ITALIAN LECTURE

THE IDEA OF TRUTH IN MANZONI AND LEOPARDI

By KENELM FOSTER

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THERE is a danger in being honoured beyond one's expectations; one may try a little too hard to rise to the occasion, and I fear I have run the risk of doing that in choosing to address so distinguished an audience on so difficult, though fascinating, a topic. Two men of genius and their idea of truth would always be a large subject for one lecture, and the matter is certainly made no easier in the present case by the fact that the two minds and mentalities I have chosen as my theme are not only complex but also exceedingly different. As thinkers—which is how I have to consider them—Alessandro Manzoni and Giacomo Leopardi differ all along the line—in temperament, outlook, method, and conclusions, in their entire view of things; to which it seems almost trivial to add that intellectually each was wholly independent of, indeed almost unaffected by the other, though they were contemporaries and slightly acquainted. As thinkers they had almost nothing in common except the concern to think truthfully. That certainly they shared in some sense. But what does a common truth-concern imply? Manzoni, writing to Victor Cousin, insisted that every history of philosophy presupposes a philosophy 'exposée ou simplement indiquée'.[1] And this I am sure is true; but even were it not, the historian of philosophy is of course obliged to philosophize just because and to the extent that he is giving an account of philosophies. And this in a modest way is what I am attempting now: a small essay in—or on the frontiers of—the history of ideas; and so touching, inevitably, on matters in which my technical competence is, I fear, extremely limited.

[1] *Tutte le opere di A. M.*, ed. A. Chiari and F. Ghisalberti, Milan, 1963, iii, p. 596. For works by M other than the 'Lettre à Cousin' references will be to *Opere di A. M.*, ed. M. Barbi and F. Ghisalberti, 3 vols., Milan, 1942–50; and in the case of the *Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica* also to the critical edition, with commentary, of R. Armerio, 3 vols., Milan–Naples, 1966.

It is then in a way heartening to recall that neither Manzoni nor Leopardi ever took a university course in philosophy or has the general name and fame of a philosopher. Both are remembered as creative writers, the one as author of a great novel, the other as a lyric poet. And it is true that both philosophized as it were on the side—though with passion and persistence, for both were intellectually very serious men and serious about the ultimate questions. Indeed it is likely that both set more store by their relatively little-known philosophical speculations than by their triumphant achievements in imaginative literature. Leopardi's lyric poems were but a tiny part of his writings (counting the unpublished with the published) and he never spoke of them anything like so tenderly as he spoke of the *Operette morali*, the dialogues by which he hoped for a time to recommend his bitter philosophy—'my system' as he liked to call it—to the world.[1] His strongest ambition may well have been to win glory precisely as a philosopher. As for Manzoni, we all know how he liked to mock at himself as poet and novelist ('i miei venticinque lettori'!)[2] but it is an error, I think, to ascribe this only to modesty and a humorous gentlemanly detachment; it sprang as much from that speculative bent in him which, after the glorious but short-lived spell of creative writing (say, 1818–27), increasingly predominated and found its apt expression in dry prose of reflection and analysis; in those letters, essays, and dialogues of his later years, which can all be described as directly or indirectly philosophical. Italian critics used to speak of Don Alessandro's gradual lapse into silence and sterility, a judgement which has little to recommend it except that Manzoni always found composition difficult, was intellectually very scrupulous, and that much of this later writing was left unfinished or unpublished. But today—with the excellent editions we now have of the 'Lettre à Victor Cousin', of the draft of Part II of the *Morale cattolica*, of the Appendix to Part I (the refutation of Utilitarianism), of the *Discorso* on the historical novel and other scattered reflections on art and truth, of the *Dell'Invenzione*, Manzoni's clearest statement on the relation between the individual mind and universal ideas—today there is

[1] See L's letters to his publisher Stella in 1826, *Epistolario di G. L.*, ed. F. Moroncini, iv, pp. 63, 78, 85, 101, 119; cf. M. Porena, *Scritti leopardiani*, Bologna, 1959, pp. 393–5.

