LEOPARDI’S IRONIC GENESIS: “LA STORIA DEL GENERE UMANO”

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Notre Dame
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

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April 2015
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Abstract

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The present study is primarily concerned with understanding Giacomo Leopardi’s “system” described in 1820 in his Zibaldone, which fuses the incongruent relationship between the myth-like “origin story” of humanity described in Genesis and its modernity into a comprehensible reality through the medium of irony. Due to what scholars have called a shift from historic pessimism to cosmic pessimism in the year 1824, this study focuses on his opening story of the Operette Morali, “La storia del genere umano,” written in early 1820.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: “IL MIO SISTEMA”

Leopardi dedicated vast amounts of pages in the *Zibaldone* to religious questions. Most of the biblical questions revolve around Genesis, Job, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes.¹ At one point, Leopardi claimed to have a “system” that made sense of the miraculous stories contained in the holy text. The following quote points specifically to how his system interacts with the Genesis story: “Osservate che il mio sistema è l’unico che possa dare alla narrazion della Genesi, una spiegazione quanto nuova, tanto letterale, facile, spontanea . . . senza fare forza al testo, o considerarlo come assurdo” (435).² This quote is interesting because it both validates the importance of the creation story in Genesis while saying that the common interpretations of the text are flawed. If his system is the *only* one that can elucidate the Genesis story, it necessarily implies that other interpretations do the opposite—they are antiquated, metaphorical, difficult, and even absurd.

It is important to point out, however, that Leopardi does not see his system as being at odds with Christianity. He says, “Il mio sistema . . . non si oppone al Cristianesimo” (393). His system and Christianity can work in complete harmony. Still unknown, then, is what Leopardi specifically means by his “system;” what exactly defines his system, and in what ways it provides a new, more sublime, reading of

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² All citations from the *Zibaldone* are parenthetically documented in this thesis using Leopardi’s original pagination. The Mondadori edition was consulted throughout. Likewise, the pagination for the *Operette Morali* comes from the Mondadori edition of *Leopardi: Poesie e prose.*
Genesis. On 19 December 1820, Leopardi lists eleven points in the *Zibaldone*, which go into detail answering that very question. The list is the most prolonged discussion of Genesis in the *Zibaldone*. One of the central tenets of his system holds reason and knowledge as a direct effect of sin, and not vice versa. Leopardi resists the idea that partaking of fruit of the Tree of Knowledge was an absolute benefit to humanity, and he makes the basic claim that theologians generally see the Fall as something that gave humanity the possibility to pursue perfection. In early March of 1821, Leopardi continued writing in his *Zibaldone* about his system. The following passage clearly explains the “principal teaching” of his system and how it is related to Christian dogma:

Uno dei principali dogmi del Cristianesimo è la degenerazione dell’uomo da uno stato primitivo più perfetto e felice: e con questo dogma è legato quello della Redenzione, e si può dir, tutta quanta la Religion Cristiana. Il principale insegnamento del mio sistema, è appunto la detta degenerazione. Tutte, per tanto, le infinite osservazioni e prove generali o particolari, ch’io adduco per dimostrare come l’uomo fosse fatto primitivamente alla felicità, come il suo stato perfettamente naturale (che non si trova mai nel fatto) fosse per lui il solo perfetto, come quanto più ci allontaniamo dalla natura, tanto più diveniamo infelici ec. ec.: tutte queste, dico, sono altrettante prove dirette di uno dei dogmi principali del Cristianesimo, e possiamo dire, della verità dello stesso Cristianesimo. (1004)

From this quote, Leopardi makes the claim that the central teaching of both his system and Christianity is degeneration: such degeneration is based on the idea that humanity was made to enjoy happiness but, through the process of civilization, which led it away
from nature, humanity brought unhappiness on itself. His system, in the years of 1820-23, focused on this idea of degeneration or corruption: Humanity was created in a perfect state and has corrupted itself throughout the ages. Leopardi applies this system both to understand history broadly (the cycles of degeneration throughout time) and personally (the cycles of degeneration throughout one’s life). These pages of the *Zibaldone* express thoughts that Leopardi develops in his poem *Inno ai Patriarchi, o de’ principii del genere umano* in 1822. To summarize, the *Inno ai Patriarchi* re-presents the Genesis narrative in poetry. In this rendering, Leopardi describes that knowledge corrupted humanity, brought suffering into the world, and created all of the *noia* (boredom) in which humanity must exist. The poem has a serious tone and respectfully represents the Christian tale. This thesis, however, will focus on a later work, “La storia del genere umano,” which was not received as respectful to the Christian narration. Massimo Lollini refers to the “Storia del genere umano” as a “riscrittura profana del libro di Genesi” (37). Lollini’s use of the word “profana” might be debatable considering the context explained above with which Leopardi approaches the Genesis story. In short, the “Storia” might be ironic, but, according to Leopardi’s intentions as explained in the *Zibaldone* and his poetry, it should not be considered profane. Indeed, Leopardi’s principle objective in creating a “system” was to harmonize with Christian dogma. The extent to which he was successful is arguable.

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3 Cesare Luporini connected the *Inno ai patriarchi* to “La storia del genere umano” in his detailed book, *Decifrare Leopardi*. See pages 79-155. Luporini focused primarily on the *Inno* and drew conclusions from the poetry to infer claims about the prose and their interrelatedness. The article is very well done, but it does not cover the change in the content, nor does it take into account the philosophical change in Leopardi in 1824.
The title, “Storia del genere umano,” precisely describes what the first *operetta* is about. Laura Melosi has called it a “favola cosmogonica.” In the “Storia,” Leopardi shows how the process of human degeneration has occurred throughout history following a cyclical pattern. The pattern starts at happiness and ends in misery, and then starts over again. In December of 1820, Leopardi explained the cyclical pattern of human nature in the *Zibaldone*. He wrote, “La storia dell’uomo non presenta altro che un passaggio continuo da un grado di civiltà ad un altro, poi all’eccesso di civiltà, e finalmente alla barbarie, e poi da capo” (403). While it is cyclical, the process of degeneration in the “Storia” can also be imagined as a downward spiral that starts at perfect creation and ultimately leads to the disorganization modernity. Looking broadly at the storyline, humanity went through four phases of degeneration and regeneration. The first phase begins with the creation where humanity is in an Edenic, happy state where all human beings are imagined as in infancy. As humanity grows up, it falls into a despondent state. In the second phase, Jove makes some adjustments to people and to the earth, which momentarily restored humanity to a state of pseudo-happiness. He created large mountains, stars, and other wonderful things. Before long, however, humanity returned to cursing its creator and wishing death upon itself. Jove ends this phase with a universal flood. The third phase starts after the earth is repopulated through coercion, and Jove sends down four virtues to the earth: Justice, Virtue, Glory, and Love of country. This stage refers to the ancient, noble era of the Roman republic (Melosi 78). The virtues and distractions keep humanity busy and somewhat happy for a while, but they again curse

