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Fortini's Literary Debt to Manzoni and Leopardi

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Abstract. From his earliest publications until his final works, Franco Fortini was inspired by the models of Manzoni and Leopardi. Drawing on Manzoni's philosophical-historical essays, narrative works and *Inni sacri*, Fortini revitalized our understanding of the Milanese poet, whose sublime vocabulary penetrated into Fortini's late verse. In a contrasting but complementary way, Fortini embraced Leopardi, especially the poet of the *Canti*, elevating our understanding of the poet's final, Neapolitan period. Assisted by studies of Lenzini, Diaco, Bonavita and others, the essay establishes the intellectual and poetic counterpoint represented in Fortini's thought and poetry by these two giants of the Ottocento.

Keywords: Fortini, history and metahistory, irony, Leopardi, Manzoni, romanticism.

Riassunto. Dalle sue prime pubblicazioni fino alle ultime opere, Franco Fortini si è ispirato ai modelli di Manzoni e Leopardi. Attingendo ai saggi storico-filosofici, alle opere narrative e agli *Inni sacri* di Manzoni, Fortini ha rivitalizzato l'interpretazione del poeta milanese, il cui vocabolario sublime è penetrato soprattutto nelle raccolte fortiniane più tarde. In modo contrastante ma complementare, Fortini ha accolto la lezione di Leopardi (soprattutto dei *Canti*), migliorando la nostra comprensione dell'ultimo periodo napoletano del poeta. Con l'aiuto dei precedenti studi di Lenzini, Diaco, Bonavita e altri, questo saggio ricostruisce il contrappunto intellettuale e poetico rappresentato nel pensiero e nella poesia di Fortini da questi due giganti dell'Ottocento.

Parole chiave: Fortini, storia e metastoria, ironia, Leopardi, Manzoni, romanticismo.

I.

Franco Fortini was profoundly invested in the work of Alessandro Manzoni and Giacomo Leopardi. As a critic, Fortini offers a novel and illuminating perspective on these classic poets and philosophers and their pertinence to contemporary debate. As a poet, Fortini is mindful of the models of the two masters more than has been recognized (not surprisingly, perhaps, given the slower recognition of Fortini's poetry with respect to his essays). As a youth Fortini was drawn to Manzoni's prose (fiction and non-fiction); in the 1950s his attention shifted to the *Inni sacri* (*Sacred Hymns*) and tragedies, in particular *Adelchi*. As for Leopardi, Fortini's focus, early and late, critical and creative, was on the poems of the *Canti* more than the prose.

As a young poet and intellectual Fortini was impacted by the European romantics. Writing of his first volume of poetry, *Foglio di via e altri versi* (*Marching Orders and Other Poems*) in his classic study, *I poeti del Novecento* (*Poets of the Novecento*), he conveys a vivid sense of how the romantic tradition induced an awareness of the moral dimensions of history:

The historic and political reality intervened to alter, if not suppress, any idyllic inclination; rather it inserted it onto a reprise of the accents of tragic romanticism. Thus, it was amidst the events of political and racial persecution, the experience of the war, the contacts with the Resistance and emigration, that the poems of *Foglio di via* took shape.¹

When Fortini refers to the authors of «tragic romanticism», he is undoubtedly thinking of Manzoni, Leopardi, and Foscolo, but also Heine, Goethe, Schiller, Novalis, Shelley, Blake, and Pushkin, authors who took a stand against the dehumanization brought about by the Industrial Revolution and understood the tragic consequences of social oppression.² By

¹ F. Fortini, *I poeti del Novecento*, a cura di D. Santarone, Roma, Donzelli, 2017, p. 168: «La realtà storica e politica circostante sopraggiunse [...] ad alterare, se non a sopprimere, ogni inclinazione idilliaca; anzi, la innestò su di una ripresa di accenti del romanticismo tragico. Fra le vicende della persecuzione politica e razziale, l'esperienza della guerra, i contatti con la Resistenza e l'emigrazione, si vennero così componendo i versi di *Foglio di via*». There were distinguished individual poets such as Montale, Saba, Noventa and Sereni, who directly confronted the catastrophes of two world wars and the debacle of fascism, but in general the prevailing poetic schools, the post-symbolists and hermetics, evaded any direct treatment of recent history.

² See F. Fortini, *Insistenze*, Milano, Garzanti, 1985, p. 291: «Già tra la fine del Sette e le prime decadi dell'Ottocento Goethe, Shelley, Hölderlin, Leopardi conoscevano chiaramente il doppio legame fra i massimi esiti dell'uso letterario del linguaggio e le condizioni che sfruttamento e oppressione indicavano nella maggioranza degli uomini». Some critics have minimized the

identifying with «tragic romanticism» Fortini eluded the more recent culture of symbolism and modernism and designated his wartime book as a meditation on the tragic course of human history and the pursuit of justice; not coincidentally this is a direction he shares with his mentor, Giacomo Noventa, himself rooted in the Romantic experience starting with Heine and Goethe.

II.

Given a copy of the Revised Protestant Italian translation of the Bible (the Riveduta) by his father at age ten, Fortini read it avidly and later attributed the Biblical vein of his poetry to his early experience of that text (which he read without the benefit of historical annotations or the Vulgate):

This made the sapiential use of biblical episodes and verses natural to me, the moral hermeneutics proper to the sermons of the evangelical churches. It was – but certainly I couldn't know it – the absolute reading of the theological existentialists, à la Karl Barth, averse to the historicism of liberal origins. I was filled with a kind of musical stupefaction; a rhythm that, especially in the Poetic Books, occupied the entire space of my mind.³

In 1939 Fortini was baptized in the Waldensian Church of Florence. In 1941 he was drafted into the Italian army. When the army was disbanded on July 25, 1943, he settled briefly in Milan before self-exiling to an internment camp in Switzerland, where he met a number of fellow anti-fascists, eventually taking part in the short-lived Partisan Republic of

existence of an Italian romanticism. See G. Martegiani, *Il romanticismo italiano non esiste. Saggio di Letteratura Comparata*, Firenze, B. Seeber, 1908, and P.V. Mengaldo, *Leopardi antiromantico, e altri saggi sui «Canti»*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2012. Obviously Fortini was not referring to those romantics who were nostalgic for altar and throne, or to the followers of the gothic spiritualism circulating in northern Europe, or the intellectuals of the romantic movement centered on «Il conciliatore». See D. Dalmas, *Fortini romantico*, in «...come l'uomo s'eterna». *Studi per Riccardo Massano*, a cura di P. Luparia, Dipartimento di scienze letterarie e filologiche, Università degli studi di Torino, 2006, pp. 265-277.

