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Giacomo Leopardi in the Anthropocene: Translating the non-human from animals to AI

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Introduction: A cultural history of the Other

A nineteenth-century poet from Italy, visionary philosopher and systems subverter, Giacomo Leopardi (Recanati 1798 – Naples 1837) sensed what we have come to call the Anthropocene. His writings capture in cogent and moving manners the challenges of an Anthropocene age characterized by boundary crossing, mass extinction, human-machine interaction, decaying or imaginary civilizations, expanding galaxies and interspecies (un)communication. For example, the *Operette Morali* [Small moral works] (1827), a collection of twenty-four fictional dialogues exploring cultural, natural and planetary themes, deploys an ecological imagination that 'furnish[es] grounds for a less imbalanced relationship between the human species and the natural [and technological] world[s]' (Harrison 2019: 125). Leopardi's post-human vision is equally at work in *Canti* (1835), a collection of forty-one poems – ranging from dramatic monologues to translations and from epistles to elegies – which, by shifting the focus from a Romantic 'hypertrophic … human subjectivity' to a 'natural non-human object', testifies to 'Leopardi's protoecological poetry of enquiry'(Pellecchia 2020 111). Similarly, the *Zibaldone* (1898–1900), Leopardi's posthumous monument and the immense notebook that he kept for most of his life (the manuscript counts more than 4,500 pages), explores diversity in its many forms – linguistic, cultural, historical, disciplinary, biological and ontological. The diary tackles numberless themes, from politics to emotions, from philology

to astronomy and from cosmology to the meaning(lessness) of life, while the narrative voice meanders, amends, translates and contradicts itself (Piperno 2017: 36) in an attempt to capture the vertiginous plurality of the world. It seems to me that this style, known as 'pensiero in movimento' (thinking in motion), is an expression of Leopardi's endeavour to engage with the Others that populate our past and present existence, as well as our visions of the future.[1]

From its origins as a geological term to its 'spread as a cultural *zeitgeist*' (Malhi 2017: 81), the Anthropocene is a complex notion whose various facets and definitions invite us to rethink long-standing distinctions between what counts as Self or Other, culture or nature, mind or matter. By exploring notions and experiences of alterity, this essay aims to reveal, through the prism of Leopardi's writing, the contribution of translation and translation studies to our understanding of the Anthropocene age. I chose the framework of translation because I see it as a 'science-art of alterity' (Arnaldi 2022: 1), one that permits us to transcend our own physical and cultural conditions to imagine alternative world-views and ways of living.

Moving from these premises, the present study will contribute a new chapter to the cultural histories of the Anthropocene through the radical lens of Leopardi's literary writing. I will discuss passages from the *Canti*, *Operette Morali* and *Zibaldone* to explore his poetic prefiguring of the Anthropocene as an encounter with, and discourse about, alterity. To do so, I will use a methodology that combines two symbiotic frameworks, close reading and translation studies. As a premise and key to these texts, notions of translation can help investigate precisely those dynamics of Self-Other communication, coexistence and interaction that lie at the heart of Anthropocentric debates.

First, I will discuss what these notions of translation are, how they were formed historically and the extent to which they resonate with Leopardi's cultural history of the Other; second, I will apply this conceptual framework to the close reading of selected animal, celestial and robotic texts by Leopardi. The aim of this essay is therefore twofold: (1) to suggest that cultural history has a fundamentally literary-translational engine, one that has remained forgotten despite the discipline's new and emerging directions in the face of the unprecedented (Handley, McWilliam and Noakes 2018, e.g., overlooks it) and (2) to examine how translation and translation studies can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of human and non-human interactions in the Anthropocene era. As we shall see, there is indeed a remarkable resonance between recent theories of translation and Leopardi's writing.