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4 Melosi elaborates more on the cosmogonic fable in the introduction to her edition of the *Operette Morali*, page 77-8.
the gods because they tire of waiting for Truth. The final phase Jove decides to send down Truth to the earth, and its effect is devastating. With the arrival of Truth, all hope is eradicated, and Leopardi explains how people suffer, rather than benefit from the Truth. The story ends with the gods not caring much anymore about humanity and letting them fend for themselves because they have understood that the nature of man is to be discontent, even when the gods have given them all. Most critics stop at this point and use the “Storia” to defend Leopardi’s change to cosmic pessimism. Not all is gloomy, however, as this thesis will explore later on. In the end, Leopardi might allow for an ounce of hope in this mass of degeneration. But before Leopardi’s narrative can be analyzed effectively, it is necessary to contextualize and understand the style of the prose.

The style and tone of the Operette Morali is ironic. The title, Operette Morali, itself provides a basis for this statement. The strategically placed diminutive at the end of the word “opera” is what Massimo Lollini has called a “riduzione ironica” (38). The idea that any book about “morals” can be paired with the diminutive of “opera” is an example of Leopardi’s irony. Specifically, one could ask how the history of humanity and the cosmogony of the universe can be described in an operetta. More generally one might ask what it means about the human condition and the nature of moderns to write about origin stories ironically. At the heart of the problematic age of irony in which Leopardi finds himself is the idea that the human condition might be similar to an ironic unfolding of natural events. The above mentioned questions have not been addressed by scholars

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Cosmic pessimism includes the idea that humans are particularly insignificant in the larger scheme of universal existence. The universe is indifferent and blind to both suffering and purpose, and perhaps humans are just a small species projecting their own mental idolatries onto the vast cosmos, susceptible to being wiped from existence at any moment. For further information specific to cosmic pessimism in Leopardi, consult the articles in the bibliography by Melosi, Luporini, and Binni.
about the “Storia del genere umano.” In fact, very little has been studied on irony in
general in Leopardi. While most scholars claim irony plays a role in Leopardi’s works,
they do not attempt to discover what it means to use irony in his specific texts.

This gap in scholarship is surprising since historically the Catholic Church saw
the ironic retelling of the Genesis story as offensive. Indeed, the Operette Morali were
placed on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum primarily based on the religious implications
of the “Storia.” For the second printing—the Florentine edition of 1834 of the
Operette—Leopardi inserted this caveat: “Protesta l'autore che in questa favola, e nelle
altri che seguono, non ha fatto alcuna allusione alla storia mosaica, né alla storia
evangelica, né a veruna delle tradizioni e dottrine del Cristianesimo” (493 emphasis
added). Obviously, this statement had more to do with avoiding censorship issues than
with structural and hermeneutical issues. Ironically, if Leopardi had to include a
statement like this, the Operette Morali must be very similar to the Mosaic tale. In fact,
Paolo Rota agreed with Leopardi’s statement by clarifying that the allusions to the
biblical text are “infatti qualcosa più che semplici ‘allusioni’ i riferimenti al libro biblico
d’esordio presenti nel testo; appaiono decisamente come elementi indispensabili” (65).
Leopardi definitely included biblical allusions despite what he says. The allusions are
structural components of the narrative. Leopardi’s “system,” as delineated above,
fundamentally includes looking at the Genesis narrative with a new perspective. This
operetta examines the Genesis story by using irony as its stylistic tone. The result of

6 The source for church censorship comes from of the Index of Prohibited Books. See page 292 for
the information about the Operette Morali.

7 This historical information was found in the footnotes to the Operette Morali in Tutte le poesie,
tutte le prose e lo Zibaldone.
fusing pagan and Christian creation myths is both ironic and problematic. Though this study focuses on the Christian content of Leopardi’s myth, it is of utmost importance to keep in mind Leopardi’s amalgam of the Judeo-Christian beliefs with pagan traditions (supported mainly by Plato, Hesiod, Ovid, Lucan and others). As Luporini points out, Leopardi’s more religious works allude to Greek mythology as much as, if not more than, Christian cosmogony.⁸

⁸ Luporini elaborates this point for many paragraphs in Decifrare Leopardi, between pages 80-3. One quote that specifically supports the thesis’s claim is the following: “Va subito premesso che le considerazioni di Leopardi si svolgono soprattutto (anche se non esclusivamente) sul doppio binario del paganismo e del cristianesimo (coi suoi antecedente ebraici), e, occasionalmente del loro confronto, o per accostamento o per opposizione, secondo i casi e gli aspetti esaminati” (82).
1.1 Romantic Irony and a Theory of Irony

Irony is very different from parody or satire, which mock a situation without the deep meditation that irony brings to the discussion. Leopardi once wrote a letter that said he was working on “prosette satiriche,” and for years scholars have assumed that the satiric prose referred to the *Operette Morali*. However, Laura Melosi, in her introduction to the *Operette Morali*, clearly shows that the satiric prose and the *Operette Morali* are two distinct things: “Occorre tuttavia precisare che le “prosette satiriche” sono cosa abbastanza diversa dalle *Operette Morali* (8). Melosi’s helpful insight provides further evidence that rather than being a satirical work, the *Operette* are more ironic. In order to understand what is meant by irony in Leopardi and in the European cultural milieu of his age, one must briefly address the history and development of the word and the idea itself. The *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et de Métiers* of 1765 defines irony in a fairly simple and straightforward way: Irony was the rhetorical device by which the author meant the opposite of what he/she said or wrote. This in essence sums up the definition of irony before the dawn of European Romanticism. One could find irony alongside a list of other modes of speech like allegory, metaphor, irony, synecdoche, hyperbole, etc.