³ F. Fortini, *Il discorso accanto alla pietra*, in Id., *Saggi ed epigrammi*, a cura di L. Lenzini, Milano, Mondadori, 2003, pp. 1587-1588: «Questo mi ha reso naturale l'uso sapienzario dell'episodio e del versetto, l'ermeneutica morale propria ai sermoni delle chiese evangeliche. Era – ma certo non potevo saperlo – la lettura assoluta degli esistenzialisti teologici, alla Karlo Barth, avversa allo storicismo di origine liberale. Me ne veniva una sorta di stupefazione musicale; un ritmo che, soprattutto nei Libri Poetici, occupava tutto lo spazio della mente». By «Poetic Books» Fortini refers to Job, Ecclesiastes, Psalms.

Ossola.⁴ In Zurich Fortini joined the Waldensian congregation of Pastor Alberto Fuhrmann, in whose home he found a hospitable place for writing and sharing poetry. In that context he writes a sermon, delivered in Basel in 1944, in which he draws an arc between passages from the Books of Job and Titus, which contain the same imagery of the spirit, of light and dark, endurance and suffering, and the same prospect of redemption. He writes: «Purity is the result of the victory over anguish and anxiety, is a quickness of the body and soul, a constant availability to Grace»; in the closing lines one hears an echo of Manzoni's *Il Cinque maggio* (*The Fifth of May*): «Chi può trarre una cosa pura da una impura? Nessuno, se non l'eterna forza del Signore, che atterra e suscita, che affanna e che consola, che atterra e affanna Giobbe, che suscita e consola i credenti» («Who can draw a pure thing from a pure one? No one, except for the eternal force of the Lord, that knocks down and lifts up, that exhausts and comforts, that knocks down and exhausts Job, that lifts up and consoles believers».)⁵ The lines from Manzoni's poem are:

Tu dalle stanche ceneri
Sperdi ogni ria parola:
Il Dio che atterra e suscita,
Che affanna e che consola,
Sulla deserta coltrice
Accanto a lui posò.

(You, all malicious murmur
ban from his poor remains:
that God Who strikes and comforts,
Who weakens and sustains,
near the forsaken pall
came down to rest and call).⁶

It is clear the young Fortini had cultivated Manzoni's poetry and identified with its dramatic, penitential themes.

Fortini's early study of Manzoni was primarily of the prose, *Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica* (*Observations on Catholic Morality*), *Storia della*

⁴ See R. Broggin, "Svizzera, rifugio della libertà". *L'esilio* inquieto di Franco Fortini (1943-1945), in «L'ospite ingrato», 2, 1999, pp. 121-167. See D. Dalmas, "Bisogna scegliere": Kierkegaard e Fortini, in «L'ospite ingrato» 2, 1999, pp. 185-198, for a probing study of Fortini's protestant inclinations, especially when he was reading Kierkegaard (whom he went on to translate) and Karl Barth.

⁵ F. Fortini, *Saggi ed epigrammi* cit., p. 1231.

⁶ The passage recalled from *The Fifth of May* are the final six lines, ll. 103-108. Trans. J. Tusiani, *From Marino to Marinetti An Anthology of Forty Italian Poets*, New York, Baroque Press, 1974, p. 145.

rivoluzione francese (*History of the French Revolution*) and the *Storia della Colonna Infame* (*History of the Column of Infamy*), the latter being the historical text that Manzoni wished to include in the first publication of *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*).⁷

Fortini will draw the titles for two of his major books from Manzoni's prose: *Verifica dei poteri. Scritti di critica e di istituzioni letterarie* (*Testing the Powers. Writings on Criticism and the Literary Institutions*) is taken from Manzoni's history of the French Revolution: «I commissari della Nobiltà [...] esprimevano il timore che la verifica de' poteri in comune tirasse con sé la deliberazione in comune» («The commissioners of the Nobility [...] voiced the fear that the test of powers in common implied deliberation in common»)⁸. The significance is that Fortini, like Manzoni, possessed a passionate commitment to a just society and a keen awareness of the role of social institutions in the struggle for freedom and self-determination, and the interdependency of that discourse with the meditation on philosophical-religious matters.⁹

The second citation concerns Fortini's 1963 volume of poetry, *Una volta per sempre* (*Once and for All*) and is drawn from Manzoni's *Del romanzo storico* (*On the Historical Novel*), where Manzoni writes of «un vero veduto dalla mente per sempre o, per parlare con più precisione, irrevocabilmente» («a truth seen by the mind forever or, to speak more precisely, irrevocably»), a passage Fortini explicates as follows:¹⁰

⁷ See F. Fortini, *Manzoni*, in Id., *Le rose dell'abisso. Dialoghi sui classici italiani*, a cura di D. Santarone, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2000, pp. 84-104.

⁸ A. Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789, III*, cited in F. Fortini, *Verifica dei poteri. Scritti di critica e di istituzioni letterarie*, Torino, Einaudi, 1989, p. 7; eng. trans. A. Toscano, *A Test of Powers. Writings on Criticism and Literary Institutions*, London, Seagull, 2016, n.p. Subsequent translations from *Verifica dei poteri* are those of Toscano.

⁹ An important *inedito* (which I have not read) is the transcription of a transmission on Radio della Svizzera italiana, F. Fortini, *Alessandro Manzoni nei due secoli*, Franco Fortini Archive, University of Siena, F2a XVIII, 84, 38 cc. ds. and ms (1984). For an excellent treatment of Fortini's critical writing on Manzoni, including extensive commentary on this text, see F. Diaco, «Un luogo centrale della mente»: *Manzoni negli scritti critici di Fortini*, in «Allegoria», 79, 2022, pp. 28-65. Especially noteworthy are the scholar's treatments of the debates concerning the historical reception and canonicity of Manzoni's works (and to some extent Leopardi's), the psychological dimension of Fortini's relation to Manzoni, also as «il poeta della violenza» («the poet of violence») whose *Storia della colonna infame* is a profoundly ethical probe into the abject abuses of power in 17th century Lombardy, and a discussion in a Manzonian key of Fortini's espousal of the political unconscious (Jameson) as integral to his critical method. See F. Diaco, «Un luogo centrale della mente» cit., p. 49: «Per Fortini [...] è il dittico Leopardi-Manzoni a porsi al centro di problemi che dal XIX secolo si protraggono fino ad oggi».

¹⁰ A. Manzoni, *Del romanzo storico*, in Id., *Tutte le opere*, a cura di M. Martelli, Firenze, Sansoni, 1973, p. 1731: «un vero veduto dalla mente per sempre o, per parlare con più precisione, irrevocabilmente», cited by F. Fortini, in *Notizie e dichiarazioni di scrittori*, in «Rassegna della letteratura italiana», 85, 1981, p. 441.