Historical perspectives on translation and alterity

The link between translation and alterity has deep historical roots. In modern times, it was first envisioned by the German Romantics, especially by Friedrich Schleiermacher in his 1813 lecture to the Berlin Academy of Science (now available in Venuti 2012: 43–63), subsequently explored by Walter Benjamin in his 1923 essay 'The Task of the Translator' (Arendt 1968: 69–82), and eventually theorized over the course of the twentieth century by a number of translation studies scholars including George Steiner (1998), Jacques Derrida (1982), Antoine Berman (1992) and Lawrence Venuti (1995). There indeed seems to be continuity between Leopardi's translational thought, as I will describe it in the next section, and the branch of translation studies which advocates the presence of the foreign in the translated cultures and texts (examples of foreign presence can include linguistic deviations as well as unfamiliar concepts and discourses).

Walter Benjamin authored what is still considered the manifesto of the otherness of languages. In his 1923 essay, considerations about poetry, translation, theology and other forms of estrangement associated with the experience of encountering the alien are intertwined. For Benjamin, translation is a mode of alterity, one that manifests itself not just in literal or unidiomatic renditions of the original text – 'the interlingual version of the Scriptures [being] the prototype or ideal of all translation' (1968: 81) – but also in a shift of focus from the familiar to the foreign, and from the target culture and its readers to the source or erased text:

> In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. … No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener. (69)
>
> All translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages. (74)

In these passages, a supra-linguistic idea of translation emerges. Rather than simply referring to the transfer of meaning from a language A to a language B, translation can be a way of thinking about the foreign, the distant and the unknown, be it a language, a culture, a different species, an ancient civilization and God, the divine representing an extreme example of alterity (Arnaldi 2021: 13).

Benjamin's essay had a considerable impact on the shaping of contemporary translation theories linked to notions of alterity; it also planted the seed for a hermeneutical comprehension of translation, which, broadly understood,

can include the realm of intralingual (within the same language), interlingual (between languages) and intersemiotic (across media and non-verbal sign systems) transfers to virtually encompass all forms of communication.

In *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (1975), George Steiner develops Benjamin's double idea of translation as alterity, and of translation as a hermeneutic act transcending the purely linguistic sphere. In the 'Preface to the Second Edition' (1998), Steiner states that

> translation is formally and pragmatically implicit in *every* act of communication, in the emission and reception of each and every mode of meaning, be it in the widest semiotic sense or in more specifically verbal exchanges. To understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate. (xii)

For Steiner, translation is *the* mode of human speech, even when it is intralingual or monoglot (see Arnaldi 2022: 6). In the same book, he postulates a translation model, named the 'hermeneutic motion', whereby every act of communication, and therefore translation, unfolds according to a four-fold movement which progressively illustrates our encounter with the Other through acts of (1) trust, (2) aggression, (3) embodiment and (4) restitution (1998: 315). In every translational/relational endeavour – on linguistic, cultural and biological levels (e.g. through our interactions with viruses and bacteria) – we encounter an Other, may experience loss and breakage or inflict violence. Steiner sees in the 'enactment of reciprocity', or restitution, that is, the stage that allows us to restore balance, '"an act of double entry" seeking to equalise outflows and inflows of energy in a way that reproduces the enigmatic dynamics of otherness and self-definition' (Arnaldi 2022: 6). In this sense, 'the hermeneutic motion is an ethical movement, in that it points to a way of preserving the Self without rejecting the Other' (ibid.).

Validating the idea that translation is a prototypical locus of alterity, Antoine Berman identified twelve deforming tendencies in translation which function as markers of estrangement (1992): among them are rationalization, clarification, expansion, the destruction of vernacular network or their exotism and the effacement of the superimposition of languages. In *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany* (1992, first published in French in 1984), he famously described translation as the 'trial of the foreign', which suggests that 'translation constitutes the ultimate cognitive experience of alterity' (Brisset 2003: 101). Even though Berman's study focuses on concepts of literary translation in the German Romantic era, analysing figures such as Goethe, Novalis, Hölderlin and Schleiermacher himself, its results can be applied to contexts other-than-literary, as well as to different times and spaces.

Drawing upon this line of translational thinking, in the 1990s Lawrence Venuti defined as 'foreignization' the process whereby the uncanny and often disturbing existence of the Other is not lost, manipulated or effaced in the transmission of texts, concepts or experiences; the opposite of 'foreignization', 'domestication' refers to a type of translational vision and practice in which the original, foreign elements are concealed or eradicated in order to create a familiar experience for the target audiences (1995, 1998).