The Romantic writers, and Leopardi with them, however, expanded and nuanced its usage. Irony grew from the single definition in the dictionary cited above to a complex definition that took pages of categories and subcategories in order to define it. The entry

9 The original dictionary entry in French read as follows: “une figure par laquelle on veut faire entendre le contraire de ce qu’on dit,”
for irony in the Italian Tommaseo Dictionary published in 1869 includes the earlier
definition, but it expands to fill an entire page including an additional four subcategories:
“(1) Ironia del lungo discorso (exemplified by Parini), (2) ironia del sorriso (“ironia non
eccita il riso, ma appena un sorriso quasi velato”), (3) ironia socratica (didactic use of
irony), and (4) ironia di fatti (irony of the entire life of the individual like a parody of
Job).” The fourth category includes a view of the world where one feels like God placed
humanity on the earth to make fun of them and where God’s creatures feel ridiculous.10
Leopardi uses each one of these definitions at different times in his Operette.

Romantic irony owes its genesis to Friedrich Schlegel’s “Epochen der
Dichtkunst” of his Gespräch über die Poesie (1799-1800)11. From that point forward,
irony became a distinguishing trademark and point of discussion for the Romantic
generation. The citation below, by critic Ernst Behler, gives a glimpse of the age and a
silhouette of Leopardi:

It is in this epoch that we encounter individuals who, out of their ‘dédoublement’,
engage in infinite reflection—that is in an infinite mental spiral in which the
individual ego hovers between naïve experiences and critical reflection on its
experiences while viewing its own passions with disillusioned detachment. Irony
and masquerade become the devices for this intellectual attitude which often
cloaks a vulnerable personality plagued by melancholy, loneliness, and profound
suffering. (43)

10 The four categories and the idea that God’s creature feel the ridiculousness of the human situation
are all suggested from the Tommaseo Dictionary under the entry for the word “irony,” pages 1687-8.

11 Romantic scholars such as Lowry Nelson, Jr., Frederick Garber, Ernst Behler, and Henry Remak
in their respective essays collected in the book, Romantic Irony, all trace Romantic irony back to Schlegel’s
essay.
In other words, Leopardi fits in the epoch of irony since he qualifies on every account given by Behler. Concern for the infinite, critical reflection, disillusionment, melancholy, loneliness, and profound suffering all define Leopardian history and thought. Importantly, Romantic irony includes a metaphysical dimension that aligns itself closely to Leopardian thought. Benedetto Croce, looking back at literary history, defined this period as irony’s transition from a merely rhetorical device to incorporating a metaphysical meaning: “dalla comune accezione della parola “ironia” si è compiuto il passaggio al significato metafisico che essa ebbe per i fichtiani e i romantici” (48). Behler adds another distinctive quality of Romantic irony: it fuses feelings of damnation, world-weariness, despair, and ennui hidden with a smile. Though Behler is specifically referring to German Romanticism, he sums up Leopardian ideas of irony as well. The following quotation from Behler could be used to describe Leopardi:

This melancholic note of irony devolves from the contradictory experience of infinite longing in the face of the finitude of life. Immeasurable sadness permeates every form of life, since the absolute can only appear in limited, finite, and transitory form. Pain is the basic timbre of nature, transitoriness the mark of art, and death-wish the desire of him who encounters such experiences. At best, we can only mask and in irony disguise this “Weltschmerz” through feigned laughter and gaiety.” (45 emphasis added)

This quotation helps form a starting point for thinking about Leopardi’s Operette Morali under contextualized lenses. The “Storia del genere umano” compares finite life with infinite beings; it speaks of immeasurable sadness that leads to suicide; it talks about pain
and distraction as essential elements of life; and it uses irony to create the effect of “feigned laughter.”

As a last point about Romantic irony that points at the conclusion of the “Storia” and this thesis, Schlegel wrote that “Genuine irony is the irony of love. It arises from the feeling of finiteness and of one’s own limitations and the apparent contradiction of these feelings with the concept of infinity inherent in all genuine love” (Kritische Ausgabe 357). The irony of love will be analyzed in connection with the arrival of Amore in the “Storia del genere umano.”

However, before going to Leopardi’s text, this thesis also needs to set up the theoretical rationale behind irony. Rhetorically, as aforementioned, irony consists in a statement whose intended meaning is incongruous with its literal meaning. In a way, irony is always two-faced, uniting a literal meaning to its opposite. But it is also dialogical, because in bringing together the two meanings, it places them in dialogue with each other. Even if one meaning negates the other, the reader of irony is invited to consider the two meanings together, to compare them and to choose one over the other. Now of course any ironic connection between two elements, two concepts, or two situations is only possible insofar as there is a correspondence between the two. That is to say if the two elements belong to the same context, or discourse, if there is something that somehow unites them, a congruency underlying the incongruencies. The opposites in dialogue with each other inserted into the “Storia” include life and death; happiness and noia; free will and fate; and imagination and reality to name a few.

Now, if we posit “Storia del genere umano” as an ironic rewriting of Genesis, we need to clarify the kind of relationship that established between the two narratives. I
propose to see this relationship in terms of reversal. “Storia del genere umano,” in other words, is an ironic reversal of the Genesis narrative. Genesis, or certain aspects of Genesis, are not simply negated or parodied, but rather reversed, re-presented in a different form and from a new perspective. Ironic reversal requires a certain kind of engagement on the part of the reader: First, that the reader be acquainted with the original narrative which is being “reversed;” and second, that the reader be able to operate a radical change of perspective in order to look at things from a different angle. In “Storia del genere umano” Leopardi is asking his readers to (re)consider human condition in a new light—in light of his “system.” The next logical question to ask is this: How is ironic reversal accomplished in Leopardi’s operetta?
CHAPTER 2

LEOPARDI’S IRONIC GENESIS AND THE HEBREW BIBLE

The academic history of Leopardi scholarship bears witness that the topic of religion remains unresolved. Most recently, in 2013, Cosetta Veronese and Pamela Williams published a collection of their essays focused around this topic, *The Atheism of Giacomo Leopardi*. Their book deals specifically with religious questions and explores Leopardi’s atheism. This thesis will argue that Leopardi allows for belief, faith, and hope even in his staunch atheism. Leopardi is doubtlessly critical of clerical, historical Catholicism; he certainly focuses on nature’s merciless power of destruction; he thoroughly ponders why a good God would inflict his creatures with pain and suffering; and his understanding of life is rooted in philosophical materialism. He also seems to favor reason over dogmatic superstition, and he writes against the positivistic attitude of the scientists of his time. The rich biblical subtext of all of Leopardi’s works, however, provides for poignant incongruences. One might say that Leopardi is as doubtful and pessimistic about science as he is about religion; maybe this is a good starting point to begin reflecting on irony in Leopardi.