[2] *Promessi Sposi*, c. I; and cf. his description of *Adelchi*: 'mon petit monstre romantique' (letter to Fauriel, 6 Mar. 1826, *Carteggio*, ed. Sforza and Callavresi, p. 10).

no excuse for ignoring his philosophy, unless perhaps it is not worth studying; which obviously is not my own view and which I am encouraged to discount by signs in recent Italian criticism of a growing interest in this aspect of Manzoni.[1] This 'élève de rhétorique', as he once described himself, 'qui *a* écouté, quelquefois et en passant, à la porte de la salle de philosophie'[2] is himself now being listened to and is found to have pertinent things to say about those *sous-entendus*, as he called them, those ideas underlying all language and discourse, which he thought it the proper business of philosophers to examine.[3] I observe too that the thought of Leopardi also has attracted a growing attention since the war.[4] These renewals of interest tend to represent, understandably, rather different backgrounds: Catholic in Manzoni's case and humanist or Marxist in Leopardi's; but not without some overlapping.

Since comparison presupposes definition, let me now try briefly to define or describe, in their salient characteristics as I see them, these two poetico-philosophical mentalities, beginning with the older man Manzoni. This done, I shall attempt to draw the threads together and compare and contrast the two in terms of what seems to me most characteristic and essential in the way each used and applied the concept of truth.

Everyone knows that Manzoni was a Christian, and discerning readers will know that in him an ardent faith went hand in hand with a very rational cast of mind and a conviction of the rightness, indeed the duty of using reason freely and vigorously on all serious matters, not excluding the issue of religious belief.

[1] e.g. the new edition of *Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica* by R. Armerio, mentioned in n. 1, p. 243, the third volume of which, *Studio delle Dottrine*, is the most careful analysis yet made of M's thought in general. Other noteworthy recent studies: B. Boldrini, *La formazione del pensiero etico-storico del M*, Florence, 1954; R. Montano, *M o del lieto fine*, Naples, 1950; N. Sapegno, *Ritratto di M*, Bari, 1961; L. Derla, *Il realismo storico di A. M.*, Milan–Varese, 1965.

[2] 'Lettre à V. Cousin', ed. cit., p. 583.

[3] Ibid., p. 597.

[4] Some noteworthy studies within this period: C. Luporini, 'L progressivo', in *Filosofi vecchi e nuovi*, Florence, 1947; W. Binni, *La nuova poetica leopardiana*, Florence, 1947; L. Salvatorelli, *Il pensiero politico italiano dal 1700 al 1870*, Turin, 1949 (5th ed.); G. A. Levi, *Fra Arimane e Cristo*, Naples, 1953; B. Biral, *La 'posizione storica' di G. L.*, Venice, 1962; G. Berardi, 'Ragione e stile in L', *Belfagor*, xviii, 1963, nos. 4–6; *L e il Settecento. Atti del I Convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani*, Recanati, 1964; S. Timpanaro, 'Alcune osservazioni sul pensiero di L' and 'Il L e i filosofi antichi', in *Classicismo e illuminismo nell'Ottocento italiano*, Pisa, 1965.

This rational temper, reflected in the persistent logical finesse of his prose, is a constant in Manzoni's work, in his approach to every topic without exception. His return to the Church in youth was the decisive event of his long life and an absolutely religious event; yet he remained, and consciously so, a child of the Enlightenment, even in a sense, of the Revolution: the *Promessi Sposi* from one point of view is all a searching critique of the *ancien régime*. Indeed in a sense he always remained a rationalist, if this term can be used without its negative connotation of disbelief in revelation.[1] He rejected with horror the idea that Christian faith involves any sort of loss or reduction of rationality; and—given the powers he possessed and the interests he came to pursue—this meant that Christianity, as he conceived it, was not only capable of, but demanded, the utmost extension of those powers and interests; which again meant, in particular, an exploration, both rational and poetic, of what I would call the special manzonian problem, the relation between history and morality, man as he has been and man as he should be.

In a way this is only a variant on the age-old issue of the real and the ideal; but the form it took in Manzoni was determined, I think, by the interaction of three personal factors: by his deep interest in history; by an extreme moral sensibility;[2] and by what I would call his intellectualism. His interest in history and his profound and exact knowledge of certain historical periods are generally admitted. It is more relevant to note that this historical bent implied a certain concentration on human nature as social, such as one does not, I think, find in Leopardi, for all the many and acute reflections in the *Zibaldone* on social life and customs, and not forgetting the famous call for human brotherhood in the *Ginestra*. The difference is not a matter of themes or topics but of fundamental outlook. Nor do I wish, in affirming that in one sense Manzoni's thought was socially orientated and Leopardi's was not, to dispute the general rightness of the post-war reaction in Italy, chiefly in Marxist circles, against the old, rather facile stress on Leopardi's solitude and

[1] See R. Armerio, op. cit. iii, espec. pp. 51–7, 66–90; R. Montano, op. cit., pp. 139–46.