Venuti argues in favour of foreignization as a stronghold against 'the violent, ethnocentric risks' of domesticizing (1995: 20). He points out that 'foreignizing translation is a dissident cultural practice, maintaining a refusal of the dominant by developing affiliations with marginal linguistic and cultural values in the receiving situation', including those values that emerge from hidden human and non-human peripheries (1995: 125). By enabling and heralding 'difference' (Derrida 1982), foreignizing translation can be an ethical act that preserves the plurality of languages and cultures in or of this and other possible worlds.

In the twenty-first century, translation has become more and more concerned with questions of biocultural diversity; this focus led some branches of the discipline to explore the semiotic potential of translation as a form of communication with the other-than-human. An exemplary thinker is Kobus Marais, who (echoing Steiner) defines translation as 'the process underlying semiosis' (2018: 83) – from 'DNA processes through animal interaction and human politics and power, to dreams and other flights of fantasy' (ibid.: 5). Another key figure is Michael Cronin, whose seminal book *Eco-Translation: Translation and Ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene* (2017) puts forward an ecological understanding of translation today, especially in light of the fact that translation studies, 'traditionally part of the humanities and social sciences, has shared [a] general indifference to the more-than-human world' (ibid.: 10). By moving away from a human-centred semiotics to what he calls an 'ecosemiotics', Cronin describes as 'tradosphere … the sum of all translation systems on the planet, all the ways in which information circulates between living and non-living organisms and is translated into a language or a code that can be processed or understood by the receiving entity' (ibid.: 71). In communicating with others, Cronin continues, 'in trying to understand what it is an organism or non-sentient object is expressing, the point is not anthropomorphic projection but communication across and in the full knowledge of radical difference' (ibid.).

Overall, this brief historical survey allows us to see how for those thinkers who embrace the idea of translation as alterity, translating means 'becoming

aware of undeniable diversity [Steiner 1998: 29], of the difference between languages, idiolects, [biological] and textual worlds'; at the same time, it also means 'finding the foreign as an inexhaustible source of creativity' (Agnetta and Cercel 2019: 365). In the next section I will suggest that a similar understanding of translation started to take shape in Leopardi's works.

Leopardi's translational thinking: Prefiguring the Anthropocene

In *Zibaldone* Leopardi explores the link between translation and alterity by investigating the following ideas: (1) that language is not simply a system of verbal signs and a channel to convey meaning, but rather an active agent in the shaping of the world; (2) that plurality is inherent in languages and the many forms of life with which we coexist (biocultural diversity); (3) that translation is an act of hospitality and (4) that, by welcoming the alien, we can enhance our own creativity and imagination.

Leopardi's theory of communication is a complex one to grasp. It requires us to expand our understanding of language and translation as instruments of verbal communication, while also suspending any arbitrary distinction between the two, in order to treat the natural, the cultural and the textual as interlinked dimensions that concurrently contribute to processes of meaning transmission. In this sense, Leopardi anticipated Steiner's and Marais's notions of language as semiosis, thus postulating the 'non-instrumental, shaping [and material] function of language' in all processes of meaning making (Gensini 1998: xxiii, my translation):

> The intellect could do nothing without speech, because the word is almost the body of the most abstract idea. It is, in fact, a material thing, and an idea tied to and identified with a word is made almost material. (Z: 1657–8)[2]

> Ideas are enclosed and as if bound in words …, so that ideas are inseparable from the words, … as would happen to our soul if it were separated from the body. (Z: 2584)

> We think only by speaking. (Z: 2212)

Leopardi's material conception of language finds its roots in the poet's familiarity with thinkers such as Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), John Locke (1632–1704) and d'Holbach (1723–1789). Echoing ideas that originated in the European

Enlightenment, Leopardi specifies that language forms ideas, and therefore worlds, not just at individual level; crucially, it also contributes to the making of history and society by giving shape (as well as voice) to human customs, deeds and beliefs. 'The history of languages', he says, 'is the history of the human mind' (Z: 2591) because 'without innovation in languages' there is no 'progress of the human mind' (Z: 1237). He also suggests that languages are the 'thermometers' of people's habits, opinions, nations and times (Z: 1215), and that 'languages and humans and nations are almost the same thing' (from Leopardi's 1821 letter to Pietro Giordani, in Gensini 1998: lxv, my translation). From this perspective, Leopardi's theory of language is a form of cultural history in that it moulds the reality, not just the metaphors, we live by.