The Bible is often quoted as one of the main subtexts of the *Operette Morali*. Several critics have pointed out that Leopardi intended the *Operette* to have structurally

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12 For more information on Leopardi’s philosophical materialism see Daniela Bini’s *A Fragrance in the Desert* pages 97-108.

13 In another operetta, *Proposta di premi fatta dall’accademia dei sillografi*, Leopardi ironically suggests that humanity should put its faith in machines. However, this assertion is so ludicrous that it proves the opposite point: Humanity must put faith in something and science is most definitely the wrong place—but so is religion.
unity, and they claim a link between the overall structure of the Operette to the biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelations. Supporting this theory is the fact that Leopardi did not allow his original twenty operette to be published individually in newspapers and journals. He insisted that they be printed together (Regni 379). In other words, he believed that his work as a whole was worth more than the sum of its stories and that the stories themselves, and the order in which they came, created a narrative that worked synergistically. Regni also points out that the last operetta of the original twenty, “Cantico del gallo Silvestre,” harkens back to the “Storia del genere umano” in the same way that the book of Revelations harkens back to Genesis—thus connecting the beginning to the end (504). In this way, the two operette are the symbolic bookends of Leopardi’s system. Both stories are highly ironic and fuse Christianity with other ancient myths. In any case, “La storia del genere umano” acts as a prologue to the entire Operette Morali (Luporini 87). As such, it contains fragments inherent to understanding the whole work.

In the Zibaldone, Leopardi defines the precise organization of the universe as a “spazio infinito” and he asks this question: “chi di noi sarebbe atto di immaginare, non che ad eseguire, il piano dell’universo, l’ordine, la concatenazione, l’artifizio, l’esattezza mirabile delle sue parti?” (4142-3). A few sentences later he clarifies his own opinion by repeating that “l’intelletto umano non è atto ad immaginare un piano come quello.” It would take “un intelletto infinito,” and even if man had an intellect trillion upon trillions of times larger, he would still have infinitely less than an infinite intellect, which leads

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14 For instance see Rossella Regni’s “Ragione architettonica delle Operette Morali.” 501-3
Leopardi to conclude that “l’uomo non può fare il mondo” (4142). Though this passage does not mention God, it revolves around the idea of an infinite creator. This passage self-consciously deals with the theories of creation, humanity and imagination while sidestepping both traditional Christian thought and scientific advancements. Leopardi’s preoccupation with the creation reflects an engagement with religious-poetic cosmogony, rather than traditional-rational theories.

Early in 1818, in his “Discorso di un italiano intorno alla poesia romantica,” Leopardi relates the customs of the modern Italians directly to the Christian tradition and the story of Genesis:

Ma da quale altra fonte derivano e il nostro infinito affetto alla semplicità de’ costumi e delle maniere e del favellare e dello scrivere e d’ogni cosa; e quella indicibile soavità che ci diffonde nell’anima non solamente la veduta ma il pensiero e le immagini della vita rustica, e i poeti che la figurano, e la memoria de’ primi tempi, e la storia de’ patriarchi e di Abramo e d’Isacco e di Giacobbe e dei casi e delle azioni loro ne’ deserti e della vita nelle tende e fra gli armenti, e quasi tutta quella che si comprende nella Scrittura e massimamente nel libro della Genesi. (972)

Leopardi claims not only that the Bible (and specifically Genesis) informs Italian literary and social customs of his day, but also that the book of Genesis contains the spiritual highlights and the literary heights of the Bible. Because the Bible acts for Italians as a childhood memory common to all, it has influenced Italian literature and Italian art for generations, and it continues to be important in forming Italian identity. Maybe it is for
this reason that Leopardi felt the need to create a new system whereby Italians could rethink and reimagine their customs.
2.1 The Garden of Eden

Nature and happiness are two essential terms in Leopardian thought that have to be clarified before one can speak specifically about the Garden of Eden. The “Storia del genere umano” points to an ironic paradox found in the Judeo-Christian creation story: the impossibility of having a loving Creator while humanity fundamentally suffers from unhappiness. The “Storia” repeats the word felicità or infelicità throughout, showing how important this theme is to Leopardi’s re-creation myth. The operetta also shows how humanity gradually gains knowledge, and how this accrual of knowledge is directly correlated with a decrease in happiness. In Leopardi’s view, God lets humanity suffer the consequences of its own mistakes. In this way, Leopardi views Nature as the same as God.

In the Zibaldone Leopardi wrote that “La natura è lo stesso di Dio” (393). Nature for Leopardi is a complex issue. Near the end of his Zibaldone (27 May 1829), he explained the paradox of Nature that has been described above. This quote combines the ideas of God, 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. Gli

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15 Critics have recognized the monumental importance of this “operetta” repeatedly. Divo Barsotti said that “L’operetta è uno dei testi più importanti del poeta” (116), and Walter Binni said this about the short story: “È un’operetta di grasso impegno poetico, un’operetta-epitome . . . . In questa operetta . . . vengono in realtà elaborati con più chiarezza e precisione temi centrali e fecondi, come quello dell’infelicità degli uomini e della loro incolpevolezza” (331).
Nature, when endowed with symbols, creates room for imagination and illusion that hold the secrets of the universe. It entices humanity and plants a desire for happiness and beauty; however, Nature is an entity worried solely about its job of destruction and creation.\textsuperscript{16} Mother Nature for Leopardi is often described as a “matrigna,” as someone who only cares about herself.\textsuperscript{17} Nature has this two-faced ironic potentiality: the power to inspire poetry, as demonstrated in Leopardi’s own \textit{L’infinito}, and the power to destroy lives without feeling remorse. If God and Nature are to be equated, like Leopardi claims in the \textit{Zibaldone}, then God himself contains the same ironic, two-faced attributes of Nature with His ability to inspire and be an entity void of feeling. “Storia del genere umano,” however, complicates equating God/creator with Nature. This complication will be explored in more detail later on in the narrative when the creator’s omnipotence is curbed by natural law. In short, humanity desires to be youthful forever, and Jove says that that request is impossible to meet.