This means that there exists an objective, natural, historical truth, and a mind that confronts it (as distinct from the scientific cognitive view) and grasps it in a formal dimension. Whoever has seen that truth once and for all cannot disregard it; one who does is lost. Great poetry demands the same: it is an intimately dialectical entity, with a beginning and an end, demanding imitation and aiming to endow our existence with purpose and form.¹¹

In the mid-1950s, together with Angelo Romanò and Giovanni Giudici, Fortini was drawn to the poetry of the *Inni sacri* and the choruses of the tragedies, especially *Adelchi*, finding in the percussive rhythms of their hymnological style a welcome alternative to the prevailing lyric style of the Novecento. Fortini suggests that Manzoni's lyric style fell out of favor due to the disappearance of a public familiar with popular hymns and songs, whether of the evangelical church or the socialist movement.¹² Indeed the style and rhythms of the *Inni sacri* – created by the use of *versi tronchi* and *versi sdrucchioli* in rhyme, a conspicuous use of hyperbaton and iteration, and a grave and sublime lexis – sounded quite archaic to the modern ear.

Fortini approaches Manzoni's poetry with a philological sensitivity to the physical activity of writing and notating, and the time periods – the long delays when drafted texts or fragments lay fallow before being returned to – and the impact of changing historical situations on Manzoni's decisions to alter or suppress a text. He has a special interest in the hymns *Pentecoste* and *Ognissanti* (the latter only concluded in 1859), including early drafts that are later abandoned, not least because Manzoni seems to have borrowed lexis from Leopardi.¹³ With respect to *Pentecoste*, an early draft contained several strophes in which the poem's pious request to the Holy Spirit to protect the poor and the humble is extended to the revolutionaries struggling in the Caribbean and South America to throw off their oppressors. When Manzoni returns to the draft after the death of Napoleon and the tumultuous events of 1820 and 1821, the times have changed and he removes those stanzas.¹⁴

¹¹ F. Fortini, *Preface*, in *Summer is Not All. Selected Poems in Italian and English*, eng. trans. P. Lawton, London, Carcanet, 1992, pp. 11-12.

¹² F. Fortini, *Manzoni* cit.

¹³ See F. Fortini, *Nuovi saggi italiani*, Milano, Garzanti, 1987, pp. 51-52, where Fortini cites conspicuous lexical evidence that Manzoni read *La ginestra* (published in 1845), and naturally, as one would suppose, earlier Leopardian texts, before he wrote *Ognissanti*.

¹⁴ See M. Palumbo, *Fortini critico e il "caso Manzoni"*, in «Critica letteraria», IV, 117, 2002, pp. 717-724, who elucidates Fortini's idea that with Napoleon dead and the tide of popular revolts in the Caribbean and elsewhere stemmed, Manzoni represses his earlier inclination to heroize the armed peasants of Haiti as agents of a liberation at once revolutionary and Christian. The

In order to better understand the appeal of the *Inni sacri*, it is best to reject the cliché, in the words of Giovanni Giudici, that they are «antilyrical, ideologically petty, prosodically squalid, boring, hindered by moderatism and Lombard conformism, confessional or (it amounts to the same) recommendable for reasons of content», as such a view fails to acknowledge how in Manzoni «poetry becomes its own theatre, the page becomes a stage, the voice (of the author or reader) a mask», and how such poetry constitutes «a model of poetic asceticism, of poetic sanctity».¹⁵ Giudici clarifies the importance of irony as a structuring principle of the *Inni sacri*: irony is the hidden force of their self-imitative and theatrical approach to the sublime and the simultaneous recognition of its unattainability. Thus – and here the bond with Fortini is most evident – the language of the *Inni sacri* is *other* from the language of discursive prose and is distant from any kind of proselytizing religiosity.

Even as he explores the novel paradigm presented by the *Inni sacri* in contemporary poetics, Fortini retains his scholarly interest in Manzoni's philosophical and historical writings, noting how in Manzoni «moral freedom» affirms the «absolute responsibility» of humanity to not accuse the innocent, to not be an accomplice to violence and torture and to defend justice. While Manzoni's ardent defense of moral justice reflects his Catholicism, it is possible to retain that goal, writes Fortini, outside of the faith (here with reference to Manzoni's invoking of the concept of Providence in the introduction to the *Storia della Colonna Infame*):

We must have the ability and open-mindedness to see that for the word of God we can substitute [...] a transcendent value, a goal proposed to all of humanity. [...] Now we can substitute for the word 'Providence' one or two words that in less theological terms indicate [...] the relationship between the past and future, the 'Foresight' or the tension of humanity toward a final goal...¹⁶

critic also discusses the alternative interpretation of Umberto Eco, for whom the changes to *Pentecoste* have nothing to do with repressing the historic content of the earlier draft and everything to do with finding an adequate formal rhythm in the mixture of *versi piani*, *sdruciolati* and *tronchi*.

¹⁵ G. Giudici, *Per forza e per amore: critica e letteratura (1966-1995)*, Milano, Garzanti, 1996, pp. 143-144: «antilyrici, ideologicamente angusti, prosodicamente squallidi, noiosi, viziosi di moderatismo e di perbenismo lombardo, confessionali o (che è lo stesso) raccomandabili per ragioni di contenuto. [...] [L]a poesia diventa teatro di se stessa, la pagina palcoscenico, la voce (dell'autore o del lettore) maschera»; «un modello di ascetismo poetico, di santità poetica».

¹⁶ F. Fortini, *Saggi ed epigrammi* cit., p. 1798: «[D]obbiamo avere la capacità e la spregiudicatezza di vedere che alla parola di Dio possiamo sostituire, ad esempio, un valore trascendente, una mèta che si propone a tutta l'umanità. [...] Ora noi possiamo, alla parola Provvidenza, sostituire una o più parole che in termini meno teologici indichino [...] il rapporto fra passato

Fortini believes that Manzoni was poorly understood in the 20th century when some of his major works were considered to be out-of-date. He argues that Manzoni matters more than ever today as a figure of mediation between history and metahistory and as one who envisioned a classless society: «Was the “Christian people” that Manzoni augured in the final stanzas of his ode “Pentecost” an interclassist myth? Certainly, but it was also a figure of what lies beyond classes».¹⁷

In response to a critique of Manzoni’s lyrics by Andrea Zanzotto, Fortini admits that the lyrics contain «powerful dissonances» but clarifies that these «dissonances truly do not arise from “the intrinsic antinomy of [the Manzonian] eros” alone but [...] out of Manzoni’s having confronted the “myth” of an objective and choral lyric».¹⁸ Furthermore, he states, «To retrace [...] the path that Manzoni took, and to draw from his prose the unique lesson of his poetry, would mean to give one’s blessing to the ideology of *indistinction*, which is, in a profound sense, the ideology of a century of the avant-garde».¹⁹

If we now turn our attention to Fortini’s poetic derivations from Manzoni, it will be useful to recall the underlying premise of the title *Una volta per sempre*, that poetry pursues an objective truth in history. A key poetic text that centered on such an historic and moral truth is *Il nido* in *Questo muro* (*This Wall*), a poem that incorporates elements of an early draft of Manzoni’s *La Pentecoste*.²⁰ *Il nido* is an allegorical *tour de force* of six five-line stanzas alternating between roman type (stanzas 1, 3, 5) and italics (stanzas 2, 4, 6).²¹ The differing fonts serve to indicate, on the one hand, a temporal present in which the poet lies awake in bed listening to a family of birds nesting in the wall of his home; and, on the other, his rec-

e futuro, la Preveggenza ossia la tensione dell’umanità ad un fine...». These remarks are part of a memo written on the back of the test of Fortini’s 1973 conference in Mexico, published as *Storia e antistoria nell’opera di Alessandro Manzoni*, in F. Fortini, *Saggi ed epigrammi* cit., pp. 1461-80.

