve "almost as if to leave their place occupied, in order to leave things that might remain in exchange" (4238). In both cases, whether they are preserving or destroying, the two groups engage directly with the future. If the young carve out for themselves a place where they may grow, the old leave behind what is necessary for them to establish a relationship with younger generations, and so with the future. They leave a legacy to be inherited. The material or intellectual capital that they leave behind is an investment in the future. This engagement with the future, Leopardi suggests, is what binds one generation to the other.

According to him, however, in the passage from antiquity to modernity the commitment to the future goes unfulfilled. Herein lies the fundamental rupture between the ancient and the modern.³² Modernity, in Leopardi's narrative, is not simply a myth-less condition. Rather, it has replaced the illusions of the past with a new more powerful myth—the myth of progress, which projects into the future the idea of the perfectibility of people and conditions. Leopardi's understanding of progress can be seen in terms of his theory of pleasure and his ideas about human desire: society's accomplishment, just like individual fulfillment, is always displaced into a future moment, while the present is continuously elided and surpassed. Modernity, then, constructs for itself a narrative of progress based on an abstract ideal of future improvement. According to Leopardi, however, this is not the same as seeking an actual engagement with the future, because to invest in the future requires above all an effort of the imagination. In a *Zibaldone* entry from 1823 Leopardi illustrates the different ways in which antiquity and modernity relate to the future, and thus to posterity. He starts from a matter-of-fact observation: the material works of the ancients (monuments, buildings, medals, coins, but also literature and even public speeches) were made to last and in fact many still exist. They display a "portentous

³⁰ Leopardi and Burke could not be more different on some accounts. Unlike Burke, Leopardi was an atheist and did not share Burke's transcendental philosophy of society, but he had in common with him the critique of the consequences of a rationalization of the world.

³¹ Edmund Burke, *Revolutionary Writings: Reflections on the Revolution in France and the First Letter on a Regicide Peace*, ed. Iain Hampsher-Monk (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 100–101.

³² See, e.g., Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 4171. Cf. Robert Pogue Harrison, *Juvenescence: A Cultural History of Our Age* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014), 148.

solidity” and “still appear to be beautiful and fresh” (3435–36). In comparison to those of the ancients, the works of the moderns appear precarious and will probably leave no trace behind. “Durability and solidity,” Leopardi writes, “were what distinguished ancient manual constructions, transience and brevity are what characterize modern ones” (3437). The ancients, according to Leopardi, always sought to make things that lasted, that would defy time to be used and admired by generations to come. He describes the ancients’ striving for posterity and eternity in ethical terms as an effort directed to a collectivity merging the public and private interests of the present with those of the future: “If [what was being created was] for usefulness, all generations to come had to participate in this usefulness; if the prince, the municipality, or private individuals, if out of convenience, honor, individual or public advantage [...] whatever purpose they set themselves [...] it had to extend to the entire future” (3436–37). If the ancients were able to build an enduring legacy, one bridging private and public interest, it is because they did not limit their perspectives to the present and were able to imagine themselves as indissociable from the society to come.