In addition to defining the terms, it is important to understand that the “Storia” is a narrative in the same way that the Genesis account, for Leopardi, is a narrative—not historical fact. This is clear from the initial word of the “Storia,” which is “Narrasi,” “it is narrated” (5). Comparing this beginning to the Bible, Leopardi clearly departs from the

\textsuperscript{16} See “Dialogo della Natura e un Islandese.”

\textsuperscript{17} In his poem \textit{La Ginestra}, Leopardi famously writes this of Nature: “Madre è di parto e di voler matrigna” (125). Also, in \textit{A Silvia} Leopardi asks why Mother Nature tricks her children: “O natura, o natura, / perché non rendi poi / quel che prometti allor? perché di tanto / inganni i figli tuo?” (36-9).
factual statement, “In the beginning . . . ”, which is a common translation of the first line of the Bible. Certainly, Leopardi is pointing to the fact that even the Bible’s authoritative beginning is simply Moses’ narration of the event. Contrary to logic, Leopardi is not criticizing the Bible for its narrative; rather, he is drawing the reader’s attention to the importance that it is a narrative and, therefore, evoking the function of narrative. The Bible story as a narrative has more impact and importance for Leopardi than a Bible story as a historical fact, or as a document of telling the factual creation of nature and humanity.18 Leopardi’s use of the impersonal third person, with “narrasi,” is a technique that ironically locates the authority of the tale in its reception from antiquity, distancing the author from the original telling of the story. This initial distance created by the use of the third person is crucial in Leopardian thought—the myth gains authority in its antiquity and repeatability. Because the Mosaic story was retold over generations, it gained authority; likewise, Leopardi is reflecting on authority by employing the same narrative technique. In other words, this Operetta is not Leopardi’s story (even though it obviously is); this story belongs to the history of humanity; and, as such, it increases the importance of the storyteller19 even as it reaffirms its distance from factual events.

As one completes reading the first sentence of the “Storia del genere umano” this distance is pushed further: “Narrasi che tutti gli uomini che da principio popolarono la terra, fossero creati per ogni dove a un medesimo tempo, e tutti bambini, e fossero

18 Lollini has noticed this same interesting point. He says that for Leopardi “L’origine non può essere un evento reale, storico” (39). Also, in the Zibaldone, Leopardi makes a few references to the fact that it is a narrative story of Moses, and not a historical fact. (see Zib. 398, “Narrazione Mosaica”).

19 For Leopardi, Storytellers were all poets in the beginning: “I primi sapienti furono poeti . . . le prime verità furono annunziate in versi” (2940)
nutricati dalle api, dalle capre e dalle colombe nel modo che i poeti favoleggiarono dell'educazione di Giove” (5 emphasis added). Here, the pastoral imagery is used to describe an infant-humanity nurtured by bees, goats and doves, and is mediated by the poets’ fables.20 In Leopardi’s retelling, Man is neither created out of the dust nor in the image of creator as the Bible recounts. Still, mankind retains a similarity with deity from the very first sentence by comparing the way Jove was nurtured to the way that Man was nurtured. Therefore, this passage implies that humanity shares something with the gods, at least a similar alimentary history.

Next, the “Storia” goes into the physical description of the earth and the drama of the story begins.21 The “pre-social” stage or the Garden stage includes infancy; it represents a primitive age where man was happy (or could be happy).22 In the Zibaldone, Leopardi explains why a degree of happiness was possible in the past:

Da fanciulli, se una veduta, una campagna, una pittura, un suono ec. un racconto, una descrizione, una favola, un’immagine poetica, un sogno, ci piace e diletta, quel piacer e quel diletto è sempre vago e indefinito: l’idea che ci si desta è sempre indeterminata e senza limiti: ogni consolazione, ogni piacere, ogni aspettativa, ogni disegno, illusione ec. (quasi anche ogni concezione) di quell’età

20 Bees make honey, goats make milk, and the dove is a classic scriptural sign of the Holy Spirit. This reading could lead one to read the beginning state of humanity literally as a land of milk and honey where the Holy Spirit dwells. However, this passage has a particular reference to the ancient story: Jove fled from the harsh cruelty of his father Saturn, and he was raised in a cave and fed honey and goat’s milk.

21 Walter Binni proposed that the “Storia del genere umano” can be divided into cycles of creation: first Leopardi describes two “pre-social” cycles that are followed by two “social and historical” cycles (Lezioni 332), and this is an effective way to divide this story. However, this paper will divide the story following the biblical tradition.

22 The idea of childhood or infancy, both ontogenically and phylogenically, as a happier time in human existence is seen in all three of Leopardi’s accounts of the Genesis: Inno ai Patriarchi (in poetry), Zibaldone 395-420, and in the “Storia.”
Even the smallest of ideas can lead to contemplation of the infinite in the age of childhood. In the age of infancy, Leopardi particularized the plainness of the world. He described this world as being many times smaller and lacking the grandeur and awe-inspiring objects that have inspired poets for ages and particularly the Romantic authors of his day; this age of the world lacked mountains, stars and seas.

