Life and Disease in Leopardi and Svevo



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Short abstract

This thesis looks at Giacomo Leopardi's and Italo Svevo's works from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective. The elusive presence of Leopardi in Svevo is followed and justified via two sets of coordinates: both writers are connected via techniques of hybridization between medical and literary discourse, and via the goal of narrating a shared notion of *vita* as *male* or *malattia*. Through the four chapters of this thesis – focusing on ineptitude as physiological illness (Chapter I), experiments of prolongevity (II), revelations of life as disease (III), and stories of evolution and apocalypse (IV) – the notion of 'disease' is posited as a revelation of 'life' (physical and medical, metaphysical and cosmic) as a field of contradictory forces and energies, an impasse impossible to justify or cure through scientific or humanistic means.

A rationale is provided for the multifaceted Leopardian presence in Svevo. This thesis interweaves three methodologies: comparable physiological models narrativized into comparable discourses ('comparability'), literary presences ('literary'), and late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century medical schools reformulated towards parallel conclusions ('medical'). These elucidate and redirect to each other, proposing a comprehensive and hybrid perspective on narratives previously never systematically compared. This study expands on Svevo's medical readings by detecting in his works 'antiquated' archetypes that Leopardi had, himself, integrated into comparable narratives.

It is in discourses where life appears as painful and arcane (physiological disease or metaphysical ill – or both) that Leopardi strategically emerges in Svevo's works. This thesis concluded that Leopardi is – despite a lack of provable readings and clear philological traces as well as Svevo's reticence in admitting this – a vital author for Svevo's essays and narratives of *malattia*.

The methodology proposed in this thesis allows for studies beyond Leopardi and Svevo, hypothesising further interdisciplinary comparisons between Italian and European writers previously not attempted or, in fact, never considered possible.

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Extended abstract

This thesis investigates a multifaceted and elusive presence in the Svevian *oeuvre*: Giacomo Leopardi. Although important elements – thematic, philosophical, and (auto)biographical – connect these Italian nineteenth-century writers, this relationship has never been comprehensively explored. This thesis thus presents the first systematic study of both writers from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective.

There is no information on Svevo's readings of Leopardi, nor does Svevo acknowledge him as one of his authors. In Svevo's writings, Leopardian traces appear as either too subtle (thus, easily assimilable to other sources) or seemingly random. Studies on the subject tried to circumnavigate these problems by either listing such traces or by hinting that both writers share writing techniques – that is, models of contamination between science and the humanities – and general pessimistic views. This thesis refines these observations and outlines clearer coordinates (how and why) for Leopardi's presence in Svevo. Then, a new methodology for interdisciplinary and comparative studies is proposed – namely, one relying on theories of source assimilation, re-composition, and transformation over ideas of direct and traceable philological filiation.

This thesis expresses Leopardi's and Svevo's 'contaminated techniques' in terms of hybridization between medicine (notions, terms, theories, experiments, doctors) and

literary writing – where ideas, words, and models from different fields are metabolised towards new possibilities of speculation. This model is cemented by Leopardi and Svevo's intellectual and clinical interaction with nineteenth-century medicine and medical personalities, by their theories of creative contamination between otherwise sectorial subjects and jargons, and by modern scholarship on the medical humanities and the history of ideas (George Rousseau, Bruno Latour). This thesis compares Leopardi and Svevo in line with an idea of writing as knowledge reformulation – exploring how discursive boundaries are softened, moulded, and then re-cemented into solutions (literary, philosophical, therapeutic) to recurrent dilemmas.

One specific dilemma is identified as directing these comparable writing practices. This thesis links strategies of hybridization to the explorations of the umbrella notion of *vita* as *male* (Leopardi) and *malattia* (Svevo) – where 'life' is both *physiological* and *philosophical* existence, and 'disease' encapsulates scenarios of conflict, tension, and impasses (energetic, medical, metaphysical, cosmic) recurrently presented as beyond resolution and cure. It is via this discursive movement – from medicine to literature, from microscopic to macroscopic vision, and *viceversa* – that Leopardi and Svevo can be seen to diagnose, problematize, and re-narrate that succinct thesis into ampler and unexpected scenarios.

The texts selected and explored – primarily, fiction and philosophical prose works – present similar medical and existential crises, similar physiological models and theories of life, similar experiments and doctors, and similar ambivalences on themes of health. This thesis proposes a hybrid methodology for a hybrid subject matter. Three perspectives are interwoven and alternated: comparable physiological models fictionalized into comparable developments ('comparability'); Leopardian references or intertextualities in

Svevo's *oeuvre* ('literary'); historically identifiable late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century experiments, medical philosophies, and doctors reformulated in comparable narratives ('medical'). These perspectives confirm and redirect to each other throughout the four chapters of this thesis. In following the trail of comparability, undetected quotations from Leopardi are identified in Svevo, while those already identified by scholars are finally liberated from the label of amateur references. Interconnected medical schools and experiments are detected in both writers, which allows for both hitherto unexplored textual comparisons and for new discoveries and hypotheses on Svevo's 'outdated' medical models. This perspective leads to strategic (and often previously undetected) Leopardian traces, quotations, and even titles disseminated by Svevo at cardinal points of his narratives of *malattia*. By combining and empowering different methodologies, this thesis finally casts light on a fundamental but quintessentially elusive presence in the Svevian *oeuvre*.

Methodologies are selected and alternated according to the complexities of each chapter. The first one ('Self-destructive Misfits: Physiological Models and Narrative Developments') tests the model of comparability by hypothesising and following a *physiology of ineptitude* in Svevo's *Una vita* and Leopardi's unfinished draft 'Vita abbozzata di Silvio Sarno'. This chapter presents the first systematic exploration of ineptitude in Leopardi, the first comparison between Leopardi's unfinished novel and another work of fiction, and a new model of ineptitude applicable to other authors. Comparable impasses (imbalance between internal and external tensions, mental excesses and external hindrances, enhanced metamorphic abilities and spiritual mortifications) are detected in both pieces as leading to comparable (meta)literary, pathological, and philosophical developments. Furthermore, this chapter applies parallel models to *Senilità*.

Parallels between self-destructive Leopardian and Svevian pairs (Silvio/Silvia and Emilio/Amalia) are proposed, intersecting comparability with the identification and contextualization of Leopardian quotations in Svevo's second novel and in its associated revelations of life as disease.

In the second chapter ('Medical Errors and Fictional Horrors: Dr Hufeland and the Book of Long Life') the three methodologies of this thesis intersect. A late eighteenth-century medical school, doctor, and book are presented – namely, Neo-Hippocratism, Dr Hufeland, and *The Art of Prolonging Human Life* – arguing that it is by reformulating such archetypes that Leopardi ('Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico') and Svevo ('Lo specifico del Dottor Menghi') develop comparable stories of life and its illness. The same impasse between *vita estensiva* and *intensiva* is fictionalized by both into parallel fictional developments: experiments of sensory acceleration/deceleration, limbos between life and death, and narratives of biological relativity. These narratives – explored via comparability – are often texts where Leopardi's hidden influence had been detected (but not explained) by previous scholars. The two methodologies of comparability and literary presence are finally combined with a third perspective. A medical investigation on the Svevo-Hufeland connections is proposed, considering texts, mediators, and doctors that could allow Svevo to encounter such models and integrate them into his own narratives of prolongevity. Amongst those, Dr Basedow embodies the most relevant discovery of this chapter. His presence amongst Hufeland's *milieu* allows for new Leopardian readings of Ada's disease in *La coscienza di Zeno*. Such an operation leads this thesis to identify resounding Leopardian quotations in what is arguably the heart of *La coscienza* – a section further explored, via different perspectives, in the subsequent chapter.

The third chapter ('The "Dark Metaphysician" – Dr Brown: A Model of Reformulation and Comparability') proposes another intersection of methods and perspectives. The Doppelgängers of Hufeland and his group – Dr John Brown and his obscure (meta)physicians – are presented as ideal models for Leopardi's and Svevo's medical-literary reformulations. A set of 1826 *Zibaldone* notes of likely Brunonian derivation (including, but not limited to, the passages on the 'Garden of *souffrance*') are compared to physiological models and narrative developments in the revelations of 'life as disease' condensed in *La coscienza di Zeno* and its associated 'Basedow narratives'. This chapter delves into the heart of Leopardi's and Svevo's narratives of (bio)logical contradiction, identifying in both comparable starting points, fictional developments, and philosophically *original* solutions – in line with Rousseau's thesis on the unexpected therapies deriving from the interplay between medicine and literature. This chapter proposes two major results. Narratives of disease and doctors previously never placed in parallel are compared via models of interdisciplinary reformulation, identifying and contextualizing potential Leopardian traces in Svevo's works. Furthermore, another 'old' medical model is linked to the Svevian *oeuvre* via another series of mediators. New archival results are finally presented, expanding on Svevo's medical readings and challenging previous scholarly contributions on the subject.

The last chapter ('More than one *storia del genere umano*: Comparable Models and Creative Tensions') has a more daring manner of proceeding. This chapter expands the boundaries of comparability, moving from a 'physiological premise-fictional development' model to new and unexpected comparisons between discursive ambivalences and therapeutic (ir)resolutions in Leopardi's and Svevo's wider reflections. This chapter begins by identifying and explaining Leopardian quotations detected by

scholars in Svevo's essays on evolution, and by claiming that a new case of comparability can be found in Svevo's theory of *ordigni*. Then, another model of comparison between discursive tensions is proposed. This chapter argues that Svevo's *salute-malattia* dilemma – from his essays to the mysterious conclusion of *La coscienza* – can be compared to more than one of Leopardi's pieces and positions on matters of natural life and health. Leopardian tensions (regressive tensions towards nature *versus* the realization of natural existence, itself, as disease) are detected throughout Svevo's core narratives, too, proposing new readings for the contradictory finale of *La coscienza*. This chapter claims that both writers' recurrent dilemma of 'life as disease' can be followed beyond models of philological filiation, beyond traditional models of comparison, and beyond individual texts – namely, considering how parallel contradictions are commonly developed into scenarios of endless illness and endless literary discourse.

This thesis is the first comprehensive, comparative, and interdisciplinary study on two major Italian writers and knowledge reformulators of the nineteenth century. It concludes that – despite a general lack of philological proof, and despite Svevo's reticence in admitting this – Leopardi is, in fact, a crucial source for Svevo; namely, one that, as Leopardi does with his own medical-literary sources, Svevo integrates, hides, and recomposes within his own laboratory of contamination. Leopardian presences, previously either ill-explained or considered as random, are explained by this thesis as strategically positioned by Svevo in important narratives of *malattia* – mostly, in *Una vita*, *Senilità*, and *La coscienza di Zeno*, and in essays on human history, *ordigni*, and apocalypse. This thesis concludes that Leopardi in Svevo has a 'contaminated' (thematic, literary, medical) presence. Furthermore, it is claimed that this presence can be seen to assume a recognizable 'function' in the Svevian *oeuvre*. Leopardi emerges strategically

in crucial moments of Svevo's writings, recurrently empowering discourses where the life of individuals – or existence as a whole – is explored or narrativized as a cluster of opposite forces, contradictions in terms, or cases of physical short-circuiting and irredeemable pain. The Leopardian presence in Svevo, thus, is finally claimed to perform a function of disease. Although this is not a monographic study on Leopardi, it constitutes the longest study on the theme and literary function of disease in the Leopardian *oeuvre* – opening new directions on research on Leopardi, beyond outdated scholarly bias (Leopardi as a pessimistic writer due to his condition of illness) and beyond modern taboos and attitudes denying disease the crucial place it deserves within Leopardi's life-long writings and reflections. This thesis finally proposes new research directions, suggesting that the new methodology presented can be applied beyond Leopardi and Svevo and provide theoretical ground for unexpected connections between Italian and European writers under the flag of medical contaminations and the fertile idea of existence as *male* or *malattia*.

Introduction

The presence of Leopardi in Svevo is a confusing matter. Any Leopardi reader going through Svevo's works of fiction and essays for the first time would sense that Leopardi is somehow at play there. The challenge is explaining how and why. Many of Svevo's recurrent themes – a certain dry pessimism towards the role of human beings in the universe, their representation as ever-desiring and gullible small things, and essentially different from the 'healthy' animal world – are elements that Svevo could have found in Leopardi as well as in other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers, scientists, and philosophers: Schopenhauer, Darwin, and Freud. If Leopardi is one of Svevo's authors, his ideas seem diluted with those of many others, to the point of being hardly recognizable, or even hardly relevant, within the overall orchestration of the Svevian *oeuvre*. Yet sometimes Svevo quotes Leopardi almost verbatim. Seemingly out of place and gratuitous, these references are often seen as undeveloped school memories, or the game of a budding writer indulging in literary references. How to make sense of Zeno claiming that his *pensiero dominante* came from obsessing over thyroid problems, or quoting from 'Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie' (1824) when quarrelling with his no-nonsense father, or indeed of the constellation of Leopardian buzzwords scattered through Svevo's writings about *ordigni* and evolution? On the one hand, Leopardi's 'presence' in Svevo seems too vague, too confused and hybridised. On the other, it appears almost too blatant, with clear references dispersed throughout Svevo's *oeuvre* like pebbles however seemingly unable to trace a path of their own. What to make of this?

1. An elusive presence: Leopardi in Svevo

Sometimes authors reveal their sources. Declarations of poetics and internal references, however passing or indirect, can help critics understand how writers look at their models, or point to which books, archives, or libraries could be explored with profit. This is clearly not the case here. Svevo rarely mentions Leopardi in his private writings or theoretical pieces. In a 1925 letter to his French correspondent Valery Larbaud, whose 1924 *Lettre d'Italie* had devoted a section to Leopardi and the backwardness of Recanati, Svevo claims:

> È proprio leggendo quelle pagine che mi venne il desiderio di scriverle. Qui [a Trieste] troverà certamente cose degne della Sua penna ma non Recanati. Anzi anche Recanati ma vuota di Leopardi. Cioè (guardi com'è ricco il mio paese) i genitori di Leopardi ci sono in quantità ma pare riproducano sempre sé stessi con grande pedanteria.[1]

[1] Italo Svevo, *Opera omnia*, ed. by Bruno Maier, 4 vols (Milan: dall'Oglio, 1966-1969), I: *Epistolario* (1966), pp. 764-765. For Svevo (1861-1928), this thesis will refer to the following editions: Italo Svevo, *Teatro e saggi*, ed. by Mario Lavagetto and Federico Bertoni (Milan: Mondadori, 2004); *Racconti e scritti autobiografici*, ed. by Mario Lavagetto and Clotilde Bertoni (Milan: Mondadori, 2004); *Romanzi e 'continuazioni'*, ed. by Mario Lavagetto, Nunzia Palmieri and Fabio Vittorini (Milan: Mondadori, 2004). For Leopardi (1798-1837), we will adopt the following editions: Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, ed. by Franco Gavazzeni and Maria Maddalena Lombardi, 6th edn (Milan: BUR, 2009); *Operette morali*, ed. by Antonio Prete, 14th edn (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2015). For the *Zibaldone di pensieri* (*Zib*. in the footnotes, followed by the page number of the original manuscript) we will use Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, ed. by Giuseppe Pacella, 3 vols (Milan: Garzanti, 1991). For *Pensieri*, we will use Leopardi, 'Pensieri', in *Poesie e prose*, ed. by Rolando Damiani, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1987-1988), II (1988), 283-344.
Individual pieces will be contextualized by citing their year of composition. For Leopardi, an accurate summary for individual poems and *operette* can be found in Massimo Natale, 'La poesia', in *Leopardi*, ed. by Franco D'Intino and Massimo Natale (Rome: Carocci, 2018), pp. 21-61 (pp. 27-30); Franco D'Intino, 'La prosa', in *Leopardi*, pp. 67-100 (pp. 85-86). For Svevo, the novels will be mentioned with their year of publication, while several pieces (often unfinished, unpublished, or published posthumously) will be described via the composition year or period cited in the critical editions above. See Federico Bertoni, 'Apparato genetico e commento', in Svevo, *Teatro e saggi*, pp. 1181-1903; Clotilde Bertoni, 'Apparato genetico e commento', in Svevo, *Teatro e saggi*, pp. 815-1467. Fabio Vittorini and Nunzia Palmieri, 'Apparati e commento', in Svevo, *Romanzi e 'continuazioni'*, pp. 1235-1751. For both Leopardi and Svevo, if the composition period is particularly uncertain, or hypothetically reconstructed, this will be preceded by 'circa'.

Having published, after a life of fiascos and frustration, several novellas and three novels – amongst which one of recent international success, *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923) –, Svevo felt that he, too, had lived through that condition of a genius in isolation. He would recycle this notion when praising Benjamin Crémieux's works in 1928, comparing Trieste ('ultima città del mondo') and the whole of Italian culture to the closemindedness of 'la famiglia Leopardi'.[2] Leopardi, however, does not feature in other letters. In fact, with one single exception, Leopardi does not appear again in Svevo's non-fiction works. This exception occurs in the essay 'Soggiorno londinese' (1926), where Svevo considers 'l'incanto che lo Schopenhauer provò al conoscere l'opera del Leopardi' – a charming coincidence brought up to show that artists can indeed find their own way to the notions of philosophy and science, as it is 'escluso […] che il Leopardi abbia saputo della filosofia dello Schopenhauer'.[3] It is reasonable to take this remark as a further and indirect connection between Svevo and Leopardi – at least in terms of 'philosophical affinity' and 'fictional development'. Indeed, as Svevo explains in his 'Profilo autobiografico' (1928) – a third-person summary of his own life, intellectual development, and attempts to achieve literary recognition – Schopenhauer was certainly an 'autore preferito' of his

[2] Svevo, *Epistolario*, p. 876.

[3] Svevo, 'Soggiorno londinese', in *Teatro e saggi*, pp. 893-910 (p. 897). As Bertoni underlines, '[i]n effetti, la prima edizione del *Mondo come volontà e rappresentazione* (1818) passò nel più assoluto silenzio, con un insuccesso replicato anche dalla seconda edizione (1844). È solo negli anni successivi, soprattutto con l'uscita dei *Parerga e paralipomena* (1851), che Schopenhauer riuscì a ottenere un pieno riconoscimento. È dunque escluso che Leopardi, morto nel 1837, possa essere stato in qualche modo influenzato dalla sua filosofia. Ciò non toglie, come è stato ampiamente sottolineato, che vi siano numerose tangenze tra i sistemi di pensiero del filosofo e del poeta, soprattutto in rapporto all'etica e alla concezione della vita umana. Non a caso, quando Schopenhauer, nel 1858, si avvicinò all'opera di Leopardi dietro suggerimento di un amico, ne fu assolutamente entusiasta, come testimonia un passo della terza edizione del *Mondo* (1859) dedicato al tema "vanità e dolori della vita": "nessuno ha trattato così a fondo e così esaurientemente questo soggetto come […] Leopardi. Egli ne è tutto pervaso e compenetrato. Il suo tema è ovunque la beffa e la miseria di quest'esistenza, da lui rappresentate, in ogni pagina delle sue opere, con una tale varietà di forme e di espressioni, con una tale ricchezza di immagini, che esso non viene mai a noia, ma è sempre interessante e commovente" […] È anche possibile che questo legame sia suggerito a Svevo da uno scritto di De Sanctis, *Schopenhauer e Leopardi. Dialogo tra A e D* (1858).' See Federico Bertoni, 'Apparato genetico e commento', p. 1692.

formative years. The German philosopher's writings allowed for the development of key lines of fiction; namely, that of Svevo's first novel *Una vita* (1892), where Alfonso, the protagonist, embodies that very 'affermazione schopenhaueriana della vita tanto vicina alla sua negazione'.[4] While this thesis will not explore Svevo by looking at the recombination, within his work, of Leopardi *plus* Schopenhauer, it is clear that Svevo had multiple reasons to approach Leopardi as an ideal 'literary' counterpart to that German philosopher. These two 'presences' are hard to disentangle, and this operation would probably – as underlined by Rusi – favour a more 'justifiable' Schopenhauerian interpretation of Svevo's works, with the 'memoria di Leopardi […] dislocata in luoghi strategici nel percorso che da Alfonso Nitti e attraverso Emilio Brentani conduce verso Zeno Cosini' being 'minacciata dal rischio di venire assorbita sotto l'egida schopenhaueriana'.[5] In general terms, we can argue that Svevo's *direct* references to Leopardi are not sufficient, or sufficiently strong, to convince anyone that Leopardi played a major role in his reflections or education. The 'Profilo' certainly does not mention Leopardi amongst those writers (Machiavelli, Guicciardini, Boccaccio, Manzoni, Carducci, De Sanctis) whom Svevo used to read in his 'due ore serali di ogni giorno passate alla Biblioteca Civica' with the aim of 'conquistarsi un po' di cultura italiana'.[6] This is not to say that Svevo's list should be considered as exhaustive, or that the *Biblioteca Civica* of Trieste could not provide young Svevo with satisfactory editions

[4] Svevo, 'Profilo autobiografico', in *Racconti*, pp. 799-813 (p. 801).
[5] Michela Rusi, 'Svevo e la funzione Leopardi', *Quaderni veneti*, 3.1-2 (2014), 219-226 (p. 219).
[6] 'La vita d'Italo Svevo alla Banca è descritta accuratamente in una parte del suo primo romanzo *Una Vita*. Quella parte è veramente autobiografica. Ed anche le due ore serali di ogni giorno passate alla Biblioteca Civica vi sono descritte. Si trattava finalmente di conquistarsi un po' di cultura italiana. Per varii anni passò quelle ore con Machiavelli, Guicciardini e Boccaccio. Poi fu introdotto nei suoi studii un qualche ordine dalla conoscenza delle opere di Francesco De Sanctis. Ed intanto anche i contemporanei ebbero grande influenza su lui: il Carducci specialmente. Forse per l'influenza del Carducci – e se ne dichiarò amaramente pentito – non amò in quell'epoca, quando si sentiva abbastanza giovanile per apprendere ancora, il Manzoni.' See Svevo, 'Profilo autobiografico', pp. 800-801.

of Leopardi's works. However, the archives of the *Civica* do not prove particularly helpful in this sense. Important nineteenth- and early-twentieth century Leopardi editions that Svevo could have consulted – including the *Opere di Giacomo Leopardi* edited by Ranieri for Le Monnier in 1845-1849, and Carducci's 1898-1900 first edition of *Pensieri di varia filosofia e di bella letteratura* – bear no accession date.[7] These books might have been bought, or received as gifts, after Svevo's years of 'apprenticeship', or even after his lifetime – although this last is an unlikely option for editions of this stature. We should also bear in mind that the *Biblioteca Civica*'s catalogues can only partially describe the range and variety of Svevo's readings and literary experimentation. After his first period of apprenticeship, and certainly after the 1890s, Svevo mostly bought his own books. Specifically, after the disheartening failure of his second novel *Senilità* (1898), Svevo claimed to abandon literature (a 'ridicola e dannosa cosa') and entirely devote his life to his in-laws' business.[8] Yet, his 'literary silence' (1898-1919) was actually characterised by a combination of private and clandestine readings and literary experiments, significantly inclusive of authors of scientific and philosophical prose. These fundamental years, leading to Svevo's masterpiece *La coscienza di Zeno*, coincided with a moment of general revaluation of Leopardi's 'philosophical' prose in Italy, which turned the tables on Benedetto Croce's traditional dismissal of it in favour of his poetry. Key contributions in this direction included: the abovementioned 1898-1900 Carducci edition of the

[7] Amongst the titles with no accession date that Svevo *could* have consulted at the *Biblioteca Civica*, we can list Leopardi, *Opere di Giacomo Leopardi: Edizione accresciuta, ordinata e corretta, secondo l'ultimo intendimento dell'autore,* ed. by Antonio Ranieri, 3 vols (Florence: Le Monnier, 1845-1849); Leopardi, *Pensieri di varia filosofia e di bella letteratura*, ed. by Giosuè Carducci, 8 vols (Florence: Le Monnier, 1898-1900). As for Leopardi's unpublished and/or unfinished works, including drafts of *Operette morali* and autobiographical sketches, we can include: Leopardi, *Scritti vari inediti: Dalle* carte napoletane (Florence: Le Monnier, 1906); Leopardi, *Appendice all'epistolario e agli scritti giovanili*, ed. by Prospero Viani (Florence: Barbèra, 1878). This selection of books, entirely hypothetical, covers all the works by Leopardi that this thesis will consider in relation to Svevo's works.

[8] Svevo, *Opera omnia*, III: *Racconti, Saggi, Pagine sparse* (1968), p. 818.

Zibaldone di pensieri, Giovanni Gentile's 1918 edition and commentary of *Operette morali* and – in closer proximity to the publication of *La coscienza* – the identification of a new model of Italian prose in Leopardi by the Roman periodical *La Ronda*, which published in 1921 *Il testamento letterario di Giacomo Leopardi*, a selection of texts from the *Zibaldone* providing a stylistic model for contemporary writing.[9] All these experiences could certainly have influenced Svevo, guiding his reading interests as well as his experiments in style and narrative solutions. Unfortunately, we have no bibliographical information on this, either. Svevo's private library was destroyed in the Second World War bombings, with Svevo's daughter Letizia salvaging some of the books and moving them into her husband's archive, now the *Fonda-Savio* archive of Trieste. In 2013, Cepach and Volpato engaged in an extensive and thorough exploration, classification, and commentary of that archive, which features several – and at times unexpected – authors, but no Leopardian titles.[10]

All this information points towards one significant fact: an investigation of Leopardi in Svevo based on *strictly* philological-bibliographical grounds would not go very far. Although Leopardi seems to play *some* part in Svevo's works – as a series of direct quotations and devious re-elaborations would seem to suggest – no scholar has so far worked out a pattern able to justify and contextualise these recurrences and their elusiveness. In a nutshell, this is the current state of the scholarship. The 'presence', or 'life', of Leopardi in Svevo resembles that of an amphibian, living half of the time under the surface, combined and cross-bred with other forms of life, and only occasionally

[9] Leopardi, *Operette morali*, ed. by Giovanni Gentile (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1918); *Il testamento letterario di Giacomo Leopardi: Pensieri dello Zibaldone scelti, annotati e ordinati in VI capitoli da La Ronda* (Rome: La Ronda, 1921). A summary of this change in Leopardi reception can be found in Tommaso Gennaro, 'L'eredità', in *Leopardi*, pp. 283-303 (pp. 293-299).
[10] Riccardo Cepach and Simone Volpato, *Alla peggio andrò in biblioteca: I libri ritrovati di Italo Svevo* (Macerata: Biblohaus, 2013).

surfacing to claim some enigmatic role for itself. This thesis pointedly embraces this hybridity, accepting the difficulty of detecting clear bibliographical sources and unquestionable philological filiations, and exploring instead the oddity of this relationship in its own, hybrid terms. This does not mean evading key questions over the nature of this relationship. Quite the opposite – by embracing its oddity, we will come to appreciate that this connection is, in fact, *about* hybridity and contamination of discourses, as it will soon become apparent through this thesis' interdisciplinary approach. A discourse over intellectual components, recombination of ideas, and mutually empowering discourses will be preferred to one of directly traceable author-recipient influence, developing an investigation on the means of this connection, as well as where they might lead. In other words, we will draw a pattern describing *how* and *why* Svevo relies on Leopardi, also providing an explanation to Svevo's occasional and seemingly random quotations.

2.1 Literature review and 'the elephant in the room'

The limited scholarship on this subject has identified some of these problems and touched upon possible solutions. These studies can be divided in two groups: namely, those identifying direct quotations from Leopardi in Svevo, and those underlying the contaminated and hybrid dynamics of this relationship. Palmieri's 2000 study looks for Leopardian *risonanze* and *sintagmi* in Svevo's *oeuvre*, arguing that it is only from *La coscienza* onwards that these can be seen as mature assimilations. Palmieri also hypothesises a possible Leopardian 'reading list' for Svevo, underlining however that

there is no bibliographical evidence supporting his hypothesis.[11] Rusi's 2014 work adopts a similar approach, embracing Lonardi's category of *leopardismo*, and scouting *Una vita*, *Senilità*, and *La coscienza* for recognizable Leopardian notions and reformulations. According to Rusi, 'il leopardismo di Svevo […] potrebbe collocarsi nella linea di riduzione novecentesca del modello, che è sorte comune alle riprese da Leopardi, come ha ben chiarito' Gilberto Lonardi.[12] The critic refers to Lonardi's observation that, in many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italian writers, the presence of Leopardi becomes an 'introiettarsi progressivo […] in "forma interna" di un'esperienza[,] […] il che prevede anzitutto la riduzione o perfino la rinuncia alla immediata vocabolarizzazione.'[13] However, while this model certainly applies to much of Svevo's work, his writings also feature undeclared quotations, and even titles, from Leopardi. As Lonardi admits, the category of *leopardismo* identifies, in fact, a portmanteau for the most disparate uses of Leopardi in the Italian *Otto-novecento*. As such, scholars are encouraged to adopt this in a manner 'largamente empiric[a]' and to explore *broad* trends of a 'materia' fundamentally 'centrifuga' – including undercover integrations, declared imitations and fashionable copycatting, and using Leopardi as a bridge towards wider European perspectives.[14] In this sense, the category of *leopardismo* will not be adopted

[11] In his study, Palmieri particularly adopts 'F. Flora: G. Leopardi, *Le poesie e le prose*, Mondadori, Milano, 1940, voll. II; ID., *Zibaldone di Pensieri*, Mondadori, Milano 1937, voll. II. […], perché ritengo che l'ed. Flora sia più vicina alle edizioni leopardiane che leggeva Svevo e di cui non abbiamo riscontro documentario. È tuttavia probabile che Svevo possedesse i seguenti volumi di Leopardi: *Prose*, scelte e annotate a uso delle scuole dal professor R. Fornaciari, Barbera, Firenze 1882; *I Canti*, commentati da A. Straccali, Biblioteca scolastica di classici italiani diretta da G. Carducci, Sansoni, Firenze 1895 (2ª ed. riv. e corretta).' See Giovanni Palmieri, 'Leopardi in Svevo. Risonanze e Fonti', in *'Quel libro senza uguali': Le 'Operette morali' e il Novecento italiano*, ed. by Andrea Cortellessa and Novella Bellucci (Rome: Bulzoni, 2000), pp. 43-51 (p. 46).

[12] See Rusi, 'Svevo e la funzione Leopardi', p. 224.

[13] Gilberto Lonardi, 'Premessa: limiti e implicazioni dell'idea di 'leopardismo'', in *Leopardismo: Saggio sugli usi di Leopardi dall'Otto al Novecento* (Florence: Sansoni, 1974), pp. 1-9 (p. 3).

[14] As Lonardi explains, 'se si procede al confronto con altri più pacifici *ismi* ci si accorge che' the exceptionality (in themes, approaches, genres, and even philosophical positioning) of Leopardi's works 'ha impedito che davvero si sviluppasse […] un leopardismo che […] percorresse questi non pochi anni come

by this thesis, as its – necessarily vast and inclusive – range would not necessarily help, or add value to, our manner of investigation.

A parallel line of enquiry – namely, the one stressing the 'hybrid' and 'a-philological' dynamics ruling this connection – starts with Lavagetto's 1975 study *L'impiegato Schmitz e altri saggi su Svevo*. Although this is not primarily a study on Leopardi in Svevo, it is here that the former is mentioned for the first time in Svevo scholarship; namely, this appears in Lavagetto's definition of Svevo's contaminated narratives of 'evolution' as a Leopardian '*Storia del genere umano* secondo Italo Svevo'.[15] Indeed, Lavagetto argues that a considerably wider set of sources is at play in Svevian narratives, concluding his brief section on Leopardi with a crucial warning: 'tutti i rimandi vanno presi in ogni caso con estrema cautela perché nessuno scrupolo filologico, nessuna remora, nessuna preoccupazione di fedeltà guida Svevo nei suoi imprestiti.'[16] Following in these footsteps, Vacante's 2009 paper discusses the way in which Svevo freely recombines scientific, philosophical, and literary ideas from different authors and works – including those of Leopardi's *Operette morali* and some of the discursive techniques found in the *Zibaldone*. This paper casts light on the immense complication, and the equally immense fertility, of exploring the development of an omnivorous and 'metabolizing' reader like Svevo, who admits to using his sources like 'reagents' that

movimento omogeneo e munito di comuni programmi e si traducesse in istituto insieme della forma e del vivere […] tale era l'altezza dell'esperienza leopardiana, la sua irrespirabilità, da non patire istituzione, o da declassarla subito ai piani modesti, ad atto di pigrizia o di mistificazione.' Proposing an 'empirical' model of *leopardismo*, then, Lonardi investigates openly 'Leopardian' authors from Trieste, like Saba and Michaelstaedter. His investigation, however, does not include Svevo. See Lonardi, 'Premessa: limiti e implicazioni dell'idea di "leopardismo"', pp. 2-4. Lonardi expanded on this study – yet again, without exploring Svevo – in *Leopardismo: Tre saggi sugli usi di Leopardi dall'Otto al Novecento* (Florence: Sansoni, 1990). For the idea of *leopardismo* in relation to *Operette morali*, and in general on the *Operette* and the *Novecento*, see the introduction of the already mentioned volume edited by Cortellessa and Bellucci: Novella Bellucci, 'Le *Operette morali*: un libro per il ventesimo secolo', in *'Quel libro senza uguali'*, pp. 13-26.

[15] Mario Lavagetto, 'Storia del genere umano', in *L'impiegato Schmitz e altri saggi su Svevo*, 2nd edn (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), pp. 167-207 (p. 172).

[16] Lavagetto, 'Storia del genere umano', p. 176.

decompose, disappear, and 'fertilizzano come […] materia organica per meglio ricostituirsi'.[17] Leopardi is also seen to be 'fertilised' with Freud and other influences in Spignoli's 2011 study, which nevertheless detects recognizable quotations from lesser-known Leopardian texts in Svevo's writings.[18] I discussed Svevo's interest in Leopardi respectively in 2019 and 2022. In the first contribution, I argued that Svevo's 1898-1919 'abandonment of literature', after the fiasco of *Senilità*, saw a productive fusion of Freudian theory and Leopardian prose – a contamination probably encouraged by Svevo's miscellaneous contemporary readings.[19] My second study stems from a part of this dissertation, and follows both writers' interaction with nineteenth-century models of 'balanced living' and 'life prolongation'.[20] This latter paper finds its complete form and comprehensive methodological context in chapter II of this thesis.

These contributions show different approaches and results, but they also have something in common. They all passingly touch upon a common theme, only to abandon it as if either too obvious or perhaps circumstantial. This thesis shall argue that it is precisely this 'elephant in the room' that allows one to make sense of Leopardi's presence in Svevo, and it is by following this thematic route that the processes of hybridity and contamination described above can be seen to reveal their parallel dynamics and demonstrative goals. It is at the heart of the 'paradosso esistenziale', in Zeno's epiphany

[17] Natalia Vacante, 'Favole, apologhi, aforismi. Svevo sulla Linea da Leopardi a Hebbel', in *Italo Svevo: Il sogno e la vita vera*, ed. by Mario Sechi (Rome: Donzelli, 2009), pp. 113-138 (p. 115). This quotation, cited in Vacante's study, comes from one of the Svevian notes gathered in *Racconti e scritti autobiografici* under the label 'Frammenti brevi'. See Svevo, 'Documenti umani', in *Racconti*, p. 781.
[18] Teresa Spignoli, 'Tra Freud e Leopardi: modelli intertestuali nell'opera di Italo Svevo e Paolo Volponi', in *Italo Svevo and His Legacy for the Third Millennium*, ed. by Emanuela Tandello Cooper and Giuseppe Stellardi, 2 vols (Leicester: Troubador, 2014), II, 135-142 (pp. 132-133).
[19] Olmo Calzolari, 'Metamorphosis and Nightmare in Leopardi and Svevo', in *The Archaeology of the Unconscious: Italian Perspectives*, ed. by Alessandra Aloisi and Fabio Camilletti (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 217–234.
[20] Olmo Calzolari, 'Dr Hufeland and the Book of Long Life. Errors and Horrors in Leopardi and Svevo', in *Scienza e follia, stravaganza, eccezione: Alchimisti, maghi, scienziati eslegi nella cultura italiana*, ed. by Daniela Bombara, Ellen Patat, and Silvia Zangrandi (Bologna: Pàtron, 2022), pp. 263-282.

of life as an original and tragicomic trap, Palmieri notes, that Leopardi appears a most congenial source for Svevo.[21] Vacante notes that Leopardi serves Svevo in what can be seen as a 'personale indagine del male che tarla il mondo', with the *Operette* acting as a model of 'lucido credo negativo che investe' the obscure dynamics of nature and its biological deadlocks.[22] Rusi observes that in the trademark Svevian 'concetto di vita come malattia più di un'eco leopardiana si può avvertire'.[23] I have already indicated that Spignoli indirectly 'detects the important connection between Svevo's narratives of illness and Leopardi's meditation […] opening a – still unmapped – field that could allow for a wider reconsideration of Leopardi as a pre-Freudian investigator of the diseases of modern life'.[24] This is no element to be underplayed by generalizing both writers' negative or 'pessimistic' outlooks. Even the most unexperienced reader – of Svevo, Leopardi, or both – would recognize that the idea of life as pain can be identified as a cardinal, fertile, and mouldable nucleus of poetics for both writers. Leopardi's 'Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia' (1829-1830), concluding that, for both human and beast, 'la vita è male', presents what is just one of the many formulations of a *philosopheme* problematized, readjusted, fictionalised throughout the whole Leopardian *oeuvre*[25] – that of life as torment since its inception, an endless loop of physical and psychological suffering that cannot be fixed, justified, or controlled via scientific or humanistic means. It is on such a ground – *la vita è male* – that Leopardi's poetics encounters Svevo's pivotal theme of *vita* as *malattia*, and it is from this perspective that these two writers will be examined.

[21] Palmieri, 'Leopardi in Svevo', p. 51.
[22] Vacante, 'Favole, apologhi, aforismi', pp. 115; 118.
[23] Rusi, 'Svevo e la funzione Leopardi', pp. 224.
[24] Calzolari, 'Metamorphosis and Nightmare', p. 219.
[25] Leopardi, 'Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia', in *Canti*, pp. 452-454 (p. 449).

2.2 Models of 'disease' and 'medical narrativizations'

Although several studies identified this core element of connection, none of them has engaged in its exploration from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective. There are probably good reasons for this. Developing a discourse that associates Leopardi, and specifically the *Operette morali*, to whatever notion of 'disease' runs the risk of participating (more or less consciously) in a reductive yet historically fortunate perspective on Leopardi. This line of thinking is most perfectly exemplified by one of Leopardi's harshest contemporary critics, the catholic philologist and poet Niccolò Tommaseo (Leopardi was ultimately 'pessimista perché gobbo', as summarised by Timpanaro)[26] – a paradigm that has enjoyed an easy nineteenth- and early twentieth-century afterlife, enlivened by romantic and/or positivistic 'pathographies' of 'Leopardi's genius' (or pessimism), and feeding a discourse that still dominates the perception of Leopardi amongst the general Italian public.[27] We should, therefore, clarify how this thesis defines the notion of 'disease'. This thesis will consider disease precisely in the terms explored, dramatized, and problematised by Leopardi and Svevo; that is to say, as the revelation of life in its absurd, unfair, uncontrollable, and destructive powers – powers that both writers explore through comparable narratives of ineptitude, suicide, consumption, fatigue, and self-destruction. This thesis will identify, compare, and

[26] Sebastiano Timpanaro, 'Alcune osservazioni sul pensiero del Leopardi', in *Classicismo e illuminismo nell'Ottocento italiano* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1965), pp. 133-182 (p. 157).
[27] For an overview of such late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century studies, and on the problematic contamination between positivistic medicine and literary criticism, see Maria Conforti, 'The poet who lost his head: Giacomo Leopardi's pathographies', in *Littérature et médecine. Approches et perspectives (XVIe-XIXe siècles)*, ed. by Andrea Carlino and Alexandre Wenger (Genève: Droz, 2007), pp. 135-153.

intersect these narratives, aiming to detect parallels in terms of themes, methods, and demonstrative aims. Of course, this is not the only means of associating these two writers. Other perspectives can be brought forward, including ideas of anti-anthropocentrism and animality, discourses on the survival of sensitive organisms in times of modernity and disbelief, and even aspects of temporal manipulation and literary writing – all aspects that this thesis, with its focus on the transdisciplinary and semantically complex notion of 'disease', will partially come to consider, providing elements and observations for future studies. The choice of using 'disease' as a 'thematic magnet' able to attract both Leopardi's and Svevo's approaches to writing, and reveal the elements and dynamics regulating this attraction, lies precisely in the interdisciplinary 'scientific', and more precisely 'medical', components of this idea. Lavagetto provocatively titles the section of his study on Leopardi and Svevo 'La vita è una malattia della materia', observing that:

> A Leopardi Svevo non deve solo il motivo, peraltro non originale e di larga circolazione, della presenza umana come elemento dissonante […] nell'ordine del mondo; non soltanto il tema della 'mala contentezza', dell''inquieta, insaziabile, immoderata' natura degli uomini che li spinge […] a rifuggire dal proprio stato. Anzi: questi temi, mescolati con altri, […] potrebbero apparire più come echi diffusi e non precisamente localizzabili, che come un debito preciso. Se non ci fosse poi, nelle pagine di Svevo, qualcosa che […] si percepisce con tale nettezza da ridurre in termini modesti ogni possibilità di abbaglio. Ed è prima di tutto il modo di utilizzare […] l'aneddoto costruito con materiali desunti insieme da mitologia e 'scienza', al fine di rappresentare e sceneggiare pochi aforismi altrimenti organizzabili in un rapido teorema[.][28]

The idea of human life as a dissonant particle within the order of nature, a virus of sickly energies and restlessness, which constantly tries to mutate its own state – in short, the *rapido teorema* of life as *male*, or *malattia* – is commonly dramatized, on the Leopardian and Svevian page, by empowering the literary narration via a patchwork of terms, images,

[28] Lavagetto, '"La vita è una malattia della materia"', in *L'impiegato Schmitz*, pp. 176-181 (p. 177).

and archetypes deriving from those very 'sciences' that are unable to improve this condition. Vacante expands on this passage by explaining that 'la riflessione di Svevo incrocia quella leopardiana' insofar as 'scienziati, filosofi e scrittori' and all the 'apporti più problematici e stimolanti della filosofia della natura tra sette e ottocento' are metabolised with the aim of 'scomporre gli errori e gli inganni' of the human attempt to justify or heal the 'costitutiva inerenza del dolore alle forme dell'esistenza'.[29] We can reformulate this as follows: if Svevo relies on a Leopardian model to narrate and explore the theorem of 'life as illness', he does so also because of the comparably hybrid and 'negative' scientific-humanistic recombination, which that model itself operates. In a confusing game of Chinese boxes, Leopardi can be considered as an extraordinary and 'interdisciplinary' source for Svevo, who had already internalised and manipulated previous models of nature and physiology towards his own philosophical agenda.

Nor should this come as a surprise within the context of Leopardi's scientific culture. Forlini points out that the *Operette* were classified by the editors of the Milanese journal *Biblioteca italiana* under the label of 'philosophy', that is, within the same genre as natural sciences, investigations in physiology, and discussions on recent experiments and discoveries – in line with an early nineteenth-century culture where sciences and literature had not yet diverged into different and mutually exclusive fields, sharing similar journals, encyclopaedias, and cultural circles as common intellectual spaces, as well as parallel 'tecniche letterarie e convenzioni retoriche' in their writing styles and methods.[30] Gillian Beer, in her classic study on Darwinism and Victorian fiction, observes that this

[29] Vacante, 'Favole, apologhi, aforismi', pp. 116; 118; 122.
[30] Adolfo Forlini, 'Stratone e l'"ospitale" dei viventi. Tradizioni filosofiche e contesti scientifici per il Leopardi Bolognese', in *Leopardi e Bologna: Atti del Convegno di studi per il 2° centenario leopardiano (Bologna, 18-19 maggio 1998)*, ed. by Marco Antonio Bazzocchi (Florence: Olschki, 1999), pp. 133-170 (p. 133).

interplay survived at least until the mid-nineteenth century, when 'scientists still shared a common language with other educated readers and writers of their time'.[31] As for Svevo, whose later reflection and works shows, according to Nay, the dynamics of a 'sincretismo culturale […] ancora ottocentesco' as 'l'ultimo prodotto della fermentazione di un secolo', much has been written on the interaction between literary narration, philosophical investigation, and medical knowledge.[32] Specific attention has been given to *La coscienza di Zeno* and the late nineteenth-century paradigm of Freudianism – a discipline whose overall plots and language, according to Svevo, better suit novelists than doctors. But Freud is only one tassel of a wider medical mosaic. Recent contributions have hypothesised his works as recombining an array of *previous* and *physiological* models, either mediated by literary readings or via a network of medical personalities, philosophers, and scientific divulgators. This field received a decisive spur with the 2008 volume *Guarire dalla cura*, edited by Riccardo Cepach, whose collected essays identify theories, experiments, and physiological perspectives creatively metabolized within the Svevian *oeuvre*. This field was additionally explored, in 2014, by a special issue of the Svevian journal *Aghios*, paying crucial attention to themes of nineteenth-century vitalism and energetics applied to fiction, and theories of biological and narrative time.[33] A fundamental and more recent study in this field is Contarini's 2018 volume *La coscienza*

[31] Gillian Beer, 'Introduction', in *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 1-21 (p. 4).
[32] Laura Nay, 'Italo Svevo ovvero "l'ultimo prodotto della fermentazione di un secolo"', in *'Guarire dalla cura': Italo Svevo e i medici*, ed. by Riccardo Cepach (Trieste: Museo Sveviano, 2008), pp. 33-84 (p. 45).
[33] In the same issue of the journal, see Silvia Contarini, 'Energetica vitale e paradigmi della psicofisiologia nel primo Svevo', *Aghios: Quaderni di Studi Sveviani*, 7-8 (2014), 27-51; Marc Föcking, 'La tiroide di Ada. Endocrinologia e narrazione ne *La coscienza di Zeno* di Italo Svevo', *Aghios*, 7-8 (2014), 52-65; Marie Guthmüller, 'Il sonno come paradosso vitalistico e energetico in due racconti di Italo Svevo: *Lo specifico del dottor Menghi* e *Vino generoso*', *Aghios,* 7-8 (2014), 66-83; Riccardo Cepach, ''Si capisce che è meno malato chi ha meno tempo per esserlo'. Macchine del tempo e paradossi temporali nella narrativa sveviana', *Aghios*, 7-8 (2014), 173-191; Giuseppe Stellardi, 'Dal tempo del corpo al tempo della scrittura: le forme della temporalità umana nell'opera di Italo Svevo', *Aghios*, 7-8 (2014), 192-207.

prima di Zeno, which identified the first systematic survey of Svevo's late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medical cultures, models, and writing techniques. Contarini considers the Svevian text as a quintessential 'spazio ibrido', where preceding medical models find new associations and narrative possibilities via processes of literary-scientific *ricezione*, *dialogo*, and (more or less parodic) *metamorfosi*.[34] Svevo's writings clearly situate themselves in that passage, between the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, where the sciences and the humanities – the 'two cultures', to evoke a historical formula by Charles P. Snow – gradually diverged into independent jargons, methodologies, and writing practices.[35] Yet Svevo belongs to both cultures, indiscriminately combining the humanistic and scientific into new formulas of fiction, and twisting languages and models (seemingly) uncaring of scientific rigour or philological faithfulness.

While there has been a certain degree of interest in the medical aspects of Svevo's work, much remains to be said on Leopardi's own creative work on nineteenth-century medicine. Leopardi was certainly an avid reader of medical sciences, and was personally involved in the latest development of that field – in this sense, it is safe to admit that the biographical intersects the literary in the terms suggested by Timpanaro: Leopardi's own *mali* acted as a 'formidabile strumento conoscitivo' into the mechanisms of biological

[34] Contarini underlines that this interdisciplinary perspective, 'se si dà credito agli studi più recenti a proposito tra scienza e romanzo, non sembra infatti più differibile […][;] tutto ciò non riguarda solo la prima metà dell'Ottocento, quando, come è stato dimostrato, il discorso della medicina attinge alle risorse della retorica per tradurre i risultati delle osservazioni riguardo all'ambito sfuggente della science de l'âme, ma in misura anche maggiore l'età del modernismo, nel periodo che intercorre tra Charcot e Janet fino al primo Freud'. See Silvia Contarini, '*Una vita* allo specchio di Taine', in *La coscienza prima di Zeno: Ideologie scientifiche e discorso letterario in Svevo* (Florence: Franco Cesati, 2018), pp. 11-35 (p. 12).

