CHAPTER THREE
THE ETHICS OF SUICIDE
IN GIACOMO LEOPARDI

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For Giacomo Leopardi, the issue of suicide is above all a problem of ethical reflection. Leopardi’s ethics is unsystematic in nature—often in his major works he will present varying or contradictory viewpoints on the same topic, or link notions that he elsewhere sets in opposition. In the case of suicide, Leopardi places it, on the one hand, within the sphere of the ethical pursuit of happiness, specifically, as evidence of man’s immortality. The permanent unhappiness of the soul—the state that leads to suicide—is born out of the inability to fulfill the highest will of human nature and the kernel of a virtuous life: unending happiness. If we equate virtue with an “uncorrupted” state of nature, then suicide is understood as

a direct consequence of the distance from that primitive nature and as a result of a “new ethos.” The concept of a new ethos thus implies a separation between a first natural order and a second order of human existence, which are presented by Leopardi as two different natures. On the other hand, however, Leopardi presents the act of reflection on suicide—not the act of suicide itself—as a source of virtue, by allowing man to appreciate life in its complexity. Seen as a philosophical exercise on death and life, the reflection on suicide tends to assume the value of a moral virtue.

In this essay I explore these two stances on suicide, in both cases placing Leopardi’s complex, contradictory and fascinating notion of suicide within the context of his reflection on ethics. The texts analyzed are the Dissertazioni Filosofiche (especially the Dissertazioni morali [1812]), along with some excerpts from the Zibaldone, his Frammento sul suicidio and the Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio, from the Operette morali.2

1. Immortality and the Pursuit of Happiness

In his Frammento sul suicidio, a brief essay written around 1820, Leopardi encapsulates the principal concerns of his reflections on the paradoxes of human existence. In this text, the major problem faced by humankind is the impossibility of avoiding self-knowledge. Thanks to the exercise of philosophy, asserts Leopardi, man is able to know himself and his own reality in depth. This kind of knowledge leads to a constant awareness of one’s incapacity to attain happiness, which is the first commandment of human nature (Frammento sul suicidio, 276). Unable to act following nature, man longs for an end to his suffering. According to Leopardi, we cannot forget ourselves, in particular our contradictory desire for happiness and inability to grasp it (“impossibile la dimenticanza di noi stessi,” Frammento sul suicidio, 275). This link between nature and happiness is the context in which Leopardi places his ethics of suicide, for suicide is the extreme response to a primitive nature that demands

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something which exceeds human power: existential happiness. Happiness is thus, paradoxically, the core element of Leopardi’s reflection on suicide.

The centrality of happiness for Leopardi does not begin in the Frammento sul suicidio, but in the much earlier stages of his thought. For example, in a text called Dissertazione sopra la felicità (1812) Leopardi endorses Aristotle’s thesis on civil happiness, which he sees as an all-encompassing ethical concept. According to Leopardi, Aristotle’s notion of happiness is the only one that embraces a broader concept of human nature and moral practices (Dissertazioni, 245-247).

Leopardi begins the Dissertazione by summing up the major notions of happiness as expressed by different classical philosophical systems. Firstly, he explains Epicurus’ notion of happiness as connected to the quest for pleasure. Epicurean ethics, says Leopardi, is ordered toward pleasure, and therefore virtuous actions are legitimate insofar as they provide pleasure for the individual who practices them. Leopardi criticizes this notion of happiness by asserting that virtue has to be practiced for its own sake, and not as something secondary to the pursuit of pleasure. Next Leopardi criticizes the Stoics’ idea of happiness, which is based only on virtue and a virtuous life. On the contrary, human nature—says Leopardi—also tends to seek happiness in other things that are different from virtue or even opposed to virtue (i.e. human vices). Finally, this opening section of the Dissertazione ends with a strong critique of Plato’s notion of happiness, which according to Leopardi is reduced to the contemplation of an idea (goodness). This idea of happiness as contemplation—an idea that Leopardi links to the Christian notion of eternal happiness (Dissertazioni, 244)—lacks the fundamental element of

3 In a later excerpt from the Zibaldone, Leopardi lucidly explains this paradox between nature and happiness: “La natura non ci ha solamente dato il desiderio della felicità, ma il bisogno; vero bisogno, come quel di cibarsi. Perché chi non possiede la felicità, è infelice, come chi non ha di che cibarsi, patisce di fame. Or questo bisogno ella ci ha dato senza la possibilità di soddisfarlo, senza nemmeno aver posto la felicità nel mondo.” Zib. [4517], 3077.