¹⁷ F. Fortini, *Un giorno o l’altro*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2006, p. 453: «Il “popolo cristiano” che Manzoni auspicava nelle ultime strofe della *Pentecoste* era un mito interclassista? Certo, ma era anche figura di un al di là delle classi...».

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 453: «prepotenti stonature»; «quelle “prepotenti stonature” non procedono davvero soltanto dalla “antinomia intrinseca dell’eros” manzoniano ma [...] dall’avere il Manzoni affrontato il “mito” d’una lirica oggettiva e corale». Fortini disagrees with both Luzi and Zanzotto about the relative unimportance of Manzoni’s poetic example to the poets of today.

¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 453: «Ripercorrere [...] la via che Manzoni percorse, e dalla sua prosa cavare la sua unica lezione di poesia, vorrebbe dire piegare il capo alla ideologia della *indistinzione* che è, in senso profondo, l’ideologia vitalistica di un secolo di avanguardia».

²⁰ L. Lenzi, *Appunti su Manzoni in Fortini (e viceversa)*, in «Testo» 38, 2, 2017, pp. 37-53: p. 45.

²¹ See T.E. Peterson, *The Ethical Muse of Franco Fortini*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1997, pp. 150-153, for discussion of *Il nido*, and its reference to *Pentecoste*.

ollection of the historical situations of the Thirty Years War and the 1621 Austrian massacre of the protestants and related insights about human suffering. The poem, like many others in *Questo muro*, including reminiscences of the deceased colleagues Vittorio Rieser and Raniero Panzieri, is an example of the “spectral” style of the late Fortini, a style that increasingly finds him confronting his own mortality.

In *Appunti su Manzoni in Fortini (e viceversa)* Luca Lenzi considers Fortini's complex poetic relation with Manzoni, recognized as one of his major sources in the select company of Brecht, Dante and Goethe. In his discussions of Fortini's poetic derivations from Manzoni, notably from the *Inni sacri*, Lenzi lists a number of poems: *Coro di deputati (Foglio di via)*; *Parabola, Ventesimo congresso, Sansepolcro (Poesia e errore)*; *Il nido (Paesaggio con serpente)*; and *E il temporale, Mi hanno spiegato and Stanotte (Composita solvantur)*. The poetic derivations from Manzoni indicate a deep affiliation reflecting common philosophical and (meta)historical positions in which the suffering of humanity, and humanity's quest for freedom, are central themes. The shared diction draws on the semantic fields of death and rebirth, the pathos of suffering, the savagery of violence and the sublime. Among the arch metaphors employed (also indicated by Lenzi) are the bird and the flower, representing for Manzoni the Cross and the hope of the resurrection and for Fortini the utopian transformation of society. Thematically, Fortini's borrowings share the evidence and deep structures of a Christian philosophy without the element of Christian faith.²² This philosophy – and here is Manzoni's genius – attaches to the biblical imagery of insemination, growth, incarnation, fertility, death, resurrection, maternity and the coexistence in the Church of brothers and sisters in community and communion. In doing so, it superimposes the time frames of prophecy (the eschatological) and utopia (classlessness), a fact that allows us to read Manzoni in secular, metahistoric terms: «Prophecy is rather a horizon. Associated by tradition with the “ultimate things”, with eschatology, it can instead be an historical horizon, a goal».²³

Fortini's debt to Manzoni derives from the contradiction he identifies in the Milanese poet's intellectual-spiritual personality: «If one considers the poetic profile of Manzoni the *creator*, one discovers that his greatness consists precisely in the result of contradictory tensions that Manzoni

²² Fortini attacks the Christian/atheist dichotomy that critics have employed to judge Manzoni, whose proponents fail to note the analytical power of Manzoni the social thinker and philosopher. See Fortini, *Saggi ed epigrammi* cit. p. 1464.

²³ F. Fortini, *Profezie e realtà nel nostro secolo*, Bari, Laterza, 1965, n.p.: «La profezia è invece un orizzonte. Associata per tradizione alle “cose ultime”, alla escatologia; ma può essere invece un orizzonte storico, un traguardo».

the *religious thinker* strove to combat».²⁴ While Manzoni never loses his rationalism, his casuistic discernment of subtle distinctions, he struggles with «an inextinguishable sense of guilt and degradation».²⁵ The years of his formation were replete with traumatic events: the living witness of Napoleon in Milan, the 1795 attack on a Milanese monarchist rebellion by Napoleon's artillery, the madness of his wife Enrichetta, the shocking news of Waterloo.²⁶ Politically, Manzoni wished at all costs to avoid a Robespierre type dictatorship from forming in Italy; thus he supported the moderate solution of Cavour, promoting liberal relations between the illuminated aristocracy, the upper middle class manufacturing sector, and the artisans.²⁷ Yet he also foresaw the consequences of this solution: the destruction of the Christian-agrarian economy by the industrial revolution. He saw that the liberal government was not committed to the Christian morality and struggle for justice. Herein lies Manzoni's contradiction, in his perception of «the desperate threat to the metahistorical dimension of man, the loss of the sense of the eternal and the immutable»:²⁸

What lies beyond history, in what history does not say [...]? [...] It is the theme of the unknown and the reason of the lives of disappeared peoples and forgotten individuals; it is not just a matter of the movement of the liberal and humanitarian conscience [...], [but] of the *radical opposition between what appears and what is, what passes away and what remains*.²⁹

It is critical for Fortini that Manzoni's metahistorical thought be seen in his poetry as well as the historical writings. If modern readers are not drawn to the verse, that is due to the «area» of poetic thought it encompasses, which has its basis in Latin Christian hymnography and the elegy.³⁰ The appeal of Manzoni's hymns is not their clarity but their obscurity, in their being «a speech that is in no way assimilable to discursive-prose speech and which, at the same time, is presented as a *public*

²⁴ F. Fortini, *Saggi ed epigrammi* cit., pp. 1471-1472: «[S]e ci volgiamo a considerare il profilo poetico del *creatore* Manzoni, si scopre che la sua grandezza consiste proprio nel risultato delle tensioni contraddittorie che il *pensatore religioso* Manzoni si sforzò di combattere»

²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 1465: «un senso inestinguibile di colpa e di degradazione».