What is key for Leopardi is the capacity for imagination that the ancients had. In this same thought, Leopardi writes that “the imagination always drives us toward what does not fall within reach of our senses. Therefore, toward the future and posterity, for the present is limited” (3437). The imagination, here, does not refer simply to a capacity to transcend time and place, nor is it just the power to represent or evoke what is not there. It is the ability to think about what is produced now as something that *will be* incorporated into the future, something that *will become* a part of the reality of our successors. In a sense, one might say that this kind of imagination, despite the nobility of its goals, is arrogant—inasmuch as it is a way to lay claim to the future, or at least to a part of it. But Leopardi suggests that this striving toward eternity is an act of generosity. It is natural, he says, that the modern era should produce things that only serve the moment, because it is an egoistic age. “It is egoistic,” Leopardi writes, “because it is disillusioned. Now, as disillusion causes man to think only of the present; he cares little or not at all of what will come after him” (3437–38). Leopardi was not the first to identify cynicism and self-interest as symptoms of cultural decline which undermine the very foundations of society. Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), for example, in the conclusion to the *New Science* (1744), had listed them among the causes that lead to the dissolution of advanced civilizations, especially the selfish attitude whereby peoples “fall into the custom of each man thinking only of his own private interests.”³³ The emphasis on the individual sphere would eventually lead to a neglect of the common good and to social atomism. These were all dangers that, for Vico, were inherent in the culture of modernity. The principles at the basis of social life, for Vico, were all principles that bind past, present, and future generations: religion, marriage, and burial of the dead. Leopardi agrees with Vico about the egoism of the modern age, because he sees that modernity, despite its blind belief in progress, conceives of itself as a closed entity.³⁴ The challenge, according to Leopardi, is for the moderns to *act* in the present, as the ancients did, but with the understanding that, as Francis Ponge said, “Man is the future of man.”³⁵

³³ Giambattista Vico. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 424.

³⁴ In his *Discourse on the Present State of the Customs of the Italians* (1824), Leopardi finds a chief example of such civic egoism and disengagement in Italian society, which becomes the epitome of modern society in all its flawed complexity. See Leopardi, *Prose*, ed. Rolando Damiani (Milan: Mondadori, 2009), 441–480. For a summary of Leopardi’s position, see Alessandra Aloisi, *Desiderio e assuefazione. Studio sul pensiero di Leopardi* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2014), 185.

³⁵ Francis Ponge, “Notes premières de ‘l’Homme’,” *Les Temps Modernes* 1/1 (1945): 67–75, 75.

By following Leopardi's reflection on the future in the *Zibaldone*, this essay has uncovered the multiple connections between Leopardi's theory of pleasure and his philosophy of history, showing how the very futurity of desire that leaves the modern individual profoundly dissatisfied is also enacted at an epochal level through the modern myth of progress. In the modern regime of disenchantment, Leopardi believes, only an indeterminate future can accommodate the boundless reaches of progress. But precisely because of this indeterminacy, the future remains forever foreign to the weakly modern imagination, and modern society accordingly struggles to fulfill its obligations to posterity. A chance for modernity's redemption, according to Leopardi, lies in its willingness to embrace a principle of responsibility and to seek an imaginative engagement with future generations. In the concluding section that follows, it is worth turning our attention to Leopardi's own commitment to posterity and to the way in which his ideas on futurity intersect with a reflection on the place and role of literature in modernity.

We might begin by asking ourselves: Did Leopardi *act* for the future? Did he embrace that same "principle of responsibility" towards future generations which he thought the moderns should rediscover and cultivate? These questions can be related to the larger issue of the contemporaneity of a work of art, and specifically of literature. To consider the contemporaneity of literature means to ask how literature can be understood in relation to its historical context, but also, how it can transcend this context and become contemporary to its future readers.

Leopardi himself deals with this issue in *Zibaldone* 2944–46, where he considers the place and role of the poet in modern society. "There is a cry for poetry to be contemporary" (2944), he writes, which means that a poet is expected to speak the language of her epoch, to express the ideas and to portray the deeds and customs of the people who live in her time. In order to be contemporary, he suggests, the poet should adhere completely to the era to which she belongs historically, which requires that she conform her style, opinions, and thoughts to those of her readers and that she cater to their tastes and expectations. Leopardi, though, sees a fundamental contradiction between poetry and modernity. He thinks that in its ideal form poetry is an expression of that magical-mythical thinking that was rendered ineffectual by the rise of rationalism. It is the voice of illusions, naturally appealing to feeling and imagination. In this sense, poetry has a natural affinity with antiquity and, both in spirit and character, is antithetical to modernity. This does not mean, though, that it has no place in the modern world. Analogously to Schiller, Leopardi thinks that poetry is still possible in the present time as sentimental expression.³⁶ The sentimental poet tries to recreate the power of illusions through reflection, in a self-aware manner that brings together self-reflexivity and melancholy. But even if poetry is confined by modernity to "the grey area of 'disillusioned illusions,'"³⁷ for Leopardi it never ceases to be what is intended above all to "move the imagination."³⁸ This intention is what places poetry out of sync with its own time, but it is also what keeps it meaningful. For Leopardi, the relevance of modern poetry, and by extension of all literature that embraces the poetic mode,