4 This text is part of the Dissertazioni morali, included in a book called the Dissertazioni Filosofiche, 237-247. In this early work (1812), Leopardi follows the philosopher Francesco Maria Zanotti, who he sometimes calls the “moderno Filosofo” (see 280 n27). Zanotti had written the philosophical treatise La filosofia morale secondo l’opinione dei Peripatetici (Venezia, 1754 [1763]), a book that possessed a clear Aristotelian imprint—very attractive for the young Leopardi. For more information about Zanotti and his influence on Leopardi, see Dissertazioni Filosofiche, 501-541.

5 See Leopardi, Dissertazioni Filosofiche, 242.
action. Happiness cannot rely solely on contemplation, for this ignores the highly active ground of human life.

All these gaps or failures in the various ideas of happiness are emended by Aristotle. Aristotle sees civil happiness (which Leopardi differentiates from religious happiness) as the ultimate goal of man—that toward which all man’s actions are directed. Civil happiness is not based merely on pleasure, virtuous actions, or contemplation, but on the sum of all goods (“[la] somma di tutti i beni,” Dissertazioni, 245) sought by a human nature that is, above all, rational. In Leopardi’s view, Aristotle’s notion of civil happiness does not reject the previous ones (Epicurus’, the Stoics’, Plato’s), but rather tries to integrate them into a broader understanding of human existence. As a consequence of this, Aristotelian happiness possesses a twofold direction: it directs human existence toward both pleasurable and honest goods (“beni dilettevoli e onesti,” Dissertazioni, 246), while also presenting itself as the principal means to achieve a higher happiness, the happiness “dell’uom Cattolico” (Dissertazioni, 247).

For Leopardi, Aristotle’s notion of happiness represents the goal of all the tenets of moral philosophy, the core of man’s moral life. In the light of a civil happiness that directs itself toward a transcendent happiness, Leopardi’s reflections in the Dissertazione sopra la felicità seem fundamentally optimistic. However, this will change in the following years, when his thought evolves in the direction of a disenchanted perception of life. Despite this departure from an essentially optimistic idea of happiness, Leopardi will continue to maintain happiness’s central role in his understanding of human existence. He will still agree with Aristotle on the eudemonistic conception of life, but the critical difference will be his changing stance on the human possibility of grasping happiness. If according to Aristotle happiness is not only an option but also a moral obligation, for Leopardi the tragedy of life lies in man’s inability to fulfill that obligation. This inability leads inevitably to the idea of suicide.6

In some sections of the Zibaldone we observe this departure from an Aristotelian idea of happiness and human existence to a more—although not completely—nihilistic one. For example, early in the Zibaldone, Leopardi establishes the connection between unhappiness, the soul’s immortality, and suicide. According to him, unnatural self-knowledge, the force of passions, and consciousness of time make us unhappy beings,

distinct from the happy animals who act according to their limited nature. Man, on the contrary, demonstrates his own immortality by not accepting this narrow existence, which itself prevents him from grasping happiness. Suicide is thus the radical proof of man’s immortality. Leopardi asserts:

Una delle grandi prove dell’immortalità dell’anima è l’infelicità dell’uomo paragonato alle bestie che sono felici o quasi felici, quando la previdenza de’ mali... le passioni, la scontentezza del presente, l’impossibilità di appagare i proprii desideri e tutte le altre sorgenti d’infelicità ci fanno miseri inevitabilmente ed essenzialmente per natura nostra che lo porta, nè si può mutare. Cosa la quale dimostra che la nostra esistenza non è finita dentro questo spazio temporale come quella dei bruti, perché ripugna alle leggi che si osservano seguite costantemente in tutte le opere della natura, che vi sia un animale, e questo il più perfetto di tutti... il quale racchiuda in se una sostanziale infelicità, e una specie di contraddizione colla sua esistenza al compimento della quale non è dubbio che si richieda la felicità proporzionata all’essere di quella tale sostanza... giacchè un uomo disperato della vita futura ragionevolissimamente detesta la presente, se n’amma, ne patisce (cosa snaturata) e s’uccide come vediamo che fa... L’uccidersi dell’uomo è una gran prova della sua immortalità. (Zib. [40], 63-64. Italics are mine)