Arguably, Leopardi attributes to language an essential role in our cognitive processes and collective life. Yet it is important to notice that, for him, language as a universal, 'original' and homogenous entity does not exist; in fact, the pursuit of it is an illusion ('a chimera') since we are surrounded by a multitude of languages – ancient, modern, disciplinary, specialist, oneiric and so on. We use different tongues even when speaking to ourselves, for example when we find that a certain idea may be better expressed in another medium or idiom. Plurality is the 'natural', as in fundamental, feature of language, a trait that ensures the continuity of speech and preservation of languages on Earth, while powerfully revealing the key role of translation in both natural and cultural history:

> The diversity of languages is natural …, inevitable in mankind, and an essential characteristic of nations. (Z: 936)
>
> The project of a universal language (if by this is a native, everyday, mother tongue belonging to all nations was ever meant) is a chimera. (Z: 936)
>
> Knowing several languages affords some greater facility and clarity in the way we formulate our thoughts, for it is through language that we think. [This knowledge] makes it easier for us … to understand ourselves, and to apply the word to the idea, which, without that application, would remain confused in our mind. (Z: 94–5)

Critics such as Antonio Prete and Stefano Gensini have emphasized the translational fabric of a philosophy and poetics that continually show us 'how to [co]exist among languages, in the thick of a plural condition, and therefore in comparison' (Prete 2020: 86, my translation). A precocious translator himself, Leopardi translated into Italian, among others, Moschus' *Idyls*, Isocrates' moral tales and Epictetus' *Manual for Living*. In addition to being a practice, translation had also a historical and hermeneutic significance for him, as seen,

for example, in the theoretical proses opening the *Discorso sopra Mosco* (1815) and the *Discorso sulla Batracomiomachia* (1815), both of which have been collected by Walter Binni in his edition of Leopardi's *Tutte le opere* (1969), as well as in various passages of the *Zibaldone*. What interests us here, however, is an unexplored dimension of Leopardi's proto-Anthropocene thought, namely its engagement with alterity, a feature that aligns with his broader translational agenda.

On a linguistic level, Leopardi conceptualizes a form of foreignizing translation *ante litteram*. While pointing to the inevitable residue of untranslatability if not impossibility associated with any translational endeavour, he also puts forward a practice and understanding of it that, by acknowledging and pursuing 'an effect of distance' (Prete 2020: 71, my translation), anticipates the Benjamin-Venuti foreignizing line:

> No language … is so perfect an instrument that it can serve adequately to grasp perfectly each and every property of every other language. (Z: 969)
>
> So when you translate, even if you have found a word that corresponds exactly … , nevertheless you achieved nothing if this word is not new and does not have the same effect on us as it had on the Greeks. (Z: 12)

To describe this idea of translation as something both 'familiar and estranging' (Prete 2020: 149, my translation), Leopardi uses the powerful image of a popular nineteenth-century object, the camera obscura. For this poet of linguistic diversity, translating means standing and dwelling 'in the shadow of another tongue' (Prete 2020: 17):

> The effect of a text in a foreign language on our mind is thus like the effect of prospects reproduced and viewed in a camera obscura … so that the whole effect depends on the camera obscura rather than on the real object. (Z: 963)

The reference to the camera obscura suggests that Leopardi's understanding of translation implies a sense of dislocation, that is the state of unfamiliarity and 'darkness' we may find ourselves in when trying to put ourselves in the position of an Other. But translation can also itself be, or lead to, luminous acts, when it functions as a gesture of hospitality, non-dominance and diversity; by attending to the alien in all its forms – animals, planets, the Ancients, children or our younger self and so on – translating becomes an ecological posture whereby we can preserve the disappearing and the endangered.