[2] 'E in verità è la visione morale, l'attenzione volta non ai dati fisici o sentimentali o d'altro genere ma all'essenza peccaminosa o virtuosa degli atti che costituisce la natura vera della visione manzoniana. Dove altri sentono il distacco dei colori, i rilievi fisici, il Manzoni vede qualità morali.' R. Montano, op. cit., pp. 88–9.

misanthropy; nor even at present to dispute Salvatorelli's and Luporini's judgement that the thought of Manzoni is politically sterile whereas Leopardi's has an enduring vitality.[1] I am concerned, now, not to evaluate attitudes but to define them; and by attitudes here I mean characteristic and basic ways of taking stock of the human situation. Both our subjects were poets but for Leopardi poetry meant chiefly lyrical utterance, for Manzoni poetic drama which was to Leopardi the least poetic form of poetry. Again, for Manzoni incomparably the richest material for poetry was historical fact—what existing men have actually thought and done; and his best lyrics—the first chorus of *Adelchi*, *Cinque maggio*, *Marzo 1821*, *La Pentecoste*—are themselves brief distilled histories; whereas whatever Leopardi said about poetry even allowing, I think, for the final realistic phase, presupposed the position he had adopted in adolescence, that poetry is born of illusion—'l'illusione senza cui non ci sarà poesia in sempiterno'.[2] I say 'said *about* poetry', for of course the leopardian lyric itself represents, both in theme and in tone, a persistent *rejection* of illusion; so that paradoxically it is in fact dominated by an ideal of truth, by a continual taking the measure, so to say, of a human and cosmic reality which simply *is what it is*. But the 'realities' envisaged by the two men differ *toto coelo*; and a very important factor in the difference, and one that is not reducible to the opposition between Christianity and atheism, is Manzoni's special concern with morality. His historical curiosity was entirely governed by an interest in the relations between men as involving justice and injustice; so that through the study of laws, institutions, etc., it always came round in the end to ethical matter, to a preoccupation with right and wrong, to a contemplation of actions as at once inter-personal and morally responsible; whereas in general the relationship Leopardi was most deeply concerned with was only unilaterally personal and not, I would say, properly ethical at all. I will return to this last point, only asking you for the moment to try to imagine Manzoni even conceiving the basic situation expressed in the *Canto notturno d'un pastore errante*, where all mankind speaks through one solitary shepherd alone with the moon and stars and his indifferent sheep. All mankind—yes, for half the theme of that

[1] Cf. L. Salvatorelli, op. cit., p. 189 (in 2nd ed.); C. Luporini, op. cit., p. 273.

[2] *Zibaldone* 17 (ed. Flora, i, p. 23). For the pre-eminence given by L to lyric poetry, see *Zibaldone* 4234–6, 4367, 4475–7 (ed. Flora, ii, pp. 1063–5, 1191, 1283–4).

great poem is the common human lot ('la vita mortale, lo stato mortale'), the other half being, to adopt Pascal's phrase, 'ces espaces infinis (la stanza / smisurata e superba)' and their 'silence éternel (silenziosa luna)'; but it is a humanity facing outwards, away from itself; facing a world not merely unknown but *unconscious*. And that is never Manzoni's attitude: the universe outside man did not greatly interest him; when he faces outwards, away from humanity, it is towards God alone, whose traces he thought he discerned *within* humanity.

But such a 'facing outwards' is Manzoni's attitude as believer and thinker, not—or not immediately—as an artist; witness the *Promessi Sposi* in which Manzoni the artist found his *complete* expression. And what in the novel Manzoni aimed at achieving was precisely that which he had already defined as the proper and only adequate aim of the historian: to represent as far as possible the *whole* condition of a given society in a given period.[1] The aims of historian and novelist (or poet) are so far identical: to represent man in his whole social reality. Yet obviously poetry is not history, as art is not science. And yet again, if there is one thing which characterizes Manzoni's intellectual procedures from first to last it is a tendency to relate every aspect of the human spirit as closely as possible to *knowing*; to see every human activity as an expression of some aspect of truth. It is this that I call his intellectualism, and from it sprang his special problem about poetry and his two chief attempts at a solution: the *Lettre à M. Chauvet* of 1820 and the *Del romanzo storico* a dozen years later.