[35] For the context and the precedents of this controversy, which started at the 1959 Rede Lecture at Cambridge with Snow's remarks on the non-permeability of modern humanistic culture to basic scientific knowledge, see Stefan Collini, 'Introduction', in Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures*, 26th edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. vii-lxxi.

life and the techniques and possibilities of redressing its nefarious effects.[36] But Leopardi was extremely receptive to the way in which archetypes of physiology, medicine, and overall of disease, could be integrated, reworked, and used as a catalyst to empower a personal discourse on the human condition. Medicine and illness as themes can be traced throughout the whole Leopardian *oeuvre*, with clear early examples in the 1819 unpublished poems 'Per una donna inferma di malattia lunga e mortale' and 'Nella morte di una donna fatta trucidare col suo portato dal corruttore per mano ed arte di un chirurgo'. These texts integrate notions of a famous case of failed abortion that occurred in Pesaro, reworking medical scenarios and surgical terms to expand on life's unfairness, with its violent allure and wounding forces. In the same years, Leopardi drafts 'Vita abbozzata di Silvio Sarno', where the protagonist Silvio, also an innocent youngster attracted by the world's calling, is consumed by excessive vitality and burning desires. This story reappears, a decade later, in 'A Silvia' (1828), where a young maiden '[d]a chiuso morbo combattuta e vinta' embodies the ultimate symbol of *natura*'s sick deceptions.[37] Associations of physiology, medicine, and ideas of *male* and *malattia* recur throughout the *Operette*, with late eighteenth-century therapies of life-prolongation twisted to sustain a discourse over life's inextinguishable pain in 'Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico' (1824), and terms of 'anatomic preparation' and 'conglutination' reworked in 'Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie' to reiterate that *dolor* is, in fact, the quintessence of being alive. Nor can we underplay Leopardi's fraternal friendships and intellectual dialogue with some of the most influential doctors of his time, such as the eclectic Dr Francesco Puccinotti (1794-1872), who assisted Leopardi when writing of Ruysch' embalmed bodies, or Dr Giacomo Tommasini (1768-1846), the reformist frequented by

[36] Timpanaro, 'Alcune osservazioni sul pensiero del Leopardi', p. 158.
[37] Leopardi, 'A Silvia', in *Canti*, pp. 394-407 (p. 404).

Leopardi while composing vivid *Zibaldone* meditations on the perverse 'hospital chamber' of natural existence. While a comprehensive study of these narratives from the perspective of the medical humanities remains a desideratum (and would break a long-standing taboo in Leopardi studies), significant contributions in this direction have been given, which look into the potential sources of Leopardian discourse and consider the creative methods through which medical knowledge is translated onto the Leopardian page.[38] Leopardi, a man provided with an acute scientific sensibility – he was offered the Natural History Chair at the University of Parma in 1829 – was certainly acquainted with the fundamentals of medical thought, which he derived from Classical (Hippocrates and Celsus) and Enlightenment readings (Cabanis, Tissot), as well as from his interest in contemporary medical debates and discoveries. Conforti outlines, for example, that Leopardi was certainly familiar with the fundamentals of vitalistic theory in its two main early nineteenth-century manifestations of Neo-Hippocratism and Brunonianism[39] – two

[38]Adolfo Forlini, 'I fisici e il metafisico: congetture per un dialogo possibile', in *Letteratura e orizzonti scientifici*, ed. by Giovanni Baffetti (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997), pp. 123-156; Giuliana Benvenuti, 'La medicina nella biblioteca di Leopardi', in *Letteratura e orizzonti scientifici*, pp. 107-122; Alessandro Volpi, 'Leopardi presents his Physician Friends', in *Leopardi in Pisa: 'cangiato il mondo appar'*, ed. by Fiorenza Ceragioli (Milan: Electa, 1998), pp. 232-238; see also Forlini's aforementioned 1999 'Stratone e l'"ospitale" dei viventi'; Alessandro Volpi, 'La malattia incolpevole. Leopardi contro le certezze della medicina', *Antologia Vieusseux*, 18 (2000), 5-25; Maria C. Meschiari, 'Leopardi e la medicina', in *Un medico di casa Leopardi*, ed. by Giorgio Zavagli (Ferrara: Corso, 2001), pp. 175-198; Loretta Marcon, ''La ragione, il corpo, la vita.' Kant, Hufeland, Leopardi', *Rivista di letteratura italiana*, 25.2 (2007), 49-70; Maria Conforti, 'L'ignuda morte delle mummie di Federico Ruysch: sapere del corpo e poesia in Giacomo Leopardi', *Medicina nei secoli*, 22.1-3 (2010), 163-180; Conforti, 'Leopardi e la medicina: prolungamento della vita e concetto di morte', in *Leopardi e il pensiero scientifico*, ed. by Giorgio Stabile, 2nd edn (Rome: Fahrenheit 451, 2015), pp. 121-159; Gaspare Polizzi, 'Corpo sano e Corpo malato. Tra medicina, antropologia e biopolitica', *Rivista Internazionale di Studi Leopardiani*, 11 (2018), 127-160; Emanuela Tandello Cooper, 'Percorsi di lettura tra *Operette morali* e *Frankenstein*', *Rivista Internazionale di Studi Leopardiani*, 12 (2019), 87-114; Francesca Fiumara, 'Medicina', in *Lessico Leopardiano 2020*, ed. by Novella Bellucci and Valerio Camarotto (Rome: Sapienza University Press, 2020), pp. 103-113; Polizzi, '"Debolezza corporale" e "incivilimento". Leopardi e i médecins philosophes', in *Nei labirinti dell'esistenza, illuminati dalla ragione: Scritti in ricordo di Sergio Moravia*, ed. by Gustavo Raffi and Riccardo Roni (Rome: Bonanno, 2022), pp. 155-168. As for science at large, including but not limited to medicine, an interesting reconstruction of Leopardi's interactions with scientists and doctors while in Pisa can be found in Polizzi, 'Circostanze amichevoli: gli amici scienziati', in *Leopardi e 'le ragioni della verità'* (Rome: Carocci, 2003), pp. 203-224. Furthermore, Leopardi's use of scientific-medical analogies is explored in Andrea Campana, 'Le physique et le moral', in *Leopardi e le metafore scientifiche* (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2008), pp. 191-237.

[39] Conforti, 'Leopardi e la medicina: prolungamento della vita', pp. 129-140.

schools that will be covered in this thesis, considering how these can be seen as participating in Leopardi and Svevo's reappropriation of science in their explorations of 'life as disease'. But there is more to be said about such comparable processes of hybridization.

3 Interdisciplinary 'fertilization' and discursive 'weddings'

A catalogue of sources, which can be (more or less safely) conjectured, with the help of the Recanati library, does not do justice to the way in which such 'medical nuclei' are transformed onto the Leopardian page.[40] This does not mean that 'manc[a] un interesse teorico di Leopardi per la medicina (o meglio per il fenomeno biologico della vita e del suo mantenimento o conclusione), ma a essere "scientifico" è più lo sguardo oggettivo, e insieme attento ai fattori affettivi'. Particularly, Conforti continues:

> nel caso della medicina […] e della sua trasformazione in *discorso* (anche poetico) […] quello che colpisce nei testi leopardiani è soprattutto la lucidità dello sguardo […] sui corpi, umani e non, e più in generale sulla vita degli organismi, dalle formazioni

[40] As Polizzi explains, one of the obvious reasons of '[g]li interessi medici e fisiologici di Leopardi' is identified in 'le numerose acquisizioni della biblioteca paterna, consonanti con gli interessi di Monaldo in ambito medico'. Monaldo was certainly 'all'avanguardia per la promozione della vaccinazione anti-vaiolosa, che introdusse nel 1801 per la prima volta nello Stato Pontificio (il siero di Edward Jenner era stato usato per la prima volta nel 1798)'. Beside collecting 'numerosi e aggiornati libri di medicina e fisiologia', he also 'scrisse un'ode *In lode del Vajolo* e da Gonfaloniere invitò a Recanati grandi medici, tra i quali Puccinotti.' The critic reports that '[n]ella Biblioteca vi sono sei settori di cultura medica: 1) Storia della medicina, Leggi di essa, e Lessici; 2) Anatomia; 3) Trattati generali di medicina; 4) Trattati particolari; 5) Chirurgia; 6) Dei preparamenti e loro preparazione.' Furthermore, Benvenuti adds that the 'presenza nella biblioteca di Leopardi dell'*Encyclopédie*', too, played a role in his developing awareness of contemporary medicine and general physiological models. See Polizzi, 'Corpo sano e Corpo malato', pp. 144-146. See Benvenuti, 'La medicina nella biblioteca di Leopardi', p. 108. For the library's contents, we will refer to *Catalogo della biblioteca Leopardi in Recanati (1847-1899)*, ed. by Andrea Campana (Florence: Olschki, 2011). According to Pasquini, this critical re-edition of the catalogue produced in 1847, 'anno della morte di Monaldo' is the 'fotografia più fedele della consistenza della biblioteca stessa ai tempi in cui Giacomo vi consumava le sue ore di studio.' See Emilio Pasquini, 'Prefazione', in *Catalogo della biblioteca Leopardi*, pp.1-4 (p. 3).

> geologiche ai corpi politici, una lucidità che è possibile ricondurre alle sue fonti classiche e sette-ottocentesche ma che non si esaurisce in esse.[41]

This process of 'transformation', reworking, and exceeding of medical sources cannot be regarded as an unconscious operation. Educated since childhood to 'translate' scientific notions into original, philosophically sophisticated, and literarily articulate *Dissertazioni*, Leopardi's later and mature discourse, according to Campana, is 'fecondato' by the 'scienze sperimentali', and consciously builds on a web of scientific-physiological analogies and metaphors.[42] Campana discusses examples drawing from the innumerable 'physiological-social' or 'physical-moral' analogies enlivening the *Canti*, *Operette*, and *Zibaldone*, highlighting, for example, how mechanical notions of 'flexibility' come to be associated with how sensitive souls endure societal hardship, or how organisms adapt to different environmental conditions, or even to how the human race as a whole can change throughout history. Ideas from fields as disparate as energetics, meteorology, and psychology are creatively reassociated to expand upon how individuals of genius and exuberant 'inner life' respond to hostile settings by either heating up or freezing, with alternate risks of burn out and depression. This is the case, for example, in the *Zibaldone* 1473-1474 narrative of the 'uomo-grandine':

> Quel giovane che fu d'animo eroico nella virtù (come sogliono essere tutti quelli che nascono con grande e forte immaginaz[ione] e sentimento), se per forza dell'esperienza, delle sventure, degli esempi, disingannato della virtù, arriva a lasciarla, diviene eroico nel vizio, e capace di molto maggiori errori, che non sono gli altri ec. Non già per una

[41] Conforti, 'Leopardi e la medicina: prolungamento della vita', p. 131.

[42] As part of his comprehensive educational regime, Leopardi had to produce between 1811 and 1812 a series of dissertations on subjects of science, which Campana's study considers as an endless 'banca di analogie' for his later production of poetry and prose. Amongst these, those specifically labelled 'dissertazioni fisiche' are: *Dissertazione sopra il moto*, *Dissertazione sopra l'attrazione*, *Dissertazione sopra i gravi*, *Dissertazione sopra l'urto dei corpi*, *Dissertazione sopra l'estensione*, *Dissertazione sopra l'idrodinamica*, *Dissertazione sopra i fluidi elastici*, *Dissertazione sopra la luce*, *Dissertazione sopra l'astronomia*, *Dissertazione sopra l'elettricismo*. See Campana, 'Introduzione', in *Leopardi e le metafore scientifiche*, pp. 9-31 (pp. 16; 25).

> continuazione di entusiasmo applicato al male, ma per un eccesso di freddezza che è sempre compagna della malvagità. Egli diviene un eroe di freddezza, e tanto più intrepido, duro, ghiacciato, quanto era stato più fervido. Come quei vapori che si convertono in grandine, i quali non si stringerebbero nel più duro, denso, e sodo ghiaccio che possa formarsi nell'aria, se straordinario calore non gli avesse innalzati a straordinaria sublimità. In tutte le cose gli eccessi si toccano assai più fra loro, che col loro mezzo, e l'uomo eccessivo in qualunque cosa, è molto più inclinato e proclive all'eccesso contrario che al mezzo. Ed è molto più facile, *conseguente*, e *naturale* per la forza e la qualità di un'indole *eccessiva*, il saltare dall'uno all'opposto estremo, che il recarsi e fermarsi nel mezzo ec. ec. (9. Agos. 1821.).[43]

Campana contextualises this process of scientific-literary hybridization starting with Leopardi's famous distinction between the terms of science – *termini*, characterised by geometrical precision and revealing the 'naked truth' of things – and the words of poetry – *parole*, vague and indefinite, allowing for imaginative misunderstandings and infinite re-combinations of meaning.[44] Leopardi does not make this distinction with the aim of drawing impassable lines between fields and writing practices. Quite the opposite, the critic argues that this so-called 'separation' elucidates the creative dynamics of dialogue and transformation sparking between 'poet' and 'scientist' in a 'teoria globale dell'immaginazione e da una originale idea del rapporto tra scienza e letteratura'.[45] While the scientist or philosopher reveals reality 'nuda', the poet elaborates on that nudity and covers it through an ornate and polyvalent approach to language (*Zibaldone* 1226 points

[43] *Zib*. 1473-1474. Italics in the original. The passage is reported in Campana, 'Introduzione', pp. 23-27.
[44] Campana, 'Introduzione', p. 10. Leopardi elaborates this distinction in several passages of *Zibaldone*. See, for example, an early 1820 note such as *Zib*. 110: '[l]e voci scientifiche presentano la nuda e circoscritta idea di quel tale oggetto, e perciò si chiamano termini perchè determinano e definiscono la cosa da tutte le parti. Quanto più una lingua abbonda di parole, tanto più è adattata alla letteratura e alla bellezza ec. ec. e per lo contrario quanto più abbonda di termini, dico quando questa abbondanza noccia a quella delle parole, perchè l'abbondanza di tutte due le cose non fa pregiudizio. Giacchè sono cose ben diverse la proprietà delle parole e la nudità o secchezza, e se quella dà efficacia ed evidenza al discorso, questa non gli dà altro che aridità.' See also *Zib*. 1226: '[a]lle scienze son buone e convengono le voci precise, alla bella letteratura le proprie. Ho già distinto in altro luogo le parole dai termini, e mostrata la differenza che è dalla proprietà delle voci alla nudità e precisione. È proprio ufficio de' poeti e degli scrittori ameni il coprire quanto si possa le nudità delle cose, come è ufficio degli scienziati e de' filosofi il rivelarla. Quindi le parole precise convengono a questi, e sconvengono per lo più a quelli; a dirittura l'uno a l'altro. Allo scienziato le parole più convenienti sono le più precise ed esprimenti un'idea più nuda. Al poeta e al letterato per lo contrario le parole più vaghe, ed esprimenti idee più incerte, o un maggior numero d'idee ec. Queste almeno gli denno esser le più care, e quelle altre che sono l'estremo opposto, le più odiose.'
[45] Campana, 'Introduzione', p. 29.

out that '[è] proprio ufficio de' poeti e degli scrittori ameni il coprire quanto si possa le nudità delle cose, come è ufficio degli scienziati e de' filosofi il rivelarla'). This is not to say that artistic writing obfuscates science via empty rhetoric and/or utter misunderstanding, but that these two dimensions can interact, according to Gensini and Mortara Garavelli, through an innerweb of paragons and associations that allow 'intellect' and 'poetic imagination' to magnify each other's possibilities of narration and enquiry.[46] Leopardi's proximity to medicine can be both explicit and recognizable – as in the case with the medical-themed poems or *Operette* – or covert, like in the *Zibaldone* passage above, 'al limite dell'ambiguità semantica' and in line with a conscious strategy of scientific-literary hybridization.[47] In this sense, the artist can expand on the scientist's investigation, and the latter can provide the former with new scenarios, terms, and imaginative implications. The *Zibaldone*, whose discursive patchwork interweaves subjects as varied as aesthetics and anthropology, politics and physiology, metaphysics and biology, claims that what truly connects the great minds of all the 'possibili discipline e cognizioni umane' – the poet as well as the scientist, the physician as well as the metaphysician – is the ability to create narratives, plots, and interconnections between the 'rapporti che esistono fra le cose le più disparate, non conoscendo i quali, nessuna cosa si conosce perfettamente', arriving via their own independent manners and languages to

[46] Gensini warns that 'naturalmente è da evitare la secca corrispondenza termini/ragione:parole/immaginazione: Leopardi è molto più cauto, al di là dell'apparente radicalismo del suo dire. Quella corrispondenza si pone in termine di paragone'. As for 'la contrapposizione fra scienza e *humanae litterae*, nella dissociazione fra "le due culture"' Mortara Garavelli argues that in Italian literature 'bisognerà arrivare a Leopardi […] per sentire affermare la necessità della convivenza di intelletto (pensiero, scienza) e immaginazione; ove le retorica, come teoria letteraria, ha un ruolo fondante' in terms of narrative and philosophical implications. See Stefano Gensini, 'La distinzione "parole/termini" e la sostanza immaginativo-metaforica delle lingue', in *Linguistica Leopardiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984), pp. 103-124 (p. 115); Bice Mortara Garavelli, *Manuale di Retorica* (Milan: Giunti Editore, 2018), pp. 12-13. Both Gensini's and Mortara Garavelli's statements are cited in Campana, 'Introduzione', pp. 13; 29-30.

[47] Campana, 'Introduzione', p. 13.

comparable conclusions.[48] Campana reports that, in the *operetta* 'Il Parini, ovvero della gloria' (1824), Leopardi observes that the same imaginative *colpo d'occhio* connects the works of, say, Homer and Netwon. Many scientists 'in quanto all'innata disposizione dei loro ingegni, sarebbero potuti essere sommi poeti; e per lo contrario […] Dante, lo Shakespeare, sommi filosofi'.[49] This *coup d'oeil*, or Lockian 'ricombinazione di idee' able to relate notions and ideas that many would not see as interconnected, links the great imaginative minds in all fields, of poetry and philosophy, of literature and science, and it is by aiming at such 'potenziale conoscitivo' that Leopardi's *oeuvre* operates within this hybrid path.[50]

It is probably from this perspective that, as Vacante reports, Svevo particularly liked the *Operette* as a book of 'stile chiaro e ornato'[51] – that is, as a book hybridizing 'naked' philosophical clarity and imaginative patterns, scientific notions and fictional recombination of knowledge – in which the artist and the scientist can be seen to contaminate and generate patterns and notions. Furthermore, this is what Svevo, in the already mentioned 'Soggiorno londinese', argues about Leopardi and Schopenhauer, two great minds – one a poet and one a philosopher – that, through their independent methods and languages, nevertheless reached comparable conclusions on life and its painful mysteries ('un raro caso nel quale un artista arrivò alla filosofia ignorando il filosofo. Questi la ragiona; il povero Leopardi la visse.')[52] In the lines before this brief reference to Leopardi as a 'contaminated author', this essay presents one of the few declarations of poetics in the whole Svevian *oeuvre*. Asked by literary critic Enzo Ferrieri to talk about

[48] *Zib*. 1922.
[49] Leopardi, 'Il Parini, ovvero della gloria', in *Operette*, pp. 123-149 (p. 138). The passage is cited in Campana, 'Introduzione', p. 30.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Vacante, 'Favole, apologhi, aforismi', p. 116.
[52] Svevo, 'Soggiorno londinese', p. 897.

Freud and the influence of Freudianism on literature (but this was a way of having Svevo talk about himself), Svevo sways onto a fundamental reflection on the artist-scientist liaison and onto the creative marriage that can occur between languages, fields of knowledge, and fictional possibilities. 'Noi romanzieri usiamo baloccarci con le grandi filosofie […]. Le falsifichiamo ma le umanizziamo' – thus, Svevo famously concludes his discourse on Freud and *La coscienza di Zeno*.[53] However, like Leopardi's seemingly rigid distinction between *termini* and *parole*, Svevo's discourse, too, develops into a more integrated approach. Artists often remove scientific terms from their semantically 'rigid' contexts, hence perhaps *falsificando* their truth, but also *umanizzando* so that these can bloom into their full potential. Svevo explains that a writer could try and divulge Einstein's theory of relativity by translating and 'humanizing' its mathematical symbols into new scenarios and physiological analogies (for example, '[a]mmettendo che si possa costruire un uomo il cui cuore pulsi anziché 72 volte il minuto, soltanto una volta ogni dieci minuti, è certo che quest'uomo tanto lento vedrà passare il sole da un orizzonte all'altro con la rapidità di un fuoco d'artificio.') Of course, this is not Einstein's theory as expressed in the $e = mc^2$ formula, but Einstein himself would be inspired (according to Svevo) to know of his discovery's unexpected implication ('[l]'idea è bellissima ma non ha niente a che fare con la mia relatività. Intanto l'aveva trovata bella ed è già qualche cosa.')[54] Once the 'Svevian artist' encounters a scientific notion, a mysterious and creative intellectual process commences – a process that generates a *tertium quid* sharing both its component elements, but that cannot be entirely traced back to either of them. The artist does not always necessarily understand science in science's own terms, yet this

[53] Svevo, 'Soggiorno londinese', p. 895.
[54] Svevo, 'Soggiorno londinese', p. 896.

exercises a tremendous allure on his/her ability to reconnect information and re-narrate the world:

> L'artista, voglio dire l'artista letterato e l'illetterato, dopo qualche vano tentativo di avvicinarvisi, […] mette [that new scientific idea or term] in un cantuccio di dove essa lo turba e l'inquieta, un nuovo fondamento di scetticismo, una parte misteriosa del mondo, senza della quale non si sa più pensare. È là, non dimenticata ma velata, è ad ogni instante accarezzata dal pensiero dell'artista.[55]

A proper *mania* sparks an inspiration, a Leopardian *colpo d'occhio*. New notions fertilise *wider* imaginative scenarios, possibilities of representation, and philosophical constructions – a perchance delirious process, whose dynamics we will see in action when Zeno derives grandiose and life-changing implications from Ada contracting a mere endocrine disorder like Basedow's syndrome: a segment of Svevian narrative and recombination of sources that we will particularly explore from a Leopardian perspective. And speaking of mismatched romances, Svevo's essay continues by explaining that the artist-scientist liaison behaves like a real 'wedding': 'perché non s'intendono fra di loro proprio come il marito e la moglie e tuttavia […] producono dei bellissimi figliuoli'. The advantages of this marriage are difficult to quantify, or to explain. Literature expands its vocabulary by 'translating' science and renovating it into a new system of analogies and narrative connections ('conquista all'artista un rinnovamento […] gli dà il calore e il sentimento della cosa nuova come avverrebbe se fosse possibile di mutare una parte del vocabolario e darci delle parole nuove non ammuffite dalla loro antichità e dal lungo uso'). As for scientists and philosophers, literature can 'popularise' science by casting a 'potente riflettore' onto their otherwise obscure implications. But there is more – this encounter could improve the results of philosophy and science themselves ('[m]a io sono

[55] Svevo, 'Soggiorno londinese', p. 895.

convinto che talvolta anche l'opera dell'artista può promuovere il pensiero del filosofo'), although Svevo cannot precisely say how ('[n]on saprei provarlo').[56] Although this latter aspect, the way in which literature 'empowers' the enquiry of scientific research, will not be the main subject of this dissertation, it is certain that both Leopardi's and Svevo's theories propose a model of mutual empowerment in terms of knowledge and narration. The artists' covering, gilding, falsifying and humanising the sciences is no ordinary act of misunderstanding or readaptation. It points towards a *creative* recombination, an alchemy of notions where terms, images, and analogies are reworked until they lose their original rigidity and metamorphose into something new and unexpected. The creative outcome of this process, in this sense, can be seen to outweigh the importance of the individual sources at play. Contarini's study admits that a crucial aspect of investigating the 'medical cultures' behind an author's works is, in fact, that of exploring the 'intenzioni che assume di volta in volta il "jeu de miroirs" fra il discorso della scienza e quello della letteratura, nelle forme sempre diverse della contaminazione e della riscrittura', rather than in solely identifying sources.[57] Making a similar point for Leopardi, Campana explains how '[n]on sarebbe […] cauto, né tanto meno vantaggioso, puntare su un'unica spiegazione delle analogie leopardiane, affidando a qualche corrente filosofica o a qualche autore la responsabilità esclusiva di averle determinate.'[58] Such recombination of words and ideas, occurring because of precise philosophical agendas or/and narrative necessities, derives from an extensive '*carpet* più esteso di discussioni, di incontri e occasioni intellettuali', which are in turn dramatized and altered in writing. We can thus update our previous observations: not only, as Lavagetto argues, do Leopardi and Svevo

[56] Svevo, 'Soggiorno londinese', p. 896.
[57] Contarini, '*Una vita* allo specchio di Taine', p. 13.
[58] Campana, 'Introduzione', p. 28.

dramatize a commonly negative *philosopheme* ('life as disease') by recombining literature and science, but both authors enact a conscious and comparable work of hybridization between fields, creatively manipulating and altering their sources into new demonstrative and narrative possibilities.

4 A hybrid methodology for a hybrid connection

It is additionally clear that a discourse primarily relying on demonstrable bibliographical sources, and on the individuation and subsequent tallying of a series of direct influences, would not be able to cast light on the fertile 'hybridity' that rules this connection. Nor is this necessarily what a study on medicine and literature should aim to do. As cultural historian George Rousseau argues, 'the point of the activity is not historical fussiness (authorship, sources, influences) but cultural completeness: learning what was imagined, as well as discovering possible therapies embedded in the wisdom of literature'.[59] This does not mean that this thesis will not consider – when possible and productive – what important nineteenth-century medical 'cultures', famous doctors, and fashionable scientific experiments could be 'reformulated' and 'metabolized' in Leopardi's and Svevo's discourses. However, this will not be the sole, or the dominant, approach of this thesis. Adapting to its subject matter, this thesis will adopt a hybrid methodology. More specifically, we will look at a selection of Svevian and Leopardian texts by combining: a comparative approach (common reformulations of physiology towards explorations of 'life as disease'), research onto specific medical ideas (and their

[59] George Rousseau, 'Literature and Medicine: Towards a Simultaneity of Theory and Practice', *Literature and Medicine*, 5 (1986), 152-181 (p. 158).

literary transformation), and a discussion of literary influence (the individuation and contextualization of Leopardian references in Svevo). Throughout the four core chapters of this thesis, these three perspectives will naturally redirect to, and intersect, each other, casting light on factors that they alone could not detect or justify – a Leopardian presence whose complexity has not yet received satisfactory explanation.

This thesis will begin by exploring how Leopardi and Svevo, from the early stages of their reflection, derive similar fictional implications from comparable physiological models – beyond models of direct literary influence and recognizable scientific sources. Comparable *modus operandi* and demonstrative agendas will emerge as dominating both investigations of life, contradictions, and illness, individuating a pattern that will be followed throughout the rest of this thesis. This way of connecting Leopardi and Svevo (*comparable* physiological models reformulated into *comparable* discursive expansions) will be referred to as a recurrent strategy of 'comparability'.

The featuring of comparable medical experiments, ideas of 'life forces', and physiological terms in these narratives will lead us to ponder whether both writers could, in fact, be seen to rework historically interconnected models. Our comparative approach will, thus, be hybridized with one of reception of medical ideas and literary transformation. Leopardi's appropriating early nineteenth-century medicine will allow us to hypothesise that Svevo, too, remodelled (directly or indirectly, via Leopardi or an external tapestry of literary and medical mediations) similar 'outdated' models in his own narrations on comparable themes. This approach finds inspiration in Forlini's study of Leopardi and the world of Bolognese medicine in the early-nineteenth century.[60] Forlini relies on epistemologist Bruno Latour's emphasising ideas of 'reassociation' and

[60] Forlini, 'Stratone e l'"ospitale" dei viventi', pp. 133-136.

'rewriting', over those of original 'source' and 'theory'. Latour underlines how scientific notions per se – even the ones of exceptional magnitude, like Pasteur's discovery of microbes – have only a limited reach of expansion and influence, if not transposed, translated, hybridized, reassociated, and most importantly *rewritten* according to a diversity of philosophical, social, and political agendas, and to individual reformulations of knowledge. In this process, the 'allies' (as well as the opponents, and the misinformed) transporting a notion through time and space, and into new fields, play a role that is as critical as that of the theory itself: 'such distinctions are less important than the attribution of meaning […][,] than the fact that [the actors involved] are all renegotiating what the world is made up of'.[61] The epicentre of this process is, thus, 'the action of *writing*, an action which involves working with *inscriptions* that have been extracted, and that is practised through talking to other people who likewise write, inscribe, talk'.[62] As such, Forlini explains that in connecting a scientific theory and an author's act of *rewriting* it, it is not necessarily essential to prove that an author *directly* read a specific book, or that he/she *directly* interacted with a set of theories. Two passages are necessary instead. The first is that of 'dimostrare la *traducibilità*, nel suo linguaggio' of that specific set of 'scritture scientifiche'.[63] The second is that of hypothesising or reconstructing the 'associations' and the 'actors' of this process of rewriting, that network of 'frequentazioni, da parte dello scrittore, di libri e luoghi che consentissero, nei termini di Latour, di operare spostamenti e traduzioni […] di incontrare queste parole, in modo da allearsi con qualcuna di queste e vincolarle al servizio delle proprie.'[64] In combining

[61] Bruno Latour, 'Strong Microbes and Weak Hygienists', in *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. by Alan Sheridan and John Law (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1988), pp. 13-58 (p. 40).
[62] Latour, 'Irreduction of "The Sciences"', in *The Pasteurization*, pp. 213-236 (p. 218). This passage is also reported in Forlini, 'Stratone e l'"ospitale" dei viventi', p. 135.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.

comparability and a 'medical' approach, this thesis will identify some core eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories and discourses that could have proved *translatable* in Leopardi's and Svevo's interconnected narratives. We will then draw the networks of interactions, medical readings, and mediations that could allow Svevo to participate in the same Leopardian process of reformulation. This does not mean that Svevo necessarily relied on Leopardi's same *source* (if Leopardi himself can be seen as relying on precisely identifiable sources, rather than rhapsodically reading and reformulating networks of images and notions), but this process will reveal that both Leopardi's and Svevo's *thematically interconnected* discourse can, in fact, be seen to rewrite *interconnected models of medicine, experiments, and paradigms*.

Several elements will validate this hybrid course of action. In following Leopardi's and Svevo's narratives – those that we will identify as 'thematically' and 'medically' linked – this thesis will also come to discover undetected Leopardian references in the Svevian *oeuvre*. These references will be placed within the context of medical appropriation and rewriting linking Leopardi and Svevo, finally liberating them from the demeaning label of amateur quotations or half-baked and randomly appearing school memories. In this sense, the thematic-comparative and the medico-historical approach of this thesis will interweave and cast light on the third perspective of the Svevo-Leopardi connection: that of literary influence. What Palmieri called *risonanze* o *sintagmi leopardiani* will be seen as appearing, in Svevo's wider narratives, precisely where the discourse on life as *malattia* – that is, the dramatization of life and its contradictory forces, and the epiphany of these as leading to sickness and destruction – reaches its narrative peaks. This is where Svevian characters attempt, through life choices, medical treatments,

or delirious experiments, to fix the sickly loop of mania and depression, of pain and excitement, that is the *originale* curse of living.

Finally, these perspectives will allow us to cast new light on the elusive presence of Leopardi in Svevo; namely, where this was originally detected by the pioneering studies of this field. In so doing, we will set aside models of 'literary references' and 'medical cultures', and empower, instead, this thesis' proposed model of comparability. A 'traditional' model of comparability (comparable physiological models reformulated into parallel developments) will be expanded beyond individual texts and moments, looking at how, indeed, comparable discursive 'tensions' lead both writers to develop comparable solutions throughout their wider *oeuvres*. All in all, the three techniques of comparability, literary references, and medical reformulations will alternate, interweave, and reappear (amplified) throughout this thesis, proposing a merging of perspectives and interdisciplinary viewpoints.

5 Selected works

This interweaving of approaches will recur thorough this thesis, providing a hybrid and multifarious pattern for a hybrid and multifarious presence. While we will try to consider works of different genres and nature, a selection had to be made. For Leopardi, we will primarily consider his prose works, with recurrent attention being paid to those of the *Operette morali* and *Zibaldone*, which several studies have already detected as compatible with Svevo's interdisciplinary approach, philosophical outlook, humorous style, and which can be seen as the origin of most Svevian borrowings. This does not mean that references to the *Canti* will not occur. However, these will be only occasionally

explored vis-à-vis Svevo's narrations of illness – and will therefore not act as our primary lens to view these writers in comparison. As for Svevo, we will take into consideration his novels – with extensive explorations of *Una vita* and *La coscienza di Zeno*. A more contained discussion will be proposed for *Senilità*, whose narrative will be led back to dynamics recognized in the first Svevian novel. We will not particularly focus on Svevo's *Continuazioni*, which will only rarely be brought up to further consolidate elements of comparability or 'medical links' already implied through other textual intersections. On the other hand, core sections of this thesis will be dedicated to Svevo's published and unpublished short stories and essays, whose Leopardian presence has recurrently puzzled scholars, and which we will aim to clarify.

6 Thesis outline

The first chapter ('Self-destructive Misfits: Physiological Models and Narrative Developments') will look at manifestations of 'life as disease' in the form of 'ineptitude', considering two early works by Leopardi and Svevo and reading them from the perspective of comparability. In other words, we will be looking at how common physiological ideas are developed into comparable fictional scenarios and philosophical conclusions, beyond models of literary influence. The texts in question are Leopardi's unpublished and unfinished novel 'Vita abbozzata di Silvio Sarno' (1819) and Svevo's first novel *Una vita*. This chapter will underline how both writers, from early phases of their careers, derive similar narrative implications from ideas of flexibility, conformability, and shapelessness, dramatizing comparable models of ineptitude resulting from the impossible balance between life forces. Finally, this chapter will look

at narratives of ineptitude in *Senilità*, arguing that similar models, here, too, are dramatized into parallel solutions and fictional scenarios. With this novel, a model of comparability will begin to interweave with that of 'literary references' to Leopardi, providing an explanation for their presence in the Svevian *oeuvre*.

The second chapter ('Medical Errors and Fictional Horrors: Dr Hufeland and the Book of Long Life') will consider whether comparable, or historically interconnected, nineteenth-century experiments could be detected in Leopardi's and Svevo's narratives of life forces and their impossible balance. We will connect Leopardi's 'Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico' and Svevo's story 'Lo specifico del Dottor Menghi*'* to the 'errors' and 'horrors' of Dr Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland, whose manual *The Art of Prolonging Human Life* (1796) proposed a vastly influential and optimistic theory of prolongevity. Both stories interact with common theories of prolongevity, fictionalising them into medical/existential visions pointing to similar conclusions – whether short or long, intense or extensive, life is a condition that cannot be soothed. The *operetta*, openly mentioning Hufeland, will lead us to explore the manners and networks through which Svevo could have encountered and integrated that outdated model. In listing the 'interconnections' and 'actors' connecting Svevo and Hufeland, new Leopardian references will appear in Svevo's wider *oeuvre*, specifically in *La coscienza di Zeno*, confirming the fertility of our hybrid approach. This will be the first chapter to hybridize the three models of comparability, medical reformulations, and literary references while exploring both writers' narratives of *vita* and its elusive *malattia*.

A similar tactic – from rewritings of medical ideas to thematic interconnections, and from thematic interconnections to lists of medical intermediaries – will be employed in the third chapter ('The "Dark Metaphysician" – Dr Brown: A Model of Reformulation

and Comparability'). This section will consider the medical school that opposed Hufeland's optimistic therapeutics: that of Dr John Brown and his many (covert) followers. Finding inspiration in Forlini's work, we will find the beliefs of Brunonianism integrated, reformulated, and magnified in the Leopardian *oeuvre*, identifying a 'medically empowered' reflection on life as evil, illness, and (bio)logical paradoxes. These narratives will be identified as sharing a high degree of comparability (parallel medical images reformulated into parallel 'visions' and 'solutions' *in writing*) to passages already mentioned from *La coscienza di Zeno*. This will allow us to expand on a comparison between both writers' discourses on the similarity between illness and health, between natural life and hospitalization – ideas that also identify the revolution of Brunonian theory. Comparable premises develop into comparable solutions to parallel impasses; namely, a 'therapeutic' response of 'original levity' to the burden of existence and its pressures. In so doing, this investigation will also intersect new Leopardian presences in Svevo and will better explain those previously detected by scholars. Although we will not claim that *all of these* should be seen as direct, unmediated, or conscious literary filiations, their appearance along our comparative path will confirm the validity of the methods adopted. As such, the two modalities of comparability and literary presences will, once again, interweave and support each other, providing material and context for future scholarship. Furthermore, this chapter will strengthen its argument by integrating the strategy of medical reformulations. The fundamental translatability of Brown's ideas into Svevian discourse, and the proximity between Leopardi's narratives and *La coscienza*, will lead us to consider the interconnections, intermediaries, and (so far only partially explored) readings that might have allowed for Svevo's – conscious or

not – integration of Brunonian plots. This chapter, like the previous one, proposes an integration between the three core models of this thesis.

The fourth chapter ('More than one *storia del genere umano*: Comparable Models and Creative Tensions') will go back to the origins of the Leopardi-Svevo scholarship. The Leopardian presences in Svevo's 'essays' on evolution – which Lavagetto called a *Storia del genere umano* according to Svevo – will finally be explained via a recurrent model of this thesis: comparable physiological models developed into comparable solutions. Furthermore, novel elements of connections will be detected, and specifically in Svevian narratives of *ordigni* developed until the last pages of *La coscienza di Zeno*. To better follow this connection, this chapter will abandon models of direct literary filiation and historically interconnected models, and empower, instead, a new manner of comparability. *Parallel discursive tensions* and *contradictions* will be seen to lead both writers towards comparable open-ended conclusions. This chapter will end with the conclusion of *La coscienza*, comparing it to a selection of Leopardi's perspectives, ambivalences, and visions on themes of health and disease. Via this modality of connection (parallel images, parallel principles, parallel contradictions), this chapter aims to cast light on 'presences' that have often been detected, but never explained, in core moments of the Svevian *oeuvre*.

I
Self-destructive Misfits
Physiological Models and Narrative Developments

In a *Zibaldone* note dated '1. Dic. 1828' drafted as part of *Memorie della mia vita*, Leopardi reports his first encounter with society:

> Andato a Roma, la necessità di conviver cogli uomini, di versarmi al di fuori, di agire, di vivere esternamente, mi rese stupido, inetto, morto internamente. Divenni affatto privo e incapace di azione e di vita interna, senza perciò divenir più atto all'esterna. Io era allora incapace di conciliar l'una vita coll'altra; tanto incapace, che io giudicava questa riunione impossibile, e mi credeva che gli altri uomini, i quali io vedeva atti a vivere esternamente, non provassero più vita interna di quella ch'io provava allora, e che i più non l'avessero mai conosciuta. […] Ma quello stato fu forse il più penoso e il più mortificante che io abbia passato nella mia vita; perch'io, divenuto così inetto all'interno come all'esterno, perdetti quasi affatto ogni opinione di me medesimo, ed ogni speranza di riuscita nel mondo e di far frutto alcuno nella mia vita[65]

Before Rome, Leopardi had only experienced the golden seclusion of Recanati. His aristocratic upbringing allowed for the intensification of his erudite and imaginative *vita interna* while preserving him, not unlike a foetus, from the corruptions of external life. Indeed, when later confronted with the necessity of it, that is, with the need to step into the world by performing societally, Leopardi discovers that he is an *inetto*. Looking back at that state, Leopardi describes it as the most humiliating circumstance of his life, registering the quasi-mechanical jamming, and the subsequent death, of his resourceful spirit. Leopardi mournfully lingers on his Roman failure to 'pour' his inner energy into outward performance ('versarmi al di fuori'), recognising within himself an inaptitude 'di conciliar una vita con l'altra' – a 'riunione impossibile'. Instead of allowing for the enactment of Leopardi's inner desires, the external life of society depleted their energies,

[65] *Zib*. 4420.

making him *inept*, humiliated, and barren ('inetto all'interno come all'esterno, perdetti quasi affatto ogni opinione di me medesimo, ed ogni speranza di riuscita nel mondo e di far frutto alcuno nella mia vita'). The philosophical dilemma over what form of life – *interna* or *esterna*, *intensiva* or *estensiva* – a sensitive individual should choose, and whether these dimensions can coexist and balance each other out within the same person, are core themes in Leopardi's *oeuvre*. Indeed, the *memoria* considered above is followed by a theoretical note on a similar theme. In this, the notion of *vita interna* is replaced by the intensity of young desire and that of *vita esterna* by society at large: '[i]l giovane, p[er] la stessa veemenza del desiderio che ne sente, è inabile a figurare nella società. Non diviene abile se non dopo sedato e pressochè spento il desiderio.'[66] However, the line of thinking is analogous – the intensity of inner life can be of hindrance to personal development, making one 'inept' to assume agreeable adult forms, or to conform to society.

While these passages are often adopted in reconstructing Leopardi's intellectual biography, the Leopardian condition of *inetto*, and specifically that of ineptitude as an 'impossible reunion' between internal and external existence, has not yet been paid the attention it deserves. Nor has it been appreciated how the discourse over ineptitude featured in Leopardi's contemporary philosophy. Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* provided a clear diagnosis for the condition of 'INEPTIE':

> INEPTE, (*Gram. & Morale.)* c'est l'état d'une ame qui n'a d'aptitude à rien; elle est l'effet d'une stupidité que ne remue aucune passion; elle est aussi l'effet des circonstances qui placent un homme de mérite dans des postes au-dessous de lui, ou seulement opposés à son génie. Les hommes communs deviennent *ineptes* pour avoir trop dispersé la dose bornée de sensibilité & de talens qu'ils avoient reçû de la nature; ils ont trop essayé & trop peu persévéré; ils finissent par n'avoir qu'une ombre d'existence. A la cour & dans

[66] Ibid.

> la capitale, ils peuvent être encore ce qu'on appelle *hommes de bonne compagnie*, ou se faire *des connoisseurs*.[67]

The lemma of the *Encyclopédie* fundamentally describes the *inepte* as a subject affected by paralysis, stupor, apathy. These can be caused by external factors, such as in the case of a man of merit coping with sustained humiliating circumstances, or by internal ones, if that man has shapelessly dispersed his inborn sensibility instead of 'pouring' it into concrete projects, actions, or forms of existence. Either way, the specimen of the *inetto* is the result of an imbalance between opposing energies, and identifies a weak specimen of humanity, depending on others for survival. This study will explore how the 'phenomenology of ineptitude' that, according to traditional literary scholarship, describes many twentieth-century *ombre d'existence* was already an object of fictional and philosophical writings in the early-nineteenth century. While this will not entail a historical – in terms of the history of literature, and of the ideas – reconstruction of that model throughout the nineteenth century (or before), the comparative perspective and choice of literary texts will provide material for such studies in the future. This chapter will focus on and explore specific pieces of writing and compare them, in terms of common premises and narrative developments, via models of ineptitude. We will start with Leopardi's works, arguing that his philosophical and fictional works identify significant – yet so far entirely unexplored – expansions on similar models. While we do not know whether Leopardi was aware of that *Encyclopédie*'s definition, his exploration can be seen to develop interconnected 'pathologies of ineptitude'; namely, one pertaining

[67] 'INEPTIE, INEPTE', in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers,* 28 vols, ed. by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (Paris: Le Breton, Michel-Antoine David, Laurent Durand, & Antoine-Claude Briasson, 1751-1772), VIII (1765), p. 696. Via 'University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Spring 2021 Edition), Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe (eds),' <https://artflsrv03.uchicago.edu/philologic4/encyclopedie0521/navigate/8/3071/?byte=7484710> [accessed 8 August 2022]. Italics in the original.

to *vita esterna*, and one to *vita interna*. As we will see, the term *inetto* features on several occasions in the *Zibaldone* and *Operette morali*, showing how the late Roman *memoria* of 1828 only constitutes the culmination of a storyline reformulated throughout Leopardi's whole *oeuvre* – the one narrating the failures of a young organism confronted with overwhelming circumstances. In the next two paragraphs, we will chart these unfrequented narratives between physiological models and discursive expansions.

1.1. Leopardian ineptitudes – unhappiness, humiliation

Before the experience of Rome, Leopardi had already contemplated the effects of prolonged unhappiness on a sensitive soul. In a February 1821 note, he meditates on the way in which a 'uomo sommamente sventurato, o scoraggito dalla vita' can reach the point of seeing life as hopeless and deprived of 'senso di se stessa'.[68] Leopardi engages in a rather lugubrious analysis of how such humiliating circumstances can still allow for survival in society. Degraded and mortified, the sensitive soul can endure by 'metter se stesso fuori dalla sfera de' suoi pensieri' and 'servire […] gli altri, anche quelli che […] gli sono […] odiosi', hence losing itself in forms of psychological parasitism towards stronger parties ('la persona degli altri sottentra nell'animo suo, quasi intieramente, alla persona propria, ch'è sparita'). Leopardi empowers this narrative of 'survival' with a quintessentially 'scientific' simile. Such individuals, he explains, are not unlike bodies preserved via blood transfusion:

> [this man] moralmente morto, risorge a una languida vita, ma tuttavia risorge e vive in altrui […]. Come quei corpi di sangue corrotto e malsano, e quindi incapaci di vita, che

[68] *Zib*. 614-615.

> alcuni medici spogliavano (o proponevano di spogliare) del sangue proprio, e restituivano ad una certa salute, colla introduzione del sangue altrui, o di qualche animale; quasi cangiando la persona, e trasformando quella che non poteva più vivere, in un'altra capace di vita: e così conservando la vita di una persona, per se stessa inetta a vivere.[69]

This passage constitutes Leopardi's earliest mention of a *persona inetta a vivere*. We can appreciate how, from its first reference, Leopardi's idea of ineptitude intertwines and is contaminated with the realms of medicine and disease; namely, through 'experiments' recurring in later works, like 'Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie', where laboratory corpses lament the pain of living after an injection of artificial blood.[70] Two months after the passage above, Leopardi reiterates this idea by clarifying that unhappiness makes man *inetto al fare* because this *physically* depletes ('debilita', 'snerva') the 'amor di se stesso che era nel paziente'.[71] By insisting on this terminology, Leopardi re-narrates the connection between ineptitude and physiology, with specific reference to his central idea of *amor proprio* as the life-giving spring that animates the bodily machine. If *amor proprio* is degraded by unbearable circumstances ('obbliga[to] ad uno stato contrario' or 'rid[otto] per necessità ad uno stato opposto'), this loses its essential 'elasticità e […] forza di molla', that is, its life-triggering capability for malleability and movement, freezing the 'patient' into depression, indifference, and paralysis ('nebbia grevissima d'indifferenza sorgente immediata d'inazione e insensibilità').[72] Similarly, in the summer of 1824, Leopardi notes that by 'tener

[69] *Zib*. 615-616.
[70] We will discuss elements of this *operetta*, as well as its Svevian 'counterparts', in the next chapter. There, narratives of life preservation or forced 'survival' will be explored by interweaving models of comparability, literary connections, and historically connected medical archetypes. The current chapter gradually introduces some of these models, opening the road to more complex manners of investigation throughout this thesis.
[71] *Zib*. 958.
[72] *Zib*. 958-959.

continuamente represso […] l'amor proprio' this loses its *ressort* – again, its flexibility – and the consequences of losing this, Leopardi clarifies, is the condition of *inettudine*.[73]

We will soon return to this topic to explore the implications of the idea of flexibility vis-à-vis the possibility and the 'discontents' of ineptitude. For now, we should note that Leopardi connects inner flexibility to self-love, mental ingeniousness, and the very intensity of life. However, we saw that contrary conditions have the power of corrupting and hardening this organic sprightliness, making a person static and insensitive: in other words, *inetta.* We can thus start drawing some initial parallels between Leopardi's adoption of the term 'ineptitude' and his physiological exploration of the circumstances, and the degree, whereby the human organism can be seen to change, conform, and corrupt according to external inputs. In the next paragraph, we will move further in the exploration of this theme, appreciating how very problematic Leopardi's opinion on the matter is. If we are to follow the 1821 meditation of the *Zibaldone,* we can observe that it is not only external life which, by paralysing one's malleability, brings about a pathological state of paralysis. The risk of being *inetto* also lies in an *excess* of movement, energy, elasticity. If too chaotic, if too untameably shapeless, interiority can be overwhelming, reducing *il più gran genio* into the shadow of what he could have been. In Leopardi, notions and models of physiology are recurrently developed, reformulated, and re-imagined into novel narrations of existence and its quintessential tensions.

[73] *Zib*. 4105-4107.