In this excerpt Leopardi also makes the important connection between existence and happiness: if our being is not satisfied with the brief moments of happiness that are possible in life, it means that its own existence must be proportionate to a different happiness unachievable in this life. In other words, man aims at an everlasting happiness precisely because his own being (soul) is immortal, and thus has some awareness of that elusive existential happiness. Just as the limited happiness of animals is proportionate to their limited existence, human existence is ultimately proportionate to—and finds relief in—eternal happiness. This leads Leopardi to assert that the desire for this mortal, narrow life is a desire for unhappiness: “Desiderar la vita, in qualunque caso, e in tutta l’estensione di questo desiderio, non è insomma altro che desiderare l’infelicità; desiderar di vivere è quanto desiderare di essere infelice” (Zib. [829-830], 605). In the hopeless pursuit of the perfection of his own existence—happiness—man remains irremediably unhappy (Zib. [2552-2553], 1634-1635).

The relationship between happiness, immortality, and suicide will persist in Leopardi’s later thought, where he will expand his notion of suicide mainly as a subject of philosophical-ethical reflection. In the
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log di Plotino e di Porfirio (1827), for example, Leopardi asserts (through the sometimes opposing and sometimes complementary voices of Porfirio and Plotino) that happiness is the goal of every act, but it is a goal that is never achieved in this life. Our current civiltà (Leopardi’s time) directs man to a constant state of unhappiness in which the only genuine thing is noia—unease or angst. The tedious state of noia is the only reasonable, true, substantial thing in modern man’s existence (Dialogo, 195-196). Noia gives birth to the possibility of ending our life, which is an idea that leads us—paradoxically—to be less unhappy and to continue living. In other words, the idea of finishing our life at any desired moment makes that same life less unhappy and more bearable.

In this dialogue, Leopardi seems to mark a clear boundary separating the act of suicide from the contemplation of its possibility. The first is seen as a major subversion of the natural order, whose first law is self-preservation. The act of suicide alters that order by using life to generate no-life: “Perché tutto l’ordine delle cose saria sovvertito, se quelle si distruggessero da se stesse. E par che abbia repugnanza che uno si vaglia della vita a spegnere essa vita, che l’essere ci serva al non essere” (Dialogo, 200). On the contrary, the idea of suicide attenuates the unhappiness that accompanies human existence; it shakes the tedious immobility of oneself and one’s vision of the world that characterizes any unhappy state.

2. Suicide and Nature

In the Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio, the character of Porfirio places the problem of suicide in the context of an apparent paradox of nature. Nature is here defined as involving a dialectics of love and hate that is impossible to overcome. Nature grants hate of death and love of self-preservation, but at the same time it provokes hate of unhappiness (an ever present feature of life) and love of our best being (unattainable in life). Since happiness is the main end of human existence, superior even to the natural abhorrence of death, Porfirio asserts that when that happiness is unreachable suicide becomes licit. Plotino, on his part, responds by remarking that all of nature rejects self-destruction, for it violates the first law of self-preservation (Dialogo, 202-204; 206).

Leopardi then explains an important notion—tightly linked to suicide—which he has already developed in previous works: the concept

7 Published posthumously, in 1845. See Roberto Garaventa, “Il suicidio in Leopardi,” 143.
of two natures. According to Leopardi—whose voice is unified with that of Plotino by the end of the dialogue—there are two natures; the first, *natura primitiva*, is the original (uncorrupted) nature that directs creatures toward happiness, the one that can soften and transform man’s unhappiness; the second, *natura alterata* or *civiltà*, lies in reason, and is the cause of man’s self-knowledge. This second nature leads to unhappiness, and can culminate in the act of suicide (*Dialogue*, 203-204).