Manzoni's instinctive starting-point, what he felt in his bones from the first, was that poetry simply could not be an interesting, an 'adult' matter at all—it was a refined and disguised frivolity —if and in the degree that it could be separated from reason, the faculty of truth, and regarded as a product of mere sensibility and imagination. Now just this separation was vehemently affirmed by the young Leopardi, and affirmed in the name of 'holy Nature', the source of all poetry as of all that was great and good in man; but also, alas, and by the same token the source of illusions, for reason, and knowledge its bitter fruit

[1] Cf. *Del romanzo storico*, p. 626 of vol. ii of *Opere*, ed. Barbi and Ghisalberti; *Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica*, ibid., pp. 34–5 (in R. Armerio, op. cit. ii, p. 10). It is, of course, relevant to note that in the *Lettre à M. Chauvet*, defending romantic drama against neo-classicist objections, M calls the general method of such drama 'le système *historique*', *Opere*, ii, p. 322. Cf. also *Carteggio*, ed. cit. i, p. 541.

('l'acerba verità'), was Nature's enemy; and though in his later years (notably in his great poetic testament *La ginestra*) Leopardi came round implicitly to a certain reconciliation between reason and poetry, it was on grounds that are anything but manzonian, as we shall see. His usual explicit view is recorded, for example, in the *Zibaldone*, in June 1821: poetry has nothing to do with philosophy or science, since 'its proper object is the beautiful, which is to say the false, for the truth (such is our sad human lot) has never been beautiful'.[1] Or again in the following March, speaking of a philosopher he admired, 'his aim was not beauty but the thing most contrary to it, truth'.[2] For Manzoni, however, 'only the true is beautiful'.[3] It is truth that is holy—'il santo vero'[4]—and while poetry and science represent different approaches to truth and illustrate different aspects of it, nevertheless the poet, so far as he is genuinely one, is guided in his own way by reason and arrives in the end at reason's proper objective, true knowledge. Hence the essential element of reflection in great poetry: 'To those who say poetry is based on imagination and feeling and reflection only chills and numbs it, I answer that the more deeply one explores the human heart for truth, the more true poetry one will find.'[5] Or again, with characteristic pugnacity: 'Literature (les belles-lettres) will be accurately considered only when it comes to be regarded as a branch of the moral sciences';[6] which, along with the previous allusion to the 'human heart', points us towards the kind of truth Manzoni expects poetry to reveal: it is truth about man, both man as a moral agent, balanced between right and wrong, and man as a feeling, desiring subject. This human complexity is the matter of poetry. But first of all it has been history itself, it has happened or is happening: let the poet only look and see; what could he imagine, make up, invent more interesting than that which exists?[7] More *interesting*—that is the right manzonian word here, with its connotations of attending, considering,

[1] *Zibaldone* 1228–31 (ed. Flora, i, pp. 828–30); cf. ibid. 168 (ed. cit. i, p. 184): 'La cognizione del vero cioè dei limiti e definizioni delle cose, circoscrive l'immaginazione.' It is the theme of the canzone *Ad Angelo Mai*.

[2] *Comparazione delle sentenze di Bruto minore e di Teofrasto*, in *G. L., Opere*, ed. S. Solmi, 'La Letteratura Italiana: Storie e Testi', Milan–Naples, 1966, ii, t. 1, pp. 682–3.

[3] *Del romanzo storico*, in *Opere*, ed. cit. ii, p. 631.

[4] *In morte di Carlo Imbonati*, in *Opere*, ed. cit. iii, p. 213.

[5] *Opere*, ed. cit. iii, p. 618; cf. p. 488.

[6] *Opere*, ed. cit. iii, p. 617.

[7] *Lettre à M. Chauvet*, in *Opere*, ed. cit. ii, pp. 344–6, 351.

thinking; Manzoni's theory of art, though in one sense 'romantic', is thoroughly intellectualist. Poetry depicts passion because it depicts man, and the poet cannot depict what he does not feel; but that is only his starting-point. The purpose of his art is not to feel or make others feel but to induce a state wherein feeling is contemplated;[1] to bring about certain states of contemplation of which the poet alone has the secret; and he has this secret, he is truly a poet, in the degree that, besides a special capacity for feeling, he has also the capacity to achieve an *idea* of his emotion, and so discern the 'truth' of it: 'la verità insomma di quell'affetto'.