²⁶ I draw here on Fortini's words in *Saggi ed epigrammi*, cit., p. 1466.

²⁷ See F. Fortini, *Saggi ed epigrammi* cit., p. 1467.

²⁸ *Ivi*, p. 1469: «la disperante minaccia alla dimensione metastorica dell'uomo, la perdita del senso dell'eterno e dell'immutabile».

²⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 1473-1474: «[C]he cosa c'è al di là della storia, in quel che la storia non dice [...]? [...] È il tema degli ignoti e della ragione di vita dei popoli scomparsi e degli individui dimenticati; non si tratta solo del movimento di coscienza liberale e umanitario [...], si tratta della *opposizione radicale fra ciò che appare e ciò che è, quel che passa e quel che permane*».

³⁰ F. Fortini, *Un giorno o l'altro* cit., p. 452.

communication».³¹ As we read the *Inni sacri* we see Manzoni's aspirations for the liberation of the oppressed and his abhorrence of violence, including revolutionary violence, and his commitment to a universal and catholic reconciliation under God. Given this situation, the reader of Manzoni's verse encounters a «semiotics of the socially repressed», which it is the critic's job to unearth.³² Today's readers have lost touch with the poetic language of a text like *Dagli atrî muscosi* (*From the mossy atria*), the chorus of Act III of *Adelchi*.³³ Yet such texts still possess a certain urgency as they speak to our current historical predicament and testify to the impact that poetry can have in elucidating the exclusion from history of entire populations.

III. Leopardi

Fortini's first essay on Leopardi, *La leggenda di Recanati* (1946), addresses the late 19th and 20th century reception of the poet, starting with De Sanctis, who recognizes the dialectic between Leopardi's «faith» and «scepticism», a dichotomy Fortini expands into that between Leopardi's elevation of poetic form and his historical disillusionment.³⁴ De Sanctis provides a reliable basis from which to resist such 20th century critics as Solmi and Rigoni who view Leopardi's poetry under the sign of intimism and purity and ignore its political value as a poetry of revolt against the status quo and the moderate progressivism of 19th century Italy. Fortini opposes the pseudo-hermetic interpretations of Leopardi as a «pure»

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 453: «una parola che in nessun modo è assimilabile alla parola discorsivo-prosastica e che, nello stesso tempo, si dispone come comunicazione pubblica».

³² L. Lenzi, *Appunti su Manzoni in Fortini (e viceversa)* cit., p. 40: «semiotica del rimosso sociale». Lenzi provides a robust list of Fortini's poetic derivations from Manzoni, notably from the *Inni sacri* and from drafts of the *Inni* that were eventually rejected by Manzoni, and from the moral essays.

³³ See F. Fortini, *Altezza della situazione, o perché si scrivono poesie* (*What is Called For, or Why Poems are Written*), in «Officina», 3, 1955, pp. 96-104: p. 103: «L'enorme falsità del presente rende possibili l'ironia, la satira, l'epigramma; il confronto ormai quotidiano fra destino nazionale e destino mondiale rende possibile la comprensione e la traduzione di testi quali *Dei Sepolcri* e *Dagli atrî muscosi* [...]; la contraddizione di classe, il tragico delle vite e delle generazioni lasciate ai margini del moto storico, la dialettica fra destino individuale ed evento collettivo riaprono la possibilità di un discorso e di un verso pronunciato e quindi del teatro» («The enormous falseness of the present renders irony, satire and epigram possible; as one faces the now incessant comparisons between national and world destinies, the understanding and translation of texts such as *Dei Sepolcri* and *Dagli atrî muscosi* grows impossible [...]; class contradictions, the tragedy of the lives and generations left on the margins of movement of history, the dialectic between individual destiny and collective events restart the possibility of a pronounced speech and poetry and therefore of theater»).

³⁴ F. Fortini, *La leggenda di Recanati*, in «Il Politecnico», 33-34, 1946, pp. 587-601.

poet and places into relief the imperfect poet who erred and contradicted himself, and expressed his pessimism openly through verse to the world and not simply to a coterie of literati. What emerges in *La leggenda* (and will persist in Fortini's later critical work) is Fortini's high estimation of Leopardi's thought as it arises from the form and language of his poetry, which is more heterogeneous than posterity has generally recognized. A keyword that recurs in this regard is «gioia» («joy»), which appears for the first time in *La leggenda* and then appears in the titles of two subsequent essays on Leopardi's poetry discussed below, the 1967 *Il passaggio della gioia* (*The Passage of Joy*, in *Verifica dei poteri*) and Fortini's last written essay, *The Transit of Joy*. In the 1967 essay Fortini addresses the fact that a poet's formal choices – of style, genre, and diction – do not simply impact their thought but constitute it.³⁵ His remarks are intended to free Leopardi from the grips of aestheticist criticism and defend the autonomy of his poetry from his prose. The multiple dimensions of Leopardi's thought are seen to express a historical contradiction whereby the joy expressed in poetry – in the moment, in the clarity of vision, in the force of a feeling rendered through song – can never be reduced to, or summarized by, rational discourse:

What is the concrete contribution to “thought” that results from the lived contradiction, so often described by Leopardi, between the mythic-irrational lie and its consoling effects? What support to thought results when the lie is surpassed by poetic writing?³⁶

Fortini's defense of poetic form in Leopardi (reminiscent of Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*) is a rejection of those critics who reduce the poet's work to aesthetics, on the one hand, or ideology on the other. While Fortini feels that Leopardi's «antispiritualistic thought» has been undervalued, he disputes Timpanaro's view of Leopardi's poetry as «something ineffable and untranslatable, something “pure” and thus separate from “thought”».³⁷

I think I must affirm that the verbal organisms of the *Canti*, with their phonetic, lexical, syntactic, metrical plexuses, with the play of figures of discourse and stylistic differences and tensions in balance and imbalance

³⁵ F. Fortini *Verifica dei poteri* cit., pp. 249-254.

³⁶ *Ivi*, p. 252: «Qual è il concreto apporto di “pensiero” che consegue alla vissuta contraddizione, tante volte descritta da Leopardi, fra menzogna mitico-irrazionale e suoi effetti consolatori? Che è implicito nel superamento di essa, di fatto, nella scrittura poetica?».

³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 251: «un alcunché di ineffabile e di intraducibile, di “puro” e dunque di separato dal “pensiero”».