³⁶ See, e.g., *Zibaldone*, 734–35, where Leopardi describes the sentimental as the dominant mode of modernity and contrasts it with the poetry of imagination of antiquity. His distinction is reminiscent of that of Schiller in his 1795 *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*. Despite the convergence of their thought on this matter, it is unlikely that Leopardi ever read Schiller, whom he never cites. Leopardi, unlike Schiller, seemed resigned to the necessity of sentimental poetry, but, although he did not think that a return to the naiveté of ancient poetry was possible, he felt it was necessary for modern poetry to reaffirm the value of the imagination, even if filtered through reason. See Mario Andrea Rigoni, "Romanticismo leopardiano" in Neumeister and Sirri, *Leopardi*, 475–487 at 485n40.

³⁷ D'Intino, "Leopardi as Writer of Prose," in *The Oxford Handbook of European Romanticism*, ed. Paul Hamilton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 405–425, 420.

³⁸ Leopardi, *Operette*, 397.

consists precisely in its untimeliness, which gives the writer a unique chance to speak in counterpoint to her own age and engage critically with it.³⁹

In Leopardi's reflection, contemporaneity becomes synonymous with conformism. Yet, the way in which he describes the place of the writer and the relationship of her work to her historical moment coincides with a different, more positive notion of contemporaneity. In recent reflections on the contemporary, there has been a move to associate the notion not with an epoch, but rather with an intellectual attitude.⁴⁰ Following a Nietzschean idea, Giorgio Agamben has redefined being contemporary in terms of a disconnection or out-of-jointness with the present which grants the contemporary a rare insight into the problems of one's own time:

Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense [out-of-time] (*inattuale*). But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time.⁴¹

Leopardi's modern poet is similar to Agamben's genuinely contemporary individual: she is never at home in the present and experiences her time anachronistically. It is because of this that she can see clearly the possibilities of her own period and the fault lines that traverse it. This capacity, according to Agamben, can be assimilated to the ability of perceiving the darkness of the firmament at night—an obscurity, he explains, which is the result of the delay of the light striving to reach us from the farthest galaxies of an ever-expanding universe. This darkness and the light that it implies represent what is hidden and still illegible in the present, but will determine the character of that historical moment (Agamben, 46–47). A contemporary is one “who firmly holds his gaze on his own time” and can perceive its foretelling obscurity (Agamben, 44).

Agamben's analogy calls to mind the description of the night sky in one of Leopardi's late poems, “Broom” (1836). A somber and yet fiercely compassionate meditation on the human

³⁹ In the “Dialogue between Timander and Eleander” (1824), the *operetta morale* cited above, Eleander discusses with Timander the question of whether books can help the human species. A spokesperson for Leopardi himself, Eleander says, “If moral books could help, I think that the most helpful would be poetic books—I say poetic, using this word in a broad sense; I mean to say, books intended to move the imagination, in prose no less than in verse.” (Leopardi, *Operette*, 397.) In Eleander's words, the poetic transcends genres and becomes a mode or way of understanding the purpose of writing. The possibility for literature to become moral is given by the capacity of the poetic mode to move the imagination. On Leopardi and the moral role of literature, see D'Intino, “Leopardi.” On Leopardi and the untimeliness of poetry, see Guido Gugliemi, *L'infinito terreno. Saggio su Leopardi* (Lecce: Piero Manni, 2000), 35.