But what, more precisely, is this poet's truth? How does it differ from the historian's or the scientist's? This question gave Manzoni a deal of trouble. His first answer came with the defence, in the *Lettre*, of romantic drama. Poetry is essentially an insight into history and the poet *par excellence* is Shakespeare. Now history is apprehended under two aspects: as a connected series of objective events and as subjective experience: the first is the province of ordinary historiography, the second the special field of poetry. The poet's task then is to complete man's possession of his past by bringing out its inward subjective side, the part the historian cannot reach to, 'la partie perdue', the felt experience of countless human individuals.[2] But this was only an *ad hoc* answer, it could not satisfy Manzoni for long. For, first, it defined poetry in terms of a special subject-matter, not as a special way of treating *any* subjective matter; and secondly, by so stressing the historical aspect it seemed to leave poetry still confused with positive factual knowledge (albeit 'spiritual' facts), thus discounting the element of imagination and invention. Hence in the *Del romanzo storico* the idea of 'inwardness' is tacitly dropped, and with it the stress on the common subject-matter of poetry and history. The specific imaginative factor of invention in poetry is frankly accepted: and the proper *res* of poetry, the object the poet *qua* poet produces for contemplation, is specified as 'il verosimile', a verisimilitude, something quite distinct from the historian's factual truth, 'il vero positivo', and claiming a quite distinct kind of assent from the mind.[3] In fact, this brief dense essay all turns on a distinction between historical assent, given to truth of fact,

[1] *Lettre à M. Chauvet*, in *Opere*, ed. cit. ii, pp. 368–9; cf. R. Armerio, op. cit. iii, pp. 225–31, 237–40.

[2] *Lettre à M. Chauvet*, in *Opere*, ed. cit., p. 347.

[3] *Del romanzo storico*, in *Opere*, ed. cit. ii, pp. 627, 630.

and poetic assent, given to verisimilitude;[1] and the ground is cleared for an unconfused consideration of the latter. But here, just when we expect at last a positive definition of poetry and the poetic, Manzoni breaks off, leaving us only tantalizing hints and suggestions—brilliant, seminal, no more. Two points, however, have emerged clearly. First, the 'verosimile', the proper matter of art, may be an illusion in respect precisely of its mere *likeness* to factual truth (as Don Abbondio is only 'like' a country priest in seventeenth-century Lombardy), but considered in a wider perspective it is unquestionably *true*; a genuine object in its own right offered, for contemplation, to the truth-seeing faculty of intellect. And secondly, we can say what truth this is, what area of reality it shows: for on this point the teaching of the *Lettre* is maintained, that poetry's function is to give knowledge of man; but it does so by the creation of truth-likenesses, where the truth presupposed and implicit is an idea of man as a being open to all the possibilities inherent in a nature that requires to be defined in terms of *indeterminacy*—driven by an indeterminate desire for happiness and able at any moment freely—that is, out of a previous indeterminacy—to determine itself by an act of will. Now every act of the will for Manzoni is governed by truth or falsehood, as is every act of the mind; and as thinking is either true or false, so in its own order, the practical order, is voluntary action. It is either a conforming or a not conforming to the full reality of a given situation; it is either, that is, just (practical truthfulness) or unjust (practical mendacity). If then every act of will is either just or unjust, the truth about man, which is poetry's truth, 'il vero poetico', will be a showing of justice and injustice, good and evil, a 'vero morale'.

Thus implicitly poetry is a lesson, it suggests an ideal. But looking out on history, on reality, Manzoni, like Newman, was appalled by that same 'heart-piercing, reason-bewildering fact' of human misery which Newman summarized in an inspired page of the *Apologia*. Only, perhaps Manzoni's reason was less bewildered than that of his great contemporary. He did not pretend to discern God's ways in history; nor even think it was his business to try. But he did think he discerned in man himself the fundamental cause of human distress—namely, that, within the limits of this life, man's natural desire for happiness is basically irreconcilable with his equally natural (if often less obvious)

[1] This is R. Armerio's view and I accept it; see ed. cit. iii, p. 248; and cf. R. Montano, op. cit., pp. 34–7.

sense of moral obligation. The 'drive' for happiness and the claims of justice—reducible to the claims of truth as governing not intellect alone but also will—these two things can perfectly unite only in another life, an immortal life, where justice is transformed into and rewarded by the vision of its divine source, truth itself.[1]