[...] say something [...] that critical analysis cannot [...] translate in discursive terms.³⁸

He wrote something similar with regard to Goethe's poetic language in a letter to Leo Spitzer; Fortini states that Goethe's poetry resembles a moral truth in its very structure because of its artful use of rhetorical figures and *Gleichnis* (parable, allegory).³⁹ He would identify the same vertical and transcendent power – though in contrasting ways – in the poetry of Manzoni and Leopardi. As for the distinction of Leopardi's poetic thought from his prose thought, Fortini argues that in the former there is joy, despite the historical and existential contradictions of a life weighed down by desperation, boredom, and tedium:

In short one cannot omit from Leopardi's "thought" the enormous *joy* of the formal adventure, or rather the contradiction that the history of Leopardi criticism has so variously intoned. Because one can and must definitively tear away Leopardi from the aestheticism of yesterday; but one cannot tear him away from the general condition of the times in which he wrote, the condition that determined him more than his culture and thought could know.⁴⁰

The value attributed to the poet's unawareness of the effects of the surrounding milieu on his verse is not peculiar to the early 19th century or to the cultural hinterlands of Recanati. What Fortini places into relief is the role of the unconscious, not least the collective unconscious, in artistic creation. While he respected the ideological positions of Luporini and Timpanaro, which reframed the political figure of Leopardi, Fortini retained a different hermeneutical approach to Leopardi's lyrics as being

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 251 «[P]enso dover affermare che gli organismi verbali dei *Canti*, con i loro plessi fonetici, lessicali, sintattici, metrici, con il giuoco delle figure di discorso e degli scarti stilistici e le tensioni in equilibrio e in squilibrio [...] non dicano qualcosa [...] che l'analisi critica può [...] tradurre in termini discorsivi».

³⁹ See *ivi*, p. 213. The poem is Goethe's *Wanderer's Nightsong II (Über allen Gipfeln)*, about which Fortini suggests that Goethe's desire that the reader not simply decode the poem's nocturnal context as meaning peace and death, but understand that it expresses a syntax of the mind: «fatevi una mente ed un cuore capaci di leggere *Gleichnisse* in ogni oggetto naturale ma di leggerli in modo veloce, immediato; [...] abbiate una sintassi dell'animo simile alla sintassi di questi versi» («fashion yourself a mind and a heart capable of reading *Gleichnisse* in every natural object, but quickly, immediately; [...] Let the syntax in your mind be similar to the syntax of these verses»).

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 253: «[N]on si può insomma omettere dal "pensiero" leopardiano l'enorme *gioia* dell'avventura formale, ossia quella contraddizione che la storia della critica leopardiana ha tanto variamente intonato. Perché si può e si deve strappare definitivamente Leopardi all'estetismo di ieri; ma non si può strappararlo alla condizione generale del tempo in cui scrisse, condizione che lo determinava più di quanto la sua cultura e il suo pensiero potessero sapere».

rooted in the perceptions and the threshold experience of *poiesis* itself, that is, the activity of making something new and conveying a form of knowledge that was infrangible and distinct from discursive knowledge.

What form this threshold of consciousness might take in historical terms is touched on by Fortini in a note from 1975 where he discusses the regressive, pre-bourgeois environs of Recanati that excluded Leopardi from contact with those intellectuals who lived in more progressive cultural climates, and that he suffered that regression psychologically as «the return to a phase of development that normally we consider to be surpassed, [but] not an intellectually and morally negative meaning».⁴¹ Thus the regression imposed on Leopardi from without catalyzes a different kind of regression from within, a visionary and utopian return to the freshness of youth.

In his essay on *Sopra il ritratto di una bella donna* (*On the Portrait of a Beautiful Woman*) Fortini elevates those aspects of this late poem – after the *Aspasia* cycle, forming a group with *Il tramonto della luna* (*The Setting of the Moon*) and *La ginestra* (*The Broom*) – that commentators have averted, notably «the stylistic use of musical blocks that in the late Leopardi tends to diminish the apparent coherence of rational linkages, favoring however a deeper rationality».⁴² Leopardi's shift to a more overtly musical and iterative poetic language, including common lexis repeated from poem to poem, is said to be a «superbly manneristic plan that is entrusted to the repetition of similar though never identical linkages and forms, organized in intermediate macrostructures between the single lyric and the entire collection».⁴³ One has the realization reading *Sopra il ritratto di una bella donna* and *Il tramonto della luna* that one is approaching the threshold of a truth, even as one is never far removed from the clash of worldly contradictions. The consummate example of this situation is found in *La ginestra*, where the poet's metahistorical response to Nature's devastating destruction is that humanity must band together in civic polity if only for their own survival.⁴⁴

⁴¹ F. Fortini, *Un giorno o l'altro* cit., p. 497: «[il] ritorno ad una fase di sviluppo della personalità che consideriamo normalmente oltrepassata, non un significato intellettualmente e moralmente negativo».

⁴² F. Fortini, *Nuovi saggi italiani* cit., p. 81: «l'uso stilistico dei blocchi musicali che nel tardo Leopardi tende a diminuire la coerenza apparente dei nessi ragionativi, a favore però di una razionalità più profonda».

⁴³ *Ivi*, 82: «proposito superbamente manieristico che si affida alla ripetizione di nessi e forme simili e tuttavia mai identiche, organate in macrostrutture intermedie fra la singola lirica e l'intera raccolta».

⁴⁴ When I visited Fortini in his home on January 6, 1987 he was eager to discuss G. Contini's recently published anthology *Letteratura italiana del Risorgimento, 1789-1861*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1986, which contained the philologist's commentary on *La ginestra*.

One finds an echo of the Leopardi of *La ginestra* in the conclusion of the twelve-line lyric, *Il sole scalda*, from *Questo muro*: «La mente turbata dall'eco del secolo atroce / intenda a poco a poco la benevolenza della luce» («May the mind / disturbed by the echo of the atrocious century / gradually understand the benevolence of light».⁴⁵ As the poet contemplates the morning light on a seaside terrace, amidst acacias and pines, his troubled mind cannot «ricevere [il] piacere» («receive [the] pleasure») of the idyllic setting; yet by articulating that contradiction he wills the mind to extend beyond itself to comprehend the goodness of the light. The syntagm «secolo atroce» calls to mind the «Secol superbo e sciocco» («Proud and foolish century») of *La ginestra* which denounced the vainglory and ignorance of contemporary society.⁴⁶ Also in *Questo muro* is this ironic calque of lines just below those just cited *La ginestra* – «Non io / con tal vergogna scenderò sotterra» («Not I / will descend underground with such shame» – «Con tale vergogna scenderò / i seminterrati delle cliniche» («With such shame I will descend / into the half-basements of clinics».⁴⁷

In the very late essay *The Transit of Joy* Fortini returns to the theme of the passage of joy discussed in 1967.⁴⁸ Here Fortini qualifies Leopardi's late mannerism as a style that favors a deeper reasoning than what is available through logical argumentation, as it taps into the originary nature of Leopardi's poetic thought, revealing itself, precisely, as the «transit of joy» afforded by the ability of art and specifically poetry to convey the exhilarating sense of being alive. Fortini clarifies that despite Leopardi's profound pessimism, his dismissal of history and his atheism, one finds joy in his observations of reality and «the rhythm of the prosody», reminiscent of the popular song: «[It seems that] the intensely *vivifying* character of Leopardi's poetry [...] should be attributed to the inclusion of brilliantly clear features of objective reality, positive and – in this sense – joyous and happy».⁴⁹ Fortini disputes interpretations of the poet of Recanati as a romantic in the pathetic and idyllic sense (interpretations that go back to Croce but had seen a revival) or in the progressive political sense associated with the Italian Romantic movement. At the basis of Leopardi's poetry lies a contradiction, between rationalism and the escape from it: «The most obvious and memorable of the contradictions

⁴⁵ F. Fortini, *Tutte le poesie*, a cura di L. Lenzini, Milano, Mondadori, 2014, p. 365.