The shift that Leopardi’s thought undergoes in this dialogue is radical, and is located precisely in the concept of nature. In previous writings he had affirmed—in a nihilistic vein—that the first nature had vanished from human existence, and had since been replaced by a new nature (*assuefazione*) based on reason. In a passage of the *Zibaldone*, for example (dated April 29th 1822), Leopardi declares:

> La natura vieta il suicidio. Qual natura? Questa nostra presente? Noi siamo di tutt’altra natura da quella ch’eravamo... L’assuefazione è una seconda natura, massime l’assuefazione così radicata, così lunga, e cominciata in sì tenera età, com’è quell’assuefazione (composta d’assuefazioni infinite e diversissime) che ci fa esser tutt’altri che uomini naturali, o conformi alla prima natura dell’uomo, e alla natura generale degli esseri terrestri... Dunque la vera natura nostra, che non abbiamo da far niente cogli uomini del tempo di Adamo, permette, anzi richiede il suicidio. Se la nostra natura, fosse la prima natura umana, non saremmo infelici, e questo inevitabilmente, e irrimediabilmente; e non desidereremmo, anzi abborriremmo la morte... La natura nostra presente è appresso a poco la ragione. La quale anch’essa odia l’infelicità. E non v’è ragionamento umano che non persuada il suicidio, cioè piuttosto di non essere, che di essere infelice. E noi seguiamo la ragione in tutt’altro, e crederemmo di mancare al dover di uomo facendo altrimenti. (*Zib.* [2402-2404], 1553-1554)

In this stage of his thought, Leopardi saw the transformation and corruption—and therefore disappearance—of the first nature into the second, as the basis of man’s increasing desire for self-annihilation. Leopardi considered suicide as an unnatural but necessary cure for the illness of life. Suicide was compared then to medicine, for both are conceived to fix the unbalanced health of an altered human nature:

> Accade del suicidio come della medicina. Essa non è naturale... Ma lo stato fisico dell’uomo essendo oggi e sempre più divenendo lontanissimo dal naturale, è conveniente e necessaria un’arte e dei mezzi non naturali per rimediare agli’incomodi di un tale stato... Or nello stesso modo questo grande accidente che contro l’ordine naturale, ha mutato la condizione dell’uomo... ci fa desiderar la morte, rende conveniente il suicidio per contrario che sia alla natura. (*Zib.* [1980-1981], 1334)
In the Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio, Leopardi completely refutes these early affirmations, asserting through Plotino’s voice (the voice that will close the dialogue, concluding the text in an optimistic tone against suicide, as we will see later) that those two natures are still present in man. Man still follows his primitive nature by reacting to its basic rules, such as that of self-preservation: “E quantunque sia grande l’alterazione nostra, e diminuita in noi la potenza della natura; pur questa non è ridotta a nulla, né siamo noi mutati e innovati tanto, che non resti in ciascuno gran parte dell’uomo antico. Il che, mal grado che n’abbia la stoltezza nostra, mai non potrà essere altrimenti” (Dialogo, 206). In his early reflections Leopardi grants preeminence to the corrupted nature founded on reason and unhappiness, whose logical consequence is the escape of suicide. In his mature conception of suicide, on the contrary, the primitive first nature prevails over reason, and even if the idea of suicide is still attractive to man, the act of suicide is rejected by that primordial nature which dominates his being.

3. Suicide and Philosophy

In the Dissertazioni morali Leopardi asserts that moral virtues are the only virtues that can make man truly happy. These are acquired virtues, gained through exercise. In Aristotelian terms—those employed by Leopardi in this early text—man becomes more virtuous by practicing virtue. However, in order to achieve this exercise of the will which is the practice of moral virtue, one must first rely on reason. The first step on the path to happiness, in other words, is represented by the intellectual virtues. According to Leopardi, the intellect possesses two faculties: the contemplative and the deliberative. The contemplative faculty allows man to contemplate and know, while the deliberative faculty allows him to deliberate and decide. The habits in which these two faculties coexist and function together are the intellectual virtues, which are habits of knowing rightly and judging rightly. Among the intellectual virtues, the highest and most important is prudence, for it allows man to know the actions that direct him toward happiness. In prudence, both the speculative and practical judgments are united.