⁴⁰ For example, Paul Rabinow, following Foucault, has outlined a definition of the contemporary as the space from which the present is observed or critiqued. See Rabinow, *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 1–3. Rabinow takes his notion of the contemporary from Foucault's essay “What is Enlightenment,” where Foucault, as we have seen, emphasizes the idea of modernity as an “attitude” or a “mode of relating to contemporary reality.” See Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” 39. For a discussion of several overlapping theories of the contemporary that finds in Agamben's essay a theory that subsumes and brings into focus recent meditations on the notion, see Nick Salvato, *Obstruction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 10–14.

⁴¹ Giorgio Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?,” in *What is an Apparatus*, trans. by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39–54, 40. I have slightly modified the translation here to capture properly the meaning of *inattuale* in Italian. Instead of “irrelevant,” as the translation has it, *inattuale* refers to the state of being not *attuale*, or timely.

condition, “Broom” ties together a string of powerful images that evoke our frailty before the awesome and indifferent power of the natural world. The poem opens and closes with an address to a broom, a common flower that grows on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius, and that the poet praises as a symbol of humility and resilience in the face of disaster. The inner verses show, in slow succession, landscapes of ruins and desolate fields, cities buried under ashes and stones, and a young farmer who powerlessly watches as his home is destroyed by lava. In the central lines, the flow of images and thoughts breaks and gives way to a moment of lyrical transcendence. Leopardi describes himself observing the night sky as his gaze shifts from the closer “shining stars” to infinitely distant galaxies. As his eyes reach as far as the most remote stars, the light of which he describes as dissolving into a foggy blur, Leopardi offers an off-centered view of the human world:

and when I see
these still more infinitely distant
nuclei, it seems, of stars
that look like haze to us, to which
not only man and earth but all our stars
together, infinite in size and number,
the golden sun among them,
are unfamiliar or else they appear
the way these look to earth: a point
of nebulous light—
how do I think of you then, sons of men?⁴²

This lyrical moment of stargazing concludes with a musing about the insignificance of human beings in the great scheme of things. When Leopardi turns his gaze from the stars back to the earth, he sees nothing but an “obscure grain of sand.”⁴³ The images in the poem emphasize this obscurity—the precarious nature of human existence and human achievements—but all together they are intended as a challenge to nineteenth-century optimism about social progress, or what Leopardi defines ironically as “the *magnificent, progressive destiny* of human kind” [original emphasis].⁴⁴ This anti-optimistic stance is not unusual in the nineteenth century—one could think of Thomas Robert Malthus’ measured skepticism about “the future improvement of society,”⁴⁵ or of Arthur Schopenhauer, who defiantly declares that optimism is a “bitter mockery of the unspeakable sufferings of humanity.”⁴⁶ Leopardi thinks that optimism fails to take into account the reality of human life, overestimates what reason and science can achieve, and ultimately attempts a project that goes beyond its reach, without having a clear grasp of the future. The nineteenth century that he denounces in “Broom” is a “proud and foolish century,”⁴⁷

⁴² Leopardi, “Broom” 174–85, in Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans. Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), 299.

⁴³ Leopardi, “Broom” 190–91, in *Canti*, 301. I have slightly modified the translation to keep closer to the original Italian.

⁴⁴ Leopardi, “Broom” 51, in *Canti*, 291.

⁴⁵ Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. Donald Winch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 13, 325.

⁴⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 352.