1.2 Leopardian ineptitudes – *Troppo (il) è padre del nulla*

In commenting on his Roman experience, Leopardi meditates that too intense a desire can hinder one's successful entrance into the world. He specifically considers how a young man's furore may prevent him from behaving properly and acquire the form required for adult survival – his *figurare in società*. This line of thinking, which links mishandled intensity to impotence or, in D'Intino's formula, to the *fallimento formale* of the Leopardian character, constitutes a recurring object of meditation and anxiety within the *Zibaldone*.[74] Leopardi was aware of the 'potential for contamination' – from physiology to literature, from psychology to social *galateo* – of this principle, and dedicated a section of his 1827 Florentine indexing to it, with the title *Troppo (il) è padre del nulla*. One of the meditations collected there points out how this phenomenon can be easily observed in the 'facoltà della mente' of geniuses.[75] Independently of external circumstances, this sample of humanity is able to burn itself out because of excessive intensity ('appunto a cagione della soverchia forza o del loro intelletto o della loro immaginazione […] tali geni sommi hanno consumato rapidamente il loro corpo e le stesse loro facoltà mentali'). More precisely, the fineness and vulnerability of their physical 'organi li rende […] più facili a consumarsi, e […] guastarsi'.[76] It can be interesting to remind ourselves that the *Encyclopédie* contemplated the possibility of ineptitude as a result of inner burnout, inducing pathological states of *stupidité*. Similarly, Leopardi diagnoses literary geniuses as marked by characteristic 'stupidità della vita', which, from a scientific perspective, makes them akin to 'quegli animali inetti alla

[74] D'Intino, 'La prosa', p. 77.
[75] *Zib*. 1176.
[76] Ibid.

generazione per l'eccesso della forza generativa (i muli)'.[77] This passage constitutes a splendid example of Leopardi's connection of physiology and literary discourse, and of the term *inetto* as a case of 'hybridization' between fields. Individuals provided with too prolific an imagination can be sterilised by their own fervour, descending the biological chain of being until they are no better than barren beasts. Leopardi used a comparable formula (*una persona inetta a vivere*) when describing how humiliation can transform a man into an anaemic body. In this case, however, the illness is not caused by the hardening of some interiority, but by its excessive fluidity:

> Questi geni straordinari, penetrano in certi misteri, in certe parti della natura così riposte […] che la stessa copia e profondità delle loro concezioni, ne impedisce la chiarezza tanto riguardo a essi stessi, quanto al comunicarle altrui; ne impedisce l'ordine, insomma vince le loro stesse facoltà, e non è capace, a cagione dell'eccesso, di essere determinata, circoscritta, e ridotta a frutto. […] E il troppo vedere, il troppo concepire, rende questi tali ingegni, sterili e infruttuosi; e se scrivono, i loro scritti o sono di poco conto, ed anche aridi espressamente e poveri (come quelli di Ermogene); o certo minori assai del loro ingegno. […] Esempio del Tasso, della sua pazzia, dell'essere i suoi componimenti, quantunque bellissimi, certo inferiori alla sua facoltà[.][78]

Images and connections overcrowd the minds of *geni straordinari*, filling them at great speed with epiphanies on the secret nature of things. However, it is precisely this intensity – too much, too quick, too deep – that makes their ideas unable to take conveyable forms, just like the chaos that inhabits a youngster prevents him to *figurare* into the world. We could go as far as suggesting that the passage above identifies a further reason for social ineptitude, which pre-exists the external dimension of society. The accelerated mental pace of the genius disables his notions' 'ordine, […] di essere determinat[e], circoscritt[e]', making him see himself as inept well before engaging with the world ('ne impedisce la chiarezza tanto riguardo a essi stessi, quanto al comunicarle altrui'). Tasso,

[77] *Zib*. 1178.
[78] *Zib*. 1178-1179.

who is also the protagonist of a 'medical' *operetta* discussed in this thesis, produced works inferior to his potential because of this internalised division – a mental pathology (*pazzia*) that makes the subject, we could say, 'unworthy of itself' before having the opportunity to fail on a literary or societal level. We should also underline how this manifestation of ineptitude, perhaps only implied in the passage above, clearly features in some of the *Operette*. In the 1824 'Dialogo della Natura e di un'Anima', Leopardi engages in the description of how a soul can be trapped in its own intensity, and how its inward paralysis is then re-enacted into the subject's relation with the world:

> *Natura*. Oltre di ciò, la finezza del tuo proprio intelletto, e la vivacità dell'immaginazione, ti escluderanno da una grandissima parte della signoria di te stessa. […] [G]li uomini rarissime volte fanno ogni loro potere; impediti ordinariamente dalla ragione e dall'immaginativa; le quali creano mille dubbietà nel deliberare, e mille ritegni nell'eseguire.[79]

The soul, nature explains, can be internally overwhelmed by its own imagination, abdicating, not unlike in a struggle for power, its own *signoria*. Individuals provided with such unruly, divided, and self-sabotaging interiorities are thus doomed to vacillate in doubt, which also undermines their actions ('impediti [da] […] mille dubbietà nel deliberare, e mille ritegni nell'eseguire'). Wrapping up what *natura* theorised in a rather depressing note, *Anima* understands how 'non sapendo fare quello che è necessarissimo, come tu dici, al commercio cogli altri uomini […] io fossi per essere vilipesa […] come inetta al consorzio umano'.[80] However, this is not the only *operetta* engaging with the spiritual causes of *inettitudine*. In what Leopardi regarded as the ideal prologue to the

[79] Leopardi, 'Dialogo della Natura e di un'Anima' in *Operette*, pp. 87-91 (pp. 88-89).
[80] At the end of the dialogue, nature too has to concede. The Soul might perhaps achieve greatness, but this can only happen if *external* ('malignità della fortuna') and *internal* life conditions ('soprabbondanza medesima delle tue facoltà') will not prevent the realization of its potential ('[non] impedita di mostrare agli uomini alcun proporzionato segno del tuo valore'). Leopardi, 'Dialogo della Natura e di un'Anima', pp. 89-90.

Operette, that is, the 1824 'Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro', the social outcast Eleandro admits that his once-fervid soul, 'per colpa o della mia natura o mia propria', is now incapable of resolute feelings like love and hate, which are required for his actions to appear firm and convincing. His self-diagnosis is indeed the following: if lacking love makes him 'inetto a conversare cogli altri, anzi alla stessa vita', being deprived of hatred 'non è piccola parte della mia tanta inettitudine a praticare nel mondo'.[81]

We can conclude that ineptitude can be considered a recurring theme in the Leopardian *oeuvre*, developing in the 1821 reflections of the *Zibaldone*, the *Operette* and the later *Memorie della mia vita*, and creatively bringing together ideas on physiology, literature, and society into original solutions. While we are not suggesting that term *inetto* identifies, in itself, a keyword within Leopardi's philosophy, his works clearly show what we can now recognize as recurrently 'contaminated' narratives of ineptitude. We observed how this expands into two key lines of thinking. The first one describes how a sensitive individual can become *inetto* because of societal humiliation. This mortifies his liveliness, or, in Leopardi's physiological terms, his flexibility. The second description of ineptitude concerns people provided with too malleable and fiery an inner life, which is the cause of shapelessness, doubt, and exhaustion. In both cases, Leopardi returns to the idea of ineptitude when 'diagnosing' and narrating sensitive subjects unable to strike a productive balance between internal and external life. In the next section, we will particularly argue that Leopardi's 'narratives of ineptitude' can be placed in comparison with Svevo's early development of the *inetto* character. We will primarily look at Leopardi's and Svevo's respective 'first novels', which deal with the uneasiness of young men provided with uncontrollable interiorities – the incomplete 1819 'Vita abbozzata di

[81] Leopardi, 'Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro' in *Operette*, pp. 194-202 (pp. 196-197).

Silvio Sarno' and *Una vita*.[82] Through the lens of ineptitude, these works will be seen to draw a common destiny of failure, turmoil, and physical exhaustion for their respective protagonists. This chapter will not argue that *Una vita* should be considered directly – that is, in a 'philologically indisputable' manner – indebted to the 'Sarno'. Instead, we will aim to bring forward a model of comparability that will be reproposed, confirmed, and further expanded and magnified throughout this thesis. In other words, we will argue that Leopardi and Svevo 'reformulate' and 'contaminate' comparable ideas of physiology into comparable narrative and philosophical conclusions. In this sense, the 'Sarno' will allow for a fresh reading of *Una vita* through the unexpected Leopardian narrative of physiological unbalance. At the same time, through *Una vita*, we will revisit the 'Sarno' as a physiologically consistent, albeit only *abbozzato*, novel of ineptitude. Indeed, although Silvio and Alfonso perish in different ways, respectively by organic disease and by suicide, both these ends, featuring the *inetto*'s self-destruction, can be detected in each text. At the end of this chapter, these comparable models will lead us to the *inetto* character of Svevo's second novel, *Senilità*. The model of comparability proposed for *Una vita* will allow, there, for the isolation and better contextualization of literary references to Leopardi in Svevo. This operation aims to inaugurate this thesis' hybrid exploration of both writers in light of 'reformulated' medical models, comparable narratives of 'disease', and elusive 'literary presences'.

[82] For the text and commentary of 'Vita abbozzata di Silvio Sarno', we will use Giacomo Leopardi, 'Vita abbozzata di Silvio Sarno', in *Scritti autobiografici*, ed. by Franco D'Intino (Rome: Salerno editrice, 1995), pp. 45-129. For Svevo's novel, we will refer to Svevo, 'Una vita' in *Romanzi*, pp. 4-396.

2. ‘Novels of failure’

Leopardi’s ‘Vita abbozzata di Silvio Sarno’ is the portrayal of a soul in its embryonic stage, that is, still uncorrupted by the world. Nevertheless, the theme of the entrance into the world visibly casts its shadow onto the whole text. Leopardi drafted the story of Silvio in 1819, the year in which he failed to flee Recanati and throw himself out of his father’s aristocratic cage. In the seclusion of his library, Giacomo had been forced to a regimen of crippling study, contemplation and aristocratic rigour. This is the quintessentially internal – physically and spiritually intramural – existence that Leopardi led for the first part of his life, and that saw his young and repressed energies turn into amplified mental work; namely, into burning desire for recognition (‘grandissimo, forse smoderato e insolente desiderio di gloria’),[83] and into an imagination able to glimpse, but not hold on to, an infinity of literary projects (‘[i] disegni mi s’accumulano in testa, ma non posso appena raccorgli frettolosamente in carta perchè non mi cadano dalla memoria’).[84] In commenting on the context surrounding the ‘Sarno’, D’Intino underlines how for young Leopardi:

> nell’isolamento della biblioteca, in una vita sedentaria di lettura e scrittura, l’energia vitale si era tramutata […] in un pensiero […] disgiunto dai contesti della vita quotidiana, e nell’impossibilità di agire e persino di muoversi, gli aveva fatto perdere la percezione della realtà delle cose[.][85]

The ‘Sarno’ identifies a quintessential Leopardian fictionalization of this ‘broken balance’, that is, of a rupture that leads from mental intensity to lack of movement, and from mismanaged desire to organic consumption. The text presents itself as a series of

[83] Leopardi, ‘A Pietro Giordani. Recanati 21 Marzo 1817’, in *Lettere*, ed. by Rolando Damiani (Milan: Mondadori, 2015), p. 48.
[84] Leopardi, ‘A Pietro Giordani. Recanati 4 Giugno 1819’, in *Lettere*, p. 203.
[85] D’Intino, ‘La prosa’, p. 78.

disarticulated flashes, whims of an interiority unable to be constrained into clear actions. The project of the 'Sarno' remained indeed as an *abbozzo*, as Leopardi failed to give its fragments a consistent narrative structure, eventually abandoning the idea of a novel altogether. In this sense, the form and content of this early work are fascinatingly interconnected. If Leopardi abandoned his plan of giving order to his draft, the themes of intensity, shapelessness, and failure are arguably the core of the novel. Leopardi noted how this project would have seen Silvio wasted by his own inner fire – namely, by a disease destroying him before his entrance, and potential corruption, into the world. We should underline how this project, which has not yet been studied in parallel to other modern Italian novels, signals Leopardi's early interest in the diseases of human interiority – also identifying a creative interplay between elements of literature and medicine, and between (auto)biography and physiology. In this sense, in line with the *Zibaldone* discourses on *Troppo (il) è padre del nulla*, we can argue that the 'Sarno' presents itself as an ideal case study to explore the literary developments of Leopardi's exploration of physiological ineptitude as inner disorder and outward paralysis.

Less than a century apart, Ettore Schmitz, aka Italo Svevo, also chose to begin his novelistic career with a 'comparable' story – one that he, too, acknowledged as painfully close to home. Educated in the Segnitz boarding school to become, according to his family's expectations, a successful Triestine businessman, young Ettore also wished to escape his family's expectation and enter society as a man of genius. In the diary of his college years, Elio Schmitz describes his brother in ways that, though certainly appropriate for many young writers, cannot but evoke the atmosphere of a 'Leopardian *Bildungsroman*'. The diary allows us a glimpse into Ettore's early works, such as the unfinished verse plays 'Ariosto governatore' and 'Il primo amore', which shows – in

Barilli's words – the almost 'bookish dependence on Leopardi' in his formative years at Segnitz.[86] Furthermore, Elio can be seen as reinforcing this image ('Ettore, mio II fratello [sic], ha ora 18 anni. È un po' poeta')[87] by portraying Ettore as a brilliant but worryingly untameable soul. Enclosing within himself an all-consuming *vita interna* ('è apatico in apparenza, giacché la sua maggior vita la trova nella sua mente e in se stesso'), Ettore is described as suffering from a mental condition which, due to its own chaos, prevents him from concluding any of his endless projects ('vive sognando commedie e lavori ora drammatici, ora romantici, che sulla carta non vengono mai a compimento').[88] Of course, we are not claiming that Leopardi's and Svevo's early years of education and writing should be regarded as perfectly aligned. While young Ettore struggled to master literary Italian and dreamily switched from draft to draft, Leopardi's supervised work routine led him to actually produce substantial works of erudition, poetry, and prose. Yet these young men's stories have something in common. Both isolated from society and similarly endowed with unbridled imagination and ambitions, Leopardi and Svevo prematurely experienced the wonders and the fears of internal life – which they 'translated' into analogous literary expansions. Indeed, both writers attempted to escape their respective isolations by writing a novel on the pains of that dimension. When returning from Segnitz, the Schmitz family's financial troubles left no room for literary ambitions, and young Ettore had to find employment at the Union Bank of Trieste. However, Ettore conveyed his frustrated ambitions in his first novel, *Una vita*. Comparably to the 'Sarno', this novel too is significantly inspired, and marked, by general models of 'unbalance' and 'failure'. The story of Alfonso Nitti, a provincial classicist moving to the city with insane ambitions

[86] Renato Barilli, *La Linea Svevo-Pirandello*, 3rd edn (Milan: Mursia, 1981), p. 23.
[87] Elio Schmitz, 'Diario di Elio Schmitz', in *Lettere a Italo Svevo: Diario di Elio Schmitz*, ed. by Bruno Maier (Milan: Dall'Oglio, 1976), pp. 195-296 (p. 246).
[88] Schmitz, 'Diario', pp. 246; 254.

of glory, is arguably the narration of how too intense an interiority can lead to chaos, shapelessness, and necessary self-destruction. A further similarity between these two novels lies in their lack of success with the public. Although Leopardi had already been recognized as a remarkable philologist and poet by 1819, he reasonably regarded publishing a novel, the best-liked and most fashionable genre of his time, as his final breakthrough into literary society. But Silvio's story never reached the public stage, denying Leopardi the recognition as a tempestuous man of genius – à la Goethe or Foscolo – that he so intensely desired. *Una vita* had a comparable destiny. Contested from its very title – the novel was previously titled *Un inetto* –, Svevo's work was published at the author's expense, failed to reach a wide readership, and was vastly criticised as grey, cerebral, and juvenile. Overall, we can begin this section by arguing that for biographic implications, physiological subject, and (mis)fortune, these stories share comparable models and trajectories. But these are not the only elements connecting these two failed projects. As we will argue in the next paragraphs, the 'Sarno' and *Una vita* explore interconnected and tragic issues, developing two comparable literary discourses on parallel physiological models. In the next section, we will particularly explore how the 'Sarno' can be productively read as a literary manifestation of Leopardi's idea of ineptitude. In this sense, we will argue that Silvio's unfinished story finds an ideal counterpart in Alfonso's own failure, allowing for a rereading of Svevo's early discourse on ineptitude through an unexpected, yet literarily and physiologically fitting, Leopardian perspective.

3. Silvio's and Alfonso's ineptitudes

The project of the 'Sarno' has rarely been classified under one specific Leopardian category. A hybrid in genre, subject, and form, this text seems to elude definitive labels, often remaining under the critical umbrella of the 'aborted draft'. Yet the opening line, indeed the very first 'flash', of the 'Vita abbozzata' ('pieghevolezza dell'ingegno facilità d'imitare') arguably provides the reader with a key guideline to navigate the text.[89] With its reference to internal malleability, this passage allows us to appreciate how Silvio's story reformulates Leopardi's theories of human physiology. In his commentary on Leopardi's *Scritti autobiografici*, D'Intino explains how the opening of the 'Sarno' clearly points to:

> una delle trame concettuali zibaldoniane più ricche e tenaci, quella della 'assuefabilità' o 'conformabilità' dell'uomo, il quale è – scrive Leopardi – 'come una pasta molle […], suscettiva d'ogni possibile figura, impronta ec. S'indurisce col tempo, e da prima è difficile, finalmente impossibile il darle nuova figura'.[90]

This is the formulation of Leopardi's theory of *elasticità-molla-ressort*, which we have briefly mentioned in the previous paragraphs. Initially as raw and malleable as dough, humans are provided with supreme ability to conform and evolve – a disposition which is one and the same with their capacity for life intensity. We observed how this versatile force is also, in its mismanaged forms, what leads a young man of genius to ineptitude. This is arguably an extremely productive key to interpret Silvio's failure, with the many

[89] Leopardi, 'Vita abbozzata', p. 45.
[90] Ibid. The cited *Zibaldone* passage is *Zib*. 1452.

implications of the text's initial *pieghevolezza* acting as a 'physiological manifesto' of the whole fictional story. Due to extraordinary flexibility of *ingegno*, Silvio is potentially able to take countless forms, yet in fact he takes none. He stays in the *abbozzo* state of a man that does not conform to the world, but lives in preparation for it, unhealthily storing energies and mental projections. It is in this sense that D'Intino reiterates how Leopardi's judgment over 'elasticity' is a quintessentially ambivalent one: 'segno di intelligenza […] denota però, quando sia eccessiva, mancanza di carattere' and 'mollezza che si reduce' to amorphousness and lack of action.[91] Silvio himself recognises this organic malfunctioning within himself, understanding his passivity as ultimately due to the disordered intensity of his forces: 'molto entusiasmo temperato da ugual riflessione e però incapace di splendide pazzie mi pare che formi in genere uno dei più gran tratti del μιο [sic] carattere'.[92] In this sense, we can argue that Silvio's persona embodies the idea of life ineptitude as a *niente* deriving from mental *troppo* from the *Zibaldone*. The narrative of the 'Sarno' presents us with a protagonist provided with a disposition towards intensity and fantasising, who fails at externalizing his inner potency, and to a pathological fault. From a Svevian perspective, we cannot but recognise key elements of comparability with *Una vita*. The story of Alfonso Nitti – who is also burdened with insane ambitions and compulsive daydreaming – can be seen as constructed on a comparable physiology of ineptitude. Similar to the Leopardian *Bildungsroman*, Svevo's novel identifies in mismanaged intensity and desire – 'chi troppo abbraccia nulla stringe' is one of the mottos that resonates through the novel – the prelude to a young person's failure.[93] Svevo describes the personality of Alfonso as that of a passionate yet ill-defined young man:

[91] Ibid.
[92] Leopardi, 'Vita abbozzata', p. 46.
[93] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 61.

'[l]a sua forza disordinata era malattia e debolezza'.[94] Of course, the early manifestations of this pathological disorder appear in Alfonso's detested workplace, Maller's Bank, where his distraction prevents him from the most elementary task of 'portar ordine nelle sue carte'.[95] But it is not in bad faith that Alfonso keeps failing in his attempts to order papers and thoughts. Throughout the novel, Svevo makes clear that Alfonso's ineptitude can be broken down to organic reasons ('il povero peccatore se ne andava […] a udire una grande predica sul disordine, […] non era la buona volontà che gli mancasse, era la capacità; il suo era un difetto organico'). [96] In his hours of repetitive and numbing work as a bank clerk, Alfonso comes to the disturbing realization that his flaw is indeed of a physiological nature, and has it causes in the malleability of his organism:

> Si era anche fatto di quest'organismo una concezione plastica che riformava ad ogni novella sensazione. Alla sera, dopo una giornata passata in mezzo alle cifre o correndo per la banca oppure con la penna sulla carta e il pensiero altrove, immaginava che nel suo corpo si movesse una materia abbondante attraverso a vasi molli incapaci di resistere o di regolare.[97]

If we linger on how this uneasiness is due to excessive plasticity, that is, to an organic resistance to limits, shape, and order, we can find the physiological coordinates of the ineptitude described in the 'Sarno'. Silvio's personality embodies the pathological disorder of Leopardi's *pasta molle*. Provided with too loose and intense an *elasticità*, Silvio suffers from a condition that hinders both his organic life and, on a metaliterary level, to its narration. We must observe that this element, connecting biological disorder with literary inconclusiveness, also has a strong connection with *Una vita*. If the text of

[94] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 76.
[95] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 8.
[96] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 68.
[97] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 69.

the ‘Sarno’ is a catalogue of ‘flashes’ potentially able to develop into many literary projects, Alfonso’s private scribbling is a comparable mess of *abbozzi*:

> [s]criveva, ma poco; il suo stile, poco solido ancora, la parola impropria che diceva di più o di meno e che non colpiva mai il centro, non lo soddisfaceva. […] Dopo di essersi stancato alla banca e alla biblioteca, gettava in carta qualche concettino, qualche espansione romantica con se stesso e che nessun altro riceveva. Di notevole in queste espansioni vi era che il giovinetto sembrava soffrisse di certo male mondiale; […] Teneva questi scritti in conto di annotazioni rudimentali di cui voleva servirsi in un lontano avvenire per opere maggiori, drammi, romanzi e peggio.[98]

We can start appreciating how Alfonso’s *difetto organico*, his internal shapelessness, and his mysterious *male* are all illnesses belonging to the pathological tree of Silvio’s fluidity. In the previous paragraphs, we observed how the *Zibaldone* argues that literary genius at times shares the physiological limits of certain ‘animali inetti alla generazione’. As the mind of such writers is too chaotic to be ‘determinata, circoscritta, e ridotta a frutto’, they end up producing works ‘di poco conto, ed anche aridi espressamente e poveri’.[99] In this sense, this Leopardian form of *inettitudine* particularly applies to Alfonso when he engages with writing his own novel; namely, the rather Leopardian story of ‘un giovinetto che venne da un villaggio in una città e il quale s’era fatto delle idee ben strane sui costumi della città. Trovandoli in fatti differenti da quanto aveva ideato si rammaricò’.[100] Boasting his genius in front of Annetta Maller, Alfonso spectacularly fails to give structure to the novel they are co-writing, not realising the he merely jotted down a hazy enumeration of mental processes. This leaves Annetta wondering:

> Chi vuole che legga volentieri queste filze di pensieri senza interruzione e senza ornamento? E poi ella racconta troppo poco; descrive continuamente anche quando crede di raccontare. Con questa premessa come faremo noi a andare avanti? C’è descrizione per mille parole e racconto per una[.][101]

[98] Svevo, ‘Una vita’, p. 70.
[99] *Zib*. 1178.
[100] Svevo, ‘Una vita’, pp. 134-135.
[101] Svevo, ‘Una vita’, p. 147.

Lacking in structure and action, the *abbozzo* simply does not proceed – it is as inconclusive as Alfonso himself. Pitying him, Annetta comments how '[c]erti giovani per amore all'accuratezza diventano pedanti prima del tempo, preferiscono la lima alla penna e finiscono col non far niente.'[102] Although it must be said that Annetta Maller is no great novelist either, her criticism of Alfonso is accurate, and it allows us to reinforce our connection with Silvio's ineptitude. D'Intino connects Silvio's inability to act in life, in particular, to the *Zibaldone* meditation on what prevents overthinkers from the 'ignorante franchezza, che è necessaria nelle somme opere dell'arte': 'non ci arrischiamo di scostarci […] da quelle regole […] che ci siamo formate in mente […] onde pel timore di non fare cose pessime, non ci attentiamo di farne delle ottime.'[103] We can begin to observe that there is a recognisable connection between Alfonso's and Silvio's immobility. At best, their agitated interiorities can develop into *espansioni romantiche* of themselves, or disordered *filze di pensieri*, but never into the *franchezza* required from life, whether this is lived or narrated.[104]

While the dimension of failed novelling dominates both texts, this is merely one of the manifestations of Silvio's and Alfonso's pervasive ineptitude. Silvio's conflict between 'molto entusiasmo' and 'ugual riflessione' chiefly prevents him from acting with instinct and resolution. We have already encountered this idea in the *operetta* 'Dialogo

[102] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 114.
[103] *Zib*. 10. This is cited in D'Intino's commentary of Leopardi's 'Vita abbozzata', p. 46.
[104] The wider and interdisciplinary connection between Leopardi's and Svevo's notions of *abbozzo* – between physiological plasticity, arrested development, and literary expansiveness – is also discussed in chapter IV, by specifically connecting Leopardi's vaster dilemmas of health to Svevo's 'La corruzione dell'anima' (circa 1919-1922), 'L'uomo e la teoria darwiniana' (circa between 1907 and the years of *La coscienza*) and the end of Zeno's story. Overall, images and models found in this first section will return, be problematized, and 'anthropologically' expanded upon in the last chapter. For Leopardi's 'draft-like' works between 'preluding inconclusiveness' and greater imaginative potential, see D'Intino, 'Introduzione', in Leopardi, *Disegni letterari*, ed. by Davide Pettinicchio, Franco D'Intino and Lucia Abate (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2021), pp. 7-35 (pp. 7-14)

della Natura e di un'Anima', in which Leopardi explains how individuals 'impediti […] dalla ragione e dall'immaginativa; le quali creano mille dubbietà nel deliberare, e mille ritegni nell'eseguire' turn into 'inett[i] al consorzio umano'.[105] Doubt plays a vital part in Leopardi's pathology of ineptitude. As *Zibaldone* 3040 explains, those who are provided with such a powerful interiority are riddled with uncertainty, which drastically limits their actions and societal success:

> Di qui è che gli uomini d'ingegno grande ed esercitato sono per lo più, anzi quasi sempre prigionieri […] dell'irresolutezza, difficili a risolvere, timidi, sospesi, incerti, delicati, deboli nell'eseguire. Altrimenti essi dominerebbero il mondo, il quale, perchè la risolutezza per se può sempre più che la prudenza sola, fu ed è e sarà sempre in balia degli uomini mediocri.[106]

The element of doubt is also a core element of Svevo's depiction of Alfonso as *inetto*. Biologically 'debole e incerto', Alfonso is consistently portrayed as freezing 'nelle situazioni esitanti, indecise'.[107] Indeed, doubting can be seen as having something of a foundational aspect of Alfonso's mental world, to the point that 'tutto quello ch'era dubbio finiva col divenire importante'.[108] If Leopardi described doubt as a prerogative of *ingegno grande*, Alfonso looks with a mixture of superiority and envy to those brutes, like Macario, who do not share his relentless faltering ('ammirava la disinvoltura con la quale […] negava o asseriva anche là dove menti superiori esitavano').[109] Macario effortlessly walks through life and society as if following an infallible instinct, while Alfonso neurotically '[a]veva meditato molto sul modo di contenersi in società' and pensa[va] intensamente'.[110] It is precisely because of this *pensare intensamente* and *molto* – a Leopardian *troppo* of interiority – that Alfonso Nitti, as his surname suggests,

[105] Leopardi, 'Dialogo della Natura e di un'Anima', pp. 89-90.
[106] *Zib.* 3040
[107] Svevo, 'Una vita', pp. 9; 155.
[108] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 107.
[109] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 99.
[110] Svevo, 'Una vita', pp. 28; 385.

ultimately accomplishes nil: 'pensava a sangue freddo delle belle frasi […] ma quando volle dirle […] smozzicò balbettando […]. All'ultimo momento aveva preso paura […] aveva rinunziato a dirle, piuttosto che esporsi al pericolo di confondersi'.[111] As such, Alfonso is made a laughingstock of Triestine society. When the young writer communicates his view on some literary work, his words fail him spectacularly because he 'finiva col dubitare di sé, della giustezza del proprio sentimento o del proprio giudizio'.[112] Furthermore, when that society, in turn, comments on Alfonso's own personality and works, it is precisely his hesitation and confused sense of superiority what publicly identifies him as misfit:

> Lo derideva per le sue debolezze […]. Ne derivò — questo però quando furono a quattr'occhi — l'aggettivo di 'rospo'. Rospo quando balbettava mezza frase e non sapeva dirla tutta, rospo quando diceva che un successo letterario valeva poco perché veniva fatto dagl'ignoranti, infine rospo gli diceva quando egli le portava il suo abbozzo fatto per esser gettato via. […] [E]gli stava rigido, parlava poco, smozzicava le parole per meritarsi più volte tale qualifica. Ella rimase sempre ferma al suo primo giudizio, che Alfonso bensì disponesse di un maggior numero d'idee elevate, ma che non sapesse unirle a farne un buon romanzo.[113]

This description of the *inetto* stumbling through society has something profoundly Leopardian about it. Alfonso is described as a 'toad' of a philologist and 'grey' philosopher (one of his glorious plans is that of 'fonda[re] la moderna filosofia italiana […] with a book titled '*L'idea morale nel mondo moderno*'),[114] unable to complete a novel. He is an unpresentable, spluttering, and boastful little thing. The similarities with Leopardi's own story about struggling with literary society are compelling. Leopardi left his own – potentially popular – novel as an *abbozzo*, and was later positively humiliated by the fashionable *letterati* of his time for his attempt to give new life to Italian philosophy

[111] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 112.
[112] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 125.
[113] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 149.
[114] Svevo, 'Una vita', pp. 93-94.

with a book of scandalously modern *morale* – the *Operette.* Particularly in Naples, Leopardi's 'grey philosophy' and his inability to conform to societal requirements, earned him the nickname of *ranavuottolo*, the froglet. This arguably adds a further element to the Leopardian atmosphere of Alfonso's own *Bildungsroman*, whose connection between intensity, genius and faltering connects both to the 'Sarno' and to Leopardi's own experience of the world – in other words, to the oft-neglected *fil rouge* of physiological *ineptitude* that runs throughout Leopardi's career.

We can, thus, conclude this section of our analysis by underlining that Silvio can be seen as sharing many diseased elements with Alfonso, the first *inetto* of Svevo's career as a novelist. This diagnosis is corroborated by the fact that Silvio's character description constitutes a literary development of Leopardi's *Zibaldone* meditation on ineptitude as mental uneasiness. As we argued, the 'Sarno' and *Una vita* present their *inetti* through a series of comparable features; namely, a physiological *elasticità* (Silvio) or *plasticità* (Alfonso) able to turn into shapelessness, a chaos of forces that could otherwise be channelled into *splendide pazzie*, and an intensity causing pathological self-doubt. Leopardi's and Svevo's first novels comparably explore the perils of mental intensity, underlining how an excess of inner life can lead a young person to the path of repression and paralysis. However, the phenomenon of *inettitudine* connects these works well beyond this initial analysis. In the next sections, we will further explore the parallel ways in which both narratives follow the development of their characters into their final revelations of life as conflict and *malattia*. Despite their apparent differences – Silvio dies of internal disease and never enters society, and Alfonso kills himself after having engaged with the world – the two conclusions of the 'Sarno' and *Una vita* are present *in nuce* within each other. We will explore these conclusions in particular, identifying the

analogous ways in which the Leopardian and Svevian *inetti* arrest their development to avoid the corruptions of the world. Specifically, the process of energy repression that leads Silvio to die of internal disease will be also detected in Alfonso's internalization of desires and final *malattia*. On the other hand, the deterioration of Alfonso's *plasticità* at the hand of society, leading him to see suicide as evasion, can be seen as the ghost haunting the whole of Silvio's story, whose *facilità d'imitare* is both sign of ingeniousness and corruptibility.

4. 'Maraviglia che gli scrittori non s'infiammino'

Leopardi's description of Silvio is comparable to that of a bomb soon to explode. Silvio's energies are repressed and magnified because of his ineptitude to channel them outwardly. This unhealthy process is arguably what leads him to his final destruction from within. Although Leopardi never actually came to write and justify Silvio's end, many elements of the 'Sarno' connect Silvio's ineptitude to his later burnout. Unable to liberate his energy in great deeds and works of literature, Silvio's desire only intensifies his ambitions: 'faremo mai qualcosa di grande?', he feverishly asks his brother. Of course, because of his self-doubt and repressed personality, his energies can only turn inward, at the expense of an organism that cannot tame this surplus of forces. As the passage continues, Silvio outlines how this excess could lead him to neurosis and self-harm: 'allegrezze pazze massime nei tempi delle maggiori angosce dove se non mi tenessi sarei capace di gittar sedie in aria ec. saltare ec. e anche forse danneggiarmi nella persona per allegria'. As D'Intino comments, regardless of their apparent positive or negative

connotations, such manic 'allegrezze pazze' and 'angosce' 'sono le due facce di una vitalità talmente intensa che', failing to find a way out, in fact 'si rivolge contro se stessa'.[115] The story of Silvio continuously hints at this idea of pathological self-destruction. When transported by art and theatre, Silvio ominously ponders that it is quite surprising that writers do not burn when their mind is overexcited: '[m]araviglia che gli scrittori non s'infiammino'.[116] A similar internalization of forces identifies the broken mechanism trapping Alfonso into his ineptitude, in a wider discourse that, as Contarini underlines, sees the pathology of 'l'energetica ottocentesca, nelle sue molteplici declinazioni […] all'origine del sistema psico-fisiologico di *Una vita*'.[117] Moving from the healthy life of the countryside to Trieste, where he lives the intramural life of a clerk, Alfonso undergoes a magnification of mental forces that is comparable to that of Silvio: 'il suo ricco organismo […] che non ne trovava sufficiente nel misero lavorio intellettuale dell'impiegato, si contentava facendo fabbricare dal cervello dei mondi intieri'.[118] Furthermore, we should observe that both Leopardi's and Svevo's *inetti* try to regulate their energies through unnatural activities aimed at either containing or releasing them. Either way, these strategies can only delay the pathological course, and inevitable explosion, of their ignited organisms. The protagonist of *Una vita* hopes to channel his forces through regular study sessions at the *Biblioteca Civica*, relying on what (he hopes) are the salubrious effects of repetition and habit: '[c]on le sue ore fisse, la biblioteca lo legava, apportava nei suoi studii la regolarità ch'egli desiderava'.[119] Unfortunately, this

[115] Leopardi, 'Vita abbozzata', pp. 76-78.
[116] Leopardi, 'Vita abbozzata', p. 79.
[117] Silvia Contarini, 'Energetica vitale e paradigmi della psicofisiologia nel primo Svevo', p. 32. See also Contarini, 'Energetica vitale e antropologia romanzesca', in *La coscienza prima di Zeno*, pp. 37-58. The next chapter will compare Leopardi's and Svevo's works through the perspective of early nineteenth-century archetypes of energetics; namely, by connecting their works via Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland's medical bestseller *The Art of Prolonging Human Life*.
[118] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 17.
[119] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 70.

added mental labour ends up aggravating Alfonso's neurosis ('usciva non appena deposto il libro e dopo quell'ora […] gli sembrava sulla via che le cose lo salutassero'), making his already bad case of ineptitude even more invasive ('il giorno appresso ancora spossato e lavorava peggio del solito' […] '[l]o studio invadeva le ore di ufficio, del pranzo e della cena e andava rubandogli ogni giorno parecchie ore di sonno').[120] We should point out that Alfonso's attempt to tame his youthful impetus through self-discipline has a recognizably Leopardian quality:

> A ventidue anni i suoi sensi avevano la delicatezza e la debolezza dell'adolescenza. Aveva dei desideri ch'egli sapeva reprimere soltanto con grandi sofferenze. A provocare questi desideri […] bastava una gonnella o anche il pensarci, ed erano forti abbastanza per toglierlo improvvisamente alla lettura quando vi si era messo e farlo correre per le vie, spinto da un'agitazione vaga, indefinita, s'egli non ne avesse conosciuta l'origine. […]
> – Alla peggio andrò in biblioteca, – pensò Alfonso per dare alla sua passeggiata una meta sicura.[121]

Physical repression through regulated study, which Leopardi describes in *Zibaldone* 1589 as able to 'sopire i desiderii', is a quintessentially Leopardian skill,[122] as the way in which Svevo jokes about the lure of floating skirts as that agitation *vaga, indefinita* which calls upon a young man's bodily tensions is quintessentially Leopardian. Of course, the presence of such a 'Leopardian catchphrase' does not mean that Svevo, here, should be seen as directly and/or significantly *influenced* by Leopardi. What is certain is that the moment in question better reveals the parallel circumstances of Alfonso's 'energetic strategies' and Silvio's pathological adventure. Forced into a secluded existence, Silvio, too, tries to find regularity and even 'piacere' in what he calls his 'vita casalinga e inclinazione al fratesco', which he perceives as provisionally able to domesticate his

[120] Svevo, 'Una vita', pp. 71; 76.
[121] Svevo, 'Una vita', pp. 72-73.
[122] *Zib*. 1589.

aimless fire.[123] The pathological consequences of this, however, manifests precisely in those moments of raging outbursts, when Silvio is literally on the verge of *saltare in aria* while losing himself in neurotic manias. The lexis of explosion, connected to fire and self-destruction, appears as the consequence of long-term seclusion also found in Leopardi's 1819 letters to Giordani: 'in questa maledetta casa, dove […], volere o non volere, a tutti i patti mi fanno viver da frate, e in età di ventun anno [sic], e con questo cuore ch'io mi trovo, fatevi certo ch'in brevissimo tempo io scoppierò'.[124] As D'Intino's commentary reports, this tension can be contained through the performance of what the *Zibaldone* considers 'att[i] di vigore' as occasional releases of repressed physical energy: '[i]l fare un atto di vigore, o il servirsi del vigore passivamente o attivamente, (come fare un veloce cammino, o de' movimenti forti ed energici ec.)' is in this sense helpful 'quando anche sia per se stesso incomodo'.[125] However, rather than identifying a definitive solution, Leopardi's suggestion visibly indicates that the organism requiring such palliatives is in fact unable to put an effective halt to its disorder. Neurotised with the hallucination of his study, Alfonso also tries to impose order on his internal mess by resorting to physical efforts – namely, through the uncomfortable long walks prescribed amongst the Leopardian *vigori*:

> – Sono ammalato!
> Per giungere a questa conclusione aveva dovuto fare molte osservazioni su se stesso. […] [L]'insonnia derivava dall'agitazione in cui metteva il suo cervello con lo studio di sera e infine lo stato anormale, febbrile che qualche volta osservava nel suo organismo era, come egli aveva pensato sempre, il bisogno di fatica […] che i suoi muscoli […] si ostinavano a chiedere. […] I suoi nervi erano indeboliti per modo che gli davano persino qualità da pazzo. […] Temeva ed evitava i propri simili quando non li conosceva e bastava che di sera un uomo gli passasse accanto per farlo sussultare dallo spavento. […] [D]oveva accontentarsi di un sonno senza intensità in cui il cervello continuava un lavorìo sordo, indistinto, ma non perciò meno affaticante. […] Aveva intero il desiderio di

[123] Leopardi, 'Vita abbozzata', p. 67.
[124] Leopardi, 'A Pietro Giordani. Recanati 21 Giugno 1819', in *Lettere*, p. 204. The letter is also cited in D'Intino's commentary to the passage, see Leopardi, 'Vita abbozzata', p. 67.
[125] Leopardi, 'Vita abbozzata', p. 78. The cited passage is *Zib*. 2017.

> riconquistare la salute. […] Alfonso balzò dal letto. […] Lo riprese il desiderio di correre, l'ambizione di giungere lontano. […] Il sangue gli turbinava nella testa e gli mancava il fiato, ma non si lasciò costringere che a brevissime pause. […] Poco dopo, pur continuando l'agitazione nel sangue, i polmoni gli si aprirono ad un profondo respiro. Da molto tempo non aveva respirato così profondamente.[126]

Alfonso's repression turned him positively insane. Not unlike a detonator, his weakened nerves are ready to snap and deflagrate at the most insignificant stimulus. Admitting his condition of disease, Alfonso tries to discharge the energies that internally burn him with their 'lavorìo sordo, indistinto, ma non perciò meno affaticante' by recurring to intense physical exercises. This too, like that of the library before, become a quest for *salute* ('[f]aceva ogni mattina una passeggiata di più ore e solitamente verso l'altipiano perché gli occorreva la fatica della salita.'), but it can only partially treat Alfonso's overheated interiority.[127] Too *inetto* to either master himself or proudly act on it, Alfonso explodes in flare-ups of rage apparently coming from nowhere. As a 'sfogo' of long workdays in which he meekly 'aveva avuto da subire […] le ire altrui', Alfonso 'diveniva violento […] più brutale del solito' with Lucia Lanucci, the poor daughter of his host family. As Svevo underlines, '[c]ome in tutte le persone deboli' – that is to say, in people like Alfonso – 'l'ira di Lucia, perché lungamente repressa' also 'scoppiò con grande violenza'.[128] But Alfonso does not always have the luxury of 'exploding' in the privacy of his own home: he feels like storming out when in society, too. However, his proverbial ineptitude forces him, in these circumstances, to bottle up his rage further, while maintaining his usual submissiveness on the outside:

> [s]entendosi sempre inferiore con la sua parola impacciata, Alfonso ebbe degli assalti violenti di gelosia, tempeste in un bicchier d'acqua. Al di fuori nulla trapelava per la

[126] Svevo, 'Una vita', pp. 85-88.
[127] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 92.
[128] Svevo, 'Una vita', pp. 79-81.

> forzata abituale sua riserva nell'espressione dei suoi sentimenti, la quale tanto maggiore diveniva quanto più forti erano.[129]

Alfonso's organism suffers the pathological effects of having a roaring interiority and a cowardly exteriority – a dissociation that can be seen as encapsulating the essence of ineptitude. Silvio's intensity, bottled-up until *scoppiare* by his *quasi*-monastic upbringing, is also described as venting, from his early years, into unexpected and terrifying detonations of rage ('compiacente e lezioso da piccolo ma terribile nell'ira e per la rabbia ito in proverbio tr[a i] fratelli'), depicting the Leopardian *inetto* as both turbulent and paralytic, both complacent and explosive.[130] Silvio's interiority will lead him to overheat and erupt from within, in a discharge of violence that, not finding way out, eventually sickens the body wherein it resides. In this sense, the narrative of the 'Sarno', starting with a youngster made inept and concluding with an outburst of bodily energies, can be seen as condensed in one of the most dramatic *Zibaldone* passages. Drafted in 1820, one year after Silvio's detonation, *Zibaldone* 195-196 describes how modern society, cerebrally charged but physically unsatisfying, represses the energies of a young and passionate man until he literally explodes:

> Non è spento nei giovani l'ardore che li porta a procacciarsi una vita, e a sdegnare la nullità e la monotonia. Ma tolti gli oggetti ai quali anticamente si era rivolto questo ardore, vedete a che cosa li debba portare e li porti effettivamente. L'ardor giovanile, cosa naturalissima, universale, importantissima, […] materia vivissima e di sommo peso, ora […] è considerata appunto come non esistente. Frattanto ella esiste ed opera senza direzione nessuna, senza provvidenza, senza esser posta a frutto (opera perchè quantunque tutte le istituzioni tendano a distruggerla, la natura non si distrugge, e la natura in un vigor primo freschissimo e sommo com'è in quell'età); […] ora questa materia così naturale, e inestinguibile, divenuta estranea alla macchina e nociva, circola e serpeggia e divora sordamente come un fuoco elettrico, che non si può sopire nè impiegare in bene nè impedire che non iscoppi in temporali in tremuoti ec.[131]

[129] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 129.
[130] Leopardi, 'Vita abbozzata', p. 55.
[131] *Zib*. 195-196.

The passage explores how life in modern society deprives an organism of *sfogo* for its ardent energies. As such, these magnify within his interiority and, while heightening their intensity, they move without direction, project, or form. This is arguably the line of thinking, and the same lexis of confusion and fruitlessness, that we found in the *Zibaldone* discourses on ineptitude as physiological discontent. Particularly, this passage expands on that discourse by showing how the feeling of being overwhelmed that leads one to ineptitude has, in a second stage, dangerous pathological consequences. Leopardi describes how this process dissociates inner life from the *macchina organica* itself, turning the former into some artificial disease; a poison of electricity and fire secretly crawling within the interiority until it breaks into *iscoppi*. We will return to similar 'explosions' throughout this thesis, and specifically in its conclusive 'anthropological' chapter, which will further expand on the 'comparability' between both writers' stories of corrupting organisms and mysterious *malattia*. For now, we can argue that this passage perfectly describes the pathological development of Silvio's story, indicating how the causes of his final disease can be found in the energy-repressing ineptitude thwarting his persona. Furthermore, there is a profound connection between this disease and the worsening of Alfonso's condition, which, intensified and confused by the *sordo lavorio* of his mind, results in delirium and poisonous bile. When Alfonso eventually consults a doctor about his condition ('[p]arlò commosso di una sua malattia che non sapeva definire, un'inquietudine che gli toglieva il sonno, il piacere allo studio, la gioia della vita'), this cannot but acknowledge that Alfonso's nervous system is visibly burned out,

and that he should go back to the salubrious life of his native village.[132] Unfortunately, Silvio was not supported by the good doctors of late nineteenth-century Trieste, and his nervous compression eventually destroys his health beyond repair. We can argue that Alfonso seems to share many elements of Silvio's internal combustion. Of course, unlike Silvio, Alfonso is able to partially vent his energies by engaging with the outside world. Yet he also dies of self-destruction. In the next section, we will argue that Alfonso's end is comparable, in terms of its premise and development, with the narrative of the 'Sarno' as a novel of ineptitude, chaos and shapelessness. We will particularly claim that Alfonso's corruption at the hands of society can be appropriately considered as an alternative conclusion to the Leopardian *abbozzo*.

5. 'Facilità d'imitare'

Although Silvio dies 'internally' – both because he dies indoors, in his birthplace, and because of a disease emerging from within – his desire is obviously directed towards society and life. We can deduce this from the first words of the 'Sarno', which refer to that extraordinary *pieghevolezza dell'ingegno facilità d'imitare* which makes Silvio so naturally disposed to absorb external examples and conform to them. As we discussed, extreme versatility constitutes a dangerous game in the Leopardian system, a true double-edged sword allowing for both the development of extraordinary genius and grey characterlessness. This is the second and complementary way in which the Leopardian

[132] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 196.

and Svevian characters are described as pathologically *inetti* when coping with society's requests; namely, because they naturally tend to corrupt themselves due to their soft – which is to say both easy to humiliate and prone to shapeshifting – disposition. In drawing a map of the *Zibaldone* discourses on ineptitude, we explored the singular way in which Leopardi describes a *persona inetta a vivere* through the metaphor of a sickly body surviving through the blood of others. This image vividly encapsulates the effects of social humiliation on a sensitive soul. Mortified by sustained unhappiness, it adopts what remains of its energies to perform what we defined as an act of 'psychological parasitism', to the point of blurring the distinction between self and other ('la persona degli altri sottentra nell'animo suo, quasi intieramente, alla persona propria, ch'è sparita').[133] Providentially, Silvio dies before losing himself in this humiliating performance – he does not experience the perils of a society that is so proficient at 'bending' sensitive people. However, this does not mean that the idea does not feature as one of the most recurrent anxieties in the 'Sarno'. In one of his musings, Silvio expresses a rather disturbing wish, which combines both his youthful yearning for the world and an ominous, almost prophetic, awareness of its evils: '[m]io desiderio di vedere il mondo nonostante che ne conosca perfettamente il vuoto e qualche volta l'abbia quasi veduto e concepito tutto intiero'.[134] Silvio is aware that there is only disappointment and aridity in the outside world, yet his organism is irremediably drawn to it. Silvio is concerned with what his capacity to imitate would make him become. He clearly voices his terror when saying 'prevedo ch'io mi guasterei coi cattivi compagni coll'esempio massimamente ec. e perciò che nessun uomo non milenso non è capace di guastarsi, mal d'occhi e vicinanza al

[133] *Zib.* 615.
[134] Leopardi, 'Vita abbozzata', p. 65.

suicidio'.[135] Every man provided with inner life, according to this passage, is susceptible to some degree of corruption. This is particularly true for Silvio, whose intensity and elasticity would lead him, in society, to conform to bad examples, eventually losing the purity of his own self and *guastare* his soul. Even more interestingly, the passage's association of images connects this process of corruption to illness and suicidal tensions. We have enough element to go back to *Una vita*, and to the way in which the Svevian *inetto* wastes himself through a similar 'facilità d'imitare' – until he can bear it no more.