All this demonstrates Leopardi’s strong faith in reason in his early years. Leopardi saw reason as the open door to an ethical world that

8 See Dissertazioni morali, in Dissertazioni Filosofiche, esp. 246 and 283.
9 Dissertazioni Filosofiche, 275-283. This part is called “Dissertazione sopra le virtù intellettuali.”
generated human happiness. The exercise of reason and happiness were fundamental parts of the same structure, for reason was the necessary element to achieve happiness: “Nulla di più prezioso, nulla di più sublime, e più nobile, che la ragione può l’uomo rinvenire in se stesso. Questa si è quel raggio, che l’illumina nel cammin della vita; questa si è quella voce, che gli serve di guida nel disastroso sentiero della virtù; questa si è quella finalmente, che diradando, e disciogliendo le maligne nebbie dell’errore lo conduce come per mano fino alla vera indefettibile felicità...”

Both reason and the virtues (moral and intellectual) are transformed in Leopardi’s later thought. In some excerpts from the Zibaldone, for instance, Leopardi introduces an interesting criticism on modern theoretical morality vis-à-vis ancient practical morality. According to Leopardi, the ancients—who lived a life in consonance with nature—practiced intellectual and moral virtues more faithfully, while the moderns—living life in a subverted state of nature—theorize on virtues without practicing them. Leopardi then asserts that distance from nature is essentially distance from a virtuous life (Zib. [2492-2493], 1604-1605).

Furthermore, Leopardi seems to present the personal reflection on suicide as a virtuous exercise, almost a moral virtue. Already in an early fragment from the Zibaldone he describes a thought that he had while resting one day in his garden:

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10 This is an excerpt from the “Dissertazione logica,” in Dissertazioni Filosofiche, 301.
11 In these passages of the text, Leopardi criticizes the modern philosophers and theologians who condemn suicide as an act against nature, but at the same time they accept living a life against nature: “Intorno al suicidio. È cosa assurda che secondo i filosofi e secondo i teologi, si possa e si debba viver contro natura (anzi non sia lecito viver secondo natura) e non si possa morir contro natura. E che sia lecito d’essere infelice contro natura (che non avea fatto l’uomo infelice), e non sia lecito di liberarsi dalla infelicità in un mondo contro natura, essendo questo l’unico possibile, dopo che noi siamo ridotti così lontani da essa natura, e così irreparabilmente. (23 Giugno 1822).” Zib. [2492], 1604.
12 The “life of virtue” proper of the philosopher was seen by Porphyry (the real philosopher upon which the character of Porfirio is based) as a type of self-imposed death, where the soul is elevated—through the exercise of virtue—beyond the prison of the body. For more information on this and for a study on the episode from the “Life of Plotin” that inspired Leopardi to write the dialogue, see Franz Cumont, “Comment Plotin détourna Porphyre du suicide,” in Revue des études grecques 32 (1919), 113-120. For the life of virtue as a life of death (or ‘second death’) see specifically, 114-115.
Io ero oltremodo annoiato della vita, sull’orlo della vasca del mio giardino, e guardando l’acqua e curvandomici sopra con un certo fremito, pensava: S’io mi gittassi qui dentro, immediatamente venuto a galla, mi arrampicherei sopra quest’orlo, e sforzatomi di uscir fuori dopo aver temuto assai di perdere questa vita, ritornato illeso, proverei qualche istante di contento per essermi salvato, e di affetto a questa vita che ora tanto disprezzo, e che allora mi parrebbe più pregevole... (Zib. [82], 118)

In Leopardi’s view, the exercise of imagining a voluntarily close-encounter with death makes him realize the value of life. A certain persistence of primitive nature remains inside of him, appearing in those moments when his life is at risk. However, this intrinsic love for life seems to be similar to the result of a wrongly-calculated mathematical operation, for living is equal to suffering and suffering goes against the primordial desire of human nature, which is happiness.