Paradoxically, humanity marveled at the beauty and smallness of this primordial earth. Also, the primal people idyllically fed on happy hopes: “pascendosi oltre a ciò di lietissime speranze.” This is the second image of people being fed—this time they are nourished by hopes. Life was paradisiacal—like Adam and Eve who did not yet have to win their bread by the sweat of their brow (Genesis 3:19) but could freely eat from every tree of the garden. People “crescevano con molto contento, e con poco meno che opinione di felicità.” Even in this primordial stage, felicità is problematic for Leopardi, and it is clear that the word has ironic undertones. The paradox of happiness is that a person must have knowledge to enjoy full happiness, yet knowledge leads to a realization of one’s own unhappiness. The next section details how knowledge leads to unhappiness in the narrative cycles of the “Storia.”
2.2 The Fall

The Fall, for Leopardi, is about increasing knowledge. The Genesis narrative states that Adam and Eve had no worries or cares in the garden, but they also had no knowledge until they partook of the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In the Zibaldone Leopardi states that “original sin” was not a transgression in the traditional sense; rather it was a result of the abusive, corruptive desire for more reason (394). In the operetta he further complicates the issue: Through the accrual of knowledge, humanity recognized that their world was small and boring. They ironically abandoned their life-sustaining hopes, considering them not worthy of much faith and they became restless, wandering around their little earth in desperation. Leopardi recounts (ironically echoing his earlier statement) that, “. . . cresceva la loro mala contentezza” even before they were out of their youthful years. As humanity became aware of its limitations, it became increasingly unsatisfied with its state. The “Storia” explains that feelings of love and hope nurtured in childhood were transformed into hatred (or weariness) of existence and despair. Contemplation of suicide is a direct result of an accrual of knowledge.

The gods were shocked by humanity. How could living creatures desire death? Why would they even consider suicide? The idea that humanity could horrify the gods is

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23 In the Zibaldone, Leopardi made a parallel statement that describes humanity in this fallen state: “Da grandi, o siano piaceri e oggetti maggiori, o quei medesimi che ci allettavano da fanciulli, come una bella prospettiva, campagna, pittura ec. proveremo un piacere, ma non sarà più simile in nessun modo all’infinito, o certo non sarà così intensamente, sensibilmente, durevolmente ed essenzialmente vago e indeterminato. Il piacere di quella sensazione si determina subito e si circoscrive” (515).

24 Leopardi reflects on suicide in a few passages of the Zibaldone. Also, in the Operette Morali, the “Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio” reflects specifically on suicide in a sustained manner.
ironic. The gods are neither omnipotent nor omniscient like the Christian God claims to be. Leopardi puts the gods in direct opposition to destiny (fato) and the laws of the universe, since they cannot go against these preset laws. Ironically, humanity threatens to go “contro l’ordine dei fati,” proving that, by committing suicide and voluntarily ending their race, mortals can change their destiny while the gods are powerless. The gods react to this crisis of humanity\textsuperscript{25} not out of love for their creation but because they would never have the “onori che ricevevano dagli uomini” if the humanity did not persevere (6). Here it is understood that the poets are the select few who honor deity with their poetry. This is why Horace is found dwelling with Zeus in Leopardi’s next tale, “Dialogo d’Ercole e di Atlante” (20 Mondadori).

As a reaction, Jove-God quickly enlarged the earth and caused great seas to appear. He raised up mountains and lowered the valleys. He dressed the sky with the stars, and he diversified the ages of people so they were not all young and old at the same time. Jove gave mankind “dreams” where they could escape the noia of reality. In short, the gods create a world where Edmond Burke’s Romantic ideal of the sublime has a geophysical reality. This drastic change momentarily improved the situation; however, fickle humanity desired perpetual childhood. Unfortunately, this desire was also contrary to the “leggi universali della natura,” so Jove could not grant them this wish. The Zibaldone reinforces this idea. Leopardi writes that because humanity has an infinite desire to “conoscere, e di amare, non può essere mai soddisfatto dalla realtà” (6). No matter how

\textsuperscript{25} As an important side note, the narrator includes himself “nostro genere” as part of “Storia del genere umano” by using the “royal we”. This is the first time out of a few in the story when the narrator changes from a third person distant voice, to a first person plural—A stylistic move that subtly includes the reader and the narrator as taking part of the story.
grand and glorious Jove could have made the earth, it would always be too small for humankind’s infinite desire for more. The ironic doubling is clear: faith as a means of searching truth without ever fully knowing it leads one to feel an “opinione” of happiness; yet, institutionalized faith is also absurd because it claims to monopolize both truth and happiness, which for Leopardi are polar opposites. The “Storia” artistically shows the level to which humanity despairs by providing examples of societies that perform shocking rituals in which they grieve each birth and celebrate each funeral. Humanity thought that Jove was no longer listening to their cries. The suicide of humankind was once again imminent.

It is important to point out that at this moment in the story, Leopardi breaks the narrative sequence in order to offer a philosophical reflection as the author. He speaks outside of the story as the authoritative, moral voice. Where the rest of the operetta is artistic, ironic and open to interpretation, this section wants to be clear and straightforward. He begins with the overtly ostentatious “perciocché,” and this is the great moral statement of the entire Operette Morali:

Perciocché s'ingannano a ogni modo coloro i quali stimano essere nata primieramente l'infelicità umana dall'iniquità e dalle cose commesse contro agli Dei; ma per lo contrario non d'altronde ebbe principio la malvagità degli uomini che dalle loro calamità. 9

This is a powerful statement when compared with the Genesis story, in which God punishes humanity because they do not show reverence to him. Leopardi’s theory is the ironic reversal of the Bible: humanity invokes evil upon themselves because of their unhappy state in which God put them, and not because they were rebellious.
2.3 The Flood

With no more transition than a paragraph break, Leopardi returns to the main narrative. Jove flooded the earth because of the “protervia” of mortals. In this case, the story of Noah and the ark parallels the pagan tale of Deucalion and Pyrrha. Leopardi refers to this event as the “naufragio universale del nostro genere” (9). In the L’infinito, the poet uses a similar statement for an opposite effect; here, the word “naufragio” is anything but “dolce.” Importantly, this is the second time that the narrator reads the audience and himself in the story using the “royal we” with the word “nostro”. In other words, this moment in the account represents our universal shipwreck, our failure and our ruin. By employing the “our”, we moderns are set up as equally culpable for the deluge—or at least we are being judged as guilty of the same “protervia” by the author.