Only envisaged in the narrative of the *Sarno*, the process described above is what dooms Alfonso as the *inetto* who actually enters society. We saw that Alfonso's adventure is ridden with humiliation, in a process gradually depriving him of self-control and self-esteem. Annetta Maller, who publicly mocks him by calling him a froglet, also laughs when she realises that the poor man is too shy to express himself unless forcefully prompted. When Alfonso realises this himself, he mirrors Annetta's behaviour and tragically laughs at his own characterlessness:

> Anche Alfonso rise trovando comico quell'uomo che attendeva di venir fatto parlare. Furono queste le prime idee che diedero ad Annetta l'intenzione di fare un romanzo insieme. Quel caratterino che le si rivelava con tale ingenuità le sembrò meritevole di venir descritto.[136]

Alfonso gets away with doing what Annetta is doing and accepts to write a novel describing his own inept persona. However, in doing this, Alfonso assents to being deprived of agency, lowering himself to the way in which Annetta wishes to label him. A further blow to Alfonso's *amour-propre* occurs when she brutally edits his first draft, considering it inconclusive and pathetic. The budding writer renounces writing *his own*

[135] Leopardi, 'Vita abbozzata', p. 63.
[136] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 134.

novel as he intended, conforming to Annetta's criticisms: 'lo umiliò di essere costretto a fare quella dichiarazione esplicita; aveva abdicato al diritto di dire la sua opinione'.[137] However, Alfonso's 'abdication' for societal survival is not only of a literary nature, and can be seen as following his character development throughout the novel. The peak of this can be found in the central passage of the so-called *Apologo dei gabbiani*, where, in observing how seagulls are biologically disposed for action and survival, Macario definitively labels Alfonso's organism as that of a poet, an overthinker, an *inetto a vivere*:

> Macario per distrarlo volle che Alfonso osservasse il volo di quegli uccelli, così calmo e regolare come la salita su una via costruita, e quelle cadute rapide come di oggetti di piombo. […]— Fatti proprio per pescare e per mangiare, — filosofeggiò Macario. — Quanto poco cervello occorre per pigliare pesce! Il corpo è piccolo. […] E lei che studia, che passa ore intere a tavolino a nutrire un essere inutile! Chi non ha le ali necessarie quando nasce non gli crescono mai più. Chi non sa per natura piombare a tempo debito sulla preda non lo imparerà giammai e inutilmente starà a guardare come fanno gli altri, non li saprà imitare. Si muore precisamente nello stato in cui si nasce, le mani organi per afferrare o anche inabili a tenere.
> Alfonso fu impressionato da questo discorso. Si sentiva molto misero nell'agitazione che lo aveva colto per cosa di sì piccola importanza.
> — Ed io ho le ali? — chiese abbozzando un sorriso.
> Per fare dei voli poetici sì! —[138]

Although terribly agitated, Alfonso smiles conveniently and conceals his mortification. Birds are physiologically able to fly, hunt, and thrive, whereas certain humans are too intellectual, depressingly studying *ore intere a tavolino*, to even consider the possibility of that movement and that happiness. We should point out that the opposition between birds and humans as a conflict between natural and rational, corporeal and cerebral, is a quintessentially Leopardian tension; and one that, as I have argued elsewhere, can be seen as having had an impact on Svevo's stories on modernity as psychophysical

[137] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 148.
[138] Svevo, 'Una vita', pp. 104-105.

'ineptitude'.[139] The occurrence of such a Leopardian *topos* – which engages with the problem of human corruptibility through the light of the natural sciences – in a fundamental moment of *Una vita* could suggest that Svevo was familiar with Leopardi's philosophy – not only his poetry, which he emulated as a student at Segnitz – before the period of 'literary silence' that precedes *La coscienza di Zeno*. We can certainly argue that, here, too, comparable tensions are reformulated into analogous narrations and philosophical consequences. We will come back to the intersection of these models (comparability and literary references) later in this chapter. For now, let us focus on the excerpt above, and on the way in which this constitutes a momentous passage in the corruption of Alfonso as a Leopardian *inetto*. Alfonso is described as profoundly impressionable when listening to Macario's unfaltering speech, and nervously awaits the latter's assessment of his personality. Not satisfied with the implicit consequences of that *filosofare*, Alfonso feels the shameful need for further clarifications: no, he cannot fly, Macario cuts it short, if not in his agitated interiority. This is an extremely important passage, as it constitutes both an instant of profound humiliation for Alfonso's sensitivity, and a key stimulus for his own incredible capacity to imitate and survive. We appreciated the way in which Silvio describes himself as so malleable a personality that it would not be difficult for third parties to influence and *guastare* his persona. Similarly, Alfonso is gifted with a clearly impressionable and *plastica* idea of himself, with his proverbially *inetto* self-doubting making him even more dependent on others' opinions ('[g]li dava una grande fiducia l'opinione altrui; senza di questo consenso, anche avendo la

[139] Calzolari, 'Metamorphosis and Nightmare', pp. 217-234. This paper connects Svevo's ornithological writings and Leopardi's *operetta* 'Elogio degli uccelli' (1824). A brief reference to Leopardi's works on birds vis-à-vis this passage of *Una vita* can also be found in Vacante, 'Favole, apologhi, aforismi', pp. 134-135. On this specific Leopardian opposition, which indeed can be seen as one between forms of *salute* and *malattia*, see the essays collected in D'Intino, *L'immagine della voce: Leopardi, Platone e il libro morale* (Venice: Marsilio, 2009).

convinzione di aver ragionato giustamente, non ne aveva mai tanta da dargli la risolutezza necessaria per agire').[140] Overall, we can maintain that *Una vita* describes Alfonso's self-perception and worldview as able to take many forms, in relation to societal necessities and influences. If Alfonso's idea of his own organism 'si riformava ad ogni novella sensazione', his understanding of social situations also *physically* conforms to the inputs of external life ('[a]veva il sentimento disaggradevole di non avere ancora compreso perfettamente la situazione e gli sembrava che ogni nuova parola che udiva ne mutasse perfettamente la fisonomia').[141] In this sense, Alfonso is comparable to Silvio – he is versatile and, thus, easy to manipulate. The novel soon reveals that Macario is mistaken in thinking that those who are not born to 'fight' will not alter themselves by 'guardare come fanno gli altri, non li sapr[anno] imitare'.[142] Humiliated and confused, Alfonso shows an incredible ability to turn the raw matter of his soul into whatever he is told he should be: '[t]empo prima Macario gli aveva detto che lo riteneva incapace di lottare […], ed egli di questo rimprovero s'era gloriato come di una lode. Ora egli aveva provato che Macario s'era ingannato sul suo conto.'[143] Initially a frog-like and awkward guest, he manages to conquer Annetta's volatile heart, unexpectedly affirming himself as both a successful social-climber and a perfect Don Juan. However, as we understand from Alfonso's gloom, his soft and *inetto* self seems to be acting according to someone else's script:

> come Annetta glielo aveva comandato, dinanzi ai terzi seppe in parte padroneggiarsi, ma quando con essa poteva trovarsi solo era ardito proprio per proposito, per calcolo e si costringeva all'arditezza non lasciandosi arrestare dal sangue che gli affluiva al core e gli toglieva la parola.[144]

[140] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 212.
[141] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 329.
[142] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 105.
[143] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 227.
[144] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 180.

Of course, we know that Alfonso is unable of *arditezza* and *calcolo*, and it is safe to assume that his actions reproduce what he heard from Macario about being able to fall, like an indifferent seagull, on his 'prey'. When Alfonso romantically approaches Annetta, he is so smooth and cunning that we struggle to recognise his previous clumsiness: 'la decisione non era presa ch'egli per un movimento quasi involontario aveva poggiato le sue labbra su quella mano' […] '[a]lla sua uscita Alfonso era trasalito credendo, sempre secondo quanto gli aveva predicato Macario, di essere ora obbligato a dire qualche cosa.'[145] The same applies to the way in which Alfonso carefully follows Francesca's advice for courting Maller's daughter, or in the way in which he imitates romantic hearsay without seeing that his behaviour has become dissociated from what he feels inside:

> Egli salutò agitando alto il cappello. Il gesto era trovato, ma a lui mancava la sensazione corrispondente. Al vedere Annetta alla finestra s'era ricordato che così si usava in amore. Poi volle sentirsi felice come la sua buona fortuna lo meritava e canticchiò un'arietta che non voleva riuscire allegra nelle vie vuote appena rischiarate da un sole invisibile nel cielo violaceo. Un malessere profondo lo fece tacere.[146]

Alfonso's shapeshifting might make him look like a *lottatore*, but we can recognise in it a manifestation of his ineptitude. Miserable and unable to help himself, Alfonso even imagines to infect his own prey, Annetta, who 'nelle sue mani abili diveniva cera molle cui egli avrebbe dato la forma che avrebbe voluto. Pensandolo moveva le dita come se avesse avuto in mano quella cera.'[147] However, while Alfonso fails to recognise in time that his plasticity is leading him towards corruption, he is extremely quick at diagnosing Annetta's *mollezza* as a clear sign of illness:

[145] Svevo, 'Una vita', pp. 156; 158.
[146] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 226.
[147] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 217.

> ella diede una definizione della sua vita. La vita era quella che le dava lui quando la baciava […]. Annetta ripeté la sua dichiarazione parecchie volte durante la notte mutandone la forma. […] Se c'era, la felicità di Alfonso veniva diminuita da un timore. Quella donna che in una sola ora aveva mutato di sentimenti e di opinioni era forse impazzita?[148]

We cannot know whether Annetta's softness originates from genuine love, but we can claim that there is nothing pure, at this point, about Alfonso's behaviour. In accepting to survive in societal life, Alfonso undergoes the humiliation of his previously weak but uncorrupted self, becoming, like in the *Zibaldone* passage, a lifeless organism in need of someone else's blood. In a ridiculous attempt to provide Annetta with the romance that she so ardently desires, Alfonso even 'fece una dichiarazione in piena regola'. However, '[m]entre si abbandonava a delle sentimentalità di proposito, perché gli sembrava che così fosse suo dovere, ne sentiva la convenzionalità senza sangue e senza vita e se ne meravigliava non sapendo a che cosa attribuire tale freddezza'.[149] This is the tragic waste of Alfonso's resourceful self, in a narrative that sees a weak and stuttering romantic changing, at society's requests, into a heartless suitor – or into a violent *lottatore* able to confront the most threatening foe ('[l]o volevano ammazzare? Si gettò sulla figurina mingherlina, trattenne la mano levata in atto di minaccia e afferrò Maller [Annetta's brother] per il collo').[150] Whatever happened to Alfonso and to his softness? In Leopardian terms, we could say that society or, more generally, external life has humiliatingly touched the *pasta molle* of his interiority ('e da prima è difficile, finalmente impossibile il darle nuova figura') hardening it once and for all into a corrupted form.[151] In one of his rare moments of lucidity, Alfonso clearly realises that the world, with its irresistible allure of societal ambitions and romantic desires, has wasted his organism:

[148] Svevo, 'Una vita', pp. 223-224.
[149] Svevo, 'Una vita', pp. 173-174.
[150] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 393.
[151] *Zib*. 1452.

> Vedeva con tutt'altri occhi la sua stanzetta allegra, ridente per il raggio di sole che, unico nella giornata, vi penetrava a quell'ora […] Quando entrava in biblioteca o nella sua stanzuccia, egli usciva perfettamente dalla lotta; nessuno gli contendeva la sua felicità, egli non chiedeva nulla a nessuno. Ora invece questi lottatori ch'egli disprezzava lo avevano attirato nel loro mezzo e senza resistenza egli aveva avuto i loro stessi desideri, adottato le loro armi.[152]

Alfonso is saddened by what he has become and craves to return to his previous stage: a confused man of letters, subjected to the ups and downs of his inner life, but at least unspoiled by reality and its temptations. Pretending to act according to Annetta's suggestion, he falsely claims that his mother's illness has aggravated, and literally plans a 'return to the origins', his native village. Once Alfonso arrives home, however, he discovers that his mother's condition is actually serious, and he needs to stay at her deathbed. If we did not know that Alfonso's soul was already beyond repair, we could see this as the last blow endured by his already weakened sensitivity. To reiterate our connection with Leopardi's idea of ineptitude as bringing about that 'nebbia grevissima d'indifferenza sorgente immediata d'inazione e insensibilità',[153] we can observe how Alfonso, even before arriving home, hopes that he is still in time to heal from that 'grigia e triste […] nube sempre più densa sul capo' that he started to feel in the city: 'credeva che così non fosse che là […] quella cappa di nebbia.'[154] However, in what can be seen as the post-mortem, and rather Leopardian, atmosphere of the village ('la neve ghiacciata scricchiava sotto ai loro piedi e la luna piena nel cielo sereno inondava dei suoi raggi la vallata bianca, abbagliante in tanta luce fredda'), we find that Alfonso's organism seems

[152] Svevo, 'Una vita', pp. 227-228.
[153] *Zib*. 959.
[154] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 253.

to have, at this point, already integrated the wintery quality of that mist.[155] Tragically, as Alfonso's mother dies, his soul also definitely freezes into indifference and insensitivity:

> Stava là immobile dinanzi al monticello di terra nuda, la tomba della madre, mancante ancora del sasso ch'era stato commesso, e si trovò tanto freddo che cercò di scusarsi verso se stesso. […] La tomba del vecchio Nitti era vicina all'entrata […] Quante lagrime Alfonso non aveva sparse su quella tomba! Quanto semplici e quanto vivaci erano stati i suoi sentimenti alla morte del padre![156]

Scared of what he has become, Alfonso returns to Trieste telling himself that there is still time to heal. He will abandon both Annetta and his occupation at Maller's, withdrawing to a life of contemplative solitude. However, the severity of Alfonso's condition seems to make such a return to health impossible, and his very plan to crawl back into that 'ideale sognato nelle sue letture, stato di rinunzia e di quiete' is in fact 'il risultato delle strane vicende degli ultimi mesi le quali avevano gettato su lui come una cappa di piombo'.[157] Talking to the Signora Lanucci, Alfonso keeps insisting that a life of meditation is the ultimate solution against the corruptions of external life:

> Le rammentò gl'insegnamenti che certamente i preti e i maestri avevano dato anche a lei! La vita aveva il suo valore per tutt'altra cosa che per quella per cui il volgo l'amava. I preti dicevano questa verità troppo freddamente e perciò non veniva creduta, ma era vera, profondamente vera. All'accorgersene ch'era così, le raccontò, egli aveva provata una grande sorpresa. Non era retorica dei preti e dei maestri quella, era verità! L'equilibrio nella nostra vita, un'esistenza laboriosa, per quanto con scopi modesti, valeva più che tutte le felicità che potevano dare la ricchezza e l'amore.[158]

[155] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 296.
[156] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 309.
[157] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 340.
[158] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 350. The next chapter will consider comparable discourses, between medical and metaphysical proposals, with reference to the wider Svevian *oeuvre* and the Leopardian *operetta* 'Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico' (1824). This *operetta* recounts how the *volgo* erroneously considers *vita* in terms almost matching those of *Una vita.* (*Fisico.* Oh cotesto no: perché la vita è bene da se medesima, e ciascuno la desidera e l'ama naturalmente. *Metafisico*. Così credono gli uomini; ma s'ingannano: come il volgo s'inganna pensando che i colori sieno qualità degli oggetti; quando non sono degli oggetti, ma della luce. Dico che l'uomo non desidera e non ama se non la felicità propria. Però non ama la vita, se non in quanto la reputa instrumento o subbietto di essa felicità'). We are not, at this point of this chapter, proposing models of (direct) literary filiation. However, it is entirely possible that – here, too, like in *Apologo dei gabbiani* – Svevo metabolizes and reworks some 'contaminated' pieces of Leopardian prose as early as *Una vita*. From this perspective, the *Metafisico*'s proposal of 'colorful' burning and intense living is turned

We could say that Alfonso is trying to find shelter into that *fratesco* lifestyle endured by the Leopardian *inetto*. However, unlike Silvio's, Alfonso's 'dough' has known society too profoundly and has been *guastata* irretrievably. Although Alfonso is resolute to withdraw to a studious *vita interna*, his return to Trieste pathologically reignites his organism's tensions towards illness and corruption: '[s]empre ancora egli si trovava nelle sue azioni in contraddizione con le sue teorie. Quel desiderio intenso di venir ringraziato e ammirato non somigliava punto né a serietà né a rinunzia'.[159] We can appreciate that this last part of *Una vita* also presents us with a quintessentially Leopardian dilemma. Specifically, that which questions the possibility of surviving internally, preserving one's sensitivity and soul, while engaging with the necessary mediations of societal life, and without falling into the two extremes of self-denying repression and spiritual corruption. This is certainly the conundrum around which the 'Sarno' revolves. As D'Intino argues, 'appunto per evitare […] di scivolare nel vortice della colpa […] Leopardi costruisce i suoi frammenti di romanzo di formazione intorno allo snodo dell'impedimento, della malattia, del ritiro dal mondo, e infine (compimento e perfezione del tema) la morte precoce'.[160] It is also in this sense that Silvio's 'withdrawal from the world' is so profoundly interconnected with the theme of voluntary death as a way of maintaining purity. We already observed this in Silvio's fear of *guastarsi* because of bad examples, which leads him to the verge of malady and suicide. Furthermore, one of Silvio's flashes

upside down by *Signora Lanucci* and her safer suggestion of withdrawal from the world and its excitements. For now, we can use this parallel to confirm that both writers develop comparable reflections on *vita* as *male* and *malattia* from the early stages of their reflection. As for models of literary filiation, these will be considered later in this chapter, with more evident references to Leopardi in *Senilità*. See Leopardi, 'Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico', in *Operette*, pp. 106-110 (pp. 106-107).

[159] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 368.

[160] D'Intino, 'Il Consumo', in *La caduta e il ritorno: Cinque movimenti dell'immaginario romantico leopardiano* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019), pp. 83-154 (pp. 105-106).

allows us to understand the profound similarity between the Leopardian dilemma and the one that haunts *Una vita*. Silvio briefly refers to his 'amore per la Broglio monacantesi, perder per sempre la vista della bellezza […] perduti gli occhi ciò m'induceva al suicidio'.[161] This passage, referring to both the life-depriving monacation of a young organism and to suicidal compulsions, connects directly to a particularly dense *Zibaldone* passage explaining the reasons for religious withdrawal:

> Giovanette […] che non hanno ancora incominciato a vivere […] si chiudono in un monastero […] il cui unico scopo […] è d'impedire la vita. […] Oltrechè escludendo assolutamente l'attività, escludono la vita, poichè il moto e l'attività è ciò che distingue il vivo dal morto: e la vita consiste nell'azione; laddove lo scopo diretto della vita monastica anacoretica ec. è l'inazione, e il guardarsi dal fare, l'impedirsi di fare. […] Io però conoscendo che il vivere pone in grandi pericoli di peccare, ed è p[er] conseg[uenza] pericolosissimo *per se stesso*, e quindi *per se stesso cattivo* (la conseguenza è in regola assolutamente), son risoluto di non vivere, di fare che ciò che la natura ha fatto, non sia fatto, cioè che l'esistenza ch'ella mi ha dato, sia fatta inutile, e resa (per quanto possibile) *nonesistenza*. S'io non vivessi, o non fossi nato, sarebbe meglio […] s'io mi potessi ammazzare […] parimente meglio […]; ma poichè non ho potuto […], resta che […] io scelga il partito ch'è in poter mio, e l'unico degno del savio, cioè schivare quanto io posso la vita, contraddire e render vana quanto posso la nascita mia, insomma esistendo annullare quanto è possibile l'esistenza, privandola di tutto ciò che la distingue dal suo contrario e la caratterizza, e soprattutto dall'azione […]. E se con ciò nuocerò al mio *ben essere*, e mi abbrevierò l'esistenza, non importa; perchè lo scopo di essa non dev'esser altro che fuggir se medesima, come pericolosa[.][162]

It is a superb *pensiero*, which combines ideas on life from both a physiologically and metaphysical perspective. The reason that leads to the imprisonment of a young woman in a monastery is that of precluding her from the life that her organism physiologically desires. Existing, the passage states, implies the corruption of the individual and is as such considerable as evil. Thus, Leopardi contemplates that the only way of maintaining one's purity is that of completely withdrawing from the life of the world, achieving an integral negation of existence: alienation, stasis, *nonesistenza*. There are of course multiple ways

[161] Leopardi, 'Vita abbozzata', pp. 95-96.
[162] *Zib*. 2381-2383. Italics in the original.

of doing this. The more elementary ways are not being born or killing oneself: where the first is not in our hands and the second is, in accordance with the long-lasting effects of Leopardi's early catholic upbringing, immoral. The third and wisest way, of course, is the one that Alfonso feebly attempts, that is to say, the ones that the old *maestri* and *preti* suggest. This is an existence of habit and regularity, secluded from that external life which, for Alfonso's disease, should truly be deemed as *pericolo*. However, while this can work for Silvio, who is actually locked up in a mansion, Alfonso has no guardians and cannot resist the world's call. Like other Leopardian youngsters, he is physiologically drawn towards what destroys him, which is life. Realising how he cannot complement the needs of his inner existence with his biological instincts, and how the latter necessarily corrupt the former, Alfonso opts for the forbidden Leopardian option:

> Annetta lo voleva morto! […] Sognava che l'amore per lui, senz'altra causa, un giorno le rinascesse nel cuore e che ella andasse alla sua tomba a spargervi fiori e lagrime. […] Doveva battersi con Federico Maller in una lotta impari nella quale il suo avversario aveva tutti i vantaggi: l'odio e l'abilità. Che cosa poteva sperare? Gli rimaneva soltanto una via per isfuggire a quella lotta in cui avrebbe fatto una parte miserabile e ridicola, il suicidio.
> […]
> Non aveva pensato mai al suicidio che col giudizio alterato dalle idee altrui. Ora lo accettava non rassegnato ma giocondo. La liberazione! […] Egli […] si sentiva incapace alla vita. Qualche cosa, che di spesso aveva inutilmente cercato di comprendere, gliela rendeva dolorosa, insopportabile. Non sapeva amare e non godere; nelle migliori circostanze aveva sofferto più che altri nelle più dolorose. L'abbandonava senza rimpianto. […] Quella era la rinunzia ch'egli aveva sognata. Bisognava distruggere quell'organismo che non conosceva la pace; vivo avrebbe continuato a trascinarlo nella lotta perché era fatto a quello scopo.[163]

Because Alfonso's organism naturally craves life, with its love, conflict, and immoralities, there is no other philosophically sound way to preserve its purity than to terminate it. In entering society, the Svevian *inetto* arguably desires to complement his

[163] Svevo, 'Una vita', pp. 394-396.

inner self with the external world, showing his potential and achieving recognition and success. However, the reality is that external life overwhelms him, corrupting his soul like an unstoppable disease. It is arguably from this perspective that we can appreciate what Alfonso declares, well before opting for suicide, on the struggle between his internal and external lives: 'si trasse le coperte fino al mento e a conclusione di una lunga riflessione sull'andamento delle cose umane mormorò: — L'uomo dovrebbe poter vivere due vite: Una per sé e l'altra per gli altri'.[164] It is arguably in these lines that we can identify the 'tragedy of ineptitude' that haunts the novel. This lies precisely in the notion that life, or better *una vita,* is simply not enough to strike a healthy balance between internal and external life, that is, to be both ourselves and for others, to combine inner ambitions and outer consumptions. For excessively soft souls, trying to act out such mediation would be folly, and would lead to either neurotic burnout or humiliating corruption. These, as we observed, constitute the two, comparable faces of Alfonso's and Silvio's pathologies of ineptitude. We can thus conclude this section of our study by returning to our first Leopardian *memoria*, the one describing what happened to Leopardi when he actually left Recanati. In Rome, young Giacomo realised that what made him *inetto*, internally and externally, was his inability 'di conciliar l'una vita coll'altra' – a reunion which, like Alfonso in bed, he philosophically defines a 'riunione impossibile'.[165] In this sense, we can conclude that the figure of the Leopardian *inetto* can be considered as combining the pathological flaws and the existential dilemmas of the protagonist of *Una vita*. Through their respective 'misfits', and through a comparable dramatization of physiological ideas, Leopardi and Svevo explore a fundamental concern of their works;

[164] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 202.
[165] *Zib*. 4420.

namely, a notion of life as tension and contradiction, a *malattia* having, in itself, the seeds of its own destruction.

But there is more to say about such stories of life and contradiction. This fertile 'nucleus of narration' can be followed throughout Leopardi's works. Roughly ten years after 'Sarno', that model is transposed onto that of his female doppelgänger, Silvia, the adolescent of *Canti pisano-recanatesi* 'da chiuso morbo combattuta e vinta', who reveals nature's contradictions and dies, still young and pure, due to internal illness.[166] A comparable development can be found in Svevo's characters through time. Indeed, the problems of Alfonso Nitti's find 'new life' in Emilio Brentani, the protagonist of *Senilità*, and in Emilio's umbratile sister Amalia. While the purpose here is not to dissect and compare another *inetto* character (the symptoms of Emilio's, 'nel suo più segreto interno come una potente macchina geniale in costruzione, non ancora in attività' can be loosely linked to Alfonso's condition), we will conclude this chapter by placing that second novel, too, in connection with important Leopardian developments.[167] We will claim that *Senilità* develops familiar models of ineptitude into directions sharing the coordinates of further Leopardian texts and strategies. Furthermore, it is precisely in moments of biological 'crisis and revelation' that Leopardi appears most recognizably within that novel. A model of comparability, between parallel physiological premises and parallel developments, will redirect this investigation to isolate and explain references to Leopardi in Svevo's *oeuvre*. In so doing, this operation inaugurates the contamination of models that rules this thesis. It is now time to meet Emilio.

[166] Leopardi, 'A Silvia', p. 404.
[167] Svevo, 'Senilità', in *Romanzi*, pp. 397-621 (p. 404).

6. ‘Quella grande forza chiusa in quel debole organismo’ – *Senilità*

Like the protagonist of *Una vita*, Emilio is also a self-hindering and cerebral individual – a man with too messy an interiority (‘l’abbondanza d’immagini nel mio cervello forma la mia inferiorità’) to get anything done.[168] His existence is divided between an office job, delusions of literary grandeur, and the love for an untameable woman whom he idealises to the point of becoming neurotic. Furthermore, Like Alfonso with his ‘rival’ Macario, Emilio, too, survives like a parasite, his host being Stefano Balli whose ‘healthy attitudes’ he tries to ‘imitate’ with either humiliating or disgraceful consequences. However, there is at least one fundamental difference between these physiological misfits. Unlike Alfonso, Emilio does not end up killing himself, and even manages to preserve his overall delusions. According to Bond, if *Una vita* can be considered a ‘demonstration of what happens if the […] “illness” of the protagonist is allowed to implode onto his own self’, the protagonist of *Senilità* ‘has forged a more successful path of adaptation’; more specifically, Emilio’s sister, bottling her desires into bookish fantasies of romance and unhealthy addictions, acts as a domestic metaphor for Emilio’s consumptive adventures in the external world.[169] As the critic continues, Emilio initially ‘creates a separate dream-like world that protects him from having to confront reality. When he is forced to […] acknowledge the divergence’ and, indeed, the impossibility of striking a balance between inner life and external circumstances, then:

[168] Svevo, ‘Senilità’, p. 497.
[169] Emma Bond, ‘Hidden Voices: Revelatory Female Illness in Italo Svevo’s *Senilità* and *La coscienza di Zeno*’, in *Disrupted Narratives: Illness, Silence and Identity in Svevo, Pressburger and Morandini* (Oxford: Legenda, 2012), pp. 37-86 (p. 40).

> the trauma that this provokes in the protagonist is successfully transferred onto […] his sister Amalia […] so that he might be able to regain control of events […] and thus be able to 're-tell' them in the future in a way that absolves him of any guilt and allows him to retreat back into a fantasy world of his liking.[170]

This 'contamination/transfer of disease' between Emilio and Amalia can be compared to the one leading Leopardi to 'transmit' Silvio's sickness onto (a 'safely' less autobiographical) Silvia – and, thus, preserve authorial distance and the ability to 'sing' that story after almost a decade. Once again, we can argue that a key element of comparability emerges between these models of disease and their narrative administration. In other words, the adventure of the Brentani siblings ('[f]ratello e sorella entravano nella medesima avventura') shares core narrative coordinates with Leopardi's stories of desire, death, and consumption.[171] The next section will further follow this comparable path, and, in so doing, will encounter, isolate, and explain the references to Leopardi in *Senilità*. We will particularly argue that these 'presences' occur precisely where Svevo's stories 'explode' in their amplest manifestations of life as contradiction and *malattia*. Let us look at these passages.

What Emilio and Amalia fundamentally share is an overabundance of inner life, an inability to pour that energy into audacious acts of romance or verbal expressions of themselves. As Svevo writes, the Brentanis were both 'condannati […] a tacere di quello ch'era il loro pensiero dominante'.[172] Palmieri has identified this specific formula, *pensiero dominante*, as a reference to Leopardi's poem 'Il pensiero dominante' (1831-1832), arguing that this reference 'potrebbe far parte della memoria dotta dell'autore ed

[170] Ibid.
[171] Svevo, 'Senilità', p. 413.
[172] Svevo, 'Senilità', p. 514.

essere inconsapevole'.[173] Given the recurrent context of comparability between both writers' discourses of ineptitude and taciturn self-destruction, this can be interpreted as something more than an unconscious moment of erudition. 'Il pensiero dominante', then, is a masterful choice for this moment of *Senilità*. Its text portrays Love's power to trouble and harden a sensitive subject, whose interiority comes to darken via obsessive thoughts and the towering shadow of Death.[174] Furthermore, as we will see in the next chapter, this is a literary reference that Svevo employs again in his stories – namely, when another young woman is devastated by another destructive syndrome in *La coscienza di Zeno*. We can start suggesting that it is with *Senilità* that Svevo starts to play and reveal some of his Leopardian 'cards' in narratives of life and *malattia*. Emilio's obsessive relationship with Angiolina is characterised, in several places of the novel, by referencing the ways in which Leopardi, himself, had explored the traumatic clash between a magnified inner life and the humiliations of reality. Rusi particularly argues that the scene of their first romantic encounter, with 'il cielo […] chiaro, seminato di stelle, senza luna'[175] and distant sounds gradually disappearing into silence, can be seen to integrate and subly manipulate the 1820 model of 'La sera del dì di festa' (starting with 'Dolce e chiara è la notte e senza vento, / e queta sovra i tetti e in mezzo agli orti / posa la luna', and ending with 'un canto che s'udia per li sentieri / lontanando morire a poco a poco /

[173] Palmieri, 'Leopardi in Svevo', p. 46.
[174] 'Dolcissimo, possente / dominator di mia profonda mente; / terribile, ma caro / dono del ciel; consorte / ai lúgubri miei giorni, / pensier che innanzi a me sì spesso torni; […] Come solinga è fatta / la mente mia d'allora / che tu quivi prendesti a far dimora! / Ratto d'intorno intorno al par del lampo / gli altri pensieri miei / tutti si dileguàr. Siccome torre / in solitario campo, / tu stai solo, gigante, in mezzo a lei.' The daunting tone of this poem – recurrently mentioning *morte*, yet never its supposed subject *amore* – is also expanded in the following text of *Canti*, 'Amore e morte' (1832). This begins by connecting these in brotherhood, and with the recurrent theme of the young person who dies in purity. In epigraph to the poem, Leopardi chooses Menander's "Ὃν οἱ θεοὶ φιλοῦσιν, ἀποθνήσκει νέος. Muor giovane colui ch'al cielo è caro.' See Leopardi, 'Il pensiero dominante', in *Canti*, pp. 474-490 (pp. 474-477); see also 'Amore e morte', in *Canti*, pp. 491-507 (p. 491).
[175] Svevo, 'Senilità', p. 392. This is cited and discussed also in Rusi, 'Svevo e la funzione Leopardi', p. 220.

già similmente mi stringeva il core').[176] Rusi argues that this 'allusione leopardiana iscrive già in partenza la vicenda del rapporto tra Emilio e Angiolina all'interno dell'antitesi tra vero (la realtà di costei) e illusioni (i sogni di quello)'.[177] But clearer manifestations of that archetype appear when Emilio, hurt and disillusioned after one of Angiolina's 'misdeeds', beholds the preparations for Trieste's carnival – a scene that ought to be considered as symbolic of the novel as a whole, considering that one of its possible titles was *Il Carnevale di Emilio*:

> Quel carnevale, perché meschino, gli dava un'ira da moralista; più tardi, molto più tardi, anche lui vi avrebbe partecipato, dimentico del tutto di quell'ira, innamorato del lusso e dei colori. Ma intanto ricordava d'assistere al preludio di una triste commedia. Incominciava a formarsi il vortice che per un istante avrebbe sottratto l'operaio, la sartina, il povero borghese alla noia della vita volgare per condurli poi al dolore. Ammaccati, sperduti, alcuni sarebbero ritornati all'antica vita divenuta però più greve; gli altri non avrebbero trovato mai più la quaresima.[178]

[176] Leopardi, 'La sera del dì di festa', in *Canti*, pp. 275-286 (pp. 275-276; 285-286).

[177] Rusi, 'Svevo e la funzione Leopardi', p. 221-222. The tension between comforting mind illusions *versus* the harsh truth of reality is important in both Leopardi's and Svevo's wider works. While this thesis will only tangentially touch upon this further (interdisciplinary and 'psychological') topic, we can at least suggest a starting point for studies in this direction. More specifically, the *operetta* 'Dialogo di Torquato Tasso e del suo Genio Familiare' (1824) can act as an interesting counterpart to *Senilità* and its double-vision on Angiolina (both aerial angel and carnal sinner, both Emilio's *Ange* and Balli's *Giolona*). Of course, Tasso is one of Leopardi's men of genius who is *both* sickened by his own inner world *and* capable of profound vision. He, too, meditates on the duplicity between in-person love and its mental representation. We can cite here the core passage on this specific topic: '*Tasso*. Oh potess'io rivedere la mia Leonora. Ogni volta che ella mi torna alla mente, mi nasce un brivido di gioia, che dalla cima del capo mi si stende fino all'ultima punta de' piedi; e non resta in me nervo né vena che non sia scossa. […] *Genio*. Quale delle due cose stimi che sia più dolce: vedere la donna amata, o pensarne? *Tasso*. Non so. Certo che quando mi era presente, ella mi pareva una donna; lontana, mi pareva e mi pare una dea. *Genio*. Coteste dee sono così benigne, che quando alcuno vi si accosta, in un tratto ripiegano la loro divinità, si spiccano i raggi d'attorno, e se li pongono in tasca, per non abbagliare il mortale che si fa innanzi. *Tasso* […] Ma non ti pare egli cotesto un gran peccato delle donne; che alla prova, elle ci riescano così diverse da quelle che noi le immaginavamo? *Genio*. Io non so vedere che colpa s'abbiano in questo, d'esser fatte di carne e sangue, piuttosto che di ambrosia e nettare. Qual cosa del mondo ha pure un'ombra o una millesima parte della perfezione che voi pensate che abbia a essere nelle donne? E anche mi pare strano, che non facendovi maraviglia che gli uomini sieno uomini, cioè creature poco lodevoli e poco amabili; non sappiate poi comprendere come accada, che le donne in fatti non sieno angeli. […] *Tasso*. Gran conforto: un sogno in cambio del vero. *Genio*. Che cosa è il vero? […] Sappi che dal vero al sognato, non corre altra differenza, se non che questo può qualche volta essere molto più bello e più dolce, che quello non può mai. […] Anzi ho notizia di uno che quando la donna che egli ama, se gli rappresenta dinanzi in alcun sogno gentile, esso per tutto il giorno seguente, fugge di ritrovarsi con quella e di rivederla; sapendo che ella non potrebbe reggere al paragone dell'immagine che il sonno gliene ha lasciata impressa, e che il vero, cancellandogli dalla mente il falso, priverebbe lui del diletto straordinario che ne ritrae.' See 'Dialogo di Torquato Tasso e del suo Genio Familiare', in *Operette,* pp. 111-117 (pp. 111-113).

[178] Svevo, 'Senilità', p. 472.

The boredom of 'volgare vita', workers rekindling their hopes because of upcoming festivities, the humiliation of those lost souls as reality manifests itself as brutal and harsh: these are references to the tensions at play in Leopardi's 'La sera'. The poetic subject, here, is disheartened by 'il solitario canto / dell'artigian, che riede a tarda notte, / dopo i sollazzi, al suo povero ostello; / e fieramente mi si stringe il core, / a pensar come tutto al mondo passa, / e quasi orma non lascia. Ecco è fuggito / il dì festivo, ed al festivo il giorno / volgar succede'.[179] And yet, despite his maddening *pensiero dominante*, and despite the humiliations received at the hand of life and 'corruptive people' such as Angiolina and Balli, Emilio's interiority does not entirely waste away. At least, not like Alfonso's. The clash between his inner and outer existence is transferred onto his sister Amalia, and it is precisely in the sections leading to her 'self-destruction' that Svevo's adoption of Leopardi emerges most powerfully. Emilio had anticipated his sister's death when realising that her constitution, too, was tormented by the powers of love and life: '[c]ome avrebbe finito coll'espandersi quella grande forza chiusa in quel debole organismo?'.[180] Such cases of inner tension, leading to the death of an otherwise pure protagonist, have been diagnosed throughout this chapter. It is from that perspective on comparability that one can finally make sense of Rusi's observation on the Leopardian presences in *Senilità*. As the critic argues, 'la memoria del modello pare richiamata con maggiore puntalità all'inizio del capitolo XII'[181], which is indeed the chapter that begins the narration of Amalia's sickness, with her final 'explosion' allowing Svevo to develop a wider discourse

[179] Leopardi, 'La sera del dì di festa', pp. 282-283.
[180] Svevo, 'Senilità', p. 468.
[181] Rusi, 'Svevo e la funzione Leopardi', p. 221.

on life and its impossible equilibrium. Furthermore, Bond underlines how in this specific section of the novel:

> the slowing of narrative time also serves to heighten the dramatic nature of the scene by gradually building up narrative tension. For example, when Emilio returns home to find his sister so ill, we are not confronted with Amalia herself for some time, but are 'prepared' with a trail of narrative clues which correspond with the time Emilio takes, and obviously needs, to face the situation that is awaiting him.[182]

We can build on these observations. Amongst such clues, preparing the reader for a final climax of disease, Svevo further includes elements from the Leopardian *oeuvre*. Let us read this passage:

> Aperse la porta evitando di far rumore e gli si presentò agli occhi uno spettacolo del cui ricordo non seppe mai più liberarsi. Durante tutta la sua vita bastò che i suoi sensi fossero colpiti dall'uno o dall'altro dei particolari di quella scena, per ricordarla immediatamente tutta, per fargliene sentire lo spavento, l'orrore. Alcuni villici passavano cantando per una via vicina e il loro canto monotono chiamò poi sempre le lagrime agli occhi d'Emilio. Tutti i suoni che gli giungevano erano monotoni, senza calore e senza senso. In un appartamento vicino, un dilettante maldestro stonava sul pianoforte un valzer volgare. Quel valzer sonato così – e lo riudì spesso – gli parve una marcia funebre. Anche l'ora, lieta, divenne triste per lui. Il meriggio era trascorso da poco e dalle finestre di faccia veniva riflesso nella stanza solitaria tanto sole da abbacinare. Eppure il ricordo di quel momento andò sempre congiunto ad una sensazione di oscurità e di freddo raccapricciante.[183]

Emilio would be scarred for life after witnessing his sister's delirium and her following death. The prelude to this moment is played by peasant songs from a distance which, together with a waltz *volgare*, turn that sunny moment into *memento mori*. The model of 'La sera del dì di festa' cannot be clearer, with the subject's heart throbbing as distant singing reminds him that all is doomed to die and hardly leave any trace of ever having existed. But there is more. Trapped, like Silvio in his own house and Alfonso within his own mind, Amalia's compressed energies generate phenomena of explosion and fire

[182] Bond, 'Hidden Voices', p. 48.
[183] Svevo, 'Senilità', p. 573.

('[p]arlava ora di un incendio; vedeva fiamme che non potevano farle altro male che mandarle un calore terribile. […] Amalia […] guardò [her neighbour, and said]:– Sì, ma brucia e brucerà sempre').[184] Like those *inetti* characters, Amalia cannot bear the devastating forces burning and storming inside her – as Dr Carini whispers to Emilio ('[n]on sembra un organismo adatto a sopportare delle temperature elevate').[185] In the middle of this *inferno* of sickness, Amalia wastes away as her mind becomes a chaos of inconsequential dreams. The only recurrent image is that of Stefano Balli, the champion of that external, animalistic life that had inflamed her inner world. Svevo arguably furthers the Leopardian 'intersection' of this narrative of life and illness – or indeed of 'life as illness' –, by revealing that Balli was, in fact, 'il pensiero dominante dell'ammalata'.[186] As Amalia's fire – that is, both her sickness and her life – dissipates, Emilio stares at her, his own ineptitude intact. Amalia's dying body utters one last haunting sound, showing Alfonso that living matter is, in itself, nothing but a painful congregation of pain: 'era infatti il lamento della materia che, già abbandonata disorganizzandosi, emette i suoni appresi nel lungo dolore cosciente'.[187] Scared about the absurdity of life and its contrasting tensions, he concludes: '[s]trano – pensò, – sembrerebbe che metà dell'umanità esista per vivere e l'altra per essere vissuta'.[188] We can conclude that this further revelation derives from a combination of parallel 'physiological' principles and Leopardian presences, pointing to the notion of life as impossible balance between opposing forces. Similar in tone and implications with what Alfonso Nitti discovers in his bedroom and Giacomo in Rome, Emilio Brentani derives

[184] Svevo, 'Senilità', p. 579.
[185] Svevo, 'Senilità', p. 588.
[186] Svevo, 'Senilità', p. 605.
[187] Svevo, 'Senilità', p. 614.
[188] Svevo, 'Senilità', p. 618.

wider philosophical conclusions from the disease witnessed: whether external or internal, intensely lived or repressed, life eventually destroys and kills. At the end of *Senilità*, the reader leaves Emilio in a devastated and befuddled state of mourning for his sister and for his love affair. Even though Emilio does not kill himself, his inner world has gone astray.

We can thus conclude that Leopardi and Svevo – respectively in the 'Sarno', and in *Una vita* and *Senilità* – commonly translate similar models of physiology and disease into wider narratives on life as unstoppable chaos and pain, where balance and health are presented as unattainable conditions. Svevo particularly reveals his awareness of Leopardi as a congenial source on such themes in his second novel, where Leopardian references are adopted when exploring the idea of life as pain and contradiction – in other words, as he narrates via published novels the quintessential Leopardian idea of *vita* as *male*. Two of the core methods of this thesis can, thus, be seen to intersect and elucidate the complex and hybrid presence of Leopardi in Svevo. Common paradigms of medicine and images of physiology allow both writers to develop interconnected and imaginative solutions in terms of fiction and philosophical implications, and it is precisely at the heart of Svevo's discourse on life and illness that the presence of Leopardi begins to appear in the form of 'literary quotation'. The next chapters will continue to follow and explore this 'contaminated path', exploring how both writers dramatize similar models of physiology into comparable narrations. In particular, the similarity between these models, and the recurrent correspondence between Leopardi's and Svevo's choice of *specific* nineteenth-century experiments and 'medical' topics will allow us to ponder *whether historically connected models of medicine can, in fact, be seen to fertilise both writers' interconnected discourses*. In this sense, the next two chapters will contaminate the comparative and

literary approaches of this first chapter with ‘medical cultures’ and ‘reformulations’ behind both writers’ works. This will lead us to identify theories and doctors that could have – directly or indirectly – empowered both writers’ discourses of life, tensions, and ambivalences.

II
Medical Errors and Fictional Horrors
Dr Hufeland and the Book of Long Life

Let us start with a specific doctor – or better, with the father of a series of nineteenth-century ideas, perspectives, and experiments on the way in which life should be lived, treated, and enhanced. At the beginning of the century, the idea of interfering with biological rhythms had an influential advocate in Dr Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland (1762-1836), a German physician whose career saw him taking on leading positions such as Professor of Medicine at Jena (1793), King Friedrich Wilhelm III's personal physician (1801), and Chair of Special Pathology and Therapy and first Dean of Medicine at the new Humboldt University of Berlin (1810). In close contact with Goethe, Schiller, and Kant, Hufeland produced extensive and diverse academic work, was a pioneer of medical journalism, and a fierce campaigner for the introduction of large-scale smallpox vaccination. His work, already popular amongst the medical community, reached best-seller status with an accessible manual in two volumes: the 1796 *Die Kunst das menschliche Leben zu verlängern* (*L'arte di prolungare la vita umana*), a guidebook on 'prolongevity' widely translated in Europe, and that reached its eighth reprint before 1860.[189]

[189] Hufeland's book on prolongevity was soon translated into Italian, English, French, Polish, Swedish, Russian, and Serbian. For both the first (*parte teoretica*) and second (*parte pratica*) volume of this manual, we will refer to the first Italian translation by Dr Luigi Careno (1766-1810), as it is this version that Leopardi and Svevo are likely to have read, heard of, or encountered through third-party mediations and rewritings. See Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland, *L'arte di prolungare la vita umana*, trans. by Luigi Careno, 2 vols (Pavia: Eredi di Pietro Galeazzi, 1798). This translation, preceded by Careno's enthusiastic (yet rather uninformative) preface, became a classic text on hygiene in early-nineteenth-century Italy, and underwent several reprints – that is, the integral text or parts of it – by many publishing houses, including Remondini e Figli (Venice, 1799; Bassano, 1812), Nuova Grafica Spinelli (Sesto Fiorentino, 1799), Vedova Ghiringhello e comp. ed i fratelli Reycend e comp. (Turin, 1830), and P.M.Visaj (Milan, 1835). While the

This popular publication is taken into consideration in 'Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico', one of the *operette morali* where Leopardi relies on models of medicine and physiology to narrate the errors of treating life as if this were somehow improvable or 'curable' from its painful, contradictory condition. As it is characteristic of Leopardi's writing, scientific models are reformulated into unexpected fictional and philosophical narratives, with the aim of reiterating a fundamental thesis of life as quintessential *male* or *malattia*. A comparable 'hybrid tactic' can be found in Svevo. Roughly eighty years later, Svevo also engages with some outdated models of prolongevity. Probably composed during the period of 'literary silence' that followed *Senilità*, the novella 'Lo specifico del Dottor Menghi*'* (circa 1904) intersects and fictionalises nineteenth-century models of long living to experiment with new fictional and existential scenarios. As hypothesised by Vacante, Svevo recombined in this period a patchwork of scientific readings and models that were probably inclusive of Leopardi's own 'contaminated' prose – also elaborating on solutions that eventually led to *La coscienza* and its parodic rewriting of science and doctors.[190]

This chapter will investigate how Leopardi and Svevo, in dramatizing medical theory, introject and transform common physiological models into comparable explorations of life's illness – or better, of life as a complex system of forces that cannot be understood nor redirected via rational analysis or medical intervention. 'Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico' and 'Lo specifico del Dottor Menghi' will be instrumental in revealing how both authors translate comparable theories into parallel literary

major nineteenth-century Italian editions of this manual were produced in the first half of the century, Hufeland's legacy in prolongevity theory exceeds that period, coming to play a role in the reflection of later Italian hygienists such as Dr Paolo Mantegazza (1831-1910), as it will be mentioned in the last section of this chapter.

[190] Vacante, 'Favole, apologhi, aforismi', pp. 116-123.

developments, specifically transforming the 'errors' of nineteenth-century medicine into manifestations of biological horror. This path of comparability will be additionally followed into Svevo's wider writings on such themes, detecting unexpected Leopardian quotations and justifying them within the 'medical pattern' proposed by this thesis. Finally, this chapter will hypothesise whether both writers' comparable narratives could be seen to rework historically interconnected models of therapeutics and schools of medicine. We will particularly contemplate the possible connection between Svevo and Hufeland, reconstructing an innerweb of nineteenth-century mediators and actors that could have allowed for this encounter. The three core perspectives of this thesis – comparative (fictionalised medicine and common philosophical aims), literary (Leopardian quotations in Svevo), and medical (Dr Hufeland and later reformulations) – will thus be triangulated with the aim of exploring the elusive Leopardian presence in Svevo's works, including *La coscienza di Zeno*, beginning a discourse on medical models, literary references, and 'disease' that will be further cemented in subsequent chapters.

1. L'arte di prolungare la vita umana

L'arte di prolungare la vita umana proposes an easy recipe for long life. The history of this science has certainly been an 'appendice alla storia dell'umano intelletto', its ideas a 'pensiero prediletto delle menti più perspicaci, il capo giro dei fanatici, e l'esca principale dei Ciarlatani, ed Impostori'.[191] A catalogue of doctors and impostors opens

[191] Hufeland, *L'arte*, I, p. 15.

the book – from the ancient Egyptians' obsession with emetics to Mesmer's ludicrous magnetic treatment –, amusing the reader with a catalogue of quackery and mistakes. But the list includes inspiring models, too. Venetian aristocrat Luigi Cornaro (1484-1566), who converted mid-life to a regimen of temperate living, reached the venerable age of one hundred years in good health.[192] In a nutshell, this is the recipe for living long – to stay cautious and sheltered from all physical, intellectual, and emotional appetites and yearnings, and dodge the temptations of everyday life. As a convinced Neo-Hippocratic, Hufeland believed in the existence of a powerful but limited amount of 'vital force' intrinsic to the body. It is a doctor's calling to manage this with prudence, behaving more like a wise philosopher than a mere physician. In line with a long tradition of prolongevity, Hufeland compares life to a 'fiamma' constantly consumed by the surrounding air, explaining how '[q]ualunque corpo […] viene alla fine consumato […] da cotesta continua finissima evaporazione'.[193] In every organism, he argues, 'forze distruggenti e creatrici trovansi […] in una incessante attività, ed in un perpetuo conflitto, e cadaun momento della nostra esistenza è un miscuglio singolare di distruzione, e di creazione.'[194] Yet, such an interplay of forces, paradoxically alternating creation and destruction within the same chamber of life, can be appropriately rebalanced, harmonised, and rewired via a regimen of medical hygiene. The idea is simple enough: if that

<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=-m6QKXp-6lEC&pg=GBS.PP1&hl=en_GB>
[accessed 9 August 2022].