In the Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio, Leopardi values the practice of virtue for its own sake, without expecting any further reward. In an implicit criticism of Christianity, Leopardi condemns the pervasive fear that, in his view, is generated by the idea of an afterlife determined by one’s merits and faults in life. This doctrine has extinguished—in those who believe in it—the hope that the contemplation of death might provide. The two basic premises that Leopardi wants to defend are related to a virtuous conception of life: fear should not prevail over hope, and the exercise of virtue should not depend upon the expectation of an afterlife or

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13 A similar reflection is found later in Leopardi, in the aforementioned Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio: “È sarebbe un conforto dolcissimo nella vita nostra, piena di tanti dolori, l’aspettazione e il pensiero del nostro fine,” 196.

14 “E si conclude ch’essendo all’uomo più giovevole il non patire che il patire, e non potendo vivere senza patire, è matematicamente vero e certo che l’assoluto non essere giova e conviene all’uomo più dell’essere. E che l’essere muoce precisamente all’uomo. E però chiunque vive (tolta la religione) vive per puro e formale errore di calcolo: intendo il calcolo delle utilità. Errore moltiplicato tante volte quanti sono gli istanti della nostra vita, in ciascuno de’ quali preferiamo il vivere al non vivere...” Excerpt from 1822, Zib. [2551], 1634. In the Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio, Leopardi will develop further the same idea: “…quello che ritiene gli uomini che non abbandonino la vita spontaneamente; e quel che gl’induce ad amarla, e a preferirla alla morte; non è altro che un semplice e un manifustissimo errore, per dir così, di computo e di misura: cioè un errore che si fa nel computare, nel misurare, e nel paragonar tra loro, gli utili o i danni. Il quale errore ha luogo, si potrebbe dire, altrettante volte, quanti sono i momenti nei quali ciascheduno abbraccia la vita, ovvero acconsente a vivere e se ne contenta...,“ 205-206.
With this criticism, Leopardi seems to fully abandon the idea of an eternal happiness, in which man re-encounters himself with his immortal nature.

4. Leopardi against Suicide: Imagination, Hope, and Solidarity

In the Frammento sul suicidio Leopardi refers to an essential law that is connected to nature in general and human life in particular: the law of distraction, illusion, and forgetfulness (“la gran legge di distrazione, illusione e dimenticanza,” Frammento sul suicidio, 276). Those three elements imply a notion of a happy life based on change and variety. The law is established by nature, which in order to preserve life—its main goal—creates those three mechanisms that make a bearable existence possible. This law tends to be distant from reason, instead searching for refuge in the imagination, an irrational force that generates illusions.

The motor of human life is, according to Leopardi in this text, the imaginative faculty that leads to hope: “O la immaginazione tornerà in vigore, e le illusioni riprenderanno corpo e sostanza in una vita energica e mobile, e la vita tornerà ad esser cosa viva e non morta, e la grandezza e la bellezza delle cose torneranno a parere una sostanza e la religione riacquisterà il suo credito; o questo mondo diverrà un serraglio di disperati, e forse anche un deserto” (Frammento sul suicidio, 276).

Imagination is the key faculty that preserves the love of life and the possibilities of a dynamic life moved by illusions. At this stage (1820) Leopardi still thinks of religion as a necessary force that helps to maintain the light of hope, although he places it in the realm of the imagination (that is, as belonging to an irrational power). The idea beneath this seems to be that the preservation of human life must be achieved by establishing a distance from reason, for reason and its systematic form (philosophy) are

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15 See Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio, where Leopardi veils his criticism directed toward Christianity as if it were directed toward Platonism. Among other things, Leopardi says: “So ch’egli si dice che Platone spargesse negli scritti suoi quelle dottrine della vita avvenire, acciocché gli uomini entrai in dubbio e in sospetto circa lo stato loro dopo la morte; per quella incertezza, e per timore di pene e di calamità future, si ritenessero nella vita dal fare ingiustizia e dalle altre male opere... Tu [Platone] sei cagione che si vegiano gl’infelicissimi mortali temere più il porto che la tempesta, e rifuggire coll’animo da quel solo rimedio e riposo loro, alle angosce presenti e agli spasimi della vita. Tu sei stato agli uomini più crudele che il fato o la necessità o la natura,”196-197.