In Leopardi’s story, Deucalion and Pyrrha survive, but unhappily sit at the edge of a cliff calling for death to take them, and thus desiring to effectively end the human race. They ponder about the “vita mortale,” an expression that contains its own ironic doubling: life and death are obviously two separate states that constantly coexist in the human condition. Jove chastises them and, since they will not procreate, Jove instructs them to throw rocks over their shoulders, which, as soon as they strike the ground, turn into men and women. With this forced and painful rebirth of human species, Jove knew he had to change the state of their existence different because “non può loro bastare, come agli altri animali, vivere ed essere liberi da ogni dolere e
molestia del corpo” (495 emphasis added). Jove is ironically baffled that humankind, just another type of animal, is not content with a life free of trials and tribulations.26

So, Jove introduced physical pain to the world. He poured out sickness and physical ailments, and he gave mortals chores and business to keep their minds from thinking about their “proprio animo.” In Jove’s reasoning, humankind would desire relief if they were always suffering atrocities. They would forget about cosmic injustice because they would be too busy surviving from day to day. Also, abundant suffering in this life might lead them to have hope in another life free of pain. Jove created the hurricanes and terrible storms to frighten humanity. The narrator says that fear of death would help them stay attached to life.27 Jove diversified climates across the globe and he made food difficult to procure and process. Before this point, Leopardi interjects, humanity lived on water, herbs and fruit (like some people still do in California). However incorrect this assumption is about the people of California in the 1800s, Leopardi is making a more important move by drawing modern connections between the history of humanity and the present. With his use of “anche oggidi” Leopardi makes the creation story apply to his day.28 In a broad sense, the

26 For more detailed study of how anthropocentrism relates to the idea of God see Daniela Bini’s book, A Fragrance in the Desert. She includes a subsection entitled “The Anthropocentric Fallacy,” which explains Leopardi’s nonanthropocentric views in most of his works. Bini’s first sentence relates anthropocentrism to the existence of God, just as Leopardi does in this “Storia” (159).

27 Leopardi’s ironic “Dialogo di Cristoforo Colombo” provides a prolonged and more detailed discussion about how the fear of death is the great motivating factor for life of the crew of Christopher Columbus’s original journey towards the “New World.”

28 For context, the tract from the operetta reads like this: “E per escludere la passata oziosità, indusse nel genere umano il bisogno e l’appetito di nuovi cibi e di nuove bevande, le quali cose non senza molta e grave fatica si potessero provvedere, laddove insino al diluvio gli uomini, dissetandosi delle sole acque, si erano pasciuti delle erbe e delle frutta che la terra e gli arbori somministravano loro spontaneamente, e di altre nutriture vili e facili a procacciare, siccome usano di sostentarsi anche oggidi alcuni popoli, e particolarmente quelli di California” (14).
problem with the Genesis story for Leopardi is that it is too far removed. His anti-Genesis or re-Genesis story makes the connection with “oggidì”. In fact, the next sentences in the “Storia” describe a time that is similar to 19th century Europe—he describes cities, peoples, nations, languages, war and art. Jove sent human virtues like Justice, Glory, Patriotism and others to earth. Most importantly, and Leopardi separates this virtue from the list, Amore (Love) dwelt on earth. To emphasize the importance of Amore and to reiterate the fact that humanity has left the Earthly Paradise behind, Leopardi tells the reader that the biggest difference between life in the Garden and outside the Garden is Amore. In the paradisiacal condition, humanity was unclothed and man and woman were brought together by impulse for creation—the same way male and female animals come together, or the same way humans have an appetite for food. Leopardi says that this impulse is starkly different from Amore.

The ironic doubling of pain and pleasure, health and sickness, and Love and hate, etc. helped humanity29 have “meravigliose” illusions and thus enjoy life. In fact, perhaps the greatest irony of the story, mortals had a greater capacity for happiness in this state than they had while they dwelt in Eden. As opposed to suicide, people in this state sacrificed their lives for the virtues, and this was acceptable to the gods because it created a love of life in others. At this blessed time in the “Storia,” Leopardi tells the reader, is what “oggi siamo soliti di chiamare antico” (10). Besides pointing the reader directly to the time period that he is describing phylogenically, Leopardi is once again employing the first-person plural bring the reader closer to his point of view. The story is the past and the present at the same time.

29 At this moment Leopardi refers again to humanity as “nostro genere” (15).
Unfortunately, mortals became idle, and the “vanità” of life set in. The primary reason for the change was the two-faced virtue “Sapienza” or Wisdom. Many mortals dedicated their lives to this virtue because Wisdom promised to show them “Verità,” which never came to earth but stayed close “agli Dei nel cielo” (15). After holding on to the hope of having Truth come down for a long time, humanity became aware of the “vanità di quelle proferte.” They lost faith in all of the Virtues, which had at one time given them beautiful illusions and times of happiness.

The Old Testament of Bible contains books referred to as the “Libri Sapienzali” or Books of Wisdom, which are didactic and *moral* books. Because of their poetic form and use of metaphor, images, rhythm and musicality, these books are also known as the “Libri Poetici.” The Book of Job and Qoelet (Ecclesiastes) belong to the biblical “Libri Sapienzali.” Leopardi, outside of the Book of Genesis, thought about and wrote the most on these two biblical books. It is no coincidence that, at this stage in the “Storia del genere umano,” humanity is pursuing Sapienza hoping to arrive at Truth. The book of Ecclesiastes opens with the lines, “Vanity of vanities, all is Vanity” (KJV), and the Latin that Leopardi read is “Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas.” Absolute truth is meaningless and vain for Leopardi, but the search of truth is not void of fruit. Truth is relative for Leopardi in the same way that “il bene non è assoluto ma relativo” (*Zibaldone* 391). Leopardi defines human existence in its meaninglessness.
3.1 Cardinal Virtues

In his concluding section of the *operetta* Leopardi seeks to explain the crisis of modernity. Jove-God, saddened by humanity’s unhappiness and wickedness, which far exceeded the haughtiness of humankind before the flood, came up with punishment. In the narrative, humanity had an infinitely “inquieta, insaziabile, immoderate natura” (14). Humanity had incited “l’ira del dio.” As a punishment, Jove ironically gave them precisely what they had been asking for: “la Verità.” Jove decided to make Truth abide eternally on earth as punishment. He explained to the other gods that Verità will have an opposite effect on mortals than on gods. For the gods, the truth shows them of their own beatitudes, but for humanity it will keep “continuo dinanzi agli occhi la loro infelicità.” The Verità will show that nothing is more true than the falsity of happiness, and it will keep very present in their minds “la vanità di ogni cosa fuorché dei propri dolori” (15) A side-effect of this punishment is that they will be “private della speranza,” Their illusions will fade away with the discovery of the Truth. Truth will increase the bitterness of their existence, and at the same time make them lacking of sufficient courage to reject it. Just as Jove predicted, when Truth presented herself in the temples dedicated to her, humanity was saddened by her presence and lived unhappily. Humankind lived in a state of endless misery.