[192] 'Quanto più confuse ed assurde erano le idee d'allora, altrettanto lodevole è la memoria di un certo CORNARO italiano, il quale non solo seppe disimpegnarsi felicemente dai malori, che lo opprimevano, ma trovò l'arte eziandio di prolungare la sua vita nella via naturale, e nella temperanza'. See Hufeland, *L'arte*, p. 29.

[193] Hufeland borrows this intuitive metaphor from Francis Bacon (1561-1626), the English philosopher also considered a father of early modern prolongevity for his 1623 *The Historie of Life and Death: With Observations Naturall and Experimentall for the Prolonging of Life*. ('Lo stesso famoso BACCONE, il di cui genio sublime si stendeva ad ogni qualunque scienza, ed il quale da principio segnò il tortuoso sentiero dello spirito umano, per rintracciarne la verità, trovò il problema degno in vero del di lui studio e della sua attenzione di prolungare la vita dell'uomo in un modo singolare; le sue idee erano veramente ardite, e nuove'). See Hufeland, *L'arte*, pp. 34-35.

[194] Hufeland, *L'arte*, p. 64.

consumption could be contained, if that fire could be dimmed, energies could be preserved and life prolonged. This section declares the principles of the system, detecting the key one in the *ritardo della consunzione vitale*:

> Quello, il quale in un giorno consuma la sua forza vitale del doppio di un altro, egli è fuori di dubbio, che alla metà del tempo avrà anche esaurite tutte le sue forze; e gli organi, i quali sono in una duplicata attività, saranno anche doppiamente logorati ed inatti alle rispettive operazioni; quindi è, che l'energia della vita sarà in una proporzione inversa colla sua durata, poiché quanto più un ente rimane intensivo, tanto maggiormente perde la sua vita nella sua estensione. […] Si può assolutamente accelerare, o ritardare il progresso della consunzione vitale, sia nell'azione, che nel godimento e perciò si può vivere più presto, o più lentamente; io distinguerò l'una cosa col nome di vita intensiva, e l'altra con quello di vita estensiva; […] [q]uanta meno intensiva è la vita di un ente, tanto maggiore sarà la sua durata.[195]

Hufeland declares the inverse proportionality between energy consumption and life duration, advocating that this ratio can in fact be manipulated one way or another. The best form of existence is that *vita estensiva*, whose secret is the hindering of all intensities. Hufeland's foremost preoccupation is that the pace of life has dramatically hastened in modern times, so that people have shorter and worse lives. The comprehensive recharging lifestyle prescribed by the manual is, thus, one of complete sobriety, varied but not excessive in diet, and full of rest. Indeed, the idea of sleep encapsulates the essence of Hufeland's programme:

> Il sonno, per esempio, è una qualità, che è propria a tutte le creature di perfetta specie, ed una saggia disposizione, il di cui oggetto primario tende a regolare, e ritardare la consunzione, come fa per l'appunto il pendolo d'un oriuolo.[196]

Of course, Hufeland would never present his system as one of artificial intervention on the body's natural rhythms. Quite the opposite, he celebrates it as oriented towards a

[195] Hufeland, *L'arte*, pp. 69-70.
[196] Hufeland, *L'arte*, p. 71.

serene and holistic lifestyle. However, a different idea seems to emerge from passages of this kind. Specifically, that of a therapy secretly aiming to rewire the body against its necessities and limits, tampering with the 'human clock' no differently than a technician would. The next section will argue that it is by dramatizing comparable 'models' that Leopardi and Svevo derive their scenarios of medical impotence, physiological short-circuiting, and existential revelations. 'Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico' and 'Lo specifico del Dottor Menghi' isolate, transform, and exacerbate medical errors into wider narrative horrors, enlivening two comparably 'hybrid explorations' of life and its associated deadlocks.

2. Medical errors and fictional horrors

In 'Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico', a physician announces his new book: 'L'arte di vivere lungamente'.[197] Manuals of this kind, Leopardi explains in a footnote, are certainly food for bizarre imaginative scenarios, but they are also hardly effective:

> I desiderosi di quest'arte potranno in effetto, non so se apprenderla, ma studiarla certamente in diversi libri, non meno moderni che antichi: come, per modo di esempio, nelle *Lezioni dell'arte di prolungare la vita umana* scritte ai nostri tempi in tedesco dal signor Hufeland, state anco volgarizzate e stampate in Italia.[198]

Through his own *Fisico*, Leopardi mocks Hufeland. His position is overall in line with his opinion of German philosophers as all-too rational, and prone to gross miscalculations. Leopardi exposes a similar idea in a *Zibaldone* passage heavily relying

[197] Leopardi, 'Dialogo di un fisico', p. 106.
[198] Ibid.

on medical analogy, with the underlying implication that doctors and surgeons, too, fall short when trying to dissect life and grasp its secrets: '[c]hiunque esamina la natura delle cose colla pura ragione […] ch'è il procedere di molti tedeschi nella filosofia […] potrà ben quello che suona [sic] il vocabolo *analizzare*, cioè risolvere e disfar la natura'; this means that once natural life has been thoroughly searched, its dynamics still escape the analyst, whereas the specimen under scrutiny lies 'decomposta e risoluta, e quasi fredda, morta, esangue, immobile, giacente, per così dire, sotto il coltello anatomico'.[199] As for Dr Hufeland's own 'cold' dissection, an earlier entry made clear that his book misunderstands the painful essence of life:

> Ho veduto le lezioni di un tedesco, il sig. Hufeland, dell'arte di prolungare la vita, lezioni dettate da lui per una cattedra ch'egli occupava, dedicata espressamente a quest'arte. Prima bisognava insegnare a render la vita felice, e quindi a prolungarla. Infelicissima com'è, stimerei molto più chi m'insegnasse ad abbreviarla.[200]

It is possible, as Marcon and Pacella argue, that Leopardi did not own a copy of this manual, and that he came to know of it through reviews.[201] However, the note above is dated 1820, while Leopardi wrote the *operetta* four years later, after his first trip to Rome where he could have easily found this publication. Leopardi's interest in Hufeland could also find stimulus in his fraternal friendship with the Urbinate Dr Francesco Puccinotti, whose works also embodied an eclectic and internationally recognized example of Neo-Hippocratism. Whether or not Leopardi read the *whole* book is not necessarily relevant, nor would demonstrating this necessarily enhance our understanding of this *operetta*'s creative interplay between medicine and literature. What is certain is that Leopardi came

[199] *Zib*. 3237-3241. This passage is also reported in Marcon, ''La ragione, il corpo, la vita.'', p. 67. Italics in the original.
[200] *Zib*. 352.
[201] Marcon, 'La ragione', p. 61. Pacella's observation can be found in the commentary of the *Zibaldone* edition adoped by this thesis. See Pacella, 'Note', in *Zibaldone*, III, pp. 445-1122 (p. 568).

back to Hufeland and his inaccuracies at least twice across his career, each time with parodic intent. This means that he had plenty of chances and means to 'meet the words' of this manual, creatively 'reassociating' them in support of his thesis – namely, that life, as it is, is an agony unworthy of extension.

A set of elements – an arrogant scientist, the secret of long living, medical miscalculations – connect this dialogue to 'Lo specifico del Dottor Menghi'. Unlike other Svevian stories drawing from ideas of regeneration and/or rejuvenation of elderly (im)patients, 'Lo specifico' narrates the experiment of medical prolongevity in itself, following it from its early formulation to its trials, to its unexpected consequences.[202] Cepach points out that Svevo parodies the 'arrembante scienza medica' flourishing throughout the nineteenth century, narrating its doctors' struggle to heal 'anche la sua *insanabile* contraddizione interna', the paradox of biological consumption, 'della morte, della sua ineluttabilità, dei tempi della sua venuta e dei modi', and attempting 'quanto meno, di ritardarla indefinitamente'.[203] A bleak humour connects these texts. Leopardi begins his *operetta* by introducing characters such as Tommaso Giannotti (1493-1577), another memorable doctor who wrote a 1550 treatise (*De vita hominis ultra CXX annos protrahenda*) with the goal of allowing Pope Julius III to live an exceedingly long life.

[202] Such narratives, between medical gaffes and senile gullibility, enliven parodic moments throughout the Svevian *oeuvre*. Old characters hope to rejuvenate or delay their departure in the unfinished and posthumously titled plays 'Degenerazione' (circa 1899-1900) and 'La rigenerazione' (circa 1927-1928), where Svevo humorously associates – not without some grounding in contemporary medical thought – therapies of energetic recharge and flirtatious exchanges between old people and young maidens. The 'cure' of adopting sexual stimuli to energize decrepit bodies is also a recurring narrative of many later pieces – including 'Novella del buon vecchio e della bella fanciulla' (circa 1926) and 'Il mio Ozio' (circa 1928) – and is mentioned in 'Corto viaggio sentimentale' (circa 1924-1926) and in the last unfinished sentence of 'Ottimismo e pessimismo' (circa between 1903 and the 1920s) through the experiments of Dr Serge Voronoff (1866-1951), Dr Eugen Steinach (1862-1944), and Dr Charles-Édouard Brown-Séquard (1817-1894) in surgical (specifically testicular) organ transplant and manipulation. For an exploration of this further medical context vis-à-vis Svevo's wider writings on senility and long living, including 'Lo specifico', see Riccardo Cepach, 'Il dottore si ammalò. Come il medico ammalato fa il paziente sano (nell'opera di Svevo)', in *Guarire dalla cura*, pp. 133-184.

[203] Cepach, 'Il dottore si ammalò', p. 158.

However, 'il Papa morì cinque anni appresso' and '[q]uanto a se, il medico prova che se egli per caso […] non toccherà il centoventesimo anno dell'età sua, non sarà sua colpa, e i suoi precetti non si dovranno disprezzare'.[204] Svevo also starts 'Lo specifico' by underlining the impotence of medicine. It is through Dr Menghi's memoir, which he drafted on his deathbed, that we are introduced to his miraculous therapy.

These connections point to a deeper consonance in techniques of hybridity and fictional developments. If we read 'Lo specifico' with Hufeland in mind, we cannot help but think that Svevo, too, was playing with comparable models of prolongevity:

> La vita animale è comparabile all'ebollizione di una caldaia d'acqua posta su un focolare di cui il combustibile sia limitato. Quest'ebollizione può finire perché il combustibile vada ad esaurirsi o perché l'acqua a forza di bollire svampisca. Nel primo caso si avrebbe una morte per esaurimento; nel secondo per abbruciamento. Ora è evidente che la vita animale è assicurata da un eccesso di calore; voglio dire che l'equilibrio fra l'acqua e il fuoco non è perfetto e che la vita potrebbe durare di più se l'ebollizione potesse essere diminuita.[205]

We find comparable ideas in Hufeland's manual. Life is a process of *evaporazione*, a conflict of energies which can be prolonged by decreasing the intensity of its fire. Before testing the *specifico* on himself, Menghi does not doubt that people would prefer an extensive life to one of short vivacity. His position perfectly matches that of the *Fisico*, who argues that 'la vita è bene da se medesima, e ciascuno la desidera e l'ama naturalmente'.[206] However, the *Metafisico* observes that he is making an embarrassing mistake, talking no better than the most ignorant mob ('come il volgo s'inganna pensando che i colori sieno qualità degli oggetti; quando non sono degli oggetti, ma della luce').[207] Life, without the full potential of its flame, without its risks and excitements, is itself a

[204] Leopardi, 'Dialogo di un fisico', p. 107.
[205] Svevo, 'Lo specifico del Dottor Menghi', in *Racconti*, pp. 59-92 (p. 69).
[206] Leopardi, 'Dialogo di un fisico', p. 106.
[207] Ibid.

colourless condition – one that lies, in fact, at the very opposite of *bene*. 'Io negava', argues the *Metafisico*, 'che la pura vita […] fosse cosa amabile e desiderabile per natura'.[208] Decreasing in energies with the aim of prolonging life would simply transform it into medical coma, a form of non-life, or 'smisurati intervalli di tempo […] vóti di ogni azione e affezione viva […] nei quali il nostro essere è piuttosto durare che vivere'.[209] The life that the *Metafisico* celebrates, instead, is one full of intensity and emotions, of burning consumption and danger – a shorter but effervescent experience capable of distracting humans from the burden of living. At the climax of his argument, he fantasises about accelerating his own pulse and morphing into some short-lived and intense creature, an insect perhaps, whose life dissipates in a blink: 'io vorrei che la potessimo accelerare in modo, che la vita nostra si riducesse alla misura di quella di alcuni insetti, chiamati efimeri, dei quali si dice che i più vecchi non passano l'età di un giorno'.[210] The *Metafisico* brings his opponent's theory of deceleration to the other end of the energetic spectrum, suggesting the possibility of adrenalizing and accelerating life via some new discovery: one allowing humans to live passionately and fully, and then abruptly cease to exist. Such an original (and desperate) counter-therapy is also incorporated into Leopardi's creative process of medical-literary hybridization. As Cori observes, the Fourth Lesson of *L'arte di prolungare la vita umana* ('Durata della vita del regno animale') begins precisely by discussing that 'efimero, e fragile insetto, il quale vive forse

[208] Leopardi, 'Dialogo di un fisico', p. 107-109. This passage identifies a circumstance where, as Lavagetto argues, Leopardi's 'rapido teorema' of life as *male* is dramatized by indiscriminately drawing from elements of humanistic and medical knowledge, from 'science' and mythology. The *Metafisico* argues that even the tales of old warned humans against too long an existence: immortal Chiron pleaded for Zeus to kill him, the unageing Hyperboreans committed mass suicide, and the gods often blessed the young by ending their lives. This chapter will mainly cite and discuss the 'scientific' elements of the *Metafisico*'s argument, as these are more relevant to the proposed comparison with Svevo's own fictionalization of medical theory into narratives of illness. See Lavagetto, 'Storia del genere umano', p. 177.
[209] Leopardi, 'Dialogo di un fisico', p. 111; 109.
[210] Leopardi, 'Dialogo di un fisico', p. 110.

un giorno solo, e che dopo 20 ore, o poco più di vita si trova nel caso stesso di un vecchio canuto fra la numerosa sua posterità'.[211] Hufeland obviously considers this an example of natural misery, a physiological taboo that 'non consist[e] in altro, fuorchè in […] una incessante consunzione di se medesim[o]'.[212] However, it is probably by isolating and re-imagining that taboo that Leopardi formulates his unexpected solution to the unhappiness of living. The interplay between literary text and scientific theory occurs, here, in the terms described by George Rousseau – as a creation of new 'therapies embedded in the wisdom of literature', which are perhaps unable to solve the fundamental impasse of life – and perhaps even serve the function of *revealing* that impasse – but that nevertheless open the road to new possibilities of narration, and of existence.[213] Of course, we cannot know whether Leopardi found this notion precisely (or solely) in Hufeland, nor this 'historical fussiness' should limit our appreciation of this fertile interplay. Leopardi could certainly encounter similar ideas through a wider carpet of sources, reviews, or discussions. For example, via Antonio Genovesi's *Meditazioni filosofiche* (1758), which *Zibaldone* 3511-3512 uses to empower a reflection on the relativity of experience titled *Niente d'assoluto*:

> E s'egli è vero come *dicono, che nel fiume Apanis nella Scizia vi abbia degli animaletti, tra i quali, quei, i quali essendo nati il mattino, muojono la sera, sono i più vecchi, e muojono carichi di figli, di nipoti, di pronipoti, e di anni, a lor modo* (Genovesi, Meditazioni filosofiche sulla Religione e sulla Morale. […]); se questo, dico, è vero […] egli è certissimo che l'idea che questi animali si formano e naturalmente acquistano della durata e quantità, p[er] e[sempio] di una mezz'ora di tempo, è tanto maggiore della nostra idea, che noi non possiamo pur concepire il quanto. […] In contrario […] [è l'] idea che n'hanno gli animali più longevi dell'uomo, come l'elefante, il cervo, la cornice, la tartaruga.[214]

[211] Hufeland, 'Lezione quarta. Durata della vita del regno animale', in *L'arte*, I, 88-108 (p. 88). This passage is also cited in Paola Cori, '*Ephemera*: The Feeling of Time in Leopardi's 'Canto notturno'', *Italian Studies*, 67.1 (2012), 70-91 (p. 83).
[212] Hufeland, 'Lezione quarta', p. 91.
[213] Rousseau, 'Literature and Medicine', p. 158.
[214] *Zib.* 3511-3512. Italics in the original.

Scientific and/or philosophical notions are introjected into Leopardi's discourse to visualise otherwise unfathomable 'ideas of life' and narrative developments – a technique that, as outlined in the introduction of this thesis, also characterises Svevo's poetics of scientific-artistic 'encounter'. Svevo describes this creative combination in 'Soggiorno londinese', outlining methods and examples that find narrative application in Menghi's transformative life therapies. In 'Soggiorno', Svevo particularly considers Einstein's theory of relativity, arguing that this could be fictionally 'humanised' '[a]mmettendo che si possa costruire un uomo il cui cuore pulsi anziché 72 volte il minuto, soltanto una volta ogni dieci minuti, è certo che quest'uomo tanto lento vedrà passare il sole da un orizzonte all'altro con la rapidità di un fuoco d'artificio'.[215] While such a narrative re-elaboration, that is, the creation of a fictional man perceiving reality in a decelerated and desensitised manner, is not necessarily a consequence of Einstein's formulation, this contamination of ideas allows for narrative 'visualizations' otherwise probably precluded to the artist's imagination alone. Like Leopardi in the *operetta* and in the *Zibaldone*, Svevo also 'reformulates' science into indeed unexpected solutions – also comparably 'translating' ideas of scientific and philosophical 'relativity' through fictional scenarios of existence. This dimension of poetics is clearly applied to 'Lo specifico', where Menghi's experiment embodies a *literal* example of hybridization between human life and alternative forms of life ('[l]o specifico – l'avrete già immaginato – appartiene all'organoterapia. Lo conquistai da un animale longevo per eccellenza').[216] Menghi scientifically rewires his patients' bodies and souls, turning the errors only contemplated by Leopardi into veritable medical horrors. Menghi is a progressive version of Dr Hufeland, as he succeeds in

[215] Svevo, 'Soggiorno londinese', p. 896.
[216] Svevo, 'Lo specifico', p. 63.

prolonging life through a formula of artificially induced 'economia delle forze vitali'.[217] However, as his testament also reveals, this was not the discovery for which he had hoped:

> Molti anni or sono, con precipitazione giovanile io proclamai la mia scoperta di un siero […] avevo scoperto uno stimolante incomparabile superiore a tutti quelli finora in uso. […] [O]ggi io amo quella mia bella scoperta che abbreviava la vita ma la rendeva intensa mentre la scoperta di cui ho da parlarvi e che raggiunse il suo scopo mi fa ribrezzo.[218]

Menghi developed the *specifico* as a counter-therapy for his first juvenile discovery, a stimulant able to make life exciting and short, which his colleagues also classified as a monstrosity ('un mio avversario […] asserì […] che non era altro che una corsa pazza alla vecchiaia').[219] The doctor rushes to amend that mistake, experimenting on some long-living animals, and developing a fluid able to decelerate force consumption and emotional responsiveness. However, almost speaking from his grave, Menghi narrates this later discovery with disgust, sharing both the *Metafisico*'s repugnance, and his longing for another outrageous solution 'che abbreviava la vita ma la rendeva intensa' – although both Leopardian 'therapies' are empowered, here, by a biochemical formula.[220]

Leopardi's anxieties literally explode in Menghi's story. While the doctor's first patient – his mother's dog – falls dead after the first injection, the second test seems to have more success:

> Il coniglio cui era stata praticata l'iniezione presentò varii fenomeni. Cessò di mangiare per molte ore e quando mangiò, confrontato con gli altri conigli in mezzo ai quali l'avevo posto, appariva meno vorace e più lento nei movimenti. […] [E]ra evidentemente colto da una specie di stupefazione.[221]

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[217] Ibid.
[218] Svevo, 'Lo specifico', p. 62.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Ibid.
[221] Svevo, 'Lo specifico', p. 71.

The animal stops responding according to its basic instincts. Its movements are slower and hindered. Menghi's mother describes the animal in a simple sentence ('[p]are sepolto nel suo corpo!').[222] This new drug certainly seems to lead its patients to an eerie condition of living death – a condition kept paralysed but grotesquely sentient on the analyst's table. Menghi's words can be seen to echo Hufeland's overall principles of therapeutics, but with none of his benevolence:

> un'intensità di vita che secondo me doveva diminuire prima di tutto nella vivacità del senso e del sentimento. I nostri [mezzi] di percezione […] peccano per troppa sensibilità. […] Dei sentimenti poi non parlo. Le gioie eccessive e gli eccessivi patemi d'animo decimano l'umanità.[223]

Stricken by delirium, Menghi comes to visualise the effects of his new drug on humanity. He imagines a new race, whose energies, no longer wasted on actions and feelings, would redirect towards the activities of the mind ('[p]ensai […] dovesse divenire il farmaco degl'intellettuali […] se l'uomo morente non sa comporre un poema o fare una scoperta, ciò dipende dal fatto che il cervello viene frastornato dagli altri organi').[224] Of course, he even tries the drug *in vivo* on himself, happily maiming his health to satisfy his curiosity: '[r]icordo con terrore la dose enorme […] che mi sono iniettata. Mi faccio dei rimproveri con mente lucidissima […] ero tale un geometra ch'ero capace di misurare un abisso in pochi istanti ma saltandoci dentro'.[225] This passage features another interesting connection between Menghi's experiment and Leopardi's discourse on the errors/horrors of 'dissecting' life. In the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi famously adopts the term

[222] Ibid.
[223] Svevo, 'Lo specifico', p. 72.
[224] Ibid.
[225] Svevo, 'Lo specifico', p. 74.

geometrizzazione to depict humankind's conversion to the new creed of *ragione* after the horrors of the French Revolution.[226] It is interesting that this notion should be adopted in another *Zibaldone* note complaining about the widespread attitude of 'misura[re] a palmi' natural life, instead of appreciating its delicate interconnections – an attitude that, according to Leopardi, specifically 'si richiede a esser medico o geometra'.[227] Indeed, Svevo's doctor truly is a Leopardian *geometra* – a rationalistic fool who would jump into the abyss just to calculate its darkness:

> La mia vita ridotta dal potente moderatore non bastava che a tener lucido il mio cervello e a mala pena il sentimento di me e per me. […] Questa freddezza non era scompagnata da un sentimento di decadenza non dissimile da quello che deve avere chi s'abbrutisce in un vizio avvilente. Guardavo al mio passato d'altruismo come ad un'altezza irraggiungibile oramai per me.[228]

By clouding his – already flawed – ability to connect with others, the drug causes Menghi's interiority to collapse. We have already adopted notions of self-love and unbalanced energies as 'physiological manifestos' to interpret Svevo's and Leopardi's narratives of degenerating characters: Silvio and Alfonso became so violently self-absorbed and compressed that their inner lives short-circuited and exploded, respectively killing Silvio with disease and turning Alfonso into a heartless suitor and driving him to

[226] See *Zib*. 160: '[è] veramente compassionevole il vedere come quei legislatori francesi repubblicani, credevano di conservare, e assicurar la durata, e seguir l'andamento la natura e lo scopo della rivoluzione, col ridur tutto alla pura ragione, e pretendere per la prima volta *ab orbe condito* di geometrizzare tutta la vita. Cosa non solamente lagrimevole in tutti i casi se riuscisse, e perciò stolta a desiderare, ma impossibile a riuscire anche in questi tempi matematici, perchè dirittamente contraria alla natura dell'uomo'. This passage condemns the French Revolution in unforgiving terms. However, it should be noted that in later entries, such as *Zib.* 2331-2336, Leopardi problematises this position, showing how the Revolution allowed for a return – paradoxically under the flag of modern civilization and *ragione* – of great national passions and enlivening illusions, allowing for a healthy discharge of energies into social living. The risks of denying this venting, and the subsequent subversion of the rule of health/nature in the world, was partially considered in chapter I (specifically in *Zib*. 195-196 with the image of the 'deflagrating youngster'). This will be further discussed in chapter IV when looking at narratives of disease, *ordigni*, and (allegedly) purifying explosions.

[227] *Zib*. 3385.

[228] Svevo, 'Lo specifico', p. 83.

suicide. While Leopardi's definitions can be seen to vary and oscillate through the *Zibaldone*, we can safely identify the phenomenon of pure *egoismo* as a manifestation of wasted *amor proprio* – a cold remnant of desire for life that is not strong enough to allow the subject to open up to the world. As *Zibaldone* 3295 outlines, this 'abbonda maggiormente […] negl'individui […] in che la vita è minore, e quindi l'amor proprio più scarso, più debole e freddo' – a physiological observation that aptly describes Menghi's sickness above ('la mia vita ridotta dal potente moderatore non bastava che a tener lucido il mio cervello e a mala pena il sentimento di me e per me').[229] Menghi engages in behaviours dictated by self-destructive egotism, showing no magnanimity even for those, like his mother, who had aided him in his discovery. Not only does he show total indifference when he finds out that she had been struck by an aneurism, but he resolves that this is an exciting opportunity to experiment the *specifico* on another human. Obviously, the medicine delays her body's self-recovery, nearly sending her to the grave:

> Come hai potuto immaginare una cosa tanto orribile? M'hai sepolta viva, tu! Una volta hai detto che quell'orribile cosa cristallizzava il corpo umano... io volevo, io volevo movermi, gridare, e non potevo e tutto era morto in me fuori che il desiderio.[230]

As the drug wears off, Menghi finally sees the horrors of what he has done, and the disease-like nature of his prolongevity therapy. His last sentence draws conclusions perfectly matching those of the *Metafisico* when first confronted with that discovery – the book of long living should not be heeded, but immediately placed into a 'cassettina di piombo' and buried away.[231] '[L]ascio seppellire con me la mia scoperta', declares Menghi, '[c]ome posso io consegnare ai nostri contemporanei un simile filtro? Ma

[229] Ibid.
[230] Svevo, 'Lo specifico', p. 89.
[231] Leopardi, 'Dialogo di un fisico', p. 106.

pensate! Ne bastarono poche goccie per fare di me un delinquente! […] Restiamo perciò mortali e buoni'.[232]

3. Fictional horrors and Leopardian traces

'Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico' and 'Lo specifico del Dottor Menghi' are key texts in exploring Leopardi's and Svevo's techniques of medical hybridization and fictionalization. Interconnected models are reworked to demonstrate and narrativize a common problem – that of life as an absurd system of forces, which cannot be balanced or redirected, one way or another, without dangerous repercussions. It is perhaps better, Menghi concludes, to drop all therapies, and to live compassionately and in awareness of life's pain. In fact, as Meschiari explains in relation to Leopardi, medicine plays a twofold role in narratives of this kind. The first is that of 'avvicinare all'uomo […] nel suo soffrire', almost providing the writer with a microscope through which 'osservare con estrema precisione' the problem of life. But this problem, life's inborn pain, cannot be solved by medical analysis or intervention; and because this science 'non può sciogliere questo mistero', that 'problema insolubile' can be translated from the domain of science into wider 'esistenziale' discourses allowing for new speculations and narrative paths.[233] We can argue that this technique, or movement, perfectly describes Svevo's approach above. Dr Menghi fantasising about a whole new future for the human race, with people finally uttering poetic and philosophical revelations on their deathbed, is a brilliant example of medical thinking translated onto a novel and extreme scale. Of course, similar

[232] Svevo, 'Lo specifico', pp. 90-91.
[233] Meschiari, 'Leopardi e la medicina', p. 196.

scenarios recur throughout Svevo's *oeuvre*; famously in *La coscienza*, when Zeno's father seems to have reached some existential epiphany a few hours before his final collapse. As Zeno sadly realises, his father's discovery is just one of the symptoms of his imminent cerebral edema, which his doctor also fails to prevent. If we compare Svevo's passing between medical impotence to existential aching with Leopardi's own movement between these two, some iconic Svevian tropes can be led back to Leopardi's repertoire. Medical tampering and unhelpful revelations from the underworld are certainly key to 'Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie', an *operetta* where Leopardi twists his readings of Dr Ruysch's embalming techniques and Dr Puccinotti's assistance with medical terminology into one of his most memorable literary solutions: a fictionalised choir of undead bodies coming back to life to philosophically 'sing' it as the most grievous mystery. This *Coro di morti* sings about how biological existence is nothing but 'dolor', and that, rather than going back to it, the bodies would flee like shadows from the intensities of the 'fiamma vitale'.[234] Here, too, ideas drawn from medicine allow one to 'visualise' alternative and otherwise hardly conceivable forms of existence, additionally proving that life – whether shortened or prolonged, intensified or mummified – is a mystery defeating rational or medical solutions. Aloisi underlines the fertility of this process of philosophical contamination by connecting it to another circumstance already considered in this chapter:

> come è solo nella prospettiva estrema degli insetti effimeri che ciò che a noi appare un punto può essere pensato come lo spazio di una vita, così è solo nella prospettiva liminare dei morti che lo spazio stesso della nostra vita si rivela essere nient'altro che un punto – un punto che tuttavia, guardato attraverso lo sguardo straniato dei morti, risplende di una luce 'arcana e stupenda', del tutto simile a quella che per noi avvolge la morte. Ma come

[234] Leopardi, 'Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie', in *Operette*, pp. 150-154 (p. 150).

> i vivi, vivendo, fuggono la morte, così i morti, morendo, quasi istintivamente si ritraggono dalla 'fiamma vitale'.[235]

The mummies even agree to answer the doctor's questions. But they cannot satisfy him, as they, too, ignore the ultimate secrets of natural existence. Like Svevo, Leopardi adopts dying and medically stimulated bodies as 'voices', or 'puppets', to propose new existential perspectives. Following this comparative path is particularly helpful to elucidate the mysterious presence of Leopardi in Svevo. When Zeno's father, years before his final hour, tries to have a heart-to-heart with his son, the pair starts quarrelling about the body. Palmieri observes that the father's words '[t]u credi che quando si è morti tutto cessi?', and Zeno's reply '[i]o credo che sopravviva il piacere, perché il dolore non è più necessario',[236] identify a clear reference to Dr Ruysch's questioning his undead friend ('*Ruysch*. Dunque che cosa è la morte, se non è dolore? *Morto*. Piuttosto piacere che altro').[237] It is evident that the comparative pattern adopted so far (medical hybridization pointing towards the idea of life as *male*) sheds light on the meaning and the intentionality of such quotations, also allowing the reader to consider further Leopardian themes and texts potentially interwoven into Svevo's works. Indeed, subterranean elements from 'Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico' can also be seen to emerge in the passage above. Zeno's father is the ultimate reader of 'libri insulsi e morali',[238] arguably identifying an afterlife of the no-nonsense *Fisico* of the *operetta,* who carries around his book and begs his interlocutor to 'lascia[re] cotesta materia, che è troppo malinconica […] io guardo alla grossa, e me ne contento'.[239] On the other hand, The *Metafisico*'s suicidal quest for a

[235] Alessandra Aloisi, 'Il desiderio di felicità lasciato puro', in *Desiderio e assuefazione: Studio sul pensiero di Leopardi* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2014), pp. 54-92 (p. 92).
[236] Svevo, 'La coscienza di Zeno', in *Romanzi*, pp. 623-1085 (p. 658).
[237] Leopardi, 'Dialogo di Federico Ruysch', p. 154. These passages are also reported in Palmieri, 'Leopardi in Svevo', p. 49.
[238] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 656.
[239] Leopardi, 'Dialogo di un fisico', pp. 107; 110.

fuller life finds a counterpart in Zeno's obsessive quest for vigour and health – a philosophy that makes his father end a conversation which 'gli ricordav[a] la morte e i suoi piaceri'.[240] Here, like in other sections, our methodological approaches intersect and assist each other, contextualising Leopardian quotations within a wider context of shared themes and common techniques. The theme is that of life as *male* or *malattia*, the method one of medical-humanistic contamination. It is within such a pattern that Leopardian references can be seen to emerge in full force within Svevo's works.

Prolongevity errors additionally appear in the story 'La morte' (circa 1923-1925) and essay 'Ottimismo e pessimismo', two unfinished texts that Sechi associates when considering the presence of Leopardian references and themes in Svevo. Like 'Lo specifico' and the *Operette*, 'La morte' also transforms techniques of physical preservation into epiphanies of life as mysterious pain. In this story, an elderly man's life is (only very temporarily) prolonged by a doctor. To his wife's surprise, the man spends his remaining time preaching on life as he was observing it from the realm of death:

> – Perché vuoi perdere quest'ultimo breve lasso di tempo che ci è lasciato? […] La morte ha importanza, la morte tanto vicina. Ed è il momento di ricordare la vita […]. Non era più la vita invece. Era una segregazione fra pareti create dal dolore. […] Le sue ultime parole già irrorate da lacrime furono: – Io non sapevo.
> […]
> La sua morte fu proprio quello ch'egli non aveva voluto: Lo spavento.[241]

'La morte' can be seen to touch upon themes and techniques developed in *Coro di morti*. Both writers, in other words, narrate the absurd and uncanny condition of 'remembering life from non-life' by fictionalizing medical abuse. Like Leopardi, Svevo ultimately portrays the mystery of life as painful and arcane, resolving this tension in an equally

[240] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 658.
[241] See Svevo, 'La morte', in *Racconti*, pp. 409-427 (pp. 424-427).

Leopardian way, which is to say, by evoking the terror for a universe void of rational, medical, or humanistic explanations. But it is in the essay 'Ottimismo e pessimismo' that medical discourses are translated into wider dimensions of biological and existential enquiry. Here, Svevo uses the 'error' of prolongevity to zoom in and out of the impasses of biological existence on both a micro and macroscopic level. The final part of this essay particularly targets the most practical kind of optimist – those who medically tamper with life without understanding its fundamental condition:

> Gli ottimisti realisti […] [s]tudiano di solito una parte della vita, una piccolissima parte, vedono o credono di vedere un futuro miglioramento ed eliminano un male della vita che poi vedono tersa di mali e di dolori. Così il Metchnikoff [sic] asserisce che verrà un tempo in cui la vita dell'uomo si allungherà fino ai 120 anni e non sarà più un male perché l'organismo esausto la domanderà come un riposo. Io devo dire che devo figurarmi questo bisogno di riposo e di tal riposo quale il risultato di una vita molto affaticante. […] Il Metchnikoff distingue la morte ch'è un male, la catastrofica, quella che colpisce un organismo immaturo, da quella buona e dolce che s'abbatte solo su un organismo preparato dalla vita, lentamente corroso dalla lotta.[242]

Following a technique of contamination that Leopardi himself adopted for Hufeland and other 'life dissectors', Svevo narrates the uncurable *mali* and *dolori* of life by drawing from the mistakes of the Russian immunologist and prolongevity theorist Dr Elie Mečnikov (1845-1916). Author of *The prolongation of life: Optimistic studies* (1907), Mečnikov is an early twentieth-century protagonist of the battle against premature death and the 1908 Nobel prize winner for the theory of phagocytosis. Amongst his many studies, the doctor analysed the routine of Bulgarian peasants, theorizing the life-prolonging properties of consuming yogurt. However, as Svevo sarcastically points out, Mečnikov's error is that his theories do not remotely improve the quality of life and simply prolong its duration ('allunga la vecchiaia. Un bel servizio!') – which is *precisely*

[242] Svevo, 'Ottimismo e pessimismo', in *Teatro e saggi*, pp. 878-883 (pp. 881-883).

Leopardi's problem with Hufeland.[243] It is in this section that Vacante sees Svevo's discourses on the 'costitutiva inerenza al dolore alle forme dell'esistenza' as fruifully integrating 'tesi leopardiane e smontando dettagliatamente le tesi di Mečnikov con modalità che sembrano seguire il procedimento di scomposizione razionalistica di tante pagine dello *Zibaldone*'.[244] Like Leopardi, Svevo explains and dramatizes that neither prolongevity nor short living can heal life from its basic uneasiness, nor can these disengage that cosmic mousetrap that is existence ('anche il marasmo senile almeno come lo conosciamo generalmente sinora non somiglia al bisogno di riposo. Anzi tutt'altro. E la gioventù cosciente quando muore soffre orribilmente').[245] Therapies of long life are nothing but debilitation, spams, and asthenia, while the motto 'live fast die young' is debunked as inglorious pain. Life, seen from this novel philosophical perspective, has no way out:

> Sulla nostra terra la morte catastrofica, la morte nell'età giovine è la legge. Guardate quanta piccola parte delle miriadi di germi che s'addensano sulla terra e nel mare e nell'aria arrivino alla vita. Muoiono prima. Madre natura che pare voglia assicurare la vita sparge i germi a piene mani in balia delle onde e dei venti. […] È addirittura l'errore antropocentrico che risorge il credere che l'uomo possa andare immune dalla morte catastrofica. Anzi più complesso è l'organismo e più facilmente lo coglie una morte dura abietta. […] Siamo composti di tali piccoli graziosi organi, miracoli d'equilibrio i quali ad un tratto si rifiutano di avanzare per cause troppo spesso misteriose. […] [D]ormiamo i nostri sonni su […] rinunzie in seguito a costrizioni imperiose dell'ambiente […]. E tutti quei germi che vengono strangolati nel nostro animo, passioni e ambizioni, somigliano i germi che volano portati dai venti ai poli, quando avrebbero avuto bisogno dell'equatore per prosperare, o nell'oceano quando avrebbero allignato soltanto su terra secca. E di disillusione in disillusione si va alla vecchiaia.[246]

[243] Svevo, 'Ottimismo e pessimismo', p. 883.
[244] Vacante, 'Favole, apologhi, aforismi', pp. 122-123. Amongst such 'tante pagine', Vacante footnotes the entry on the 'Garden of *souffrance*' (*Zib*. 4175-7176). The critic does not touch upon the comparable medical premises and literary/philosophical developments between Leopardi's and Svevo's works. Nor does she linger on the narrative of life as disease that arguably identifies that Leopardian note's central theme – focusing, instead, on discourse articulation and style. The fundamental comparability – for medical premises, philosophical developments, *and* writing techniques – between that section and *La coscienza* will be the subject of our next chapter.
[245] Svevo, 'Ottimismo e pessimismo', p. 882.
[246] Svevo, 'Ottimismo e pessimismo', pp. 882-883.

The *errore antropocentrico* of medicine – an error, Vacante underlines, also 'pervicacemente combattuto da Leopardi' – allows Svevo to formulate extensive scenarios of revealed biological horror.[247] It is safe to include in the array of scientific-philosophical readings creatively 'reworked' here some other *operette*: namely, 'Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico', and 'Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese' (1824), where an unhomely mother-nature dispenses, together with life's *illusioni* and for no apparent reason, adverse weathers and premature deaths, senile disfunctions and inborn aching. Furthermore, Sechi detects in the passage above a re-elaboration of *Zibaldone* 4510:

> Milioni di semi (animali o vegetabili) si posano, milioni di piante o d'animali nascono in luoghi dove non hanno di che nutrirsi, non posson vivere. Ma questi periscono ignorati; gli altri, e non so se sieno i più, giungono a perfez[ione], sussistono, e vengono a cogniz[ione] nostra. Sicchè quel che vi è di vero si è, che i soli animali ec. che si conservino, si maturino, e che *noi conosciamo*, sono quelli che capitano in luoghi dove possan vivere ec.[248]

This dimension of comparability and intertextuality can be certainly expanded upon. Svevo's description of fragile and minuscule organisms striving to *prosperare* and *allignare* in sub-optimal environments also points to some of the highest narrative developments of Leopardian anthropology; namely, to *Zibaldone* 3648-3649, which argues that humanity resembles a delicate plant that is unable to 'prosperare nè anche allignare nè nascere in tutti i paesi e climi della terra'.[249] We can conclude that a common set of techniques – from scientific errors to visions of biological stalemate – connects

[247] Vacante, 'Favole, apologhi, aforismi', p. 123.
[248] *Zib*. 4510. Italics in the original. This passage is also cited in Mario Sechi, 'Senilità precoce e vecchiezza d'Europa. Italo Svevo tra medici e filosofi 1898 1904, e oltre', in *Italo Svevo: Il sogno e la vita vera,* pp. 203-228 (p. 206).
[249] *Zib.* 3648-3649. This element will emerge again in the last chapter of this thesis, where both writers' *storie del genere umano* will be compared via a set of creative 'tensions' and 'oscillations' on problems of nature, illness, and health.

Leopardi's and Svevo's narratives of life. Precisely, as Sechi points out, the 'disordine immenso della natura' is revealed by a poetics of 'smascheramento della ubris della scienza', which 'non sa […] rinunciare alla grande fabbrica delle illusioni'. As for the protagonist of 'La morte', the critic explains how 'anch'egli vive con un misto di terrore […] lo scongegnarsi irrimediabile della macchina organica, e si strania dal mondo nell'oscura preveggenza del suo collasso finale' – a painful and unclear epiphany that, like the song sung by Ruysch's mummies, 'sconfessa ogni proposito o idea di saggezza, lasciando affiorare come un incubo la rivelazione dell'assurdo'.[250] We can thus confirm that, in the Leopardi-Svevo connection, thematic affinity and literary influence are dimensions that juxtapose and confirm each other, allowing for the detection of further Leopardian texts and philosophical implications within Svevo's own works. Similar medical ideas allow both writers to substantiate a shared thesis of life as inherently *male*, in a movement elevating the *dolore* that medicine cannot fix onto new existential hights. Parallel models are elaborated into parallel scenarios, and it is precisely within such contexts that the literary presence of Leopardi is better detected in Svevo's writing.

The next section will further investigate this multifaceted connection, specifically hypothesising whether at the core of both interconnected discourses historically interconnected models of medicine could be seen at work. In exploring Svevo's reformulation of pre-Freudian 'medical cultures', Contarini particularly suggests that the 'invenzione fantascientifica del dottor Menghi' can be used to connect Svevo's 'hybrid space' of writing to a trail of early nineteenth-century models and indirect influences, following the 'archetipo leopardiano delle *Operette* per il precedente del *Dialogo di un fisico e metafisico*, sulla linea maestra della ricezione italiana di Hufeland'.[251] This last

[250] Sechi, 'Senilità precoce', pp. 219-220.
[251] Contarini, '*Una vita* allo specchio di Taine', p. 34.

section will accordingly look back at that medical school, and at the ways in which Hufeland could find his way into Svevo's process of medical fictionalization. As such, this section will triangulate the comparative and literary approaches adopted so far with a final 'medical' tactic: an investigation of specific nineteenth-century theories, influences, and personalities translated and transformed in the act of writing.

4. Svevo, Leopardi, Hufeland: a triangulation

Placing the Leopardian references of Svevo's works within a larger context of shared techniques and fictional developments is not the only outcome of this chapter. In exploring Svevo's stories of prolongevity through Leopardi's writings on the same theme, one is naturally led to wonder whether thematically interconnected narratives could be seen to rework historically interconnected medical models. More specifically, is it possible to somehow connect Svevo's process of hybridization and Dr Hufeland's legacy and his influential medical school, via either direct readings or later reviews, mediations, and reformulations? According to Forlini, conjecturing a writer's participation in such a historically complex (and philologically elusive) process can be approached through a two-step method.[252] Rather than looking for direct sources – often lost or diluted in cultural mediation – the first movement towards 'cultural completeness' is that of evaluating the translatability of a specific theory for a specific writer.[253] If this can be proved, a network of 'allies' and 'actors' can be hypothesised and sketched, a 'bridge of translations' potentially able to connect writer and theory – that is, a specific theory, and

[252] Forlini, 'Stratone e l'"ospitale" dei viventi', pp. 133-136.
[253] Rousseau, 'Literature and Medicine', p. 158.

even a specific doctor, of whose influence the writer himself was not necessarily aware, but that nevertheless came to participate in his process of knowledge reformulation.

Proving the translatability of Hufeland's model for Svevo is easy. Dr Menghi follows the same inverse proportionality between life consumption and duration famously advocated by the German doctor at the end of the eighteenth century, and with the same goal of prolonging human life. More specifically, both doctors share the error of favouring biological survival over feeling and intensity, and they both paternalistically sell their model as the best possible solution. It must also be underlined that the concept of 'vital force' was at least partially out-dated when Svevo wrote 'Lo specifico'. In his practice of medical-humanistic contamination, Svevo fictionalises notions that were popular, as Menghi admits, amongst 'i fisiologi di un secolo fa' – which is to say, within the philosophical and medical context in which Hufeland and Leopardi operated. [254] There can be little doubt that the concept of 'energetic balance' underlying Menghi's story appropriates traditional problems of medical hygiene ('quanta parte di questa forza è necessaria per alimentare la nostra vita e quanta parte va perduta o risulta dannosa? L'avvenire della scienza igienica è tutto nella soluzione di tale problema).[255] We can conclude that Hufeland's theories are well translatable, and even 'manipulable', onto the Svevian page.

Let us now pass to the list of mediators that could have allowed for this encounter. Svevo could obviously dialogue with such old-fashioned models, and even see Hufeland's name, through the distorting mirror of the *Operette*. However, a larger and more complex web of philosophers and doctors could allow Svevo to 'meet' Hufeland and to add his own name to the list of those who – whether consciously or not – elaborated

[254] Svevo, 'Lo specifico', p. 77.
[255] Svevo, 'Lo specifico', p. 69.

on his theories from the early-nineteenth century onwards. According to Guthmüller, some vitalistic aphorisms of Svevo's 'favourite philosopher', Arthur Schopenhauer, can be seen as 'orientat[i] al pensiero di Hufeland', specifically when describing life as a battery constantly threatened by burnout and unable to recharge through regular rest-activity cycles – which is a model that Svevo could have already had in mind when describing Alfonso's combination of restless nights and daily consumption in *Una vita*.[256] In terms of popular hygienic and medical literature, Cepach suggests that Svevo could have encountered Hufeland in one of Paolo Mantegazza's *almanacchi igienici-popolari*; namely, in the 1885 *L'arte di campar vecchi*, in which Mantegazza particularly considers the notions of *vita intensiva* and *vita estensiva*, celebrating Hufeland for having found the perfect balance between the two.[257] According to Mantegazza, Hufeland's famous motto was indeed *mens sana in corpore sano* – which is the very adage mocked by Svevo as splendidly outdated in his 1890 article published on *L'Indipendente* 'Il fumo' ('quel detto che ai nostri padri dava tanta fiducia e calma: *Mente sana in corpo sano* sembra alquanto antiquato').[258] In his list of parodied doctors, Cepach also includes another controversial character: namely, Dr Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843), the father of homeopathy mocked in 'Il mio Ozio' ('[l]e minuscole quantità che furono consigliate da quell'eccelso uomo che fu il Hahnemann […] come se un organo più che essere nutrito o eccitato ha bisogno di essere ricordato').[259] What is interesting, in fact, is that Hahnemann was active in Hufeland's age and cultural environment, and that he enthusiastically agreed with

[256] Marie Guthmüller, 'Il sonno come paradosso vitalistico', p. 69.
[257] The rest of the *almanacco* was however dedicated to Alvise Cornaro, the Venetian aristocrat that Hufeland remembers as the embodiment of his hygienic theory. A handwritten note on Svevo's German edition of Flaubert's *Bouvard e Pécuchet* ('il gentiluomo veneziano che grazie alla dieta raggiunse una vecchiaia estrema') confirms that Svevo knew Cornaro's story. See Cepach, '"Si capisce che è meno malato"', pp. 177; 187.
[258] Svevo, 'Il fumo', in *Teatro e saggi*, pp. 1085-1090 (p. 1087).
[259] Svevo, 'Il mio Ozio', in *Romanzi*, pp. 1197-1221 (p. 1214).

Hufeland's overall theories. In his renowned *Journal of Practical Medicine and Chirurgy*, Hufeland openly supported Hahnemann, publishing in 1796 (the same year of *The Art*) his pioneering 'Essay on a new principle for discovering the healing virtues of medicinal substances'. But Hahnemann is not the only early nineteenth-century vitalistic doctor mentioned in Svevo's *oeuvre*. The most notorious one is undoubtedly Dr Karl Adolph von Basedow (1799-1854), the physician who gave the name to the disease described in *La coscienza di Zeno*. Just like Hahnemann, Basedow, too, relied on vitalistic paradigms, had his work published in Hufeland's *Journal*, and can be seen to participate in this early nineteenth-century hub of German doctors. As it will soon become apparent, this exploration of medical 'networks' and 'allies' serves more than one purpose. It allows one to build a bridge of personalities and mediators able to connect Svevo's writings to Hufeland and his school, potentially expanding on Svevo's list of medical readings and allowing for new hypotheses of interpretation of his work of fiction. But it also serves to further isolate and explain the 'medical presence' of Leopardi in Svevo. The section on Basedow's syndrome in *La coscienza* can be seen as the ultimate, and perhaps most famous, example of Svevo's technique of scientific hybridization leading to the revelation of life's illness – and it is precisely on such grounds that this thesis will return more than once to this passage. In line with the ideas outlined in 'Soggiorno londinese' – where Svevo explains how scientific ideas can obsess the artistic mind like 'una parte misteriosa del mondo, senza della quale non si sa più pensare' until said artist 'falsifies' them into something new and original –, this section will particularly focus on Zeno's *obsession* with Basedow, arguing that this discourse, in fact, conceals the most powerful and remarkable chain of Leopardian references in the whole Svevian *oeuvre*.[260] Our three

[260] Svevo, 'Soggiorno londinese', p. 895.

methodologies – medical, thematic, and literary– will thus be seen to triangulate, collaborate, and redirect to each other, revealing the importance and the complexity of Leopardi's 'presence' in Svevo's novel.