From Leopardi we learn that foreignizing translation – alongside the associated practices of imitation and adaptation discussed in the *Zibaldone* – allows us to

be traversed, and changed, by the encounter with the Other, while also acting as a source of imagination, personal and artistic growth, as well as a protection against sameness and tedium. Closely linked to imagination in its ability to offer a double way of seeing, translation is conceived by Leopardi as one of the highest forms of world-making and, therefore, creativity, a stronghold against the constrained conditions of life:

> To an … imaginative man … the world and its objects are in a certain respect double. With his eyes he will see a tower, a landscape; … and at the same time with his imagination he will see another tower, another landscape … . The whole beauty and pleasure of things lies in the second kind of objects. Sad is that life … which sees, hears, feels only simple objects. (Z: 4418)

Translating animals

Animals represent perhaps the most palpable and powerful locus of alterity. The 'animal trace' (Prete 2006: 162) – which lies at the core of Leopardi's writing from his early works (e.g. *Dissertazione sopra l'anima delle bestie*, 1811 [see Leopardi 1999]) to 'La ginestra' (1836) [see Leopardi 2009: 221–32] – offers the opportunity to adopt a non-human viewpoint, an 'estranging and corrosive vision of the human world', that is to translate between species (Errico 2010: para. 5, my translation).

The *operetta morale* 'Cantico del gallo silvestre' [Song of the great wild rooster] presents itself as an archetypal example of foreignizing translation between humans and animals. It transcribes and translates the speech given by a talking rooster as found in an ancient parchment written in Hebrew script. The narrative – I provides a faithful translation of this animal's discourse into Italian ('volgarizzamento'), mindful of the alienating effect that this 'conformity to the original' may have on readers:

> In fact, a song entitled *Scir detarnegòl bara letzafra*, that is to say, *Morning Song of the Great Wild Rooster*, written in Hebrew script and in a language mixed with Chaldean, Targumic, Rabbinic, Cabalistic, and Talmudic, was found in an ancient parchment. (OM: 371)[3]
>
> Its somewhat disconnected and perhaps occasionally turgid style should not be held against me, for it conforms to that of the original text, which in this respect corresponds to the norms of Oriental languages and especially their poets. (OM: 371–3)

Interspecies translation is the leitmotif of this *operetta* which, in addition to being itself a translation from various ancient languages and discussing the theme of translation through a powerful *mise en abîme*, also points to the issue of communication between species and with celestial bodies. This giant rooster, 'whose feet rest on the earth and whose crest and beak touch the sky', not only possesses reason but it has also been trained by an unknown master to speak in human words (OM: 371). Wiser than humans themselves, it calls upon them to change ('to awake') at the beginning of its speech in order to interrupt their state of misery: 'Up, mortals, awake! The day is born again: truth returns to earth, and empty images depart. Arise; take up again the burden of life; return from the false to the real world!' (OM: 373).

In human words, the rooster even addresses the sun, 'author of the day' (OM: 373), to which it asks the ultimate question about all creatures' suffering and the common destiny of death that unites all beings:

> I ask you, O Sun, … in the course of the centuries that you have so far measured and consumed rising and setting, did you once see a single one of the living beings happy? … Do you see now, or did you ever see, happiness within the confines of the world? … And you yourself … ; are you happy or unhappy? (OM: 375)

By giving voice to a rooster, Leopardi challenges the assumption that humans are exceptional in their ability to communicate. It also raises the issue of human-animal communication on the one hand, and that of communication across (and with) non-living organisms on the other (e.g. celestial bodies); moreover, it does so in ways that prefigure theoretical discussions about the applicability of notions of translation when speaking to or of the Other. Building on Cronin's framework, the translational exploration of non-human communication in Leopardi encompasses three key elements that are also central to the Anthropocene: the rehabilitation of the non-human subject; engaging with difference and recogniszng cross-species as well as celestial agency (2017, 76).