16 See ibid., 1383 n4 (“varietà, produzione, distruzione”).
presented by Leopardi as essentially destructive to human illusions. The exercise of self-forgetfulness ("dimenticanza di noi stessi") is fundamental in order to grasp happiness, but it is impossible if we still rely on reason.\(^{17}\)

Hope is the second element, along with imagination, that Leopardi presents against suicide. Hope too must distance itself from reason; in fact, for the Leopardi of the Zibaldone hope is not only an irrational force, but a kind of madness (pazzia).\(^{18}\) However, this madness persists and it is intrinsic to the core of human nature, which is self-love (the Leopardian notion of *amor proprio*): “Tanto è lungi dal vero che la speranza o il desiderio possano mai abbandonare un essere che non esiste se non per amarsi, e procurare il suo bene, e se non quanto si ama. (22 Agosto 1821)” (Zib. [1548], 1093-1094). Some years later, in the *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, Leopardi rethinks hope and depicts it as a force that produces a continual renovation of life: “…rifassi il gusto alla vita, nasce or questa or quella speranza nuova, e le cose umane ripigliano quella loro apparenza, e mostransi non indegne di qualche cura; non veramente all’intelletto; ma si, per modo di dire, al senso dell’animo” (Dialogo, 207). Here hope is separated from the intellect and is united to the faculty of “feeling,” of experiencing an intimate connection with the inner sensitive self, which flows according to the first nature. This flowing is in the present projected toward the future, for hope moves life in the direction of a future time of happiness.\(^{19}\)

\(^{17}\) Leopardi starts by saying: “Non è più possibile l’ingannarci o il dissimulare. La filosofia ci ha fatto conoscere tanto che quella dimenticanza di noi stessi ch’era facile una volta, ora è impossibile…” He continues: “…e un’altra felicità non si trova, e la filosofia moderna non si dee vantare di nulla se non è capace di ridurci a uno stato nel quale possiamo esser felici.” Ibid., 275-276.

\(^{18}\) “La speranza non abbandona mai l’uomo in quanto alla natura. Bensì in quanto alla ragione. Perciò parlano stoltamente quelli che dicono… che il suicidio non possa seguire senza una specie di pazzia, essendo impossibile senza questa il rinunziare alla speranza ec. Anzi tolte i sentimenti religiosi, è una felice e naturale, ma vera e continua pazzia, il seguitare sempre a sperare, e a vivere, ed è contrariissimo alla ragione, la quale ci mostra troppo chiaro che non v’è speranza nessuna per noi. (23 Luglio 1820).” Zib. [183], 211.

\(^{19}\) “E sempre il presente, per fortunato che sia, è tristo e inamabile: solo il futuro può piacere” ibid., 307. The connection between hope, future, and happiness appears also in the Zibaldone. Albeit in a pessimistic tone, Leopardi compares the memory of the past with hope for the future in terms of pleasurable things: “La rimembranza del piacere, si può paragonare alla speranza, e produce appresso a poco gli stessi effetti. Come la speranza, ella piace più del piacere; è assai più dolce il ricordarsi del ben… che il goderne, come è più dolce lo sperarlo, perché in lontananza sembra di poterlo gustare.” Zib. [1044], 756. In some early verses,
Finally, the third important element that Leopardi places against suicide is solidarity. In an excerpt from the *Zibaldone* dated 14 November 1823, Leopardi blames society for the existence of suicide: “Per esempio il suicidio, disordine contrario a tutta la natura intera, alle leggi fondamentali dell’esistenza, ai principii, alle basi dell’essere di tutte le cose, anche possibili; contraddizione ec. da che cosa è nato se non dalla società?...” (*Zib.* [3883-3884], 2443-2444). Paradoxically, this same society, which acts as the victimizer or persecutor that inflicts the illness of suicide, must at the same time be the object of our compassion, the generator of our solidarity. The only true remedy against suicide is solidarity, which consists in communal consolation.20 The individual who commits suicide, affirms Leopardi in the voice of Plotino, is only concerned with his own pain, not that of others. The basis of his self-annihilation resides in his *egoismo* and incapacity to empathize with or look after others. Suicide is the consequence of living self-marginalized from communal life—being isolated from interaction with other people’s suffering. The solution to this self-imposed isolation is to live a communal life in its entirety, which implies above all being able to console others and receive consolation from others in times of distress. Solidarity is born, according to Leopardi, from an understanding of our communal condition, when our pain and joy are shared with the community. Once we reach that understanding, we live a shared life based on solidarity, which opens the door to a continuation of our memory in others. Hope and solidarity defeat suicide in Plotino’s last words to Porfirio:

> Viviamo, Porfirio mio, e confortiamoci insieme: non ricusiamo di portare quella parte che il destino ci ha stabilita, dei mali della nostra specie. Si bene attendiamo a tenerci compagnia l’un l’altro, e andiamoci incoraggiando, e dando mano e soccorso scambievolmente; per compiere nel miglior modo questa fatica della vita. La quale senza alcun fallo sarà breve. E quando la morte verrà, allora non ci dorremo: e anche in

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20 Solidarity may be seen, in addition, as a form of friendship. On the value of friendship in the *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, see Mirella Carbonara Naddei, “Plotino e Leopardi di fronte al problema del suicidio”, in *Momenti del pensiero greco nella problematica leopardiana*, esp. 43. This study is also interesting for dealing with the identification of Leopardi’s voice within the dialogue—i.e., whether he identifies himself with Plotino, with Porfirio, or alternatively with both. See, for example, 60-61.
quest’ultimo tempo gli amici e i compagni ci conforteranno: e ci rallegrerà il pensiero che, poi che saremo spenti, essi molte volte ci ricorderanno, e ci ameranno ancora. (Dialogo, 208)

Conclusion

According to Leopardi, all the questions on life and death, the worth of living and the problem of suicide, are reduced to an existential choice: to suffer or not to suffer. In the Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio, the question is posed in these terms: “Perché la quistione in somma si riduce a questo: quale delle due cose sia la migliore; il non patire, o il patire” (Dialogo, 204). For the mature Leopardi life is synonymous with suffering, and living is the choice that one makes when facing that suffering. The consequence of that choice is solidarity, which Leopardi conceives as an extension of the idea of friendship. Hence, the isolated nature of suicide is only cancelled by the communal identification that solidarity implies. Leopardi’s final response to the question on suicide is, in practical terms, the acceptance and sharing of existential suffering.

In order to arrive at that conclusion, Leopardi had to go through a long journey from his first Aristotelian ideas on happiness to his more nihilistic understanding of life. In this essay I hope to have traced some aspects of that journey, which I see as ethical in nature. Many and complex are the elements of Leopardi’s notion of suicide, which might appear sometimes as contradictory or even paradoxical. The evolution of Leopardi’s thought can be seen from different perspectives: from his early assertion on man’s ability to reach happiness to his later reflections on man’s limitations and immortality; from his relationship with nature, both first (uncorrupted) and second (corrupted by reason), which are forces that still struggle within the human soul; from the final negative judgment on the act of suicide, vis-à-vis the ethically charged reflection on suicide, which functions as a moral virtue. All these are fundamental elements that constitute the itinerary of Leopardi’s ethics of suicide. Nevertheless, the primordial ethical movement in Leopardi’s thought is based on his distance from reason and his approach to non-rational faculties (the fundamental “senso dell’animo,” Dialogo, 207). It is in the irrational realm of human nature that Leopardi finds the personal remedies against suicide—imagination and hope.  

21 These remedies are presented, as we have seen, in an illusory light. Both imagination and hope help to create the illusions that sustain the burden of human existence. The relationship between reason and illusions (rational and irrational forces) is crucial in order to understand the ideological and literary debates developed during the eighteenth century regarding the question of suicide. For this
Similarly, it is in a social context that Leopardi’s remedies are voluntary and communal: closeness to solidarity and compassion.

Works Cited

Primary sources


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relationship in Leopardi, see the “Frammento sul suicidio.” For the importance of the illusioni in the literary world of the second Settecento, see Salvatore Battaglia, “La letteratura delle illusioni (e il suicidio dell’intellettuale)”, in Mitografia del personaggio, 205-235. See also Mirella Carbonara Naddei, Momenti del pensiero greco nella problematica leopardiana, esp. 44-45, where the author comments on several excerpts from Battaglia.