Basedow's disease is an autoimmune thyroid disorder leading to accelerated heart rate and energy consumption. When Ada, the prettiest of the Malfenti sisters, is affected by 'la malattia di Basedow che implica il generosissimo, folle consumo della forza vitale ad un ritmo precipitoso', Zeno literally falls in love with this disease. He begins to study the '[g]rande, importante malattia […] di Basedow' in various monographs, falling prey to a true obsession over that doctor and his world.[261] Of course, Zeno misunderstands notions and confuses names, even mistaking the Basedow in question with a friend of Goethe's. But this does not prevent him from cultivating his new passion to a fault, ultimately disregarding the fact that Ada is suffering from a very serious condition, and deriving from (what he understands of) it a set of implications on life and society that do not have much to do with the original theory:

> Mi parve ch'egli avesse portate alla luce le radici della vita la quale è fatta così: tutti gli organismi si distribuiscono su una linea […] [da] un'estremità – quella di Basedow – stanno tutti coloro ch'esasperano e consumano la vita in grandi desiderii, ambizioni, godimenti e anche lavoro, dall'altra quelli che non gettano sul piatto della vita che delle briciole e risparmiano preparando quegli abietti longevi che appariscono quale un peso per la società. […] La società procede perché i Basedowiani la sospingono, e non precipita perché gli altri la trattengono. Io sono convinto che volendo costruire una società, si poteva farlo più semplicemente, ma è fatta così, col gozzo ad uno dei suoi capi e l'edema all'altro, e non c'è rimedio. In mezzo stanno coloro che hanno incipiente o gozzo o edema e su tutta la linea, in tutta l'umanità, la salute assoluta manca.[262]

We will come back to this passage in the next chapter, proposing further medical models as a context to this disturbing epiphany. At a first glance, Basedow seems to be the only

[261] Svevo, 'La coscienza', pp. 957-958.
[262] Ibid.

presence here – the model that allows Zeno's obsession to expand into a new and original discourse of life as 'disease' as this thesis understands it: an absurd system of forces that allows for neither balance nor whatever form of *salute*. This model is not new. The impasse between energy burnout and timeworn lethargy, between feverish youth and unhappy prolongevity identifies the core dilemma of Leopardi's 'Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico', where therapies of life acceleration and prolongation are presented as commonly unable to heal the uneasiness of living. In fact, in the passages immediately preceding and following the discourse above, Zeno reveals important details about his discovery and his obsession:

> Io credo che da molti come da me vi sieno dei periodi di tempo in cui certe idee occupino e ingombrino tutto il cervello chiudendolo a tutte le altre. Ma se anche alla collettività succede la stessa cosa! Vive di Darwin dopo di essere vissuta di Robespierre e di Napoleone eppoi di Liebig o magari di Leopardi quando su tutto il cosmo non troneggi Bismarck![263]

It is interesting that this moment of contamination, life, and illness in *La coscienza* should feature, for the first and last time in Svevo's fiction, Leopardi's name. Of course, Zeno tries to make his presence almost invisible. Not quite as important as Darwin, Robespierre, Napoleon, and Liebig, Leopardi makes the end of the list together with 'Bismarck' and is even preceded by a 'magari'. Yet, as Zeno pontificates, Svevo disseminates the text with hints on the actual origin of this disease:

> La mia malattia fu un pensiero dominante, un sogno, e anche uno spavento. Deve aver avuto origine da un ragionamento: con la designazione di perversione si vuole intendere una deviazione dalla salute, quella specie di salute che ci accompagnò per un tratto della nostra vita.[264]

[263] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 957.
[264] Svevo, 'La coscienza', pp. 958-959.

It is certain that Svevo has Leopardi in mind. As it had occurred in *Senilità*, where Leopardian phrases appear in conjunction with Emilio's existential crisis and Amalia's death, *La coscienza* presents such quotations when life reveals itself as the ultimate form of disease and physiological short-circuiting. Here, too, Palmieri identified the first phrase (*pensiero dominante*) as a Leopardian title but does not explain why this should appear in such a crucial moment of the novel.[265] We can expand on this. 'Il pensiero dominante', 'Il sogno' (1820-21), and 'Lo spavento notturno' (1819) are three of the most darkly 'psychological' poems by Leopardi, dealing respectively with obsessive thoughts, dream-wake states, and the horror of nightmares. A quick look at these texts in the light of *La coscienza* can be revealing. Leopardi's *pensiero dominante* is certainly an amorous one, which nevertheless haunts the subject with a shadow of obsession and death. The poem 'Il sogno' portrays an unreal and melancholy conversation with a beautiful maiden who was prematurely consumed by illness. Similarly, Zeno's own 'pensiero dominante' is triggered by his love for Ada, who is also prematurely deprived of health and beauty by Basedow's disease. Zeno has also a dream about Ada and Basedow – a nightmare, in fact, a *spavento* – in which Zeno sees Ada first young and beautiful, and then sees her devastated by illness. D'Intino explains that there is much connecting Leopardi's own 'spavento' to narrations of physiological fall, and indeed to the revelation of life's darkest side:

> Questo, che sembra il più autenticamente arcaico degli idilli, è dunque invece quello che rappresenta in modo più violento e diretto una drammatica presa di coscienza, tipicamente moderna, della caducità: ciò che Leopardi definì, in un celebre appunto zibaldoniano, 'mutazione totale' (datata infatti al 1819, lo stesso anno di composizione di questi versi). La cifra simbolica dello *Spavento notturno* è l'assenza improvvisa,

[265] Palmieri, 'Leopardi in Svevo', p. 46.

> ovvero la perdita, l'oscuramento, lo spegnimento, e fin lo smembramento […] di un qualcosa che si immaginava presente, integro, luminoso e propizio.[266]

We can conclusively identify Zeno's *malattia* as something of a 'Leopardian disease'. He, too, portrays himself in a life-long quest for health and pleasure that was deviated by adulthood and overthinking – 'La mia malattia […] [d]eve aver avuto origine da un ragionamento: […] una deviazione dalla salute, quella specie di salute che ci accompagnò per un tratto della nostra vita'.[267] This is a core Leopardian quest and process, which Leopardi himself underwent in his own *mutazione totale*, when he began to 'riflettere profondamente sopra le cose […] sentire la mia infelicità in un modo assai più tenebroso' than before, and to see the real face of natural existence, like a modern thinker.[268] For both writers, this transformation – the *awareness* of this transformation – constitutes a fundamental element of poetics, allowing them to formulate an idea of existence as a field of contaminating and ambivalent forces, where the very ideas of disease and health fade into each other, mysteriously disappearing into the revealed horror of living. This section of *La coscienza* is key in understanding the elusive and multifarious presence of Leopardi in Svevo – a presence explorable via combinations of literary quotations, thematic and demonstrative affinities, and via a reconstruction of both writers' medical sources and indirect rewritings. More specifically – the passages above shows that Svevo quotes Leopardi when talking about interconnected themes, and that such themes derive from lingering on medical models that Leopardi himself had considered in narrating life as illness.

[266] D'Intino, 'L'equilibrio', in *La caduta e il ritorno*, pp. 211-274 (p. 262).
[267] Svevo, 'La coscienza', pp. 958-959.
[268] *Zib*. 144.

There is one last thing to say about Hufeland's school and on Svevo's possible reformulation of that outdated model of therapy. By reading *L'arte di prolungare la vita umana* through a Svevian lens, a curious point of contact appears. The end of the book advises on 'Uso conveniente del Medico, e delle medicine', enumerating a series of elements that Hufelands considers essential to holistic healing:

> 6. Col medico bisogna essere totalmente sincero, e schietto, raccontandogli tutta la storia del passato, per quanto ella possa avere qualche relazione colla malattia, di cui si tratta, non si ommetta [sic] alcuna delle presenti circostanze, e specialmente poi nelle relazioni in iscritto. Si badi bene di non inserire nel racconto, come pur troppo si costuma di fare, alcun ragionamento, oppure di dipingere la cosa in l'uno o l'altro aspetto, a misura del proprio adottato sentimento, ma si racconti soltanto ciò, che è stato rimarcato per mezzo de' sensi più schiettamente che sia possibile.
> […]
> 9. Il medico migliore è quello, il quale è anche amico […]. Si procuri dunque, per quanto è possibile, di stringere, e di conservare un saldo, e stretto vincolo d'amicizia col proprio medico, e questo si guardi bene di non scioglierlo con cattivi trattamenti, con diffidenza, con asprezza, con orgoglio, di cui molti si fanno leciti di servirsi verso il medico, giacchè questo altronde ridonda sempre in proprio danno.
> […]
> 11. [S]e un tal uomo [the doctor] non opera scrupolosamente dietro le massime della più sana morale […] costui è uno dei più orrendi, e pericolosi nemici, che bisogna fuggirlo più che la stessa malattia. Un medico senza morale è un mostro.[269]

We cannot but underline that Zeno's relationship with Dr S. literally turns *all* this advice upside down. Zeno is everything but 'sincero' and 'schietto': in his unorthodox 'relazion[e] in iscritto' he omits many circumstances, mastering the arts of self-diagnosis and self-medication, and twisting 'la storia del passato' with 'ragionamento' and 'adottato sentimento' in order to be the only judge of his own present health. But Zeno gets bored with his doctor and decides to cease contact. His words are charged with the feelings forbidden above: 'diffidenza', 'asprezza', and 'orgoglio'. Unfortunately, however, Zeno's choice 'ridonda […] in proprio danno', as the doctor threatens to publish his patient's memoir. In fact, the doctor plays with his patient's secrets, publicly calls him a

[269] Hufeland, 'Uso conveniente del Medico, e delle medicine', in *L'arte*, II, 204-241 (pp. 226-229) <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=LZF5d2TgWIQC&pg=GBS.PA1&hl=en_GB> [accessed 9 August 2022].

liar, and undertakes private investigations to disprove him. He is certainly one of Zeno's 'più orrendi, e pericolosi nemici' – a 'mostro' that, as Zeno finally realises, 'bisogna fuggi[re] più che la stessa malattia'. Even this section of Hufeland's manual and obsolete approach to healing could prove translatable, or fictionally manipulable onto the Svevian page. This potential connection can be strengthened by going back to 'Lo specifico del Dottor Menghi'. Probably written in 1904, this constitutes a fundamental experiment for Zeno's story of medicine and lies. The first page of *La coscienza* ('[i]o sono il dottore di cui in questa novella si parla talvolta con parole poco lusinghiere')[270] clearly reworks the finale of 'Lo specifico', in which Dr Clementi, after reading aloud Menghi's testament, declares: 'son io quell'avversario cui egli allude […] ci s[ono] tante insolenze al mio indirizzo in questa memoria'.[271] Clementi also tries to undermine the validity of Menghi's words by saying that his experiment probably did not even work ('[v]isto che il dottor Menghi non era un mentitore, vorrei sapere per quale causa sia crepato quel povero cane […]. [B]isognerebbe pensare che nella sua nervosità […] senz'accorgersene l'abbia strangolato').[272] Clementi claims that Menghi was not a liar, but his words tell us otherwise. And they conceal rancour and distrust. If Menghi was a liar, Clementi might be one too: 'Lo specifico' and its narrative of obsolete prolongevity inaugurates a season of unreliable doctors and narrators that will blossom in *La coscienza*.

It is possible that Svevo was acquainted – directly or indirectly, through Leopardi or a wider tapestry of reformulations and rewritings – with Hufeland's old models of therapeutics when he wrote 'Lo specifico'. *L'arte di prolungare la vita umana* might even be one of the medical sources that Svevo translated and creatively reworked 'in negative'

[270] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 625.
[271] Svevo, 'Lo specifico', p. 91.
[272] Svevo, 'Lo specifico', pp. 91-92.

for both ‘Lo specifico’ and *La coscienza* – two pieces whose themes, techniques, and references intersect Leopardi’s own dramatization of medical theory towards similar discourses of ‘life as disease’. What is certain is that Svevo fictionalised ideas and archetypes popular amongst Hufeland and his early nineteenth-century circle to reveal the errors of simplistic visions of medicine and health, and to maximise the revelation of life as an ultimately incurable contradiction. Like Svevo’s narratives, the *Operette*, too, portray physiologists and doctors as they lose touch with the fundamentals of living – or better, as they ‘geometrically’ interfere with life as if this, because of its necessary highs and lows, its intensities and boredoms, could somehow be soothed and ameliorated via artificial or rational means. A combination of common themes and techniques, literary references, and medically interconnected models connect Leopardi’s and Svevo’s stories of biological tragedy. It is by further contaminating these models that we will proceed in the next chapter, which considers both writers’ discourses through a further and unexpected set of early nineteenth-century medical models and reformulations.

III

The 'Dark Metaphysician' – Dr Brown
A Model of Reformulation and Comparability

> It was only betwixt the fifteenth and twentieth year of his studies, that, like a traveller in an unknown country, wandering in the shade of night, after losing every trace of his road, a very obscure gleam of light, like that of the first break of day, dawned upon him.[273]

Thus begins Dr John Brown's 1780 *Elementa medicinae* – with a glaring clarity that overthrows years of medical practice, and reveals, at last, the hidden face of existence. Dr Brown truly believed that he had reduced 'the medical art, thitherto conjectural, incoherent, and in the great body of it false' into a 'demonstrated science, which might be called the science of life' in all its manifestations,[274] to the point that the extension of 'the same doctrine to plants' and 'the application of the same profession to vegetables, should be named Agriculture'.[275]

Indeed, Brown was not wrong in detecting a potential for 'expansion' in his theory. An archenemy of Hufelandian temperance or, for that matter, of the whole Neo-Hippocratic school, Brown and his 'Brunonian' followers argued that all organisms, if they were to stand a chance of survival, ought to be constantly and artificially stimulated,

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[273] Dr John Brown (1735-1788) first published his *Elementa medicinae*, in Latin, in 1780. This chapter will adopt the 1788 English edition translated and commented by Dr Brown himself. See John Brown, *The Elements of Medicine; or a Translation of the Elementa Medicinae Brunonis with Large Notes, Illustration, and Comments, by the Author of the Original Work,* 2 vols (London: J. Johnson, St Paul's Church-yard, 1788). Hereafter, these footnotes will refer to this work as *EM*. The quotation above is from 'Preface to the original work', in *EM*, I, iii-xvi (p. iv).
<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=KChFAAAAcAAJ&pg=GBS.PP1> [accessed 9 August 2022]
[274] Brown, 'Preface', pp. xv-xvi.
[275] Brown, *EM*, I, 1.

in a continuous battle against life's inborn tension towards opposite forms of disease.[276] Even Dr Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902), a father of modern cellular pathology, had to recognize the impact of the Brunonian doctrine onto the medical world and beyond, comparing 'the stir caused by the publication of Brown's *Elements of medicine* in Edinburgh in 1780 to the effect of an earthquake which shook the whole European continent and even the physicians of the New World'.[277]

This chapter will start from Dr Brown and his colleagues, mediators, and interpreters. In line with Forlini's work on Leopardi and the fertility of the Bolognese Brunonian environment, the former's writings, too, will be seen as intersecting and participating in this trail of reformulations; specifically, in poignant *Zibaldone* pages composed in 1826, where a recurrent notion of life as *male* is fictionalised and explored by introjecting the modes and archetypes of contemporary medicine.[278] This chapter argues furthermore that such moments of contamination share a fundamental element of comparability with the most significant 'medical revelations' of *La coscienza di Zeno*. It shall be seen how both writers, in crucial moments of medical hybridization in their works, fictionalise comparable physiological models into narratives of great affinity and speculative 'originality'. This chapter's comparative perspective, like the preceding one, intersects and redirects to other models of investigation. By following comparable writing solutions, literary quotations from Leopardi will be identified and 'medically' contextualised within the Svevian *oeuvre*. More importantly, this comparative

[276] Terms such as 'Brunonian' and 'Brunonianism' have traditionally been used to refer to John Brown (in Latin, *Ioannes Bruno*), his works, and his medical school. Such terms will also be adopted in this chapter.
[277] Ramunas Kondratas, **'**The Brunonian influence on the medical thought and practice of Joseph Frank', in *Brunonianism in Britain and Europe*, ed. by William F. Bynum and Roy Porter (London: Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 1988), pp. 75-88 (p. 77). On Brown, his theory, and its reception, this collection of essays is one of the most comprehensive publications available in English.
[278] Forlini, 'Stratone e l'"ospitale" dei viventi', pp. 133-170. On Leopardi and his reformulation of contemporary (Brunonian) medical culture into analogies of wider philosophical resonance see also Campana, 'Stimolo e controstimolo', in *Leopardi e le metafore scientifiche*, pp. 309-329.

perspective will additionally confirm the translatability of early nineteenth-century Brunonian models in Svevo's works, too, thus allowing for a new exploration of his readings in the medical sciences. In so doing, this chapter will propose a new investigation of Svevo's library at the *Archivio Fonda-Savio* of Trieste – an investigation that will challenge Contarini's own archival work. But we must start with Dr Brown and his original theory, focusing on the shadows cast by his 'obscure gleam of light'.

1. Brunonianism: formulas and reformulations

Initially a follower and then a turncoat on his Edinburgh professor William Cullen (1710-1790), John Brown 'borrowed' the notion of 'nervous excitability' and reformulated it into a revolutionary model. According to Brown, excitability is the secret cause of *all forms of life*, but only activates when receiving some degree of stimulation, not unlike a match waiting to be struck.[279] Brown's grand claim was fascinating, but obviously hard to justify. As he begins his book, the doctor admits that no one truly knows 'what excitability is', nor should physicians waste their time by entertaining the 'venomous snake [of] philosophy' – 'whatever it be, either a certain quantity, or a certain

[279] Dr William Cullen was an Edinburgh doctor and professor of medicine. His teaching focused on the idea of 'nervous excitability', describing all pathology as ultimately deriving from nervous disorders. His works owed a debt to the Swiss doctor and poet Albrecht von Haller (1708-1777), who conjectured that the muscular and nervous systems responded to impulses through phenomena of *irritability* and *sensibility.* In developing his system, and departing from traditional theories and masters, Brown reformulated and magnified Cullen's notion of 'excitability' by applying it to all manifestations of life. For a brief overview on these models within the wider context of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century medical thought, see Francesco Raspadori, 'Il vitalismo ed i sistemi medici fra Settecento ed Ottocento', in *Un medico di casa Leopardi*, pp. 159-174 (pp. 164-167). For a more comprehensive study on the subject, see Giorgio Cosmacini, 'Teorie e prassi mediche tra Rivoluzione e Restaurazione: dall'ideologia giacobina all'ideologia del primato', in *Storia d'Italia: Annali,* 27 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1978-2018), VI: *Malattia e medicina* (1984), ed. by Franco Della Peruta, pp. 153-205.

energy of it is assigned to every being upon the commencement of its living state'.[280] More specifically, that initial 'quantity, or energy, is different in different animals', determining their individual manifestation of health, their reaction to circumstances, and the most appropriate therapy for their cure.[281] Already from these broad strokes, it is apparent that Brown's quantitative system of 'excitability' shares the fundamental coordinates of Dr Hufeland's economy of 'vital forces'.[282] At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Neo-Hippocratism and Brunonianism identified manifestations of the same vitalistic archetype of medicine, proposing two approaches to similar problems on the origin of life and the precarious administration of its forces. Nevertheless, despite a common point of departure, these two schools could not have diverged more. Although Brown relied on the notion of 'excitability', his model does not admit further metaphysical concepts. Neo-Hippocratic doctors strived to interpret and respect the healing power of nature (*vis medicatrix naturae*) in nursing their patients back to health, while Brunonians rejected narratives of natural wellbeing or any other teleological consolation. As Brown claims, no faith should ever be put onto 'the supposed powers of nature, which have no real existence'.[283] Even excitability is nothing but a function that, by reacting to stimulation, perfunctorily triggers life. Brown bleakly declared all life a *forced state* – a condition perpetuated, by nature or doctors, via the administration of *stimuli*. Good and bad weather, physical or intellectual exercise, alcohol and specific diets are all effective *stimuli* to be administered according to specific conditions and

[280] Brown, *EM*, pp. 7-8.
[281] Brown, *EM*, p. 7.
[282] I am referring to Hufeland's vitalism as described in *The Art of Prolonging Human Life*. For Leopardi's and Svevo's reformulation of Hufelandian theory, see the previous chapter. Brown seems to bring to the extremes what Hufeland theorizes in abstract terms, determining the amount of initial 'excitability' provided to one's life (eighty) and even providing diagrams marking the mathematical value of individual 'stimulants'. Brown, *EM*, pp. 27-28.
[283] Brown, *EM*, p. 79.

predispositions. Doctors should identify the most appropriate form of stimulation, in line with a novel concept of disease:

> The general diseases, arising from excessive excitement, are called sthenic; those that originate from a deficient excitement, asthenic. Hence there are two forms of diseases, and both are always preceded by predisposition […]. The state of the body, producing sthenic disease, or the predisposition to them, is to be called Sthenic Diathesis; that which occasions the latter, with the predisposition peculiar to it, receives the new term of Asthenic Diathesis.[284]

The universe of pathology, until then so multifaceted, was reduced to one fundamental choice: is the patient suffering from excessive (*sthenia)* or insufficient (*asthenia*) stimulation? Of course, that diagnosis entirely depends on whether an individual organism is born with a tension (*diathesis*, or *predisposition*) with either extreme – in other words, whether one is physiologically prone to exceed or to slacken. Most disturbances, Brown summarises, arise from debility, so that the safe choice lies in treating patients with stimulants. Amongst his favourites, Brown listed alcohol and opium – which incidentally contributed to the scandal surrounding Brown and his followers. Learning to be a Brunonian doctor was ultimately a matter of accepting some assumptions and experimenting (*in vivo*) with a cascade of stimulants. As Canguilhem observes, by '1798 a physician could be trained under Brown's system in just four weeks'.[285]

Although Brown provided his generation with an accessible model of therapeutics, his theory welcomed philosophical anxieties, too. The same *stimuli* triggering and restoring health could – in different circumstances, degrees, or in patients provided with specific predispositions – prove poisonous, even crush the organism

[284] Brown, *EM*, pp. 52-54.
[285] Georges Canguilhem, 'John Brown's system: An Example of Medical Ideology', in *Ideology and Rationality in the History of the Life Sciences*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 41-50 (p. 43).

receiving them. Indeed, Brown claimed that 'health and disease are the same state depending on the same cause […] varying only in degree; […] the powers producing both are the same, sometimes acting with a proper degree of force, at other times either with too much or too little'. [286] This is arguably the most important statement of his doctrine. If both 'health' and 'disease' depend on different degrees of 'force', it follows that there is no *real* distinction between them. Health only identifies an intermediate state between pathological extremes ('betwixt these opposite sets of disease […] perfect health is the mean, leaning to neither extremes'), a condition that is only temporary, and that always points towards one of two excesses:

> If the just degree of excitement could be constantly kept up, mankind would enjoy eternal health. But two circumstances prevent that. Such is the nature of the sthenic diathesis, that it wastes the sum total of excitability assigned to every being upon the commencement of its living state, and, thereby shortening life, often by the interposition of diseases, sooner or later induces death. […] The asthenic diathesis [, on the other hand,] is hurtful by not supplying that degree of excitement, which is necessary to life, and thereby allowing the state of life to approach more nearly to that, in which death consists. Which opens another gate of death to mankind.[287]

Brown's depiction of the circumstances preventing mankind's 'eternal health' and keeping instead the 'gate of death' forever ajar identifies one of the reasons why his opponents were often skeptical of his theory, judging it as the melancholy musings of a 'tenebroso metafisico, più tosto, che di un medico sperimentato'.[288] Such an interpretation still retains its appeal for the modern reader if, according to Neubauer's 1967 study, it is

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[286] Brown, *EM*, p. 132.
[287] Brown, *EM*, pp. 55-56.
[288] This is what Dr Francesco Vaccà Berlinghieri (1732-1812), the eminent professor of medicine at the University of Pisa, claimed in *Meditazioni sull'uomo malato e sulla nuova dottrina medica di Brown* (Venice: Giustino Pasquali q. Mario, 1801), p. 6. <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=KGTCAm0GC1kC&pg=GBS.PA1&hl=en_GB> [accessed 9 August 2022]. The passage is also cited in Elena Frasca, 'Dalla Scozia all'Italia. Il dibattito sulla dottrina medica di John Brown in Italia tra Rivoluzione e Restaurazione', *Italianistica Debresieniensis*, 21-22 (2016), 32-48 (p. 39). As we will see, this is the way in which many traditional Italian doctors saw Brown and his dogmatic followers.

'with the stimuli of alcohol and opium consuming the fire of Brown's own life' that 'we may perhaps appreciate [the] resigned and poetic words about human fate' of a 'doctrine […] hostile to life and essentially pessimistic' and devoid of a 'progressive tendency in nature'.[289] Of course, the scholar is not far wrong. Brown's reputation was certainly scandalous. Mostly relying on charisma and inflammatory eloquence, Brown was accused of lacking, in fact, *sobriety* and bedside experience – which were the forte, instead, of Neo-Hippocratic doctors. Followers and detractors of Brown's portrayed him either as a new prophet, or a lunatic selling opiates as panacea. The idea of life as a 'forced state' was, in fact, dark enough to scandalise physicians and philosophers alike. No higher meaning, no mysterious design was attributed to existence, which Brown fundamentally described as device doomed to destruction:

> From all that has hitherto been said, it is a certain and demonstrated fact, that life is a forced state, that the tendency of animals every moment is to dissolution; that they are kept from it, by foreign powers, and even by these with difficulty and only for a little; and then, from the necessity of their fate, give way to death.[290]

Popular amongst late eighteenth-century scientists (Erasmus Darwin, Thomas Beddoes) and writers (Coleridge, Wordsworth), the paradigm of Brunonianism lost prestige in Britain after Brown's own premature death by intoxication.[291] But the therapeutic

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[289] John Neubauer, 'Dr John Brown (1735-88) and early German Romanticism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 28.3 (Jul-Sep, 1967), 367-382 (p. 370).
[290] Brown, *EM*, p. 59.
[291] An interesting 'Brunonian network' connects the major personalities of early English Romanticism. Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) grandfather Dr Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), in prefacing his 1794 *Zoonomia*, wrote: '[t]he coincidence of some parts of this work with correspondent deductions in the Brunonian *Elementa Medicinae*, a work (with some exceptions) of great genius, must be considered as confirmations of the truth of the theory, as they were probably arrived at by different trains of reasoning.' See Erasmus Darwin, 'Sect. XII. Of Stimulus, Sensorial Exertion, and Fibrous Contraction', in *Zoonomia; or the Laws of Organic Life,* 3 vols (London: J. Johnson, St Paul's Church-yard, 1794), I, 26-100 (p. 75). <http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1794_Zoonomia_A967.1.pdf> [accessed 9 August 2022]. As for Coleridge, Vickers' study reports how, in a letter to publisher Taylor and Heney, Coleridge describes Brown as 'a man of genius and original mind [,] […] amongst Cicero, Luther, Giordano Bruno, Milton,

simplicity and the radicalism of his theory granted it international fortune, with its associated models, ideas, and terms reformulated into both traditional and nascent fields of enquiry. According to Kondratas, Brunonianism succeeded in addressing the main 'concerns of medicine in its day – the need for certainty, the need to relate medical theory and practice, the need to find a vital force or principle responsible for the organization of organic matter, and the need for medical reforms'.[292] The earthquake of Brunonianism reached the foundations of science and society, that of philosophy and of literature, shaking engrained discourses over biological existence, its meaning and cure, and its contradictions.

A list of doctors and philosophers can better exemplify the translatability of Brunonian notions into new discourse, also allowing for a 'movement' towards a model of interdisciplinary reformulation recurring in the present chapter. If the 'errant Brunonian' father of American Psychiatry Dr Benjamin Rush (1746-1813) regularly administered opioids as sedatives, the British doctor George Nesse Hill (1766-1831) institutionalised the interconnection between 'sthenic and asthenic disease' and the extremes of 'mania and melancholia', by selecting and alternating therapies for individual 'predispositions'.[293] In continental Europe, Brunonian ideas were discussed by doctors, philosophers, and writers alike, playing a vital part in the development of early German Romanticism and Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* – to the point that Hegel welcomed Brunonianism as the first entrance of medical ideas such as 'illness' and 'health' into a

Dryden, Wolfe, Hunter and Wordsworth'. Coleridge's interest in Brown was likely 'stimulated' by his own personal doctor, Dr Thomas Beddoes (1760-1808), who amply prescribed, following Brunonian theory, opium-based medicaments. See Neil Vickers, 'Coleridge, Thomas Beddoes and Brunonian medicine', *European Romantic Review*, 8.1 (1997), 47-94 (p. 48).

[292] Kondratas, **'**The Brunonian influence on Joseph Frank', p. 77.

[293] Roy Porter, 'Brunonian Psychiatry', in *Brunonianism in Britain and Europe*, pp. 89-99 (pp. 90-93).

philosophy of universals.[294] Even Dr Hufeland, a champion of Neo-Hippocratism, had to accept Brown's popularity and integrate Brunonian notions into his own medical agenda. In Italy, Brown had explosive 'ideological' repercussions. Taught at Pavia by personalities such as Dr Piero Moscati (1739-1824) and Dr Joseph Frank (1771-1842) – a doctor, according to Brown's own son, the most 'successful in promoting the new principles' at international level[295] – Brunonianism became a vehicle for social progress thanks to Dr Giovanni Rasori (1766-1837).[296] Under the flag of Brunonianism, Rasori challenged traditional institutions, as well as, in a line that connects scientific innovation and social progress, the conservativism of Austrian authorities in Northern Italy. The same theories that advocated 'metaphysical darkness' became, in Rasori's hands, the very vehicle for progress.[297] In his medical practice, Rasori 'reformulated' Brunonian theory by admitting the possibility of *controstimolo*, that is, allowing for the 'weakening' of patients alongside the traditional method of stimulation, and even alternating *stimoli* and *controstimoli* until medial health returned. Rasori's endeavour however pointed towards

[294] Cosmacini cites Hegel's declaration that Brown had the merit of 'far riconoscere piuttosto l'universale come ciò che è essenziale' in 'concetti medici – vita, morte, salute, malattia, predisposizione – esercitando una legittima e necessaria funzione filosofica nell'ambito della medicina'. Giorgio Cosmacini, *Scienza medica e giacobinismo in Italia: L'impresa politico-culturale di Giovanni Rasori (1796-1799)* (Milan: F. Angeli, 1982), p. 26. For the importance of Brunonianism in Germany, see again Neubauer, 'Dr John Brown (1735-88) and early German Romanticism', pp. 367-382. See also Nelly Tsouyopoulos, 'Filosofia e medicina nell'età romantica', in *Storia del pensiero medico occidentale,* ed. by Mirko D. Grmek, 3 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1993-1998), III*: Dall'età romantica alla medicina moderna* (1998), 3-36.

[295] These words, by John Brown's son William Cullen Brown, are cited in Kondratas' study on Dr Frank's engagement with Brunonianism from 'initial adherence and adulation to moderate scepticism […] to rejection'. See Kondratas, 'The Brunonian influence on Joseph Frank', p. 76. This thesis will return to Frank's personal take on Brunonian practice, to the philosophical implications of his personal style of therapy, and to how this could be reformulated in literature.

[296] The first two Italian editions of Brown's works are respectively by Dr Pietro Moscati (1739-1824) and Giovanni Rasori, both dating to 1792. The first, in Latin, is Ioannis Brunonis [sic], *Elementa Medicinae: Editio prima Italica, post ultimam Edinburgensem plurimum emendata atque integrum opus exhibens, cui praefatus est Petrus Moscati*, ed. by Pietro Moscati (Milan: Giuseppe Galeazzi, 1792). The second, in Italian, is *Compendio della nuova dottrina di G. Brown*, trans. by Giovanni Rasori (Pavia: Stamperia Baldassare Comini, 1792). On the versatility of Brunonianism, see again Canguilhem, 'John Brown's system: An example of Medical Ideology', pp. 41-50.

[297] Cosmacini, 'Teorie e prassi mediche tra Rivoluzione e Restaurazione', p. 160. For a comprehensive account and analysis of Rasori's medico-political adventure see Cosmacini, *Il medico giacobino: La vita e i tempi di Giovanni Rasori* (Bari: Laterza, 2002).

a collective dimension of health. Cosmacini outlines how, in 'stimulating' tired medical institutions, 'la medicina rasoriana' represents in early nineteenth-century Italy 'il maggior sforzo […] di dare alla "nascita della clinica" un primo impulso', pointing towards the restructuring of hospitals via 'inquadramento nosografico semplificato' and 'programmazione terapeutica su vasta scala, […] rispondente […] all'esigenza di sempre più strati della popolazione di avere accesso ai beni della salute, scientificamente amministrati e distribuiti'.[298] Rasori was, of course, not a lone wolf. His reformism was supported and continued by another important doctor, Professor of Pathology at Bologna Dr Giacomo Tommasini, who, despite many oppositions, attempted to gather the developments of Italian medicine into the unified *nuova dottrina medica italiana*. Forlini observes how 'avvicinandosi in questo a François Broussais, un altro dei grandi browniani della medicina europea', Tommasini proposed a model seeing life as almost necessarily tending towards forms of *infiammazione* – another description of existence as irritated by wild forces, and which the doctor, humbled by the potential of destruction dormant in all life, can only try and stimulate, back and forth, to a healthier middle ground.[299] As Forlini shows, the discourse of Brunonianism left room for wide manoeuvres of transformation and fictionalization, and from both its allies and those who were eager to discredit it. The traditionalist Dr Giovanni Battista Spallanzani (1772-1824) attacked Tommasini's physiology by re-narrating it into apocalyptic scenarios of great operatic effect, hence translating that 'polemica medica' into a language that could be received and meditated 'al di fuori della comunità degli specialisti'.[300] The 'teorica' of the Brunonian reform, Spallanzani wrote:

[298] Cosmacini, 'Teorie e prassi mediche tra Rivoluzione e Restaurazione', p. 180.
[299] Forlini, 'Stratone e l'"ospitale" dei viventi', p. 156.
[300] Forlini, 'Stratone e l'"ospitale" dei viventi', p. 157.

> degrad[a] l'umana natura supponendola tendente sempre al male e disposta e inchinevole alla distruzion sua! […] Che se ciò fosse vero […] come mai trista e lacrimabile sarebbe la condizione dell'uomo se fosse vera questa morbosa tendenza della fibra agli incendi flogistici, alle infiammazioni? […] [D]unque noi saremmo stati lanciati su questa terra per sostenere continue malattie, […] per sentire più intensamente i nostri mali, e meglio conoscere la nostra miseria?[301]

It is thus in places like Bologna, a crossroads where such elements of theories could be reformulated and reappropriated by philosophers and experimentalists – by 'physicians and metaphysicians' – that the alchemical process of hybridization explored here can find its necessary components, and spark into original discourses.[302]

It is also in Bologna that Leopardi, between 1825 and 1826, found himself under the protection of Dr Tommasini and developed a friendship with Tommasini's scholarly wife Antonietta. Thanks to the Tommasinis, Leopardi was to be offered the Chair of Natural History at the University of Parma in 1829 – a position that he refused, claiming to be a total *asino*.[303] Yet, as Forlini explains, despite Leopardi's self-professed

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[301] Giovanni Battista Spallanzani, *Sulla nuova dottrina medica italiana: Continuazione delle lettere medico-critiche* (Reggio Emilia: Davolio, 1820) pp. 328-329. <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=sqFdAAAAcAAJ&pg=GBS.PP18&hl=en_GB> [accessed 9 August 2022]. This excerpt is cited in Forlini, 'Stratone e l'"ospitale" dei viventi', pp. 157-158.

[302] Forlini's study arguably identifies one of the most productive studies on this discursive 'alchemy' in Tommasini's Bolognese environment. For more on the interaction between the Bolognese *milieu* and Leopardi, an informative reconstruction can be found in Laura Lotti, *Giacomo Leopardi e gli amici di casa Tommasini* (Lecce: Youcanprint, 2016). As for Tommasini and his role as a 'mediator' between medical discourse and wider visions of society, see again Cosmacini, 'Teorie e prassi mediche tra Rivoluzione e Restaurazione', pp. 191-205.

[303] 'Vengo dunque all'affare: nel quale io veggo due difficoltà molto gravi. La prima: che, in quella materia, io sono, a dir proprio, un asino: e mettermi a farne uno studio fondato, per impararne quanto bisogna a insegnarla altrui, Dio sa quando mi sarà possibile con questa salute, che in quanto alla facoltà di studiare, peggiora ogni giorno. La volontà colla salute può molto, ma senza la salute val poco o nulla. L'altra difficoltà è della provvisione. Liberamente vi dico, che quattro luigi al mese (anzi nè pur tanto), al merito mio sono troppo, ma al bisogno son troppo poco: con meno di cinque luigi, io non sono potuto vivere in nessun luogo. E Parma alla fine è città capitale, ha Corte, di danari non è scarsa; conseguentemente i prezzi non vi possono essere troppo bassi. La mia salute inferma richiede certe comodità di vita che ad altri non bisognerebbero; e specialmente dovrei spendere più che un altro per custodirmi dal freddo, il quale costì è lungo, e riuscirebbe grande a me che sono assuefatto ai climi più dolci. E in questi ancora, l'inverno è per me un pericolo continuo e prossimo di malattia grave. Io non so se queste difficoltà si potranno accomodare.' See Leopardi, 'A Ferdinando Maestri. Recanati 6 Febbraio 1829', in *Lettere*, pp. 875-876. This offer was meant to provide Leopardi with financial independence and came as a response to his insistent requests to his Bolognese friends for an occupation away from Recanati. The Lawyer Ferdinando Maestri, Dr Tommasini's stepson and Professor in Parma, interceded with the *presidente dell'Interno* of

'asininity', Antonietta appreciated Leopardi's eloquence on matters of natural and philosophical problems. As reported in one of her letters, a 'conformità di sentire' and 'a filosofia […] malinconica e pur troppo vera' was shared between the Bolognese couple and that learned guest, who had also read them 'bellissime cose, di verso e di prosa'.[304] This selection was probably inclusive of the *Operette*, a work stemming from an 'ossessivo ripensare la natura' in its most violent manifestations: in its wounding, rather than healing, powers.[305] According to Forlini's methodology, which this thesis embraces, 'restando dentro le metafore […] di Bruno Latour', Leopardi's contaminated 1826 works 'avrebbe potuto trovare alleati', and 'modelli […] di derivazione scientifica' translatable into original 'esiti, anche molto lontani dal punto di origine'.[306]

This is not to say that Leopardi had not encountered and reformulated similar models before his time in Bologna. Leopardi was close to Dr Puccinotti, who had opposed Rasori's crusade to remove the 'preteso genio d'Ippocrate' from academic curricula,[307] and held a copy of Brown's *Elementa* in his home library.[308] Indeed, already in 1821, Leopardi noted in the *Zibaldone* that 'oggi i medici chiamano con termine greco *stenia*

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the duchy of Parma and Piacenza Ferdinando Cornacchia to request that Chair be offered to Leopardi. However, the offer was eventually withdrawn and not renewed. More on this, including the letter above, can be found in Lotti, 'La fuga da Recanati', in *Giacomo Leopardi e gli amici di casa Tommasini,* pp. 95-103 (pp. 100-101).

[304] These excerpts from Antonietta Tommasini's letters are reported in Forlini, 'Stratone e l'"ospitale" dei viventi', p. 154.

[305] Forlini, 'Stratone e l'"ospitale" dei viventi', p. 150

[306] Forlini, 'Stratone e l'"ospitale" dei viventi', p. 133.

[307] Puccinotti replied to Rasori's disparaging speech *Analisi del preteso genio d'Ippocrate* (1798) with three 1819 speeches delivered for the *Accademia dei Lincei*, and eventually collected in his essay *Della sapienza d'Ippocrate e della necessità di ristabilire la medicina ippocratica in Italia*. On Puccinotti, see Francesco Luceri, 'Francesco Puccinotti: note per una riscoperta', in *Voci dall'Ottocento*, ed. by Ivan Pozzoni, 2 vols (Villasanta: Limina mentis, 2011), II, 109-142. On Puccinotti's relationship with Leopardi, see Andrea Trenti, *Il poeta e il professore: Giacomo Leopardi nel diario di Francesco Puccinotti* (Rome: Delfino Editore, 1987).

[308] In addition to the Latin edition of the *Elementa medicinae* ('*Brunonis Joannis. Elementa Medicinae. Mediol. 1792, in-8*'), the catalogue of Leopardi's library presents several editions of Brown's inspirations, Cullen and Haller: namely, '*Cullen M.O. Traité de matière médicale. trad. de l'angl. Paris, 1791, tom. 3*'; '*Cullen M.O. Physiologia. Venetiis, 1788*'; '*Haller Albertus. Primae lineae Physiologiae. Venetiis, 1754, in-8.*'. Also on Haller, '*Fabri Giacinto. Raccolta di opuscoli favorevoli al sistema di Haller. Bologna, 1757, tom. 3 vol. 2, in-4*'. See *Catalogo della biblioteca Leopardi*, pp. 82; 110; 152; 124.

(sarebbe σθένεια) che suona, come σθένος, *vigore*, *forza*, *robustezza*, il buono stato di salute'.[309] The world of Brunonianism could thus be of great interest for Leopardi, and specifically for a book where 'humanistic' and 'scientific' models are recombined into new narratives of natural doom such as the *Operette*. Among the ones written before Leopardi moved to Bologna, a melancholy *Metafisico* suggests, against models of Neo-Hippocratic prolongevity, to kindle the fire of life rather than dampen it; the *Islandese* claims that by 'cose vitali, anzi necessarie alla nostra vita', like air, weather, and light, we are absurdly 'ingiuriati di continuo' into sickness;[310] the poet Torquato Tasso, hospitalised for mental infirmity, ponders that 'il vivere è di sua propria natura uno stato violento'[311] – a statement seen by Campana as possible introjection of the Brunonian concept of life as a 'forced state'[312] –, while being offered 'oppio' and 'liquore generoso' for his nerves.[313] Although hardly demonstrable with philological certainty (and this is not one of this thesis's aims), there is nonetheless every reason to believe that *in Leopardi's overall career* 'abbia agito con maggior forza […] il brownismo che non il neo-ippocratismo', in the sense that the 'eredità principale del brownismo è che vivere

[309] *Zib*. 1624-1625. Italics in the original. In her study of Leopardi's medical sources, Benvenuti confirms the connection between the *Zibaldone* note above and Brunonian archetypes and discourses of illness. See Benvenuti, 'La medicina nella biblioteca di Leopardi', pp. 107-108.

[310] See Leopardi, 'Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese', in *Operette*, pp. 117-123 (p. 121). This connection between Brunonian models and Leopardian narratives, occurring before the Bolognese period, is according to Forlini 'certamente preterintezionale'. Whether this is the case or not, the critic underlines a remarkable intersection, in language and ideas, between these two. '[L]e parole dell'Islandese' specifically show a 'mutamento di prospettiva' towards models 'singolarmente consistent[i] con la patologia browniana, e non solo con l'immagine che di essa propagavano i suoi avversari. […] Secondo Brown "le forze esterne che vengono comunemente applicate", ossia gli stimoli, comprendono, oltre agli alimenti e ai fluidi […] senz'altro il calore e l'aria menzionati anche dall'Islandese, e come chiosava Rasori, il divulgatore italiano del verbo di Brown, la patologia "nella sola incongrua azione dello stimolo troverà la sorgente delle due vere e sole forme di malattie conformi all'ordine della natura: le une per eccesso di vigore, quando lo stimolo operò fortemente sino ad un certo segno; le altre di languore"'. See Forlini, 'Stratone e l'"ospitale" dei viventi', p. 159.

[311] Leopardi, 'Dialogo di Torquato Tasso', p. 114.

[312] Campana, 'Stimolo e controstimolo', p. 315.

[313] Leopardi, 'Dialogo di Torquato Tasso', pp. 115; 117.

equivale a soffrire'.[314] But it is certainly in the Bolognese period, a moment of interdisciplinary dialogue and original reformulations, that Leopardi's interaction with Brown*, theory and practice*, achieved its most formidable results: that is to say, its most imaginative and brutal narratives of life as *malattia*. It is particularly within such relevant passages that this chapter will identify a fundamental comparability with the Svevian *oeuvre* of contamination. The next section will argue that that both writers, in core sections of their hybrid work, recurrently introject similar models of physiology, reformulating these towards comparable solutions in fiction and towards complementary philosophical revelations.

2. The 'Garden of Illness' – between revelation and reformulation

Even the most 'medical' dialogues amongst the *Operette*, such as that of the *Fisico* or the one between Ruysch and his anatomic preparations, had only *indirectly* presented living as a condition of illness. Yet, in 1826, the last year of Leopardi's Bolognese sojourn, a series of *Zibaldone* passages takes a turn towards a novel set of medical associations. The experience of existing is compared to 'un malato, un convalescente, che si cura', who, aiming to 'conservar[e] la vita', does nothing but 'patire infinitamente […] p[er] non perdere […] la capacità di patire'.[315] Such a narrative picks up ideas of life conservation (perhaps even prolongevity) and rewrites Leopardi's *philosopheme* of life as *male* in fresh terms: suffering patients, impossible recoveries, biological contradictions. This specific modality of narrating life as 'illness' as this thesis intends it

[314] Campana, 'Stimolo e controstimolo', p. 321.
[315] *Zib.* 4164.