The 'Gallo silvestre' is not exceptional in Leopardi's writing since animals, both imaginary and real, are a continuous presence throughout his production. Even when they remain silent or do not exist outside of the confines of fiction, animals embody the 'symptom of the Other' (Prete 2006: 165, my translation) as well as a mirror of the Self, a family of co-sufferers on our journey on earth. In 'Passero solitario' (The solitary thrush), one of his *Cantis*, Leopardi compares

the lyrical – I, arguably a special representative of human speech at its finest, to a solitary sparrow:

> Pensive and apart, you watch it all; …
>
> Alas, how much your ways resemble mine! (C: 101)[4]

Here, it is the poet who speaks to the animal; he does so by translationally overcoming barriers of human-animal communication through the language of poetry, which is itself a powerful, foreignizing idiom employing language in nonstandard ways (e.g. Poiana 2022).

A similar pattern of communication is at work throughout the *Canti* as a whole. To give another example, let us consider the famous address to a flock of sheep given in 'Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia' (Night song of a wandering shepherd in Asia). In this case, the poet, envious of the animals' restful time and lack of boredom (a form of peace that is impossible for humans), implores them to reveal their secret, that is, to speak:

> O resting flock of mine, you blessed beings,
> who don't, I think, know your own misery!
> How I envy you! …
> Tell me who it is
> all animals are happy
> resting, at ease, while I, if I lie down,
> am plagued with tedium?
> Maybe if I had wings …
> I'd be happier. (C: 199–203)

At the end of this passage, the poet expresses his desire to acquire wings as a remedy against the sorrows of life; basically, he yearns to metamorphose (translate) into another species. In the *operetta* 'Elogio degli uccelli' he reiterates this aspiration: 'I would like to be changed for a while into a bird so that I could experience the contentment and the joy of their life' (OM: 369).

Leopardi proclaims birds' state of joy as a goal of terrestrial bliss. Unlike the solitary sparrow in the poem, these birds 'speak' a language of jubilation and glee which resembles, but is different from, human smiling and singing:

> We truly draw great consolation and pleasure – and we men no more … than the other animals – from listening to the singing of birds. And I think that this comes mainly … from that gaiety which is naturally contained in song in general and in the song of birds in particular. Which is, so to speak, a sort of laughter

> …. Thus in some way it might be said that birds share with men that privilege of laughter. (OM: 357–8)

The word 'gaiety' translates the Italian expression 'significazione di allegrezza' (literally, 'signification of happiness') which defines birds' idiom as one of joy. It is more than a metaphor that refers to the sound they make. Here Leopardi theorizes the existence and forms of an avian language and semiosis ('signification') that require us to expand our conviction of what constitutes a living tongue and, consequently, of what it means to translate.

As this *operetta* shows (the examples are numerous), the plurality of languages mentioned in the *Zibaldone* finds its most powerful expression in Leopardi's literary works, where, in the paradoxical manner that distinguishes this poet, the definition of human discourse enlarges to encompass the multitude of idioms, both human and non-human, through which we can communicate across realms of difference; in other words, through which we translate.

Now, in the age of artificial intelligence, a question arises: did Leopardi's imagination foresee the evolution of the intelligent Other that is created through and as language by way of algorithms and code? If so, can ideas of translation as alterity help us find ways of communicating with humans and non-humans in a time of virtual, augmented and automated reality?

Translating AI

To address these questions, I analyse the *operetta* 'Proposta di premi fatta dall'Accademia dei Sillografi' (Announcement of prizes by the Academy of Syllographs). While tackling themes of relationality and emotions, this *operetta* stages the link between translation and alterity in compelling ways, making the presence of the technological Other immediately graspable. At the beginning of the text, the narrative voice registers the fundamentals of an age in which machines are increasingly replacing humans; not only do humans of this time 'possibly live more mechanically than all those of the past', but they also come to the realization that 'not men but machines carry on the human affairs and the operations of life' (OM: 77). The narrator then draws two conclusions that are surprisingly applicable to today's discussions around the ethical implications of AI, its capacity for cognition and its potential for emotional processing: (1) that machines' tasks and uses will eventually include spiritual as well as material matters, so that machines will protect us not only 'from injury by lightning,

hailstorms, and many other similar evils' but also from psychological suffering, selfishness, envy, and so on (OM: 77–9) and (2) that, given that healing humans from their illnesses and vices is more difficult than replacing them all together, it is recommended that men and women 'withdraw from the business of life as much as possible', replaced by their mechanical Others (OM: 79).

