

Chapter & Verse

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Suffering and Beauty: Giacomo Leopardi (1798 - 1837)



Although Giacomo Leopardi is one of Europe's greatest poets, his name is not widely known in Britain. This is perhaps partly due to the fact that the beautiful musicality of his Italian verse is notoriously difficult to translate.

Leopardi was born in the village of Recanati, near the Adriatic coast. His father was a once wealthy aristocrat who, due to a series of unwise investments, had fallen on hard times. However, after his marriage, his wife succeeded in largely restoring the family fortune. She was a lady of fanatical religiosity and was said only to leave home in order to attend the church was situated just fifty yards from the family palace. According to her son, she never mourned the death of her children but rejoiced that they were reunited with God. It was an age of high infant mortality and one of her children died at birth and three others were dead by the age of two.

It would be something of an understatement to state that Leopardi was unfortunate in his health. He only reached 4ft

7ins in height; he developed tuberculous of the spine which left him hunchbacked; he became blind in one eye; he suffered from asthma; a disorder of the spleen; dropsy; insomnia and chronic constipation. On the rare occasions when he set foot outside his door, the village children would throw stones at him and call him unflattering names. As the cultural critic, George Steiner has pointed out, so many of the very greatest writers have had serious physical afflictions: Milton became blind; Dostoevsky suffered from epilepsy; Proust's asthma was so severe that he frequently came close to suffocating and so on.

Leopardi never attended school but was educated by various priests at home. However, by the age of twelve, his knowledge was so vast that there was no point in employing any more tutors. His home contained one of the most extensive libraries in Europe and the poet read his way through it day after day and night after night. However, despite his adventures in reading, as he grew into young adulthood, he came to feel imprisoned in his home and in his village and longed to escape. However, each time he tried to leave, his over-protective father would not allow it. Relations between himself and his parents slowly deteriorated. When eventually he did succeed in escaping, he left with little or no money and he did not find the sense of freedom he longed for. He spent time in Rome, Florence and in Naples but he could not escape his inner loneliness and pain. He fell deeply in love on more than one occasion but this only gave rise to a deeper sense

of rejection. The German poet and dramatist, August von Platen described his first meeting with Leopardi, in Naples:

Leopardi is small and a hunchback, his face is pallid and suffering, and he makes his condition worse with his way of life, since he makes day of the night and vice versa; he lives one of the most miserable existences it is impossible to imagine.

When the poet walked the streets of Naples, dressed in ragged clothes, he would allow strangers to touch his hump as it was believed to proffer good fortune. They would also ask him for numbers which they would use in the national lottery.

Leopardi began writing poetry at an early age and he also translated the poetry of ancient Greece. He kept a journal of aphorisms and philosophical reflections which was only published some fifty years after his death and which was much admired by Schopenhauer. The complete collection which came to be known as *The Zibaldone* was not published until 1937. Despite his many sufferings, Leopardi had a deep love for the beauty of the world and a deep sense of longing for some mysterious otherness which he once briefly experienced but could not ever recover: all that remains is the longing, what the Welsh call *hiraeth* and which C.S. Lewis describes in his autobiography, *Surprised By Joy*:

The first is itself the memory of a memory. As I stood beside a flowering currant bush on a summer day there suddenly arose

in me without warning, and as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery. It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton's 'enormous bliss' of Eden (giving the full, ancient meaning to 'enormous') comes somewhere near it. It was a sensation, of course, of desire; but desire for what? Before I knew what I desired, the desire itself was gone, the whole glimpse... withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again, or only stirred by a longing for the longing that had just ceased.

One of most beautiful and moving poems in Leopardi's best known collection of poems, **I Canti** is also inspired by memories of childhood where the anticipation of pleasure is so much more pleasurable than its arrival.

Leopardi's 'holiday' never did arrive but his poetry steadily gained admirers. However, as is often the case, the admiration came too late and he died in Naples in 1837 during a cholera epidemic. Due to the intervention of a friend with the city authorities, he was spared the usual fate of cholera victims whose naked bodies were thrown into a pit and covered with lime. The poet's body was taken to the church of San Vitale. Just over a hundred years after his death, his remains were removed to the Park of Remembrance situated in the hills above Naples. His tomb was declared a national monument.

Saturday Evening In The Village

*The girl comes from the fields,
at sunset,
carrying her sheaf of grass: in her fingers
a bunch of violets and roses:
she's ready, as before,
to wreath her hair and bodice,
for tomorrow's holiday.
The old woman sits spinning,
facing the dying sunlight,
on the stairway, with her neighbours,
telling the tale of her own young days,
when she dressed for the festival,
and still slim and lovely,
danced all evening, with those young
boys, companions of her fairer season.
Already the whole sky darkens,
the air turns deep blue: already
shadows of hills and roofs return,
on the young moon's pale rising.
Now the bells are witness
to the coming holiday:
you would say the heart
might take comfort from the sound.
A gang of little boys
shout in the tiny square,
leaping here and there,
making a happy din:
and the farmhand, whistling,
returns for his simple meal,
dreams of his day of rest.*

*When the other lights are quenched, all round,
and everything else is silent,
I hear the hammer ringing, I hear
the carpenter sawing: he's still awake
in the lamplight, in his shut workshop,
hurrying and straining,
to finish his task before dawn.
This is the best of the seven days,
full of hope and joy:
tomorrow the hours will bring
anxiety and sadness, and make each
turn, in thought, to their accustomed toil.*

*Lively boy,
your life's sweet flowering
is like this day of gladness,
a clear day, unclouded,
that heralds life's festival.
Enjoy the sweet hour, my child,
this pleasant, delightful season.
I'll say nothing, more: let it not grieve you
if your holiday, like mine, is slow to arrive.*