– a contrasting system of absurd and painful forces, allowing for neither therapies nor improvement, neither understanding nor rational control – finds at least two extensive developments in the *Zibaldone* entries of that year. Leopardi's strategy of medical-humanistic hybridization emerges clearly in these sections: philosophical theses are narrated by reformulating medical models and terms into new scenarios, and such 'medical narratives' lead, in turn, to 'revelations' on the quintessential pain of living. As Blasucci explains, Leopardi's technique, here, specifically lies in the hybrid 'montaggio del discorso, […] [nel]l'uso dell'obiettivo mobile, con una sorta di effetto *zoom* dal macroscopico al microscopico', where a contamination of perspectives, one of 'scientific' insight and one of 'poetic' expansion and fictionalization, sustain and empower each other, exceeding each other's discursive limits.[316]

In a *Zibaldone* note started on 19th April 1826, Leopardi reports a series of statements regarding the absurd *male* of existence:

> Tutto è male. Cioè tutto quello che è, è male; che ciascuna cosa esista è un male; ciascuna cosa esiste per fin di male; l'esistenza è un male e ordinata al male; il fine dell'universo è il male; l'ordine e lo stato, le leggi, l'andamento naturale dell'universo non sono altro che male, nè diretti ad altro che al male […]. L'esistenza, per sua natura ed essenza propria e generale, è un'imperfezione, un'irregolarità, una mostruosità.[317]

The whole system of existence points towards the ills of its components, and all these components participate, in turn, in the ills of the system. Leopardi's recurrent theme of *vita* as *male* reaches new magnitudes on these lines: whatever so much as features within the broad spectrum of existence is a horrid mistake, a cancer invisible yet operating deep

[316] Luigi Blasucci, 'Su una famosa pagina dello *Zibaldone*: Il giardino malato (4174-77)', in *Lo "Zibaldone" di Leopardi come ipertesto: Atti del Convegno internazionale, Barcellona, Universitat de Barcelona, 26-27 ottobre 2012*, ed. by María de las Nieves Muñiz Muñiz (Florence: Olschki, 2013), pp. 41-53 (p. 51).
[317] *Zib*. 4174.

within the structure of the universe. After this first 'metaphysical' moment, Leopardi begins to reformulate – but one could say 'incarnate' – his observations into instances of physiological suffering ('tutte le cose al lor modo patiscono necessariamente, e necessariamente non godono'), moving the 'obiettivo mobile' of his discourse down into the fibres of biological life.[318] Of course, the repertoire of medicine and physiology plays an instrumental part in this 'movement', allowing Leopardi, in Meschiari's words, to 'avvicinar[si] […] all'uomo nella sua corporeità, nel suo soffrire […] con estrema precisione' and, then, to catapult his discourse towards original recombinations of knowledge and narrative solutions.[319] This is precisely the tactic adopted by Leopardi's most brutal revelation of 'life as illness' in the *Zibaldone* – the passage on the 'Garden of Illness' reformulating the ideas above into new physiological scenarios:

> Entrate in un giardino di piante, d'erbe, di fiori. Sia pur quanto volete ridente. Sia nella più mite stagione dell'anno. Voi non potete volger lo sguardo in nessuna parte che voi non vi troviate del patimento. Tutta quella famiglia di vegetali è in stato di *souffrance*, qual individuo più, qual meno. Là quella rosa è offesa dal sole, che gli ha dato la vita; si corruga, langue, appassisce. Là quel giglio è succhiato crudelmente da un'ape, nelle sue parti più sensibili, più vitali. Il dolce mele non si fabbrica dalle industriose, pazienti, buone, virtuose api senza indicibili tormenti di quelle fibre delicatissime, senza strage spietata di teneri fiorellini. Quell'albero è infestato da un formicaio, quell'altro da bruchi, da mosche, da lumache, da zanzare; questo è ferito nella scorza e cruciato dall'aria o dal sole che penetra nella piaga; quello è offeso nel tronco, o nelle radici; quell'altro ha più foglie secche; quest'altro è roso, morsicato nei fiori; quello trafitto, punzecchiato nei frutti. Quella pianta ha troppo caldo, questa troppo fresco; troppa luce, troppa ombra; troppo umido, troppo secco. L'una patisce incomodo e trova ostacolo e ingombro nel crescere, nello stendersi; l'altra non trova dove appoggiarsi, o si affatica e stenta per arrivarvi. In tutto il giardino tu non trovi una pianticella sola in istato di sanità perfetta.[320]

The notion *tutto è male* transforms into a new scenario of fiction and revelation: the tale of a sick garden and the epiphany on the 'lack of health' dominating all things. Leopardi adopts a classical example of 'health' (a garden in full spring bloom) with the aim of

[318] *Zib*. 4175.
[319] Meschiari, 'Leopardi e la medicina', p. 196.
[320] *Zib*. 4175-7176.

discovering, within that superficial vigour, a model of *malattia* as this thesis understands it – a world of contradicting and brutal forces not allowing for equilibrium nor explanations. Of course, some organisms may endure this predicament more than others, but no place within this model seems to be safe from harm. Air and light, water and shade, weather moist and dry, while perhaps nourishing one life, sicken or corrode weaker beings. Plants which are by constitution too intensely alive expand too quickly and energetically, suffering for lack of space, whilst less powerful beings can barely put down roots, and need to fight not to be swiped off that 'unstable bridge' of existence. Leopardi brings his narration to a close with a final motto: no 'health' is possible throughout the garden, a phrase considered by Forlini as a 'reformulation', in years of fertile medical interaction, of the Brunonian notion that no perfect sanity can be found in life. With Tommasini's model of physiology between inflammation and invasive *controstimoli* at hand, the fragment above expands upon 'una possibilità narrativa offerta da teorie scientifiche non ancora del tutto screditate' and that, one should add, Dr Brown himself had applied to both human health and the world of plants in a grand and comprehensive 'science of life'.[321] Forlini particularly detects this model of 'fictionalization' in that 'ambivalenza dell'aria e del sole' presented as both cause of life 'e nello stesso tempo causa di malattia' in the Garden, 'proprio allo stesso modo dello "stimolo" dei medici

[321] Brown, 'Preface', p. xvi. Forlini explains that 'Leopardi d'altro canto non è il solo, negli anni Venti dell'Ottocento, a nutrire di simili materiali la propria immaginazione letteraria: *The Sensitive Plant*, di Shelley, è di sei anni prima e questi esperimenti di scrittura potevano vantare il patronato scientifico di prestigiosi naturalisti settecenteschi quali Erasmus Darwin', the author of a book, between poetry and natural sciences, titled *The Botanic Garden* (1791), and who also 'aveva ipotizzato l'esistenza, nei vegetali, di un autentico sistema nervoso' – a theory that, as mentioned before, was not foreign to the Brunonian model of 'nervous excitability'. Furthermore, as Anna Clara Bova argues, 'è probabile che Leopardi conoscesse il poema di Erasmo Darwin, dal momento che esso, nella traduzione di Gherardini, compare tra le opere della biblioteca di famiglia, ma è anche probabile che, tramite l'amico Tommasini, esponente della nuova scienza medica e seguace del Rasori, traduttore […] della *Zoonomia*, egli fosse venuto a conoscenza anche di quest'ultima opera dell'autore inglese.' See Forlini, 'Stratone e l'"ospitale" dei viventi', p. 136. See Anna Clara Bova, 'Leopardi e la *Zoonomia* di Erasmo Darwin', in *La prospettiva antropologica nel pensiero e nella poesia di Giacomo Leopardi: Atti del XII Convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani (Recanati, 23-26 settembre 2008*), ed. by Chiara Gaiardoni (Florence: Olschki, 2010), pp. 477-491 (p. 483).

browniani' in their patients.[322] Narratives of this manner, between physical illness and universal contradiction, can be seen to incorporate what Volpi calls the modalities of a 'scientificità oscura'; in order words, as the critic puts it, the revelation of a 'natura che consegna ai singoli un patrimonio contro cui è inutile combattere' in a 'patologia cosmica', where the 'scala delle intesità della malattia' identifies the only 'thermometer' able to explain and talk about the wider illness of existing.[323] Leopardi's thesis of life as *male* is contaminated, moulded, and empowered by reformulating scientific models of bleakness and distress, in a movement able to glimpse into the innermost chambers of life and linger on its tumours. In other words, to narrate *male* via stories of *malattia*.

This tactic is not unique to Leopardi. According to Lavagetto, it is in their 'utilizzare […] materiali desunti insieme' from both humanistic and 'scientific' knowledge 'al fine di rappresentare […] pochi aforismi altrimenti organizzabili in un rapido teorema' that Leopardi and Svevo find a common path towards the exploration of 'life as illness'.[324] For example, Vacante observes that the 'Garden of Illness' shares the fundamental techniques of Svevo's essay 'Ottimismo e pessimismo', as indeed we have seen in the previous hybrid chapter of this thesis.[325] There, medical models of prolongevity allow for new narrations of horror between universal doom and microorganic disorder, with Svevo appropriating a specific 'côté of pessimistic writers' in constructing his overall argument.[326] While there are several elements connecting these pieces, a different text by Svevo and another modality of comparison will be considered in the current chapter. Leopardi's adoption of a lovely garden to glimpse into the dark

[322] See Forlini, 'Stratone e l'"ospitale" dei viventi', p. 159.
[323] Volpi, 'La malattia incolpevole', p. 12.
[324] Lavagetto, 'Storia del genere umano', p. 177.
[325] Vacante, 'Favole, apologhi, aforismi', p. 123.
[326] Vacante, 'Favole, apologhi, aforismi', p. 122.

corners of existence and declare a universal 'lack of health' calls for a comparison with another moment of Svevian contamination: namely, when, in *La coscienza*, Zeno uncovers the secrets of existence by obsessing and reformulating Ada's thyroid dysfunction into a grand, new discourse. The following paragraphs will read these texts through a filter of comparability – that is to say, by highlighting how both writers reformulate *comparable models of physiology* through *comparable techniques*, developing *comparable solutions*. The *vita-malattia* notion identified by Rusi as crucial in the Leopardi-Svevo connection is developed, here, into narratives that almost seem to 'respond' to each other, sharing each other's premises, analogies, and developments, which gives the reader the impression that some form of filiation might be at play.[327] While this is possible – one daresay even *likely* in passages, like that of Ada and Basedow, featuring Leopardian quotations – the model of literary filiation is not this chapter's *core* methodological approach.[328] There are two reasons for this. The first is that the possibility of Svevo quoting from lesser-known places of the *Zibaldone* cannot be proven philologically or historically, as it has been explained in the introduction of this thesis. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, such philological zeal would not add much to our discourse over the hybrid, enigmatic, and fertile nature of the Leopardi-Svevo relationship. As such, this chapter will primarily discuss this relationship in terms of comparability, leaving models of literary quotation to the restricted number of cases where this has been identified by other scholars. The next section will focus on how, in key moments of Leopardi's and Svevo's hybridization, parallel models of early nineteenth-century physiology are developed into interconnected narrations of life as

[327] Rusi, 'Svevo e la funzione Leopardi', p. 224.
[328] The Leopardian references in the 'Basedow passages' of *La coscienza* were identified in chapter II and placed within a wider context of medical-humanistic hybridization and comparability between Leopardi and Svevo. Such quotations are additionally cited at the beginning of the next section.

revealed ‘disease’ (in the many implications of this term – instability and restlessness, lack of balance and health) and into comparable solutions of fiction and philosophy.

3. Elements of comparability – techniques, models, solutions

The previous chapter identified the passage on Basedow as a Svevian moment of contamination between ideas of science and literature. For example, it was argued that that ‘[g]rande, importante malattia’ gives Zeno a rather ‘Leopardian fright’ (‘un pensiero dominante, un sogno, e anche uno spavento’).[329] Indeed, Basedow’s syndrome allows for revelations into things obscure. Medical notions are reformulated within the laboratory of Zeno’s obsession, exposing life as a new dimension of ‘pushes’ and ‘pulls’, with no room for a healthy middle ground. ‘Mi parve ch’egli avesse portate alla luce le radici della vita’, Zeno claims, ‘la quale è fatta così’:

> tutti gli organismi si distribuiscono su una linea, ad un capo della quale sta la malattia di Basedow che implica il generosissimo, folle consumo della forza vitale ad un ritmo precipitoso, il battito di un cuore sfrenato, e all’altro stanno gli organismi immiseriti per avarizia organica […]. La società procede perché i Basedowiani la sospingono, e non precipita perché gli altri la trattengono. Io sono convinto che volendo costruire una società, si poteva farlo più semplicemente, ma è fatta così, col gozzo ad uno dei suoi capi e l’edema all’altro, e non c’è rimedio. In mezzo stanno coloro che hanno incipiente o gozzo o edema e su tutta la linea, in tutta l’umanità, la salute assoluta manca.[330]

Zeno contaminates physiology with overthinking, authorising his mind to follow freer associations of ideas. The resulting narrative, germinating from medicine and expanding into discoveries of greater resonance, can be seen to share the coordinates of the

[329] Svevo, ‘La coscienza’, pp. 957; 959.
[330] Svevo, ‘La coscienza’, pp. 957-958.

Zibaldone passages discussed in this chapter. Let us look at these texts in parallel. Zeno magnifies early nineteenth-century models into a new visualisation of 'universal illness': a *linea* where all individuals, organisms, and societies can be placed according to an absurd logic of mutual pressure and contradiction. Similarly, Leopardi reformulates principles of early nineteenth-century medicine into a 'biological model' condensing all existential contradictions – not for 'il genere umano solamente,' as the *Zibaldone* explains, but for the universe in its entirety, inclusive of all 'le specie, i generi, i regni, i globi, i sistemi, i mondi'.[331] These two moments of contamination lead to the creation of comparable universes, with similar parties and dynamics of interrelation at play. Invisible forces and organisms lie on an unstable bridge of existence, kicking, pushing, and stealing each other's right to live, in a desperate attempt to keep some degree of 'balance' and 'sanity' in a system that permits neither. Furthermore, these scenarios allow for comparable philosophical conclusions: the *Zibaldone*'s '[i]n tutto il giardino tu non trovi una pianticella sola in istato di sanità perfetta',[332] and Zeno's final discovery that 'su tutta la linea, in tutta l'umanità, la salute assoluta manca.'[333]

We can thus begin this section by claiming that, in two peaks of Leopardi and Svevo's technique of medical contamination, models of early nineteenth-century physiology are translated into comparable fictional and demonstrative solutions, confirming what Lavagetto argues about a succinct thesis (*vita* as *male* or *malattia*) being magnified and explored, in both writers, by contaminating 'literary' reformulation and 'scientific' models. These contaminated narratives can be analysed via the model of comparability adopted by this thesis – which proposes to consider whether these

[331] *Zib*. 4175.
[332] *Zib*. 4176.
[333] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 957.

'solutions' reformulate *comparable* models of medicine via *comparable* techniques. As Zeno explains, he did not expect Ada, of all people, to fall ill ('[m]'era apparsa come la figurazione della salute e dell'equilibrio!').[334] But it is precisely Ada who acts as a 'portal' into a new scenario of insanity. We can argue that such a technique and medical premise (using Ada to reveal that everything secretly lacks health) has a counterpart in the models employed in the *Zibaldone*. More specifically, in the choice of employing a beautiful garden to reveal that disease is, in fact, is quintessence of existence as a whole. 'Lo spettacolo di tanta copia di vita', Leopardi claims, 'ci rallegra l'anima, […] ci pare essere un soggiorno di gioia'.[335] Yet, as one delves beyond that surface of *vitality* and *joy*, life is revealed as secret chamber of illness ('in verità questa vita è trista e infelice, ogni giardino è quasi un vasto ospitale').[336] A similar 'physiological deviousness' can be seen at play in the disease of 'la povera Ada con quegli occhi ingranditi smisuratamente dalla felicità. La sua malattia sapeva simulare tutte le emozioni'.[337] Both passages – a garden of deceiving splendour (in fact, a hospital chamber), and a beautiful young woman (concealing a secret disease) – can be seen to introject, play, and reformulate a model of medical ambivalence. Leopardi could certainly intercept and expand on obscure philosophies of health via the 'Brunonian culture' promoted by Giacomo Tommasini and his early nineteenth-century *milieu*. But Föcking explains that Zeno, too, creatively interacts here with some outdated and distressing models of physiology. The critic explains that this moment of contamination manipulates notions popular in the 'vitalismo del XVIII e inizio XIX secolo' – theories which, in this reformulation, reveal a disquieting

[334] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 958
[335] *Zib*. 4176.
[336] Ibid.
[337] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 960.

'nota mortalistica'.[338] This section does not argue that Svevo was *directly* or *consciously* thinking about the 'dark gospel' of Brunonianism while describing Zeno's world of illness. But the physiology reformulated in this moment of Svevian contamination shares premises and ideas with the culture that Leopardi, himself, had reformulated in his own 'revelation of illness': for example, in discovering that the point *in mezzo* between diseases is only inappropriately considered as *la salute*, Zeno describes capital models amongst the early nineteenth-century doctors worshipping the *Elementa medicinae*. Dr Brown, too, saw the majority of living states as subterranean 'predispositions to disease', which receded from health in 'a manner, as to seem still within […] the former, of which, however' they are 'only insidious and deceiving resemblance[s]'.[339] Such cunning predicaments were interpreted via notions of 'diathesis' – an inborn tension, hidden deep within every individual, to either spark (and exhaust) in stimulation, or to be overwhelmed by it. Raspadori describes this Brunonian model as what 'rendeva ragione sia della diversa resistenza alle malattie' as well as:

> della variabilità individuale del comportamento umano di fronte alla vita. Così il soggetto contraddistinto da diatesi iperstenica verso il dolore è meno sensibile allo stesso, è quindi più resistente di fronte alle vicende della vita […]; al contrario il soggetto con diatesi ipostenica è sensibile al dolore, è ripiegato su sé stesso.[340]

There is a great affinity between these models and the notions of life fictionalized and explored in *La coscienza*. Zeno, too, claims that all forms of existence conceal a tension towards either one or the other pathological extreme – the *incipiente gozzo* of those who thrive in acceleration or the *edema* of those who are constitutionally doomed to paralysis.

[338] Föcking, 'La tiroide di Ada', p. 60.
[339] Brown, *EM*, p. 2.
[340] Raspadori, 'Il vitalismo ed i sistemi medici', p. 172.

It is also certain that a similar 'physiological predisposition' and 'biological spectrum' is fictionalized throughout the Svevian *oeuvre*. As Cepach points out, Svevo's characters, 'pur nella varietà della casistica e nelle differenze anche sostanziali che li distinguono, mostrano una tendenza – verrebbe da dire "naturale" – a disporsi ai due lati di questa frattura', which places 'da un lato l'uomo di carattere, dal forte sentire […] dall'altra il nevrosico […] debole di carattere, irrisolto, indeciso, sistematicamente preda del dubbio e di una pervicace, invincibile tendenza al sogno e alla fantasticheria'.[341] We can claim that comparable early nineteenth-century visions of physiology, reworked via comparable writing strategies, allow both writers to produce parallel visions of universal 'illness'. The notion of comparability employed for Hufeland and his school in the previous chapter can, thus, be applied to the present investigation on both writers and their reformulations of more melancholy and problematic manifestation of vitalism. The next paragraph will corroborate this thesis, arguing that similar frameworks, that is, frameworks akin to early nineteenth-century Brunonianism, additionally emerge throughout both the Bolognese *Zibaldone* and *La coscienza*, developing into narratives that almost seem to 'mirror each other', sharing medical premises, humanistic reformulation, and original solutions.

4. Reformulating the poison, rewriting the cure

Through Zeno, Svevo presents in a fresh medical narrative a model of f(r)iction– strong *vs* anaemic, fighter *vs* dreamer, predator *vs* prey – that orientates his whole production. Föcking explains that '[l]a diagnosi del morbo' is 'ingiganti[ta]' by Zeno

[341] Cepach, 'Il dottore si ammalò', p. 137.

'fino a farl[a] diventare una filosofia di vita' with a dark undertone. Even between pathological extremes 'non si trovano i sani', nor it is 'possibile raggiungere la "salute assoluta" tramite un giusto consumo di energia'.[342] An outdated model of physiology acts as a matrix for more than one reformulation of knowledge. The critic observes that Zeno additionally derives from Basedow a 'seconda spiegazione della vita, che concorre con la prima' and that expands, via a surplus of medical imagery, on that previous revelation.[343] Zeno realises that his fixation acted on him like some sort of mental illness ('le perversioni psichiche!', he sighs); yet that very obsession allowed him to see that his 'line of life' also applies to wider perspectives of 'survival':

> Per troppo tempo pensai a Basedow. Già credo che in qualunque punto dell'universo ci si stabilisca si finisce coll'inquinarsi. Bisogna moversi. La vita ha dei veleni, ma poi anche degli altri veleni che servono di [sic] contravveleni. Solo correndo si può sottrarsi ai primi e giovarsi degli altri.[344]

The archetype previously reformulated, between energetic excess and impossible sanity, allows for another declination of the notion of life as illness (as existential impasse and logical contradiction, as incurable disorder and incomprehensible pain) and for new 'movements' along the axis of health. The way not to fall into extremes, and not to 'pollute' by stalling on incipient disease, is to keep moving throughout a set of points along the universe, and paradoxically alternate 'poisons' and 'counterpoisons' aiming to reach some temporary equilibrium. As Zeno had considered one moment earlier, in creating a society, or a universe, one could have thought of simpler ways; yet there is not much to do – this is how existence works, with manifest illnesses at its extremes, clandestine ones in between, and absolute health lacking everywhere. Zeno's discourse

[342] Föcking, 'La tiroide di Ada', pp. 60-61.
[343] Föcking, 'La tiroide di Ada', p. 61.
[344] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 958.

has clearly veered far away from early nineteenth-century physiology and reached wider dimensions – societal obsessions, mental hygiene, existential endurance – welcoming a scenario where poisons can be cures, and where health and disease are but names on a hazy continuum. This second 'discovery', too, can be seen to introject archetypes and notions also reformulated in the *Zibaldone*. In the Autumn of 1826, the 'medical culture' fictionalized in the 'Garden of Illness' sparks into another revelation. It is a long and articulate passage, which shall be divided and analysed one section at a time. Once again, Leopardi begins by translating notions of philosophical absurdity into instances of material hurt:

> Contraddizioni innumerabili, evidenti e continue si trovano nella natura considerata non solo metafisicamente e razionalmente, ma anche materialmente. La natura ha dato ai tali animali l'istinto, le arti, le armi da perseguitare e assalire i tali altri, a questi le armi da difendersi, l'istinto di preveder l'attacco, di fuggire, di usar mille diverse astuzie per salvarsi. La natura ha dato agli uni la tendenza a distruggere, agli altri la tendenza a conservarsi. […] [L]'enumerazione di tali ed analoghe contrarietà si estenderebbe in infinito, ed abbraccierebbe [sic] ciascun regno, ciascun elemento, e tutto il sistema della natura. Io avrò torto senza dubbio, ma la vista di tali fenomeni mi fa ridere.[345]

Some creatures are made to attack, some to defend; some are disposed with contraptions to assault and ensnare their victims, while others instinctively fly away, or freeze hoping to be missed. This clearly identifies a model of physiological 'predestination' that Leopardi's works share with the Svevian *oeuvre*.[346] The passage above can aptly be juxtaposed to Zeno's 'line of living', where weak and strong individuals, destruction and conservation, are all part of a broken universe impossible to explain or cure. The grand antinomies of nature, the incurability of that painful mystery, lead the Leopardian

[345] *Zib*. 4204.
[346] For another fictionalization of a similar 'physiological impasse', see the first chapter of this thesis and the tragically Leopardian epiphany of *Una vita*: namely, the revelation there are only two possible manners of existence, and someone born inept like Alfonso can only mimic health, but never truly be healthy, like those seagulls able 'per natura [a] piombare a tempo debito sulla preda'. Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 105.

discourse to twist into an unanticipated smile of compassion – a solution also characteristic of the Svevian *oeuvre*, and which shall be discussed at length in this paragraph. Overall, the 'movement' between the universe of physiology and its humanistic reformulation finds in these Leopardian pages some of its most original results:

> io finchè non mi si spieghi meglio la cosa, paragonerò la condotta della natura a quella di un medico, il quale mi trattava con purganti continui, ed intendendo che lo stomaco ne era molto debilitato, mi ordinava l'uso di decozioni di china e di altri attonanti per fortificarlo e minorare l'azione dei purganti, senza però interromper l'uso di questi. Ma, diceva io umilmente, l'azione dei purganti non sarebbe minorata senz'altro, se io ne prendessi de' meno efficaci o in minor dose, quando pur debba continuare d'usarli? (Bologna. 25. Sett. 1826.). V[edi la] p[agina] seg[uente].[347]

And on the following page:

> Si ammiri quanto si vuole la provvidenza e la benignità della natura per aver creati gli antidoti, per averli, diciam così, posti allato ai veleni, per aver collocati i rimedi nel paese che produce la malattia. Ma perchè creare i veleni? perchè ordinare le malattie? E se i veleni e i morbi sono necessari o utili all'economia dell'universo, perchè creare gli antidoti? perchè apparecchiare e porre alla mano i rimedi? (Bologna. 1826. 26. Sett.).[348]

This section identifies a creative take on the Brunonian model of *controstimolo*, that is, that therapy of pharmaceutical intrusion (stimulation and debilitation, perpetrated almost *ad libitum* on the body) that Leopardi underwent when in Bologna. Of course, it is not the autobiography *per se* that is at stake, here. This passage could almost be seen to encompass Timpanaro's thesis on Leopardi's *instrumental* interaction with the world of illness.[349] Rather than acting as a mere conduit of universal 'pessimism', that personal experience is reformulated into a *strumento conoscitivo* allowing for new philosophical and literary reformulations. In the case above, the antinomies of nature are unexpectedly

[347] *Zib*. 4205.
[348] *Zib*. 4206.
[349] Timpanaro, 'Alcune osservazioni sul pensiero del Leopardi', p. 158.

connected to the (familiar) story of a Brunonian doctor mixing poisons and cures, and this allows Leopardi to better visualise and narrate existence as too painful a joke to be tolerated, understood, or even taken seriously. There are several elements of connection between this medical narrative and Zeno's second 'revelation of life'. Like Leopardi, Zeno derives from a creative and disturbing obsession with nineteenth-century pathology a discovery on the poisons and counterpoisons of life, humorously suggesting that cure and illness, within the wider absurdity of biological existence, cannot be distinguished from one another, and that one should jump from one to the other to avoid being polluted too severely. It is particularly interesting that the model of *veleni* and *contravveleni,* transformed by Zeno into an analogy of vaster philosophical resonance, also identifies a variation on the therapy of *stimolo* and *controstimolo* experienced and reformulated by Leopardi in his own narrative of nature as a doctor and existence as *malattia*. More specifically, that model finds a parallel in Dr Joseph Frank – Rasori's predecessor at Pavia – and his famous *Dottrina de' veleni e contravveleni*, which reformulated the original Brunonian theory into an (even more) ambiguous and obscure model of medicine. 'I migliori rimedj', Frank explains, 'agiscono come veleni, ove in smisurate e soverchie dosi vengano apprestati', which makes it impossible to give poisons 'una definizione assoluta […] e conforme al linguaggio delle scuole'.[350] Again, this is not to say that *this specific*

[350] As Kondratas explains, at the peak of his Brunonian practice, Frank 'did not confine himself to the use of stimulating remedies. He attempted', for instance, 'to cure oedema with digitalis; mental disorders with belladonna' and 'the fact that he used a large variety of drugs in his treatment already distinguished him from most other Brunonians' – in the awareness that 'the use of stimulating drugs' in some 'cases could cause more harm than good', and according to a flexible understanding of individual predispositions and excitability status, which the doctor should constantly monitor and dynamically balance. See Kondratas, 'The Brunonian influence on Joseph Frank', p. 81. Originally in German with the title *Handbuch Der Toxicologie, oder der Lehre von Giften und Gegengiften* (1800), Frank's popular manual was soon published in French as *Manuel de toxicologie, ou, dottrine des poison et de leurs antidotes* (1803), and in 1804 its first Italian edition was produced. See Joseph Frank, *Manuale di Tossicologia; ossia, di Dottrina de' veleni e contravveleni*, trans. by Giuseppe Matthey (Parma: Mussi, 1804), pp. 4-5. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/fn64txnr/items?canvas=5> [accessed 9 August 2022].

notion of pharmacology is *directly* encountered and incorporated by Svevo – not according to an acknowledged 'scientific source to literary writer' manner of connection. It is certainly interesting that a novelist, like Svevo, interested in narrations of life as *malattia*, and in placing that notion within a wider context of (medical) contradiction, could find in the culture of nineteenth-century Brunonianism a goldmine of translatable notions. While this connection is not difficult to hypothesise and follow for Leopardi, it is more complex in Svevo's works. But this thesis has already addressed similar problems. The ways in which 'medical words' and 'theories' are encountered, transformed, and transmitted by their later 'interpreters' (be they scientists, philosophers, or novelists) cannot always be drawn with precision, nor does reaching absolute historical/philological certainty on that connection necessarily cast light on the role and significance acquired by a model within the process of reformulation and rewriting. Archetypes once of great impact, like Brunonianism, are integrated into new discourses, losing identifiable authorship and historical contour – to the point that even literary writers interested in medicine like Svevo could integrate them without recognizing, knowing, or even caring about their origins. In want of philological or historical proof, a viable strategy considers whether a specific writer could find a specific model translatable onto his literary page, and this is what this section aims, amongst other things, to do. The last section of this chapter will take the next step: hypothesising the possible 'bridge' made up of mediators and reformulations that could allow Svevo to encounter such notions and to introject them into his contaminated writing. We can conclude this section by confirming that, in these further instances of hybridization, too, a model of comparability can be adopted for Leopardi's 1826 notes and Zeno's second 'revelation'. Comparable early nineteenth-century medical models become in both writers *strumenti*

conoscitivi and of greater literary reformulation, allowing for comparable fictional and philosophical narratives. The next section will follow two of these narratives in both writers' works, aiming to further explore the elusive relationship between Leopardi and Svevo via the context of medical comparability proposed so far. The two narratives in question are: that of a nature behaving like a 'unreliable doctor', and the resolution of life's grander *malattia* (intended as metaphysical, biological, and therapeutic contradiction) into an original attitude that, in order to avoid self-annihilation, has learned how to smile.

At the beginning of *La coscienza*, Dr S. prescribes Zeno to reminisce about his distant childhood with the aim of 'vedersi intero'.[351] Zeno, of course, disobeys his doctor and starts thinking of some other child; or better, of that experiment of reagents and poisons that is life from its inception:

> Povero bambino! Altro che ricordare la mia infanzia! Io non trovo neppure la via di avvisare te, che vivi ora la tua, dell'importanza di ricordarla a vantaggio della tua intelligenza e della tua salute. […] E intanto, inconscio, vai investigando il tuo piccolo organismo alla ricerca del piacere e le tue scoperte deliziose ti avvieranno al dolore e alla malattia cui sarai spinto anche da coloro che non lo vorrebbero. Come fare? È impossibile tutelare la tua culla. Nel tuo seno - fantolino! - si va facendo una combinazione misteriosa. Ogni minuto che passa vi getta un reagente. Troppe probabilità di malattia vi sono per te, perché non tutti i tuoi minuti possono essere puri.[352]

Because of the child's natural quest for pleasure, life will contaminate him with reagents and pollutants, concocting for him an existence doomed to *dolore* and *malattia.* Behind this passage, which introduces the theme of *vita-malattia* in the novel, Zinato detects the working of 'il modello delle riflessioni' of the '*Zibaldone* […] e del finale del leopardiano

[351] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 628.
[352] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 627.

Canto notturno'[353] – that is to say, the conclusion that no cradle can be protected from the *male* of existence ('in qual forma, in quale / stato che sia, dentro covile o cuna, / è funesto a chi nasce il dì natale').[354] We can corroborate this potential literary connection with the repertoire of 'medical reformulation' identified by this thesis: namely, by connecting the passage above to the passage of the *Operette morali* where the *Islandese* blames *Natura* for having both 'infuso tanta e sì ferma e insaziabile avidità del piacere' into life, and also having made 'esso piacere […] di tutte le cose umane la più nociva alle forze e alla sanità del corpo, la più calamitosa negli effetti in quanto a ciascheduna persona, e la più contraria alla durabilità della stessa vita'.[355] Later in the novel, Zeno would look back at his existence as a pleasure-seeker as a continuous state of pain, recognizing 'd'essere stato un giocattolo in mano di forze sregolate della natura. La natura che non trovava difficoltà nell'accumularle, ne trovava ancor meno nello scatenarle'.[356] A violent model of *natura* as both mad experimentalist and unwelcoming mother can be seen to live through the pages of the Svevian *oeuvre*. For example, while pieces like 'Madre natura' (1897) present a dialogue between a suffering humanity and nature itself,[357] the protagonist of the longer novella 'Una burla riuscita' (composed in 1926, and

[353] Emanuele Zinato, 'Zeno, Gonzalo, Berto, Pin, Arturo, Useppe e tutti gli altri. L'infanzia rappresentata nella letteratura italiana del Novecento', in *Il ricordo d'infanzia nelle letterature del Novecento*, ed. by Stefano Brugnolo (Pisa: Pacini, 2012), pp. 95-114 (p. 98).
[354] Leopardi, 'Canto notturno', p. 454.
[355] Leopardi, 'Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese', p. 120.
[356] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 898.
[357] 'È certo che dopo di aver fatto tutto madre natura s'immobilizzò. Stette a guardare neppure sempre guardò. Però mi consta che interpellata non rifiutò di rispondere. Un giorno un uomo […] urlò a madre natura: – Perché non provvedi per me a un posto? […] Un altro le urlò: – Perché mi creasti? –. Ed essa rispose: – Io creai il tutto che a mio sapere tranquillamente si evolve. Se tu dal tutto ti senti differente, io, davvero, non so chi qui t'abbia mandato. A me non appartieni. Un terzo le gridò: – Voglio riposo, voglio calma'. See Svevo, 'Madre natura', in *Racconti e scritti autobiografici*, p. 655. Vacante argues that it is in passages of this sort that 'l'assimilazione del modello leopardiano appare […] più evidente' – namely, in the 'riflessione sull'impassibilità della natura nei confronti degli uomini, sulla cieca inesorabilità di un organicismo di tipo meccanicistico, che presiede alla conservazione della specie, incurante dei destini singoli'. However, as the critic also admits, such a model intersects and combines with others (like Schopenhauer) within the Svevian *oeuvr*e, to the point of being hardly distinguishable from further

published in 1928) condenses several narratives considered so far: both that of nature as an unreliable scientist and the laughter/horror response to that absurdity ('dopo di aver riso si pensa all'impassibile aspetto della natura quando fa i suoi esperimenti, e si rabbrividisce').[358] It is particularly this latter element, according to Stasi, that identifies a profound connection between Leopardi's and Svevo's poetics. The Svevian 'atteggiamento […] può certo ricordare quello […] leopardiano', yet not so much 'per una concezione pessimistica classica, per non dire topica, della Natura, quanto per la scommessa su una sua rappresentabilità letteraria in grado di farla levitare in una sorprendente "leggerezza", tendente a produrre sorriso e non pianto'.[359] Let us combine these observations with the hybrid and medical context proposed by this thesis: a common notion of life as *malattia* is explored by incorporating comparable scientific models and medical analogies, and these allow for unexpected narrations of and solutions for that initial impasse: an overall levity, a wisdom possible *in writing*, to counteract the real illness of it all. It is precisely in this creative *tertium quid* that Rousseau identifies the most fruitful result of the contamination between literary and medical discourses, that is, in those unexpected 'therapies embedded in the wisdom of literature' – and it is precisely within this thesis' context of medical reformulation that we shall place this further element of comparability.[360] Just like how Leopardi smirks before the horrors of nature, comparing it to a doctor poisoning his stomach, Zeno, too, realises that the 'veleno che inquinava il mio sangue' and his overall 'eccitazione non […] buona' cannot be fixed by

nineteenth-century 'pessimistic' discourses on biological existence. The hybrid approach proposed by this thesis aims to casts light on the 'Leopardian component' of this recombination. See Vacante, 'Favole, apologhi, aforismi', p. 212.

[358] Svevo, 'Una burla riuscita', in *Racconti e scritti autobiografici*, pp. 197-264 (p. 205).

[359] Beatrice Stasi, 'Favole e porcheriole. Intorno a *Una burla riuscita*', in *L'ultimo Svevo: Raccolta di studi per il novantesimo della morte*, ed. by Angela Guidotti (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2019), pp. 21-42 (pp. 25-26).

[360] Rousseau, 'Literature and Medicine', p. 158.

doctors (one of them '[m]i propinò anche un certo acido che mi ha rovinato perché da allora soffro di un eccesso di acidità'), nor does it make sense to resists life's quintessential *malattia*.[361] As Palumbo explains, once Zeno realises that life, itself, is illness, and that his doctor caused more diseases than he could cure, he finally 'dovrà apprendere in un definitivo e finale esercizio' of 'sapienza […] in mezzo ai disordini e alle catastrofi […] proprio a sorridere alla […] vita e anche alla […] malattia'.[362] This 'solution' is identified by Palmieri as the 'senso profondo del paradosso esistenziale [….] dell'ultimo romanzo sveviano. Quello stesso paradosso che il Leopardi maturo seppe esprimere con la lievità di un sorriso amaramente disincantato'.[363] It is via this unexpected 'therapy' that Zeno would acknowledge that '[l]e mie lesioni s'erano fatte meno velenose. Fu da allora che l'atteggiamento mio immutabile fu di lietezza […]. Lieto come se il mio dolore fosse stato sentito da me quale un solletico'.[364] I have argued elsewhere, in relation to narratives of biological impasses, that *lietezza* and *riso* identify both bittersweet outlets and manifestations of pain in Leopardi's and Svevo's short works.[365] This chapter can update these observations with reference to the *Zibaldone* and *La coscienza*: both writers start from similar medico-scientific images and models, creatively recombining these into similar fictional scenarios, and producing similar human(istic) solutions, or therapies, against a common *malattia* of existence.

There is more to say about contaminated reformulations and fresher perspectives of fiction and philosophy. In addition to the moments identified by Föcking as medical reformulations there is at least another such moment in *La coscienza*. This, too, can be

[361] Svevo, 'La coscienza', pp. 635-637
[362] Matteo Palumbo, 'Svevo e i suoi autori', *MLN*, 111.1 (1996), 1-30 (p. 19).
[363] Palmieri, 'Leopardi in Svevo', p. 51.
[364] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 790.
[365] Calzolari, 'Metamorphosis and Nightmare', pp. 224-229.

seen to reformulate elements deriving from Basedow's disease, which, apparently in the background of the story, nevertheless continues to poison Zeno's imagination. In this passage, Zeno talks with another character with 'deceptive health', Ada's spouse Guido Speier, who will gradually be revealed to be temperamental, financially inept, and somewhat suicidal. Their conversation sparks from a reference to Ada and her becoming less attractive and affectionate after her illness, which is a discourse that both annoys Zeno and makes Guido sob like a baby ('[v]oleva ricominciare a dir male di Ada? […] Terminò coll'esclamare sconsolato: – La vita è ingiusta e dura!').[366] This passage is the onset of new moments of knowledge reassociation; specifically, one whose conclusion casts light on the whole health/illness dilemma that animates the novel. According to the theory of contamination described by Svevo in 'Soggiorno londinese', humanistic minds may well misunderstand scientific theories and models.[367] Yet, within that misunderstanding, something can spark into new solutions of great vision and originality. Just like when Ada first fell ill, at this later point of the novel Zeno still does not necessarily understand the science behind Basedow. But his confused notions on health and illness, poisons and counterpoisons, unexpectedly spark into a new model of knowledge:

> Tante volte si dicono delle cose seguendo il suono delle parole come s'associarono casualmente. Poi, appena, si va a vedere se quello che si disse valeva il fiato che vi si è consumato e qualche volta si scopre che la casuale associazione partorì un'idea. Dissi:
> – La vita non è né brutta né bella, ma è originale!
> Quando ci pensai mi parve d'aver detta una cosa importante.[368]

[366] Svevo, 'La coscienza', pp. 972.
[367] Svevo, 'Soggiorno londinese', pp. 895-896.
[368] Svevo, 'La coscienza', pp. 972.

Guido laughs, thinking this is one of Zeno's jokes, or a quotation from some book. But Zeno's humorous formula has deep contaminated roots, featuring memories of disease and wider universal contradictions, and the overall ability to embrace and 'humanise' a rather poisonous truth: that life, like disease, *is* unfair and harsh. This tension between impressions of science and literary reformulation, and between a philosophical *vero* of unbearable weight and the 'poetic' administration and transformation of that crushing truth, is a quintessential Leopardian modality – having in the *leggerezza apparente* of the *Operette* an example that, as hypothesised in the introduction, could spark Svevo's interest towards Leopardi's modern model of prose. A similar strategy is certainly perceivable in the 1826 reflections of the *Zibaldone*. The 'solution' for a universe of contradiction (where remedies cure and cures sicken, where gardens are hospitals, and where existence, to quote that initial passage again, 'per sua natura ed essenza propria e generale, è un'imperfezione, un'irregolarità, una mostruosità') is one of devastating wit and revitalising wisdom.[369] In a similar manner, when Zeno caresses his new-born train of thought, he also proceeds to look at the mystery of death, at the error of human existence, and at the unbearable burden of being with a novel, aerial lightness:

> Designata così, la vita mi parve tanto nuova che stetti a guardarla come se l'avessi veduta per la prima volta coi suoi corpi gassosi, fluidi e solidi. Se l'avessi raccontata a qualcuno che non vi fosse stato abituato e fosse perciò privo del nostro senso comune, sarebbe rimasto senza fiato dinanzi all'enorme costruzione priva di scopo. M'avrebbe domandato: 'Ma come l'avete sopportata?'. E, informatosi di ogni singolo dettaglio, da quei corpi celesti appesi lassù perché si vedano ma non si tocchino, fino al mistero che circonda la morte, avrebbe certamente esclamato: 'Molto originale!'.
> […]
> Ma, più che ci pensavo, più originale trovavo la vita. E non occorreva mica venire dal di fuori per vederla messa insieme in un modo tanto bizzarro. Bastava ricordare tutto quello che noi uomini dalla vita si è aspettato, per vederla tanto strana da arrivare alla conclusione che forse l'uomo vi è stato messo dentro per errore e che non vi appartiene.[370]

[369] *Zib*. 4174.
[370] Svevo, 'La coscienza', pp. 972-973.

Zeno's perspective does not deny that life is absurd and painful. In hindsight, no one would bear an existence of unmet hopes and crushed illusions, living as a human in an anti-anthropocentric universe. Yet, such an 'obscure vision' finds its silver lining in Zeno's 'original' perspective, which turns the horror of existing into almost a curiosity towards what looks like an absurd and sublime miracle. This thesis has already detected this hybrid perspective – looking at life retrospectively, and as something estranged and fascinating – in Leopardi's own contaminated writings of existence as quintessential *dolore*. For example, when the *Operette* combine poetry, philosophy, and medicine into a *Coro di morti*, looking back at life as a mysterious dimension, but still concluding that no one, who is aware of its pains, would go back to it ('Cosa arcana e stupenda / Oggi è la vita al pensier nostro, e tale / Qual de' vivi al pensiero / L'ignota morte appar. Come da morte / Vivendo rifuggia, così rifugge / Dalla fiamma vitale / Nostra ignuda natura').[371] A comparable tension – between knowing that life is both *dolore* and an 'original' temptation to nevertheless restart that journey – can be found throughout the Svevian *oeuvre*. For instance, Zeno remembers his obsession with anniversaries ('[c]erte date erano da me preferite per la concordanza delle cifre. […] "Primo giorno del primo mese del 1901"'), toying with the thought, even now that he knows that life is *malattia*, of taking that path again ('[a]ncor oggi mi pare che se quella data potesse ripetersi, io saprei iniziare una nuova vita').[372] According to Palmieri, this classic Svevian paradox finds a counterpart in Leopardi's philosophical prose: namely, in the 'XIII Pensiero', which describes the dynamics of superstition and returning hope intrinsic to that 'bella ed amabile illusione […] per la quale i dì anniversari di un avvenimento, che per verità non

[371] Leopardi, 'Dialogo di Federico Ruysch', p. 150.
[372] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 634.

ha a fare con essi più che con qualunque altro dì dell'anno, paiono avere con quello un'attinenza particolare'.[373] According to the critic, this quotation would allow one to detect, behind Zeno's playfulness, a rather 'inquietante […] profondita psicologica' in which 'i1 sorriso' is contaminated and 'si converte impercettibilmente nella serietà della riflessione esistenziale. E viceversa'.[374] If, as Palmieri argued, that *pensiero* truly identifies the 'fonte leopardiana' behind such a recurrent Svevian narrative, this thesis' comparative approach once again redirects to instances of literary filiation.[375] Specifically, Zeno's last reformulation leads us to stumble upon further Leopardian quotations in the Svevian *oeuvre* – quotations that, far from being a display of literary erudition, can now be elucidated through this thesis' notion of *malattia* as biological and existential impasse. This connection can be further cemented by looking at both writers' wider works. If Zeno lingers on that dilemma while playing with calendars, the *operetta* 'Dialogo di un venditore di almanacchi e di un passeggere' (1832) poses a comparable question (that is to say, is life *ingiusta e dura*, like Guido says, or *originale* enough to be lived again?) vis-à-vis a model of anniversaries and superstitious beliefs, also resolving

[373] As the *pensiero* continues: 'quasi un'ombra del passato risorga e ritorni sempre in quei giorni, e ci sia davanti: onde è medicato in parte il tristo pensiero dell'annullamento di ciò che fu, e sollevato il dolore di molte perdite, parendo che quelle ricorrenze facciano che ciò che è passato, e che più non torna, non sia spento nè perduto del tutto. Come trovandoci in luogo dove sieno accadute cose, o per sè stesse o verso di noi memorabili, e dicendo, qui avvenne questo, e qui questo, ci reputiamo, per modo di dire, più vicini a quegli avvenimenti, che quando ci troviamo altrove; così quando diciamo, oggi è l'anno, o tanti anni, accadde la tal cosa, ovvero la tale, questa ci pare, per dir così, più presente, o meno passata, che negli altri giorni. E tale immaginazione è sì radicata nell'uomo, che a fatica pare che si possa credere che l'anniversario sia così alieno dalla cosa come ogni altro dì: onde il celebrare annualmente le ricordanze importanti, sì religiose come civili, sì pubbliche come private, i dì natalizi e quelli delle morti delle persone care, ed altri simili, fu comune, ed è, a tutte le nazioni che hanno, ovvero ebbero, ricordanze e calendario. Ed ho notato, interrogando in tal proposito parecchi, che gli uomini sensibili, ed usati alla solitudine, o a conversare internamente, sogliono essere studiosissimi degli anniversari, e vivere, per dir così, di rimembranze di tal genere.' See Leopardi, 'Pensieri', pp. 291-292. This is cited and discussed in Palmieri, 'Leopardi in Svevo', p. 48.
[374] Ibid.
[375] Ibid.

that impasse with an example *leggerezza apparente*. The passerby asks the almanack seller, 'pure la vita è una cosa bella. Non è vero?'. And then he questions him:

> *Passeggere*
> Non tornereste voi a vivere cotesti vent'anni, e anche tutto il tempo passato, cominciando da che nasceste?
> […]
> *Venditore*
> Signor no davvero, non tornerei.
> *Passeggere*
> Oh che vita vorreste voi dunque? […]
> Una vita a caso, e non saperne altro avanti, come non si sa dell'anno nuovo?
> *Venditore*
> Appunto.
> *Passeggere*
> Così vorrei ancor io se avessi a rivivere, e così tutti. Ma questo è segno che il caso, fino a tutto quest'anno, ha trattato tutti male. E si vede chiaro che ciascuno è d'opinione che sia stato più o di più peso il male che gli è toccato, che il bene; se a patto di riavere la vita di prima, con tutto il suo bene e il suo male, nessuno vorrebbe rinascere. Quella vita ch'è una cosa bella, non è la vita che si conosce, ma quella che non si conosce; non la vita passata, ma la futura.[376]

This text, too, starts from the notion of *vita* as (mostly) *male* and develops into an unusual solution for the deadlock at hand – like Zeno, who recognizes that life is unbearable, yet also terribly interesting, but only if we could look at it with 'original' and inexperienced eyes. This affinity in literary scenarios and philosophical solutions can be confirmed and corroborated by an unpublished 'Prefazione' (1928) to Zeno's later adventures, where Svevo resolves the same life problem via a comparable perspective of ingenuity and originality.

> È l'ora in cui Mefistofele potrebbe apparirmi e propormi di ridiventare giovine. Non accetterei. Rifiuterei sdegnosamente. […] E gli abbandonerei l'anima mia solo se m'offrisse una cosa molto nuova, una cosa che mai conobbi perché non vi sono giorni della mia vita che vorrei rifare ora che so dove mi condussero.[377]

[376] Leopardi, 'Dialogo di un venditore d'almanacchi e di un passeggere', in *Operette*, pp. 225-226.
[377] Svevo, 'Prefazione', in *Romanzi*, p. 1664.