Human history then is borne onward by an inward conflict which cannot be resolved within history itself; the forces involved—the subject's urge to happiness, the objective demands of justice—these are reconciled only outside history. Ultimately they will, they must unite, but this is a truth taught not by history but by religion. To this view of things the only serious alternative, for Manzoni, was Utilitarianism, the reduction of the two conflicting forces to one by simply absorbing morality into the desire for happiness, making it a mere calculation of utilities to that end. But this, he said, was to solve the problem by denying its existence; and its existence was as undeniable intellectually as the difference between the concept of the useful and the concept of the just; a difference he thought self-evident.[2]

In a sense Leopardi's ideas lend themselves more easily than Manzoni's to a treatment in line with my general aim, which is not so much to analyse two philosophical systems as to describe and contrast two different mentalities or outlooks; an undertaking that perhaps suits Leopardi's case better than Manzoni's just because on particular topics his thought is usually less rigorous and precise—its characteristic procedure being a kind of extension into the poet's growing experience of the world of certain primary intuitions, strongly emotive in character, which themselves are never closely or dispassionately analysed.[3] This is not to say that Leopardi is not self-critical; it is only to say that dialectically he is less so than Manzoni. He is content with vaguer concepts and looser reasoning. His intellect is less detached (on the conscious level at any rate) from subjective

[1] See the very important ch. 3 of *Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica*, in *Opere*, ed. cit. ii, pp. 48 ff. (in R. Armerio's critical ed. cit., ii, pp. 45 ff.); and the Appendix to this chapter, the critique of Utilitarianism—which in fact is a short treatise on the subject—in *Opere*, ed. cit. ii, espec. pp. 185–92 (R. Armerio, ed. cit. ii, pp. 349–67).

[2] See the Appendix on Utilitarianism referred to in n. 1, above: *Opere*, ed. cit. ii, pp. 175–213; R. Armerio, ed. cit. ii, pp. 323–410.

[3] See the acute observations of S. Solmi (beginning 'Leopardi è, e non è, un filosofo') on pp. xiv–xvii of the Introduction to vol. ii of his edition referred to in n. 2, p. 249 above.

emotional factors; one sign, I suggest, of this being that Leopardi is hardly ever, as Manzoni constantly is, ironical at his own expense. His mind developed and changed; indeed it remained to the end open to change, to a degree impossible for Manzoni, so that even Leopardi's apparently final conclusions and most cherished positions have always something provisional about them, but it is a feature of his mind that it never kept pace logically with its own development. His ideas are 'tried out'—reasoned about up to a point and then left for another occasion: which of course suits the diary form he gave them—or rather, no doubt, it was the diary form which profoundly agreed with his original cast of mind. Leopardi is a blend of visionary and philosophical essayist; and perhaps his best essays, and certainly the greater number, were written for himself alone, in a private journal of unique range and richness and candour. But the philosophy in it is always somehow 'essays'.

I said that his mind remained open to the end, contrasting him in this with Manzoni. It is broadly the difference between an empiricist and a philosophical realist. For Manzoni to possess an intellect was to be always *able* to possess some absolutely irrefragable certainties. Intellect is the faculty that records logical necessities, and whatever is logically necessary is an eternal and universal truth—irrevocable: 'to know some things for certain', he said, 'there's no need to be omniscient; enough to be intelligent'.[1] Now at first sight Leopardi too seems full of certainties—even dogmatic (and far more so than Manzoni); but the deeper one gets into the *Zibaldone* the more the profoundly *provisional* nature of this thought comes home to one. Deep down Leopardi—the essayist Leopardi—is a relativist; and this because from first to last it was at least his intention, *when philosophizing*, simply to stick to facts as he saw them, to be thoroughly empirical, to eschew metaphysics. Anything might ultimately be true, but ultimate truth is beyond our range. The universe may even, ultimately, be more good than evil (or the reverse); but relative to us evil predominates; that is the *fact*.[2] As I have said, this tentative empirical 'intention' is not evident prima facie in the *Zibaldone*; especially in the earlier sections it is offset and obscured by the great dramatizing stresses on the visionary starting-points (life and the threat to life, nature

[1] Appendix on Utilitarianism, *Opere*, ed. cit. ii, p. 177; R. Armerio, ed. cit., p. 331.