⁴⁶ G. Leopardi, *La ginestra o il fiore del deserto*, in Id., *Poems*, eng. trans. A. Vivante, Wellfleet (MA), Delphinium Press, 1988, p. 63.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem.* F. Fortini, *Il seme*, in Id., *Tutte le poesie* cit., p. 320.

⁴⁸ The unpublished Italian text of *The Transit of Joy* is found in the Archive of the Franco Fortini Study Center in Siena.

⁴⁹ F. Fortini, *The Transit of Joy*, in G. Leopardi, *Canti*, eng. trans. P. Lawton, Dublin, University of Dublin Press, 1996, p. 17.

are between arguments (through expressions, messages) of an existential nature and ecstatic apparitions, virtual “exits from the self”.⁵⁰ Moreover, we owe to Fortini the lesson of the dialectic in Leopardi between the theory of illusions, as manifest in the verse, and the stark state of disillusionment when faced by the political reality of his time, both of which are expressed in his poetry.

In this final essay Fortini finds in Leopardi a catholic despite himself, a believer who in transferring the responsibility for evil to Nature betrayed a continuing faith, a worldview complemented by the crispness of the senses, boldly self-referential in communicating its «transit of joy». What lies at the basis of Fortini’s reception of the *Canti*, more than Leopardi’s philological erudition and *sensismo* was Leopardi’s impeccable ear and extraordinary capacity to shape poetic signifiers into a music that related his perceptions and experience of the world. Thus the proper understanding of Leopardi’s theory of «illusions» is not the one volunteered by the aestheticist readings of the poet of the early 20th century.

As scholars have shown, Fortini’s poetic derivations from Leopardi traverse various stages, from an early attraction to the poet of the idylls, evident in his 1939 poem *Di Porto Civitanova*, to his late interest in the poems of Leopardi’s Neapolitan period. *Di Porto Civitanova* is an imitation of the Leopardian idyll in which the subject lingers about a port, a metaphor for his existential uncertainty and yearning for a place of quiet and repose. Luca Lenzini has identified lexical echoes in *Di Porto Civitanova* from no less than five poems of Leopardi (*Aspasia*, *La sera del dì di festa*, *Spento il diurno raggio*, *Le ricordanze*, *L’infinito*).⁵¹ The solution to the poem’s melancholy opening stanzas comes in the reconciliation of the final two stanzas, driven by the reminiscence of childhood. This latter theme constitutes, in Lenzini’s eyes, «una scena di fondazione» («a foundational scene») in Fortini that he presumably shares with Leopardi.⁵²

A questa riva mi ritrovo: stanco
 Ma non deluso. Povero; ma basta
 Che mi segga sul fianco d’una barca
 A riparo dell’aria
 Sibilante, perché le mie miserie
 Dimenticando e il mio penoso andare
 Tra i volti umani,

⁵⁰ *Ivi*, p. 15.

⁵¹ L. Lenzini, *Il paesaggio e la gioia. Osservazioni su Leopardi in Fortini*, in *Id.*, *Il poeta di nome Fortini. Saggi e proposte di lettura*, Lecce, Pietro Manni, 1999, pp. 49-72: p. 56.

⁵² *Ivi*, p. 65.

Come quando fanciullo oltre i miei colli
 Aspettavo bramoso il primo raggio
 Di sole, attenda ancora,
 Ma senza affanno e solo mesto, un cenno
 Un lume, un volo, una speranza, qualche
 Voce che dall'opaco mare chiami.⁵³

(I find myself on this shore, tired
 but not disappointed. Poor, but
 by sitting on the rail of a boat I
 am protected from the hissing
 air and forget my misery
 and painful passage
 among human faces,

as when a child I hoped, yearning
 beyond my hills for the first ray
 of sunlight to appear, I beg again
 to wait, sadly but without anxiety,
 for a sign, a light, a flight, a hope, a voice
 calling from the dark sea.)

While the overt lexical debts to the *Canti* in Fortini's verse are modest in number, the personal situation of isolation and exclusion, and the dream of a radically utopian transformation of society, are not. Fortini like Leopardi often based poems on empirical observations that he developed into more general, philosophical concepts, as in such poems as *Il sabato del villaggio* or *Il tramonto della luna*. Of the many Fortinian poems that fit this pattern, I limit myself to naming *Una facile allegoria* as an example of this movement from the concrete detail to a broad formulation about human existence.

In his late poetry Fortini is drawn to the late Leopardi who had moved to Naples and reflected that environment in his verse. Considered as a group, the Neapolitan poems support Fortini's thesis that the *Canti* is a centrifugal work. These include the Sepulchral poems and *La ginestra*, in which one sees the influence of the «cadaverous» Neapolitan baroque seeping into Leopardi's language.⁵⁴ Stylistically, in his discussion of these works Fortini notes a «prose» tendency which rejects the sublime and ethereal for the sake of what is grounded and concrete, exchanging the romantic impulse for a style closer to the mannerists of the 16th and 17th centuries. Thus lexically a tendency to repeat certain phrases with varia-

⁵³ F. Fortini, *Tutte le poesie* cit., pp. 31-32.

⁵⁴ F. Fortini, *Nuovi saggi italiani* cit., p. 84.

tions but also the use of twelve hapaxes in these final poems. Leopardi felt excluded from the reactionary status quo and also from the progressive intellectuals who opposed it: his conception of a radical transformation of society is salient in *La ginestra*, a text that Fortini sees as autobiographical.⁵⁵ There is a distinct overlap between the poems of *Composita solvantur* and the late poems of Leopardi that Fortini includes in his selection published by Paul Lawton: *La ginestra, Imitazione, Scherzo, Frammenti*:

The similarity is not just tonal: the subversion of laughter and the departure from oneself staged in both the remakes and versions call in either case for the bitter autoironic nonchalance of a poetry that recognizes its outdatedness and plays at demonstrating it, showing it can smile at its own undenied pretense to the truth, to the denunciation of an evil that – and here the distance emerges – in Leopardi is especially ontological, while in Fortini it is overtly historical-political.⁵⁶

While affirming that Leopardi was not one of the poets he regularly drew on in his verse, Fortini cites as an exception the late poem *Questo verso (This verse)*, which opens in a manner similar to Leopardi's *Il sogno*:

Notte ancora e la casa nel suo sonno.
Già sveglio, andavo alla finestra, aprivo
le imposte del terrazzo,
su quella ringhiera posavo la fronte.