Interestingly, language and translation are crucial to such a radical understanding of our hyperintelligent future. In the *Proposta*, Leopardi foresees the advent of (an) AI when he admits that humans can transmit their speech ('favella') to the machines that they create (OM: 81). He says that it is obvious that, if parrots can speak instructed by humans, then certainly a machine can do so, too, since such a machine is the very product of human imagination and handiwork. He then gives examples of previous humanoids, if we may call them so, such as the Colossi of Memnon, two massive stone statues of Pharaoh Amenhotep III, one of which was thought to sing or cry at dawn.

This idea of a visionary past persists throughout the *operetta* whenever Leopardi offers literary suggestions and sources of inspiration for constructing automatons: for example, Cicero's *De Amicitia* can be used when programming the ideal friend whereas the story of the sculptor Pygmalion falling in love with his own creation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* offers an example of what designing one's own companion may look like.

By highlighting the role and impact of literary texts on technological advancements, the *operetta* subtly evokes Leopardi's distinction between 'words' and 'terms'. In doing so, it contrasts an imaginative, poetic and metaphorical mode of thinking (aligned with Leopardi's concept of 'words') with an analytical, linear and logical approach (aligned with his concept of 'terms'). This distinction notwithstanding, Leopardi advocates the need for both. Terms – for example, code, one of the means by which humans can instruct computers to create an artificial Other – can involve the use of programming languages which contribute to an already rich plurality of human and non-human tongues. On the other hand, without imagination (words), we certainly cannot code, write, speak or perhaps even be.

In this *operetta* about the advantages and risks of coexisting with the intelligent Others that we ourselves create, translation is therefore explored both philosophically – as a way of relating to and communicating with automatons – and philologically – as the point of departure for understanding the languages of technology and their transmission to, and across, non-human interlocutors. Paradoxically, the origins of this dialogue are to be found in the past, in an age of 'poetic' communication and living which can still show us ways of preserving

the many languages and species that make up our world – real and imaginary, disappearing and yet to be programmed. By performing a vertiginous leap into the past-future of humanity, Leopardi predicts not only the Anthropocene, its ethical challenges and biogeological vanishings, but also the coming age of hyperintelligence which is ahead of us, what futurist James Lovelock defined as the Novacene (2019).

Conclusions

This chapter has examined, through the prism of Leopardi's writing, translation's capacity to illuminate sites of linguistic, cultural, historical and interspecies crossings as markers of the Anthropocene. In challenging the poet's alleged anti-modern or anti-technological postures, it has revealed that literature and translation, in both their theoretical and creative inflections, can contribute to cultural history and Anthropocene enquiry. Simultaneously, the chapter has elucidated Leopardi's perception of natural, cultural and technological evolutions as intertwined processes that, in order to be fully comprehended, require translation across times, disciplines and concepts. Such a complex entanglement between the cultural, the natural and the technological, brought together and scrutinized by way of an expansion of our common definitions of language, has also outlined novel, translational forms of interaction and communication between, and across, human and non-human agents. For these and other reasons Leopardi, 'the most sensitive Italian visionary of modernity' (Camilletti and Cori 2015, blurb), prefigured the Anthropocene; as revealed in these pages, his poetry and thought point to the rejuvenating energy that we might draw from the past, to the plural condition that ensures life and survival on earth and to possible futures (to be) inscribed in a translational, hospitable and imaginative way of using languages and words.

Notes

* To my students, who help me glimpse Leopardi.

1 Still widely used, the distinction between intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic translation dates back to Roman Jakobson's seminal essay 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation', published in 1959.

2 I use the English-language 2013 edition of the *Zibaldone* edited by Michael Caesar and Franco d'Intino (hereafter Z). Please note that, in accordance with the standard referencing method for this work, the numbers refer to *Zibaldone* entries, not page numbers (e.g. Z: 4418).
3 I use Giovanni Cecchetti's 1982 translation of Leopardi's *Operette morali* throughout (OM from now onwards).
4 I use Jonathan Galassi's 2010 translation of Leopardi *Canti* (C from now onwards).

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