[2] *Zibaldone* 4258, cf. 1340–1, 4134 (ed. Flora, ii, pp. 1090–1; i, p. 902; ii, p. 960).

and rationality): it is none the less, I think, the very soul of the work considered as philosophy. In what follows I shall be concerned to state certain main positions taken up successively by Leopardi. But I would wish it to be understood that in my view he attached, implicitly, a proviso to every such position (even to the final vision of *La ginestra*), the proviso, 'this is truth *as I see it*'.

His development presents three constant features: sensism and pessimism and a habit of representing reality in oppositions or contradictions. Leopardi's sensist theory of knowledge derived from Locke through the French 'philosophes'.[1] It took root in him before he was out of his teens and I do not think he ever clearly thought it out. To say that all thinking derives from sensation seemed to him virtually the same as to say that all thought *is* sensation of some kind; for the only alternative he seems ever to have envisaged—only to reject it as early as 1821—was the theory of innate ideas, which he thought Locke had finally refuted.[2] And if innatism was false, belief in God lost its rational basis: 'Certainly, now that the Platonic pre-existing forms are destroyed, God is destroyed.'[3] Sensism opened the way to materialism, and—after some early hesitations—to the lucid atheism of *La ginestra*.

'Lucid', but only in a sense: what is lucid in the *Ginestra*, Leopardi's final—in the sense indicated—vision of man and Nature, are the contours of the picture, not the ideas they presuppose and give shape to: on the one side the vast mindless universe, utterly indifferent to man; on the other side mankind united in a common scorn and defiance of this dreadful and yet contemptible environment, and called to fight, literally to the death, against it—mankind doomed yet indomitable. The picture is indeed tremendously clear; but the ideas involved—matter, existence, man, reason, truth, happiness—each of these notions has become in the poet's mind a focus of thought and feeling expressing attitudes of attraction or revulsion; each lives in him by the emotional charge it carries; and what it expresses in the last resort is Leopardi's personal misery and his struggle to come to terms intellectually with it. He was not a metaphysical

[1] See in *Leopardi e il Settecento: Atti*, etc. (cf. n. 4, p. 245 above), the contributions of M. Sansone, pp. 133–72, of A. Frattini, pp. 253–82, and of A. L. de Castris, pp. 399–413. Cf. also M. Losacco, *Indagini leopardiane*, Carabba, 1937, pp. 165 ff., S. Timpanaro, op. cit., pp. 145–6.

[2] *Zibaldone* 1339 (ed. Flora, i, p. 902).

[3] Ibid. 1342 (ed. Flora, i, p. 903).

materialist for he was not a metaphysician. On the other hand —and here Timpanaro is surely right against the Marxists— you cannot explain Leopardi's pessimism as an extrapolation of politico-social discontent.[1] The declared basis of his final cosmic pessimism is a radical opposition between life and existence: 'life', represented chiefly by man, necessarily desires happiness; 'existence', i.e. the mindless material cosmos, takes no account of this desire and continually frustrates it and from time to time simply stamps it out. Man's fight against existence (called 'Natura' in the *Ginestra*) is decided in advance, and against man. Defeat is inevitable (as in Marxism it presumably is not): meanwhile humanity's only nobility consists in fighting. But what is humanity?

To this question Leopardi gives always, implicitly, one answer: man is the being who *stands in opposition.* In his earlier meditations it is a human self-opposition that he stresses; later, and with increasing intensity, man's opposition to the universe. Each stage expresses a reaction to evil and suffering; and the change from the first stage to the second consisted essentially in a shifting the blame for this from human nature to Nature generally, to the whole cosmic order. In Leopardi's early, 'rousseauistic' phase the agent of evil is located in reason itself. Reason arising—inexplicably—within man has withered his natural life at the root, destroying the natural illusions which are the precondition of all that is noble in him—moral vigour, generosity, enthusiasm, poetry: 'reason is the enemy of all greatness'.[2] But gradually a different attitude prevails, affecting first the concept of Nature and eventually that of reason also. Bit by bit Leopardi separates Nature from man; until, with the *Operette morali*, composed for the most part in 1824, 'she' is virtually identified with the non-human, with the indifferent cosmos 'outside'. The 'Mother Nature' illusion is destroyed. But this separation is not yet a fully declared opposition: mankind, in the poet's vision, is still more a victim than a rebel; more to be scorned or pitied than admired. By 1829, however, Leopardi had taken sides unconditionally with man against Nature, in terms which anticipate his call to mankind, in *La ginestra*, to declare itself innocent of all evil and lay the blame squarely on 'a higher principle' (. . . 'ma dà la colpa a quella / che veramente è rea' . . .).[3] His revolt had found its moral principle. All

[1] S. Timpanaro, op. cit., pp. 174–82.