(Still nighttime the house wrapped in sleep.
Already awake, I went to the window,
opened the shutters onto the balcony and
rested my head against the railing.)

Leopardi:

Era il mattino, e tra le chiuse imposte
per il balcone insinuava il sole

⁵⁵ R. Bonavita, *La scuola della gioia. Le "occasioni" leopardiane di Fortini*, in «Lospite ingrato», 4-5, 2001-2002, pp. 317-341, indicates Fortini's solidarity with Walter Benjamin, citing *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, a text in which Benjamin refers to the overturning of a corrupt historical order as a «tearing away» («strappare»).

⁵⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 320-321: «La somiglianza non è solo tonale: lo scoronamento del riso e l'uscita dal sé messa in scena nei rifacimenti e nelle versioni si vogliono in entrambe amara sprezzatura autoironica di una poesia che riconosce la propria inattualità e gioca ad esibirla, mostrando di saper sorridere della propria non rinnegata pretesa alla verità, alla denuncia di un male che – e qui inizia la distanza – in Leopardi è soprattutto ontologico, mentre in Fortini è dichiaratamente storico-politico».

nella mia cieca stanza il primo albore;

(Early morning, and between the closed shutters
the sun crept over the balcony
in my blind room the first rays of dawn): [T.P.]⁵⁷

In the first three stanzas of *Questo verso* Fortini recalls a scene from his boyhood when he awoke in the dark and stared out his window at the horizon of Florence as the first light of dawn appeared and he recalled being terrified of life and what it would bring, so that now – as an old man – he asks: Why pity the child, for what reason? The final two stanzas respond:

Rispondo che è pietà per l'avvenire,
per il patire interminato che
entro tanto splendore uno spavento
come una bestia immane dall'azzurro
annunziava a quel misero tremante
nella felicità che il pianto libera.
Da qui lo assisto, da qui ora lo consolo...

Poi quando i rami al raggio si avvivavano
della meravigliosa alba serena
l'Apparita lontana era speranza
al primo vento già volando questo verso.⁵⁸

(I reply: it is pity for the future, for the
endless suffering that, amid so much
splendor, struck fear into the lad, like a
huge beast from the blue, as he trembled
in the happiness freed by weeping.
From here I watch him, from here I console him...

Then when the branches came alive
in the calm and wondrous dawn, the distant hill
with its panorama of Florence was hope
as this verse flies away in the wind.)

What is especially Leopardian here is the movement from a specific memory to a general conclusion of a philosophical-metaphysical nature.

⁵⁷ For another use of this Leopardian image, see Fortini *Giardino d'estate, Pechino* (*Summer Garden, Beijing*), in Id., *Tutte le poesie* cit., p. 172: «chiuse le imposte» («the shutters closed»).

⁵⁸ «Apparita» is the name of an elevated locale on the outskirts of Florence that provides an excellent view of the city.

There is the pathos of a child's experience of isolation and fear about the future; there is the visual, scenic focus of the *eidōs*, a vision fueled by the hope of dawn. As in Leopardi's idylls, it is the visual sense that unlocks the poet's affect, as in his remembered scenes of his youth.

Fortini's poetic debts to Leopardi are not direct lexical or stylistic derivations so much as a sharing of «situations». As Franco articulated his poetics in 1955, modern poetry has been excessively centered on the (one) existential «situation», the plight of the self-involved poet, while what is called for today is a «poetry of situations»:

A poetry of *situations* is exactly the opposite: it is the discovery, the identification and the expression of new (or ancient) poetic places, *tòpoi*, Astyanax at the Scee, Buonconte and the rain, the young lad and the rose, Silvia singing. Of situations, as one says: dramatic situations. That is, poetry of «good subject matter» as Goethe would have put it.⁵⁹

Silvia, the deceased young woman of Recanati, is remembered by Leopardi for her song, or what might be called the «joy» of her presence, despite the agonizing permanence of her loss. This is the «contradiction» of poetry that Fortini returns to time and again when writing verse evocative of Leopardi: the idea that poetry yields joy and celebrates the joy of life, despite life's tragedies. A related *topos* are the poems of «visitation» which seem to derive from the same Leopardian tendency to dialogue with the dead (in the first instance, *Il custode*, and including the afterlife dream-visitations with Elio Vittorini, Vittorio Rieser, Vittorio Sereni, and several others).

IV. Conclusion

It is especially in the essays of *Nuovi saggi italiani* that Fortini's microscopic knowledge of the poetic works of Manzoni and Leopardi is impressive, rivaling that of the specialist. His knowledge is based on a philologist's study of the texts' composition and the biographical contexts and conditions of the authors as they composed them. Seemingly, when writing of one poet he has the other in mind. Moreover, in the late 1970s and 1980s, Fortini suggests possible influences and borrowings between the

⁵⁹ F. Fortini, *Altezza della situazione, o perché si scrivono poesie* cit., p. 104: «Una poesia di *situazioni* è tutto il contrario: è la scoperta, l'individuazione e l'espressione di nuovi (o antichi) luoghi poetici, *tòpoi*, Astyanax alle Scee, Buonconte e la pioggia, il fanciullo e la rosa, Silvia che canta. Di situazioni, come si dice: situazioni drammatiche. Cioè poesia del «buon soggetto» avrebbe detto Goethe».

two authors as concerns the late works of Leopardi that may have been impacted poetic works by Manzoni. Of great importance is the role played by ambiguity in both author's works, a trait not normally attributed to them: «the works [of Leopardi and Manzoni] reveal [...] that they owe much their life to the plurality, the more concealed the deeper, of “meanings” and thus of possible readings».⁶⁰

In his critical and poetic embrace of these two “classical romantics” Fortini rejects the customary dichotomy of tradition versus experimentalism and opts for a reburnished notion of the classical (as in his eponymous encyclopedia entry).⁶¹ Drawn to the European romantic tradition and its development of the tragic in diverse literary genres, and mindful of the tragic events of history, Fortini esteemed Manzoni and Leopardi equally. Despite their radically contrasting characters and attitudes toward the arguments of history and faith, Fortini identifies a complementarity between them based on their elevation of poetry as a sublime and often ironic means of pursuing the truth and their understanding of the poetic tradition as fundamentally prospective in nature and thus a guide to the future.

⁶⁰ F. Fortini, *Ventiquattro voci per un dizionario di lettere*, Milano, Mondadori, 1998: «le opere [di Leopardi e Manzoni] [...] rivelano [...] di dover gran parte della propria vita alla pluralità, tanto più profonda quanto più celata, dei loro “sensi” e quindi delle possibili letture».

⁶¹ F. Fortini, *Classico*, in Id., *Nuovi saggi italiani* cit., pp. 257-273.