⁴⁷ Leopardi, “Broom” 53, in *Canti*, 291.

blind to the shortcomings and weaknesses of human beings and to its own delusions. “All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are obscure,” writes Agamben (44). In his struggle to capture its obscurity and distill it in his writings, Leopardi was truly contemporary to his own time.⁴⁸

The contemporaneity of which Agamben speaks, however, implies something more. The anachronic condition that he describes, the state of being out-of-joint with the present and yet able to understand both its promises and its threats, is also what makes it possible for an author to establish a dialogue with future readers. In a recent book entitled *The Future*, Marc Augé devotes a chapter to Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* in which he explores the question of the extent to which a work of literature or a writer can anticipate the future.⁴⁹ Augé redefines contemporaneity as an ability to foreshadow what is to come and address future audiences meaningfully and empathically: “You have to be totally of your time to be able to survive it. Being contemporary,” he writes, “means concentrating on those things in the present that sketch something of the future [...] Contemporaneity is not to be reduced to passing events” (Augé, 38). Flaubert, according to Augé, was an author capable of capturing the essence of his epoch, and at the same time of rising above the present to engage with future readers. With her chimeras and fears, her disappointment and boredom, his heroine, Emma Bovary, embodies better than any other past or present fictional characters the pathetic discontent of our age. In her tragic confrontation with the nothingness of everyday life, Emma, Augé argues, is truly our contemporary. And so is Flaubert, who, in creating her character—his double—anticipated and distilled the “illusions, alienations, and tragedies” of our time (40).

The same could be said of Leopardi. His writings engage critically with the quandaries of his historical moment; they are determined by the present. Yet they always imply a future readership, even if they do not openly address one. The *Zibaldone* collects philosophical notes, private thoughts, observations on literature, art, aesthetics, and history, combined with reflections on the most diverse aspects of the human condition. Despite its heterogeneity, this collection has unifying features that are linked less to its subject matter than to its internal structure, to the radicalness and originality of its approach, and to its open-ended dialogical intention. This desire to establish a dialogue with an absent interlocutor, whether she is an ancient philosopher, a contemporary scholar, or a future reader, makes it such that the book itself is, in a sense, positioned out of time, at a crossroads between past, present, and future. The allocutory intention is especially strong when it comes to coincide with the desire to act on behalf of the other: to help, to advise, to interpret the present, or to frame a vision of the future. In Leopardi’s indices for the *Zibaldone*, for example, and in other scattered places across the work, we find allusions to writing projects that function both as internal cross-references and as themes for reflection. Leopardi indicates, among others, a “Treatise on the Passions,” a “Manual of Practical Philosophy,” of which I have discussed an entry, and a letter to a young man of the twentieth century.⁵⁰ Some of these projects took shape as poems or works of prose,⁵¹ while others never saw the light of day, but they all have in common their intention to be of practical use. They aim

⁴⁸ Novella Bellucci notices the disjuncture between Leopardi and his contemporary culture, finding in it the source of Leopardi’s authority as the critical conscience of his own time. See Bellucci, *G. Leopardi e i contemporanei. Testimonianze dall’Italia e dall’Europa in vita e in morte del poeta* (Florence: Ponte alle Grazie, 1996), 14.

⁴⁹ Marc Augé, *The Future*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 2014), 29–45.

⁵⁰ See Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 4279–80.

⁵¹ Walter Binni, for example, thinks that Leopardi’s project of a letter to a young man of the twentieth century found poetic expression in “Broom.” See Binni, “Il messaggio della ‘Ginestra’ ai giovani del ventesimo secolo,” *Poetica, critica e storia letteraria, e altri saggi di metodologia* (Florence: Le Lettere, 1993), 248–54.

to impact the individual and society and they are all directed toward an external audience and even, quite explicitly, toward the distant future. The thoughts and observations that fall under the rubric of these writing projects are uncannily contemporary—*attuali*, Agamben would say—such as the advice to channel anxiety into mindful work, or the warnings against the dangers of social egoism. Franco D’Intino has defined the *Zibaldone* as “a book of the future,”⁵² but it is also a book *for* the future. If Leopardi’s observations appear relevant today, undoubtedly more so than those of other writers who believed in the “magnificent and progressive destiny of humankind,” it is because he understood that for a writer to be engaged with contemporaneity means not only to be an untimely critic of the present, but also to envision the future and address it with empathy.

⁵² Caesar, D’Intino, and Brozzi, introduction to *Zibaldone*, xxii.