[2] *Zibaldone* 14–15; cf. 37, 44–5 (ed. Flora, i, pp. 19–68).

[3] *La ginestra*, 123–4; *Zibaldone* 4428 (ed. Flora, ii, p. 1239)

that was needed now to complete the poet's self-identification with the human against the non-human was that he fully accept reason and reason's abhorrence of illusion, and so become, in Luporini's phrase, 'a hero of the truth'.[1] And this acceptance of truth, the leopardian truthfulness, is complete in *Laginestra*.

How shall we characterize it, finally? Its dominant ethical note is a proud sincerity: its contrary, the theistic and Christian 'illusion' ('le superbe fole'), is rejected with contempt. But precisely as cognitive, as a declaration of or aspiration to knowledge, this final leopardian 'truth' is essentially, it seems to me, an acceptance of *fact*, a statement that man's solitude within an utterly alien reality is *simply the case*. For here the term 'truth' does not imply, in the poet's intention, anything other than sheer fact—not any demand that the universe should make sense, for that has been ruled out from the start; not any aspiration towards some light on the total darkness; not even any protest against the absence of light; only a recognition that things are as they are, followed by a call to mankind to shoulder the consequences and join in a common war against 'pitiless Nature'. Thus the object implied by Leopardi's 'vero' is primarily extramental material fact, and then the irreconcilable opposition between this and human nature. But observe—not in the *Ginestra* but in the background *Zibaldone*—one further essential point. As he considered and reconsidered the opposition between the universe and man a new horror took shape in Leopardi's mind: did not that opposition perhaps not only doom man to death and extinction but make nonsense of logic itself? The discrepancy between the mind's pretensions and material fact, already in a way implicit in Leopardi's sensism, now turns into a deeper, a more radical opposition between rationality and existence. Nature or existence goes its own way, indifferent to the *natural* desire for happiness inborn in living things; and this is a contradiction written into existence itself, 'terrifying but none the less true; a great mystery, an inexplicable mystery unless one denies that anything is absolutely either true or false (and my system involves this denial) and unless one in a sense even gives up the principle of contradiction, *non potest simul esse et non esse*'.[2] His philosophy of opposition could hardly go further than that.

[1] C. Luporini, op. cit., p. 252.

[2] *Zibaldone* 4128–9 (ed. Flora, ii, pp. 955–6). This is L's clearest assertion of the contradiction *in nature and existence* between man and the universe: cf. the powerful summary by Luporini, op. cit., pp. 246–51.

And now perhaps the broad contrast between his outlook and Manzoni's is clear enough for our purpose. In Leopardi's thought a double tendency has been noted: to the affirmation of empirical fact and to the affirmation of opposition or contradiction; leading in the end to the self-questioning materialism of the last poems—the positive note sounding in *La ginestra*, while the nuance of doubt is heard in the closing lines of *Sopra il ritratto d'una bella donna*. His 'truth' opposes man to the universe as it is in fact, and existence to reason. But for Manzoni fact, empirical fact, is only a medium through which the mind passes so as to return to itself and to the discovery within itself, underlying all its activities, of certain inchoate 'showings' of absolutely necessary and universal truth. These showings are not 'innate ideas'; that view of their origin in us Manzoni expressly rejects, though he offers no thoroughly formulated view of his own. But two points were for him certain: first, that the truth we apprehend in these ideas is absolutely objective—we do not cause it, we simply receive it;[1] and secondly (but this point is left more obscure), that these ideas represent a sort of contact between our finite minds and the infinite Mind; a contact which for Manzoni (as for Dante) adumbrates the possibility, even for us, of sharing eternally in the vision of infinite truth.[2] Both he and Leopardi were children of the Enlightenment and of rationalism, and both loved reason (though Leopardi in youth thought he did not) and they followed reason wherever it seemed to lead; and it led them in opposite directions. And perhaps these are the only possible directions open, in the end, to human thought. It is not for me to say, here and now, which I think the right one.

[1] This is the argument of *Dell'Invenzione*, *Opere*, ed. cit. ii, pp. 675 ff.

[2] *Dell'Invenzione*, ed. cit., pp. 690–701; cf. R. Armerio, op. cit. iii, pp. 88–90, 120–3. Dante, *Paradiso*, iv, 124 ff., v, 7–9.