Leopardi could have concluded the “Storia” with this last section that describes the sad paradoxes of modernity and leaves the reader in despair—many of
his poems do precisely that. However, the merciful poet allows for an ounce of hope in “our” human history.
3.2 Amore

The final paragraph in the “Storia” beautifully complicates an overly simplistic pessimism that the story would have had if it were to end with humanity finding itself in a state of endless, hopeless banality of misery. Here, Jove-God asks a volunteer to visit the wretched race and Amore is the only god with compassion. Leopardi is clear that this Amore is very different from the earlier “fantasma” called by the same name. “Mai per l’avanti”, never before had Amore left his heavenly abode. The ancients in their Golden Age thought that they had experience with the god of Amore, but, Leopardi says, it was not so because Amore could not go down until humanity was “sottoposto all’imperio della Verità” (18). This “massimo iddio” chose to visit only the tender and noble hearted. He would dwell with these for a brief moment and the subject would feel something that was “tutto nuova nel genere umano, piuttosto verità che rassomiglianza di beatitudine” (16). The fortunate souls in this state felt the substance rather than just the semblance of happiness. Previous epochs felt an “opinione” of happiness, and impressions of joy, but never a full measure of Love. Also, the other Virtues trailed Amore and, therefore, were manifested to those under the influence of Love. This happiness rivaled the felicity the gods could feel: “di troppo breve intervallo superata dalla divina” (16). In any case, the happiness felt with the addition of Amore was far greater than anything felt in the history of humanity. Amore was allowed to live, by destiny, in a “fanciullezza eterna;” therefore, when it abode with a mortal, it allowed humans to satisfy for a moment their first desire—to be forever childlike, which restored to these mortals an
“infinita speranza.” Leopardi’s Amore is strikingly similar to Dante’s “l’amor che muove il sole e le altre stelle.” If so, Leopardi is definitely invoking religion directly.

However, Leopardi is rarely so simple as to give answers; he prefers to suggest possibilities and connections. This image is far too uncharacteristically beautiful for Leopardi, so he quickly reminds the reader that the gods were content with the increased suffering of humanity and, therefore, they did not punish the evildoers for their wickedness. The gods just leave humanity alone, not imposing any sort of Divine Justice. Humans were left alone in a state mixed with all of the vices and virtues of the previous phases; however, in this last state there are those who dwell on the earth who have access to the benefits of divine Love.

This last interpretation might be a stretch and Leopardi might disagree with this last point about Love; but here again, a reader can hear echoes from the Bible. Leopardi does not deal with the New Testament (except John’s Revelations) much in his works, but we know he had read and studied it. In this last section about Jove-God sending Amore to the earth, a Christian reader might think of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” In the Bible, God loved the world and he sent down Jesus Christ. The descriptions of an experience that includes happiness without bounds which leads a person to follow after the virtues, can easily be read as a Christian conversion story whether Leopardi intended this or not. In traditional Christianity, Jesus Christ is the means of salvation. He represents redemption from the Fall. In this way, we can side completely with what Leopardi said about his ironic system; that it can coexist, and make sense of Christian thought.
Pain, however, is still meaningless in Leopardi. Since Leopardi’s “Storia” is all about the Fall and its effects on society, one can ask whether there is redemption. Although this last paragraph is euphoric and positive, it is far from salvific in Christian terms. In Leopardi there is no hint of an afterlife, and Christian salvation pertains particularly to the next life. If there is salvation in Leopardi, it is manifest as a momentary relinquishment from pain and suffering through imagination, illusion, and memory. Leopardi affirms this in the Zibaldone, saying that, “La salvezza è nel ricordo” (91). After humanity has grown out of its paradisiacal and infantile state, humankind can find joy through memory. As he says in the Zibaldone, the joys that we feel after we have grown out of “fanciullezza”:

    non sono altro che una *rimembranza della fanciullezza*, si riferiscono a lei, dipendono e derivano da lei, sono come un influsso e una conseguenza di lei; o in genere, o anche in ispecie; vale a dire, proviamo quella tal sensazione, idea, piacere, ec. perchè ci *ricordiamo* e ci si *rappresenta alla fantasia* quella stessa sensazione immagine ec. provata da fanciulli, e come la provammo in quelle stesse circostanze. (515 emphasis added)

Leopardi does present a means to improve this life and a possibility for a reprieve from the constant pain to which humanity is subjected. A little hope resurges in the last paragraph, and that hope may be related to a religion not based on truth but on illusion. Religion gives the illusion of how things could be as long as religion is not mystic or metaphysical. Its job is to create real change on earth…even real happiness. “Non c’è mai misticismo nelle sue considerazioni, il rapporto a Dio non è un rapporto duale o

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30 See Zibaldone 403-6.
verticalizzato. La cristianità leopardiana è un impegno morale e sociale. La religione, alla fine, è un legame alla terra e perciò alla natura” (Ferraro 55). That which brings humanity back to the wonders and signs of nature felt in childhood gives humanity the chance for a moment happiness in this world of suffering.

All of the above mentioned conclusions are cloaked in the tone of irony in the Operette Morali. Irony’s ability to compare two opposites to each other, and Leopardi’s ability to demonstrate congruencies connecting the creation narrative provide a place for a reader to think deeply about the human condition—especially the serious and troubling aspects of life and the human experience. However, the ironic narration of the events allows for a smile and maybe a chuckle on the part of the reader even in the midst of serious discourse. In this case, an ironic rewriting of a sacred text is not blasphemous, but supportive of Christian thought. For this reason, Leopardi is correct in saying that his system makes sense of the biblical tale and modernizes it.
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