There is certainly strong affinity, in philosophy and formulation, between these passages of text, to the point that one would be tempted to identify another Leopardian quotation. We can confirm that this chapter's model of comparability can be seen to contaminate and elucidate other models of connection: by following comparable narratives, possible Leopardian quotations can be detected in the Svevian *oeuvre*, and precisely where both writers present narratives of *malattia* in its amplest implications. Nevertheless, whether the one above identifies a literary reference or not, the crucial aspect of this operation lies elsewhere. This chapter aimed to show that, irrespective of provable literary connections, Leopardi and Svevo enact comparable techniques of hybridization onto similar models of medicine and life, reformulating them into parallel solutions of fiction and philosophy. In other words, both writers adopt *comparable premises, methods, and conclusions*. Particularly, such conclusions propose models of 'original' lightness – like wisdom born out of despair, or a flower growing in a sick or unfertile land. The next section will go back to the medical roots of these discourses. Given that nineteenth-century Brunonian culture could provide both writers with highly translatable notions, models, and words, this section will hypothesise and draw possible bridges that could allow that original archetype to transform, travel, and intersect – probably in new forms and under new names – Svevo's own writings of life as a mysterious and original *malattia*. The comparability model employed so far will, then, be juxtaposed with a more distinctively medical investigation, claiming that, as it happened for Dr Hufeland, Leopardi's and Svevo's *comparable works* starts by reformulating *medically interconnected models.*

5. From Brown to Svevo – a bridge of reformulations

The previous sections underlined the translatability of Brunonian models onto the Svevian page. Brunonians blurred the ideas of 'health' and 'disease', relied on a physiology of 'degrees' and individual 'predispositions', and prescribed to alternate 'poisons' and 'counterpoisons' to find equilibrium in an overall unbalanced model of life. Brown's teachings find great potential in Svevo's fiction and philosophical writings – significantly more so, say, than Hufeland and his prolongevity model, with which the Svevian *oeuvre* nevertheless significantly interacted. This current section does not aim to argue that Svevo had read the *Elementa*, or that he had profound knowledge of Brown's life and works. Once the category of translatability is satisfied, the next step lies in hypothesising the possible bridge of 'allies', mediations, and reformulations allowing a writer to intersect a specific model. Overall, as Budge explains, a 'culture' like Brunonianism did not need to be *directly* known to infiltrate literary discourses:

> If the aura of scandal which surrounded [Brown's] medical career, and its ignominious end in reputed alcoholism and opium addiction, may well have dissuaded doctors from openly declaring themselves Brunonian […][,] Brunonian ideas had an enduring presence in nineteenth century thinking […] a powerful, if somewhat submerged influence on medical thought […] and popular consciousness […] with concepts such as 'morbid irritability', 'stimulus', and 'excitement' pervading account of disease.'[378]

An example of this, and one possible bridge connecting Svevo to the literary reformulations of Brunonianism can be found in *Louis Lambert* (1832) and *La peau de chagrin* (1831), two novels by Balzac, whose discourses of illness and medicine are

[378] Gavin Budge, 'Transatlantic Irritability. Brunonian sociology, America and mass culture in the nineteenth century', in *Scottish Medicine and Literary Culture, 1726-1832*, ed. by David E. Shuttleton and Megan J. Coyer (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), pp. 267-292 (p. 268).

modelled after the early nineteenth-century doctor François Broussais (1772-1838).[379] Although Broussais proposed a model of Brunonian derivation (life moving towards states of irritation, and needing to be brought back an intermediate state of normality), the doctor denied all associations with that school. Ackerknecht in particular explains how, for Broussais, 'Brown and his followers Rasori [and] Tommasini were particularly condemnable', as they preceded him 'in almost everything' – from Tomassini's theory of inflammation or *flogosi*, to Rasori's therapy of counter-stimulation and bloodletting.[380] If *Una vita* shows Alfonso's admiration for 'l'originalità' of the 'sistema filosofico' sustaining Louis Lambert's mental inflammation,[381] Contarini observes that *La peau de chagrin*, too, should be considered as playing a vital role in Svevo's narratives of physiological crisis and 'nervous excitability'.[382] For example, Svevo could see in Dr Brisset – Balzac's parody of Broussais ('[l]e grand docteur' for whom 'l'état normal ou les anomalies délétères s'expliquent par des causes évidentes' and curing 'irritation' and 'névrose' with abundance of 'sangsues')[383] – a model for the unreliable Dr Coprosich of *La coscienza*, who prescribes the use of *mignatte* on Zeno's maddening father.[384] Whether or not this is the source at play, such narratives of 'nervous excitability' are detectable throughout the Svevian *oeuvre* – from Alfonso's fevers and Amalia's fires to Ada's burnout – and it is certainly this invasive and unreliable kind of doctor that are fictionalised by Svevo. Let us now move away from fiction and look at the scientific

[379] In his classic study on Balzac, Curtius connects this writer's interests for new theories and in general for 'quel gruppo di fenomeni coi quali un pubblico interessato alle scienze naturali, al magnetismo e alla fisiologia usava […] passare il tempo' to the innovative models 'sulle "eccitazioni" dell'organismo' onto which 'due medici come Broussais e Rasori fondarono le loro teorie fisiologiche e patologiche'. See Ernst R. Curtius, *Balzac*, trans. by Vincenzo Loriga (Milan: Mondadori, 1969), pp. 75; 161.
[380] Erwin H. Ackerknecht, 'Broussais or a forgotten medical revolution', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 27.4 (July-August, 1953), 320-343 (p. 332).
[381] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 100.
[382] Contarini, *La coscienza prima di Zeno*, p. 49.
[383] Honoré de Balzac, *La Peau de chagrin* (Paris: Flammarion, 1971), pp. 274-275.
[384] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 674.

reformulations that could allow Svevo to encounter Brunonian models. In so doing, this section will elaborate on some new findings from the *Archivio Fonda-Savio* of Trieste, which conserves what remains of Svevo's library after his house was bombed in the Second World War. In detecting the many 'medical cultures' potentially *in nuce* in Svevo's works of contamination, Contarini claims that Svevo could encounter Brunonian models, and even read Brown's name, in a manual on the interrelation between physical and psychological conditions: namely, Antongiuseppe Pari's 1882 *La psicologia scientifica*.[385] Contarini has the merit of being, so far, the only scholar to connect Svevo and Brunonianism. However, her study only briefly lingers on this model, making it also a matter of philologically proven 'medical sources', and without exploring Pari's whole manual against the medical narratives of *La coscienza*. According to the scholar, the booklet only contains a passing paragraph on Brown, which is described as having been underlined in pencil by Svevo. This is not exactly what results from my own visualization of Svevo's copy. While Svevo did underline several chapters of *La psicologia scientifica*, that *specific* section remains untouched. This thesis agrees with Contarini's thesis that '[la] fisiologia di Brown […] risulta definitivamente acquisita' by Svevo. However, her claim probably finds support in what her study does not report.[386] First of all, Svevo could have read that passage of text, and even found it interesting, without feeling the urge to underline it. With only sixty-eight pages, Pari's manual is a quick read and it carries many

[385] Silvia Contarini, *La coscienza prima di Zeno*, p. 50. Although Contarini refers to *La psicologia scientifica* as a whole, what Svevo owned was in fact only one section of Pari's study; namely, the *Parte 7 ed ultima*, which was published in a separate booklet. See Dott. Antongiuseppe Pari, *La psicologia scientifica; Parte 7 ed ultima: Applicazioni utili alla zoologia, all'uomo, alla medicina, alla sociologia, alle scuole, della legge del psichico perfezionamento* (Udine: Bardusco, 1882). All the quotations cited here are taken from Svevo's personal copy, 'Su concessione dell'Università degli Studi di Trieste – smaTs – Archivio degli Scrittori e della cultura regionale'.
[386] Contarini, *La coscienza prima di Zeno*, p. 50.

of (what are likely to be) Svevo's handwritten markings.[387] Furthermore, Svevo did not need to see Brown's name or see his theory expounded in *that specific paragraph* to appreciate the overall translatability of that model and, as Contarini argues, to incorporate it into his own reflections. Pari's discussion on Brunonian models is all but a brief mention. Celebrating the originality of that model, and specifically in its Italian declination, Pari devotes most of the sixth chapter ('*Capo VI*') to the reformulations of Brunonianism. Let us look at these passages, considering their potential for translatability onto the Svevian page:

> Che vivere, e salute, e malattia sien stati *dinamici* la è una nozione antichissima, ricavata però alla buona. *Motus*, dicevano gli antichi, *est causa caloris*; *ergo motus est causa vitae*. Ma il moto è uno stato dinamico, dunque il *vivere* è uno stato dinamico, tanto proceda con atti concordi cioè di *salute*, oppure proceda con movimenti sconcordati, cioè di *malattia*.[388]

This chapter saw how Zeno, in his second reformulation of early nineteenth-century models, claims that 'bisogna moversi' in order to escape the poisons of life and turn them into original remedies ('solo correndo si può sottrarsi ai primi e giovarsi degli altri').[389] It is clear that Pari's observation on the dynamic essence of life, and of its fluctuations between the states of *salute* and *malattia*, could identify a translatable model of physiology for Svevo. It is also clear, from a careful reading of that manual, that Pari's model identifies a reformulation of Brunonian notions and ideas. Pari proceeds to outline a short history of 'la scienza dei movimenti, o dinamica', lamenting, however, how this science 'è ancora […] in stato d'alchimia, onde il medico si trovò costretto ad

[387] What remains of Svevo's library was moved by Svevo's daughter, Letizia, into her husband Antonio Fonda Savio's library, and can be now found in the *Archivio Fonda-Savio* of Trieste. Although *La psicologia scientifica* carries the pen-drafted name 'Ettore' on the first pages, we cannot know whether the pencil marks left across the whole works were, in fact, drafted by Svevo himself.
[388] Pari, *La psicologia scientifica*, p. 27. Italics in the original.
[389] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 958.

almanaccare sulla salute e sulla malattia […] Fece egli una catenella di tutti questi studi, e ne trasse un criterio sul nucleo abbracciato'.[390] According to Pari, the forgotten *father* of this promising model of life is precisely Dr John Brown:

> Devesi allo scozzese Brown l'avervi fatto spiccare razionalmente l'indole dinamica del nucleo. Vita, disse ei, è moto d'una forza bisognevole di pungoli a metterla e mantenerla in moto, perciò occorron cause, o stimoli, ad eccittarla [sic]. Eccitata passa in moto, od eccitamento, o vita, le cui manifestazioni ne danno i sintomi, variabili di *grado*. Nel grado *medio* pose lo stato vitale fisiologico, nel *troppo* e nello *scarso* eccitamento pose gli stati patologici. Tale *eccitabilità*, era alla fin fine una *proprietà* della forza vitale, non la forza in sè.[391]

This is the passage that Contarini describes as having been underlined by Svevo. Having considered words and the ideas through which Pari introduces Brown, we do not need the book to bear (further) handwritten markings to claim that Svevo himself had *both means and motive* to encounter and reformulate models of Brunonian physiology into his work. In line with the 'dynamic' model above, Zeno describes pathological states as either due to *troppa* or *scarsa* dynamicity, labelling *salute* as nothing more than the cessation of this movement – he calls it 'una sosta', in fact.[392] It is also interesting how Pari highlights the connection between 'excitability' and notions of vitalism, hence making clear that the dark and dynamic model of Brunonianism could unproblematically combine and coexist with, say, narratives of nineteenth-century experiments in prolongevity, or with the symptoms of Basedow's disease. In his contaminated works, Svevo intersects and reformulates manifestations of vitalistic doctrine (Neo-Hippocratism, Brunonianism) that are historically interconnected to those that Leopardi, himself, had fictionalised into his

[390] Pari, *La psicologia scientifica*, p. 27.
[391] Ibid.
[392] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 958.

work – furthermore, Pari could identify one of the tesserae, in a vaster mosaic of reformulations, allowing Svevo to appreciate the translatability of Leopardi's contemporary medicine. For example, when explaining that the 'aspetto dinamico visto da Brown bisognava concretarlo' into a 'buona psicologia', Pari underlines that it was the flamboyant reformist Giovanni Rasori, who 'proclamò rispetto all'eccitabilità vitale, darsi anche *controstimoli*'.[393] Unfortunately, because of the excessive abstraction of Rasori's ideas, as well as the conservativism and scarce international visibility of Italian scientists, 'la scoperta rasoriana, […] sotto l'urto d'altre correnti d'idee […] perdette […] l'acquistato interesse'.[394] This, according to Pari, constitutes a reason for great shame for the scientific community, as not only did Rasori's *controstimolo* reformulate and even improve Brown's original theory, but it also generated a fresh perspective of the pathological cycles of the mind:

> La psiche non acquistò importanza notevole di *causa* fenomenologica se non nell'eccitamento rasoriano. Quivi le psichiche *esultanze* dichiaronsi *stimolanti*, ed i psichici avvilimenti, o patemi d'animo, dichiaronsi *controstimolanti*.[395]

Similarly, Zeno reformulates models comparable to nineteenth-century Brunonian *controstimoli* into an original designation of *le perversioni psichiche* and a potential therapy of alternating *veleni* and *contravveleni*. The subterranean presence, in the fluctuations of Zeno's mental economy, of a similar medical model is further confirmed by another therapy featured in *La coscienza*. More specifically, to counteract his nervous ups and downs, Zeno finds himself taking the 'abbondante consolazione di medicinali' prescribed by Dr George M. Beard (1839-1883), one of the fathers of American

[393] Pari, *La psicologia scientifica*, pp. 27-28.
[394] Pari, *La psicologia scientifica*, p. 28.
[395] Pari, *La psicologia scientifica*, p. 30.

psychiatry and author of the best-seller *American Nervousness* (1881**)**: a book that Svevo knew either by direct reading or through the mediation of Dr Mantegazza's similarly titled *Il secolo nevrosico* (1887).[396] Dr Beard, like many late psychiatrists, did not acknowledge his debt to (outdated) early nineteenth-century experiments in psychiatry. However, as Guthmüller explains, his model is profoundly rooted in vitalistic doctrine, proposing an 'economy of vital forces', or of 'nervous excitability', that this thesis explored in discussing Hufeland and Brown:

> Un esempio paradigmatico di quanto fosse centrale la questione relativa al bilancio delle forze vitali nella psicopatologia alla fine stessa dell'Ottocento e del fatto che qui la salute psichica, molto tempo dopo il congedo ufficiale da una *vis vitalis*, venga trattata in categorie che aspirano a fare un uso parsimonioso dell'energia, è costituito dalla concezione della nevrastenia di George Miller Beard. Nel 1881 il medico ed elettroterapeuta nel suo scritto che ha fatto epoca, *American Nervousness*, scrive che le singole persone alla fine del secolo sono provviste di un capitale sempre più scarso di eccitabilità e di forza dei nervi e pertanto corrono presto il rischio di soffrire di una 'nervous bankruptcy', una bancarotta nervosa. In Italia il popolare medico e igienista Paolo Mantegazza riprende questa connessione tra l'economia, l'energetica e il vitalismo nel suo scritto *Il secolo nevrosico*, apparso nel 1887 e sostiene da parte sua che gli individui nevrastenici si contraddistinguano perché non si trovano nella condizione di utilizzare in modo economico la loro forza vitale: sono superficiali e spreconi, consumano la loro 'forza vitale' in brevissimo tempo e perciò muoiono di una morte precoce.[397]

Beard certainly identifies another mediator between early nineteenth energetics and Svevo's creative work of medical fictionalization. But there is more. Though difficult to prove with categorical certainty, several scholars suggest that Beard's historical definition of *neurasthenia* as 'lack of nerve-force' has its origins in Brown's description of *asthenia*, or under-stimulated 'excitability', and its treatment through continuous use of drugs. As Zeno claims, 'mi capitò in mano la celebre opera del dottor

[396] Svevo, p. 1064.
[397] Guthmüller, 'Il sonno come paradosso vitalistico', p. 70.

Beard sulla nevrastenia. Seguii il suo consiglio e cambiai di medicina ogni otto giorni'.[398] Through Pari's own rewriting of Brunonian doctors, theories, and discoveries, this thesis can hypothesise and uncover a clandestine bridge of later nineteenth-century Brunonian mediators within Svevo's writings of illness. In *La psicologia scientifica*, Pari also places Dr Rudolph Virchow (1821-1902) – the father of cellular pathology, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter as acknowledging the 'earthquake' of the Brunonian revolution – amongst those who studied the dynamic spectrum of health. A pioneer in the microscopic study of tissues, Virchow discovered that a cell's nucleus can ambivalently, but entirely naturally, develop into either health or disease. Although Virchow attempted to downplay the 'Brunonian essence' of his discovery, his research, too, according to Tsouyopoulos, reformulated that 'idea of an active, self-reproducing and self-defending power mediating the organism's general reaction', which, since Brown, 'never ceased to resonate in German medical thinking'. Tsoyopoulos additionally argues that 'Rudolph Virchow, especially when he was trying to formulate the general principles of cellular pathology' succeeded in concretizing what the greatest personalities of early nineteenth-century Brunonianism could only speculate; namely, an innovative 'pathological method, the understanding and application of which distinguished doctors from other practitioners.'[399] Thanks to Pari's 1882 book, Svevo's curiosity for Virchow and his

[398] Svevo, 'La coscienza', pp. 1063-1064. On the Brunonian roots of the concept of neurasthenia, see Janet Oppenheim, *'Shattered Nerves': Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 94. See also William Bynum, 'Neurasthenia', *The Lancet*, 361.9370 (17 May 2003), 1753.

[399] The scholar shows how Virchow's writings adopted both the ideas and the language of Brunonian theory: 'he wrote for example in his article "Alter und neuer Vitalismus": "In der letzten Zeit hat man sich mehr an die functionelle Reizbarkeit (*irritabilitas*) gehalten…; ich habe daneben auch die nutritive und reproductive Reizbarkeit oder Erregbarkeit (*excitabiltas*) als eine mehr allgemein vitale Eigenschaft wieder zu begründen gesucht". See Tsouyopoulos, 'The influence of John Brown's ideas in Germany', in *Brunonianism in Britain and Europe*, pp. 63-74 (p. 73). Tsouyopoulos expanded on this subject in Tsouyopoulos, *Andreas Röschlaub und die Romantische Medizin: Die philosophischen Grundlagen der modernen Medizin* (Stuttgart: Fischer, 1982).

undercover Brunonian meditation could have sparked before composing *La coscienza*. Whether or not this is the case, it is certain that Svevo continued to study Virchow after finishing the novel. According to Cepach and Volpato, Svevo had underlined the chapter 'L'opera di Rodolfo Virchow' in one of his histories of medicine; namely, in Dr Arturo Castiglioni's (1874-1953) *Il volto d'Ippocrate* (1925).[400] Here, Svevo could detect the fundamental similarity between Virchow's theory and what Pari had described as the revolution of Brunonian medicine: namely, the continuity between 'health' and 'disease', and the fundamental equation between life and disease. As Castiglioni explains, it is thanks to Virchow that:

> L'organismo umano appare quale veramente è, uno stato perfettamente organizzato di cellule innumerevoli […] in rapporti fissi ma soggetti a continue alterazioni; e, costituendo queste appunto l'essenza del morbo, fu risolto il problema che aveva affaticato le menti di tutti i medici da Ippocrate in poi. La cellula che porta la vita porta anche la malattia, perché come non v'è la vita all'infuori di essa così al di fuori non v'è la malattia e la malattia non è altro che vita, sotto circostanze differenti.[401]

Like Beard, Virchow represents another unwilling, or at least covert, mediator between the early nineteenth-century Brunonian gospel and *La coscienza*'s characteristic discourse of *vita* as *malattia*. We can conclude that Svevo's later interest for Virchow allows us to confirm that his works, directly or indirectly, interacted with models deriving from the reformulation, manipulation, and expropriation of Brown's 'original theory' and 'obscure' declinations of vitalism. Of course, Svevo could have come to know of John Brown through other channels. Drafting a comprehensive list of the doctors able to act as a bridge between Svevo and Brunonianism would be an impossible endeavour. This is partly because we do not have access to Svevo's whole collection of books due to Svevo's

[400] Cepach and Volpato, *Alla peggio andrò in biblioteca*, pp. 121; 257-258.
[401] Arturo Castiglioni, *Il volto di Ippocrate: Istorie di medici e medicine d'altri tempi* (Milan: Società Editrice Unitas, 1925), pp. 354-355.

house having been bombed in the Second World War. Furthermore, the pervasiveness of Brown's ideas in the nineteenth century does not always allow for such clear medical distinctions. But this thesis, as Rousseau strongly puts it, does not need such 'historical fussiness' to argue that a Svevo-Brown bridge can be imagined, traced and, then, used to cast light on Svevo's writings.[402] This chapter focused on a specific set of contaminated literary texts, namely the 1826 passages of the *Zibaldone* and the 'reformulations of Basedow' in *La coscienza* – arguing that historically interconnected models lead both writers to comparable solutions in fiction, philosophy, and even to original 'therapeutic directions'. This model, often adopted throughout the chapter, has also occasionally allowed us to identify Leopardian references in the Svevian *oeuvre*, casting new light on quotations that are often considered by scholars as lacking wider and interdisciplinary contexts. Yet, overall, this chapter's primary methodologies are identified by the comparative approach employed in the first section and in the medical one adopted in this later part. The comparability between Leopardi's and Svevo's discourses lead this chapter to confirm the translatability of Brunonian models onto the Svevian page, too, and to hypothesise, via archival work and by (partially) untangling a mangrove of nineteenth-century medical reformulations, new paths and texts that could allow Svevo to encounter and integrate Brunonian models. Medically interconnected models, in both writers, are transformed into parallel universes of fiction and philosophy, expanding on a shared *philosopheme* of life as instability, absurdity, and incurability: in other words, on an 'original' notion of life as *malattia*. The final chapter of this thesis, building upon the results and perspectives developed so far, will return to the 'origin' of the Svevo-Leopardi connection, and finally explore models of 'life and illness' in both writers' extensive,

[402] Rousseau, 'Literature and Medicine', p. 158.

contradictory, and profoundly elusive *storie del genere umano*. In so doing, we will not adopt *all the three strategies* employed in this thesis, abandoning that of historically interconnected 'medical cultures' and only touching upon the potential Leopardian intertextualities within the Svevian *oeuvre*. In order to cast light on the confusing presence of Leopardi in Svevo's narratives of evolution, from his philosophical essays to the end of *La coscienza*, we will choose to 'expand' our model of comparability by looking at both common models transformed into common narratives, and at comparable 'oscillations of discourse' on a larger dilemma over nature, *salute*, and *malattia*.

IV

More than one *storia del genere umano*
Comparable Models and Creative Tensions

Between *Senilità* and the composition of *La coscienza*, Svevo intensifies his experiments with literature and science. Although Svevo had claimed to be done with the 'perils' of writing, this laboratory generates, in fact, important solutions for his fictional works. The fable 'La corruzione dell'anima' perfectly exemplifies this. As Minghelli explains, this text 'combines the oldest story of origin – the book of Genesis – with its modern day [sic] counterpart – the Darwinian theory of evolution',[403] which Svevo had reformulated and problematized throughout his career. Let us look at the elements of this contamination:

> Il signor Iddio aveva conchiusa la sua opera di creazione. Stancatosi dell'immane lavoro riposò dopo di aver detto: Io riposerò ma la creazione continuerà a ricreare se stessa. Io diedi all'essere animato un'anima e questa continuerà l'opera mia.
>
> […] Le grandi e le piccole anime gridavano malcontente degli organismi in cui erano state rinchiuse e subito risultò che l'anima era in primo luogo malcontento, malcontento [sic] intanto di tutto il creato che pur era stato allora ordinato, di tutte le cose non accessibili o poco utili e perciò di se stesso […]. E lentamente causa tale malcontento l'organismo si trasformava.[404]

Il signor Iddio appears and disappears, acting as a 'mythological persona' for natural forces. In fact, it is *malcontento* that moves the *anima* of things. This makes il *creato ordinato* an insufferable cage – with the souls yelling and pushing against suffocating

[403] Giuliana Minghelli, 'Between Darwinian Origins and Modernist Ends: Svevo's Allegory of Symbiosis', in *In the Shadow of the Mammoth: Italo Svevo and the Emergence of Modernism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), pp. 15-45 (p. 18).
[404] Svevo, 'La corruzione dell'anima', in *Teatro e saggi*, pp. 884-886 (p. 884).

boundaries. However, as Svevo continues, that *malcontento* also allows organisms to evolve. Some animals developed 'organi d'offesa, zanne, artigli e corna', while 'altri per assaltare o per difendersi si fecero velocissimi e appresero anche a volare'.[405] They either grew fur to endure long winters, or feathers to migrate into new climates. Once they adapted to their environment, the 'ordered creation' looked almost at peace – with one exception:

> il malcontento e torvo uomo. Imperfettissimo non ebbe le ali e neppure quattro mani come i quadrumani né quattro piedi come le fiere ma sempre due mani e due piedi soli, questi per portar lentamente quelle tuttavia male armate. Animale disgraziatissimo.
> […] Questo suo malcontento lo faceva andare e l'oggi doloroso s'illuminava della dimane incerta, imprecisabile ma luminosa di speranza.[406]

Humans do not evolve in peaceful or harmonic manners. Instead, they keep their restlessness, in store for the possibilities of tomorrow. As Lavagetto argues, 'non serve una capacità di registrazione molto alta per accorgersi che Svevo riecheggia […] una serie di temi e modelli culturali', even though 'li manipola liberamente, usa loro violenza, li obbliga ai connubi più inusitati'. For example, the 'dichiarata' presence 'di Darwin' identifes a general framework 'sui cui si innestano poi le singole variazioni – a volte svianti, eccessive, infedeli'.[407] Bertoni, too, claims that 'l'evoluzionismo' identifies an 'orizzonte mobile, dinamico, frastagliato, sempre esposto […] alle contaminazioni' – to the point that 'questi scritti, paradossalmente' can be considered amongst the 'meno darwiniani di Svevo'.[408] Indeed, this chapter will not particularly focus on reformulations and manipulations of Darwinian theory. Much has been written on this important topic of Svevo studies, investigating both his Darwinian models and readings, and adopting

[405] Svevo, 'La corruzione', p. 885.
[406] Svevo, 'La corruzione', pp. 885-886.
[407] Lavagetto, 'Storia del genere umano', pp. 176-177.
[408] Bertoni, 'Apparato genetico e commento', pp. 1619; 1665.

models of Darwinism to cast light on his fictional plots.[409] We will focus, instead, on a more elusive presence within this fragmented horizon: namely, that of Leopardi, his *Storia del genere umano*, and his own 'narratives of evolution'. We use this latter term provocatively. Leopardi operated before the birth and development of Darwinian theory. Although scholars have investigated the (more of less 'diffracted') connection between Leopardi and pre-Darwinian authors, this chapter will not explore this specific path of reformulation, either.[410] This is not to say that this is an element of minor interest, or an unproductive line of research. However, delving into the 'ocean' of nineteenth-century Darwinian reformulations and, then, using these to further connect Leopardi and Svevo

[409] In general, for Svevo's Darwinian readings, Bertoni reports that 'non è affatto facile identificare le fonti precise a cui può aver[vi] attinto […]. Ad attestare in modo esplicito la sua lettura di Darwin ci sono solo alcuni accenni in tre lettere alla moglie, una non datata del 1897 […] una del 14 maggio 1898' and 'una del 15 maggio 1898 […]. Di fatto, l'interesse' for Darwin 'risale ai primi anni della sua formazione culturale, anche se non è facile, come sempre, distinguere […] tra lo studio diretto della teoria e la sua assimilazione mediata'. Furthermore, Bertoni's commentary summarises Svevo's creative reformulations of Darwinian theory. Alongside the idea of *malcontento*, which has no real counterpart in Darwin, 'il modo in cui Svevo descrive l'arresto evolutivo degli organismi più semplici non ha riscontri nella teoria darwiniana', and even the idea of an organism *cristallizzato* (this is the term recurrently used by Svevo, amongst other things, to signal the paralysis of one's transformative potential) is, in fact, 'profondamente antidarwiniana'. Nor is there any trace, in Darwin, that it is, in fact, the 'anima, felicemente soppressa dagli animali […] a rendere virtualmente infinite le potenzialità evolutive dell'uomo', turning the human organism into an 'instabile and precaria posizione eretta che per Darwin costituisce il presupposto della sua superiorità, e che per Svevo è invece una delle stimmate della sua fragilità e della sua malattia'. This chapter will compare several of these variations, between new models of physiology and narratives of 'disease', to Leopardi's own models of *storia del genere umano*. Furthermore, this difference from traditional Darwinian theory can be also found in the essay 'L'uomo e la teoria darwiniana' – another contaminated piece that this chapter will discuss vis-à-vis Leopardi's narratives. As Lavagetto explains, in this latter essay, 'Svevo abbandona Darwin su un punto molto importante: lo accetta finchè si resta' within the evolution of one single species, but seems to disagree with the idea that a species can evolve into a different one (as Svevo writes, '[i]nsomma l'uomo fu sempre uomo ed ebbe un'anima; poté perfezionarsi ma non assurgere ad uomo da stadii inferiori'). See Bertoni, 'Apparato genetico e commento', pp. 1620-1621; 1667-1668; Lavagetto, 'Storia del genere umano', pp. 177-178; Svevo, 'L'uomo e la teoria darwiniana', in *Teatro e saggi*, pp. 848-850 (pp. 848-849). More on Darwin in Svevo, between readings and reformulations of ideas into original amalgams, see Sandro Maxia, *Lettura di Italo Svevo* (Padua: Liviana Editore, 1965), pp. 94-101. The Darwinian recurrences in Svevo are catalogued in Alberto Cavaglion, 'Darwin, Charles', in *Italo Svevo* (Milan: Mondadori, 2000), pp. 48-53. For wider fictionalizations of that model, see the aforementioned Minghelli, 'Between Darwinian Origins and Modernist Ends', pp. 15-45.

[410] In particular, the triangulation between Leopardi, Erasmus Darwin – whom we encountered amongst Brunonian reformulators in chapter III – and Charlies Darwin has been explored in Antonella Anedda Angioy, *Le piante di Darwin e i topi di Leopardi* (Novara: Interlinea, 2022). For more on Leopardi and Erasmus, see Vittorio Gatto, 'L'"Aspasia" di Leopardi e gli amori delle piante di Erasmus Darwin', *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana*, 170.549 (1993), 87-92; Anna Clara Bova, 'Leopardi e la "Zoonomia"', pp. 477-491.

would require a more independent manner of investigation: certainly more extensive than this chapter allows. Furthermore, the Leopardian presences in Svevo's laboratory of contamination are too numerous, too elusive, and – as we will argue – too creatively 'ambivalent' to be left undiscussed or treated lightly by this comparative thesis. This chapter will identify, compare, and contextualize elements often undetected, or unexplained, in previous studies.

Lavagetto was the first to appreciate the elusiveness of Leopardi's presence in Svevian writing. Contaminated texts – such as 'La corruzione dell'anima', but also 'L'uomo e la teoria darwiniana' and 'Ottimismo e pessimismo' – could be 'sovrappo[sti], incastra[ndone] i frammenti […] senza preoccuparsi degli spigoli eventuali', and recognising 'le grandi linee di una *Storia del genere umano* [the opening text of *Operette morali*] secondo Italo Svevo'.[411] Lavagetto hints that this 'juxtaposition' is what allows one to 'inquadra[re] l'ultima pagina di Zeno' and its puzzling solution for the *malattie* of humanity. This chapter aims to expand on these suggestions. We will accordingly propose an *expansive* modality of comparison, starting with familiar techniques of comparability (parallel physiological models and parallel scenarios) and gradually come to explore the ampler 'tensions' interweaving within that *storia*.

Specifically, we will start with 'La corruzione' and connect it to the principles and fictional developments in the *Operette*. This will allow us to clarify and contextualise references to Leopardi already detected by scholars in Svevo. Furthermore, novel elements of connection will emerge, too: namely, a model of inventions or *ordigni* leading to analogous fictionalizations. Then, we will proceed by expanding on that model, moving beyond individual texts, and considering the general 'movement' of both writers'

[411] Lavagetto, 'Storia del genere umano', pp. 171-172.

narratives of adaptation and illness. Despite the *spigoli* potentially encountered in this 'freer' modality of comparison, this operation will prove instrumental in revealing that, in fact, comparable problems and ambivalences inhabit both writers' discourses of *salute* and *malattia* throughout their works. In terms of techniques and modalities of investigation, this chapter will assume the hybridity of its subject matter; contaminating the *Zibaldone* perspectives with the darker visions of the *Operette*, and Svevian essays with the ambivalences of *La coscienza*. Let us start with a model of comparability between similar principles and developments.

1.1 'Storia del genere umano' – comparable models and fictional scenarios

In 'La corruzione', Svevo introjects and reformulates the principle of *malcontento*. Bertoni explains that while Darwin, himself, admitted that animals can feel some degree of dissatisfaction, this occurs merely 'occasionalmente, quando […] si produce un conflitto morale tra gli istinti egoistici e gli innati istinti sociali'.[412] Further to this, Vacante observes that *malcontento* identifies a model allowing Svevo to expand on a fundamentally painful perspective on existence; namely, one stemming from the 'contraddizione di fondo' between the soul and its limited circumstances.[413] Any reader of Leopardi would recognize there the broad strokes of the *teoria del piacere*. In a *Zibaldone* note from 1821, Leopardi explains that:

> la insufficienza di tutti i piaceri a riempierci l'animo, e la tendenza nostra verso un infinito che non comprendiamo, forse proviene da una cagione semplicissima, e più materiale che spirituale. L'anima umana (e così tutti gli esseri viventi) desidera sempre essenzialmente,

[412] Bertoni, 'Apparato genetico e commento', p. 1667.
[413] Vacante, 'Favole, apologhi, aforismi', p. 119.

> e mira unicamente, benchè sotto mille aspetti, al piacere […]. Questo desiderio e questa tendenza non ha limiti, perch'è ingenita o congenita coll'esistenza […] ma la natura delle cose porta che tutto esista limitatamente e tutto abbia confini, e sia circoscritto.[414]

This clash is described as 'pena, e una specie di travaglio abituale dell'anima'[415] – one that is particularly felt by the *anima* of humans. The theory above is explored and problematized throughout the Leopardian *oeuvre* – with reformulations into fields as diverse as aesthetics (famously, the production of mental illusions and poetic thinking), but also of physiology and natural history. An exemplar mythologization of this can be identified in 'Storia del genere umano' (1824). As he opens the *Operette*, Leopardi places some impotent divinity at the origin of creation. Generally speaking, the Leopardian *Giove* cannot soothe the 'mala contentezza' and 'mutazione' of the human race, when the latter realizes 'che la terra, ancorché grande, aveva termini certi, e non così larghi che fossero incomprensibili'.[416] We can begin to suggest that Leopardi, too, fictionalizes models of *anima* and *malcontento* into vaster narratives of transformation. Of course, scholars have pointed out that Svevo did not need Leopardi for this kind of reformulation.[417] Lavagetto underlines that:

> il motivo, peraltro non originale e di larga circolazione, della presenza umana come elemento dissonante nell'armonia e nell'ordine del mondo […] [e] il tema della 'mala contentezza' […] degli uomini che li spinge a non accettare mai la propria sorte […] mescolati con altri, con altre suggestioni, potrebbero apparire più come echi diffusi e non precisamente localizzabili, che come un debito preciso.[418]

[414] *Zib.* 165.
[415] *Zib*. 172.
[416] Leopardi, 'Storia del genere umano', in *Operette*, pp. 59-71 (pp. 59-60).
[417] For example, as Vacante argues, similar narratives could be found in obvious sources – for example, in Schopenhauer, the philosopher of Svevo's formative years. See Vacante, 'Favole, apologhi, aforismi', p. 119.
[418] Lavagetto, 'Storia del genere umano', p. 171.

Several models could be simultaneously at play, here. Though it does not necessarily make sense to unravel them – if not to merely please philological curiosities that the Svevian discourse recurrently eludes via interpolations, ambivalences, and variations on 'familiar' frameworks. However, this thesis has confirmed that it is precisely on the path of contamination and fictionalization that the elusive Leopardian presence can better be revealed and explained in Svevo. In fact, as Lavagetto specifies, there is 'qualcosa che richiama in modo più netto e definito le *Operette*' – that is to say, a common *quid* of 'materiali desunti insieme da mitologia e "scienza"' interwoven to expand on ideas of life as instability and *malattia*.[419] We can follow parallel discourses in the *Zibaldone*, and, in so doing, cast light on presences detected in 'La corruzione dell'anima'.

One year after his *teoria del piacere*, Leopardi reformulates that model into novel directions. In *Zibaldone* 2410-2412, Leopardi outlines that the 'infelicità del vivente' is one and the same with 'l'attività dell'anima', and that this 'forza ed attività' identifies what makes an organism 'conformabile' – 'anzi,' Leopardi concludes, 'non è altro che conformabilità'.[420] Leopardi proceeds, then, to draw distinctions between the transformation of humans and that of other animals. Because '[l]'uomo […] è naturalmente provveduto' with that painful force 'sopra ogni altro animale', humanity is also more likely to sabotage its condition, 'di secolo in secolo' becoming 'più inevitabilmente infelice' and its '*corpo* […] *scaduto da quel ch'era*'.[421] These notes are instrumental in clarifying the connection with Svevo's own contaminated narratives. In 'La corruzione', he, too, reports that animals had dispelled their unhappiness in circumscribed manners of transformation; humans, on the other hand, had preserved that

[419] Lavagetto, 'Storia del genere umano', p. 172.
[420] *Zib*. 2410-2412.
[421] *Zib*. 2412-2413. Italics in the original.

energy throughout the ages, together with a greater ability to adapt and be corrupted.[422] In exploring cases of intertextuality throughout the Svevian *oeuvre*, Spignoli isolates parallel narratives in both 'La corruzione' and the contaminations of *Operette morali*.[423] More specifically, the Svevian man – 'non ebbe le ali e neppure quattro mani come i quadrumani né quattro piedi come le fiere ma sempre due mani e due piedi soli, questi per portar lentamente quelle tuttavia male armate'[424] – is interpreted as a borrowing from Leopardi's 'Dialogo di un cavallo e un bue' (circa 1820-1821). In this *operetta*, which fictionalizes scenarios of extinction for humans, Leopardi describes 'uomini' as 'bestie a quattro zampe come siamo noi altri, ma stavano ritti e camminavano con due sole come fanno gli uccelli, e coll'altre due s'aiutavano a strapazzare la gente'.[425] Of course, Spignoli has many reasons to propose a model of literary filiation, here. Even though the *operetta* in question is an unfinished and unpublished piece of Leopardian fiction, this was certainly not difficult for Svevo to find. For example, this appears in the list of 'Leopardian titles' hypothesised by this thesis in the *Biblioteca Civica* of Trieste.[426] Furthermore, Svevo could have come to read and/or possess this text independently. Overall, although we are not denying the possibility of this intertextuality, we can certainly better understand this presence via a model of comparability between

[422] Svevo explains how animals, unlike humans, exchanged their soul force for physical adaptation; yet, in so doing, they also put a brake on more imaginative, expansive, and unstable manners of existing ('[l]a zampa del leone è un ordigno magnifico ma non potrà mai più convertirsi' and 'anche la scimmia che sa passare di ramo in ramo […] non potrà più accogliere le suggestioni dell'anima di camminare eretta in un equilibrio labile'). As we will see here and throughout the rest of this chapter, a quintessential case of 'unstable' and 'transformative' existence is identified by Svevo's and Leopardi's *malcontento uomo*. See, Svevo, 'La corruzione', p. 885.
[423] Spignoli, 'Tra Freud e Leopardi: modelli intertestuali', pp. 132-133.
[424] Svevo, 'La corruzione', pp. 885-886.
[425] The unpublished draft of this *operetta* can be found in Leopardi, 'Dialogo di un cavallo e un bue', in *Operette morali*, ed. by Laura Melosi, 10th edn (Milan: Mondadori, 2020), pp. 619-622 (p. 619). This section is also discussed in Spignoli, 'Tra Freud e Leopardi: modelli intertestuali', p. 133.
[426] See Leopardi, 'Dialogo di un cavallo e di un bue', in *Scritti vari inediti*, pp. 313-316 (p. 313). The full list of the books – which, we should iterate, is entirely hypothetical – is found in the introduction of this thesis.

physiological notions and narrations of 'disease'. Indeed, while Spignoli does not necessarily move in that direction, her study has the merit of referencing a revealing 1823 *Zibaldone* note. The critic observes that Leopardi, too, had:

> individuato la causa dell'imperfezione e dell'infelicità umana nella '*suprema* conformabilità e organizzazione dell'uomo, che lo rende il più mutabile e quindi il più corruttibile di tutti gli esseri […], lo rende eziandio per conseg[uenza] il più infelicitabile […] cioè lo rende il più disposto a potersi, e più di ogni altro essere, allontanare dal suo stato naturale, e quindi dalla sua propria perfezione, e quindi dalla sua felicità'.[427]

We can strongly corroborate this observation and begin to bring a problem of *conformabilità* to the fore of this investigation – promising to return to the above *Zibaldone* note later in this chapter, when comparing both writers via wider narrative 'tensions' on the subject of health. For now, we can conclude that many intersections between the *Operette* and 'La corruzione' can be isolated and explained via models of comparability. Specifically, Leopardian presences – like that of *malcontento*, and of the unbalanced *torvo uomo* – can be elucidated in terms of physiological models and parallel fictional scenarios. Before moving away from the *Operette*, let us identify a new element of comparability.

1.2 'Storia del genere umano' – comparable *ordigni* and diseases

In a *Zibaldone* note from 1821, Leopardi explains why humans have such a formidable capacity for corruption, whereas animals stay within more circumscribed

[427] Spignoli, 'Tra Freud e Leopardi: modelli intertestuali', p. 140. The passage cited is *Zib*. 2901-2902. The italics appear in the original text.

limits. Of course, this is not to say that the 'bestie non sieno capaci anch'esse di corruzione'. However:

> Non tanto quanto l'uomo perchè meno conformabili; non tanto generale, perchè essendo meno conformabili sono meno sociali; non tanto estensibile agli oggetti estranei alla loro specie, perchè quella stessa nat[ura] che le fa tanto meno conformabili dell'uomo, dà loro tanto minore influenza sulle cose, influenza il cui sommo grado […] costituisce la superiorità dell'uomo fra tutti gli esseri.[428]

Humans differ from animals because their conformability exceeds, so to speak, their 'boundaries'. They expand into *oggetti estranei*, influence *cose*, and allow for intrapersonal *sociali* manners of living. Parallel narratives are developed in 'La corruzione', too. The humanity described by Svevo 'voleva tutto, sempre tutto. Tutte le ore del giorno e tutti i climi della terra dovevano essere suoi'.[429] This narrative of expansion and corruption is empowered via alien 'discoveries' – as Svevo defines them, *ordigni*:

> le sue membra invece che perfezionarsi quali ordigni divennero capaci di maneggiare quelli ch'essa creò. Anzi una volta che gli ordigni erano nati […] l'uomo benché sempre torvo e malcontento si riprodusse uguale per poter maneggiare gli ordigni che s'erano cristallizzati. E così nacquero i grandi popoli perché grandi sono quei popoli che hanno gli ordigni migliori e in grande quantità.
>
> Alcuni di questi ordigni erano idee. La giustizia che regola le avventure e le sventure attenuandole o aggravandole, la scienza ch'è l'espressione più alta dell'anima malcontenta, che prepara gli ordigni e che crea il loro bisogno, la religione che dà qualche istante di pace all'anima torva e infine l'ordinamento sociale e economico cioè un metodo per fare convivere in una guerra dall'aspetto di pace il triste e malvagio animale guerresco.[430]

Once humans 'conform' to *ordigni* – tools, customs, ideas – they cannot let go of them, nor can they return to a previous condition. It is surprising that scholars connecting 'Storia del genere umano' and 'La corruzione' have missed this central narrative between

[428] *Zib*. 1960.
[429] Svevo, 'La corruzione', p. 886.
[430] Ibid.

conformability, technology, and disease. We have before us one of the contaminations identified as the heart of this connection; and it is here in particular that we can follow parallel models developed into parallel scenarios. Leopardi specifically adopts *Giove* to introduce comparable novelties/illnesses:

> una varia moltitudine di morbi e un infinito genere di altre sventure […] il bisogno e l'appetito di nuovi cibi e di nuove bevande […]. Impose a Mercurio che fondasse le prime città, e distinguesse il genere umano in popoli, nazioni e lingue, ponendo gara e discordia tra loro; […] diede leggi, stati e ordini civili alle nuove genti; e in ultimo […] mandò tra loro alcuni fantasmi di sembianze eccellentissime e soprumane, ai quali permise in grandissima parte il governo e la potestà di esse genti: e furono chiamati Giustizia, Virtù, Gloria, Amor patrio.[431]

Leopardi also explains that the causes of the general 'alterarsi' of the human race 'furono i molti ingegni trovati […] per provvedere […] ai propri bisogni'– with the final discovery that 'non tutti i geni', in fact, 'sono di proprietà benefici'.[432] Svevo, too, lists 'giustizia', 'religione', 'ordinamento sociale e economico', and 'scienza' amongst his shaping discoveries, specifying how 'idee', too, can transition humans into dimensions of illness.[433] We can, thus, add comparable models of *ordigni* to the link between 'La corruzione' and 'Storia del genere umano'. In both writers, parallel models are fictionalized via parallel 'devices', and these allow for comparable dramatizations of human existence and its *malattia*.

This is not to say that this model cannot be expanded further. If we look at the Leopardian *storia del genere umano* in more comprehensive terms, and beyond the texts normally identified by scholars, more intriguing connections can be identified. The next sections will accordingly refer to and navigate through Leopardian narratives rarely

[431] Leopardi, 'Storia del genere umano', pp. 63-64.
[432] Leopardi, 'Storia del genere umano', pp. 65; 67.
[433] Svevo, 'La corruzione', p. 886.

considered in relation to Svevo and his literary production. In so doing, we will detect cases of comparability so recurrent that it would be tempting to label these, too, as literary references, or cases of intertextuality. Future research will hopefully apply the results of this chapter to investigate this possibility. However, doing so is currently beyond the scope of this study. To quote, once again, Lavagetto: 'tutti i rimandi vanno presi in ogni caso con estrema cautela perché nessuno scrupolo filologico, nessuna remora, nessuna preoccupazione di fedeltà guida Svevo nei suoi imprestiti'.[434] As such, the next sections will identify novel connections without necessarily claiming that these constitute references to one *single* Leopardian moment. Instead, it will be in the 'tensions' and 'versions' orchestrated within the Leopardian discourse that we will find productive parallels with the Svevian *oeuvre*. More than one narrative, and more than one tension, will be seen at play in comparable stories.

2.1 Versions and tensions of *storia del genere umano*

Before the *Operette*, Leopardi had mostly considered nature as a model of well-being and wholesomeness. This narrative is gradually reformulated as he moves towards that book and its vision on the timeless *male* of existing. We can identify a 'movement' in this Leopardian transition – in other words, a modality where alternative narratives and tensions interweave into original solutions.[435] For example, Aloisi points out that the

[434] Lavagetto, 'Storia del genere umano', p. 176.

[435] Such manners of transition have often been investigated in Leopardi studies. Famously, from a traditional take on Leopardi as abandoning his 'historical pessimism' for new forms of 'cosmic' negativity, scholars have softened distinctions that, in fact, neither come from Leopardi's language, nor do justice to a more nuanced parabola of contrasts and reformulations. As Prete explains, '[t]ra le formule critiche di più elevata divulgazione e più ostinate c'era, e sopravvive ancora, quella del pessimismo' and of its distinction

uneasiness of the 'Storia del genere umano' 'interviene sin da subito […] in ragione di […] un'imperfezione ontologica o strutturale' that the *Operette* identify within the fabric of nature, itself.[436] However, that *operetta* also lingers on how 'tutti gli uomini […] da principio' lay in some condition of natural harmony, 'nutricati dalle api, dalle capre e dalle colombe nel modo che i poeti favoleggiarono dell'educazione di Giove'.[437] Interestingly, in 1827, the year the *Operette* were published, Leopardi still interacts with *Zibaldone* observations of this latter manner by regrouping them into an index entitled 'Malattie, debolezza corporale ec. prodotte dall'incivilimento, e dalla cura delle facoltà mentali'. As Polizzi observes, although the 'presuppost[i]' of those previous reflections are philosophically 'smentit[i] a partire dal 1824', it is still obviously 'in questa direzione [che] si muove l'immaginazione leopardiana quando nella "Storia del genere umano" rievoca la "varia moltitudine" di morbi introdotta da Giove' when humans abandon their

between *pessimismo storico* and *cosmico*, which 'impedisce, proprio per la sua astrazione e genericità e infondatezza, di cogliere la relazione profonda che c'è in Leopardi tra la teoresi e la poesia, tra l'interrogazione filosofica e l'interrogazione poetica. […] Leopardi presenta sulla natura un pensiero in continuo movimento. Un pensiero che non sancisce mai una persuasione una volta per tutte, ma quella persuasione la riprende, la sfuma, la reintegra, la ribalta, la approfondisce. Il suo è un pensiero in costruzione, aperto verso integrazioni, riprese, ripensamenti, aggiustamenti, come del resto è tutto lo *Zibaldone*.' See Antonio Prete, 'Contro gli stereotipi. Leopardi e il pessimismo', *Doppiozero*, 1-6 (2016) <https://www.doppiozero.com/contro-gli-stereotipi-leopardi-e-il-pessimismo> [accessed 11 August 2022] This later perspective, finding in contamination the core of Leopardian discourse, is, of course, the perspective of this section. Watershed categories like *pessimismo storico* and *cosmico* were first introduced in the early-twentieth century by Bonaventura Zumbini, *Studi sul Leopardi* (Florence: Barbera, 1904). These remained popular in much of twentieth-century Leopardi criticism and can be still seen to dominate the perception of Leopardi amongst the wider Italian public. However, already in 1965, Timpanaro starts from Luporini's discussion of such interpretations and wishes for studies that 'permetta[no] di confutare sia quegli studiosi che hanno negato ogni distinzione tra le due fasi del pessimismo leopardiano, sia quelli che hanno asserito che il passaggio avviene in modo repentino e concettualmente immotivato, col *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*. L'una e l'altra tesi, nella loro apparente opposizione, nascevano in realtà da un identico desiderio: negare coerenza e organicità di sviluppo al pensiero leopardiano'. In the second edition of *Leopardi progressivo*, Luporini reaches the general conclusion that 'bisogna essere assai cauti nell'adoperare la stessa categoria del "pessimismo" (il cui uso filosofico non era ancora diffuso); adoperarla, voglio dire in modo onnipervadente, e quasi come un apriori'. See Timpanaro, 'Osservazioni sul pensiero del Leopardi', p. 155. See Cesare Luporini, 'Il pensiero di Leopardi', in *Leopardi progressivo,* 2nd edn (Rome: Editori riuniti, 1993), pp. 105-125 (p. 111).

[436] Aloisi, 'Il desiderio di felicità', p. 69.

[437] Leopardi, 'Storia del genere umano', p. 59.

vague and natural harmony.[438] What is important, here, is that a recurrent 'oscillazione' can be detected in Leopardi's explorations of human history and the problem of disease.[439] As Polizzi explains, this movement can be seen to combine narratives and 'assi di riferimento se non contraddittori, almeno divergenti. Da un lato' the 'progressiva' and almost unstoppable:

> divaricazione tra natura e civiltà, che ha condotto alla degenerazione della specie umana e che di conseguenza produce un indebolimento corporeo e malattie e sofferenze […]. Dall'altro la tensione a ritrovare una naturalità perduta, che anche in campo medico coincide con il ritorno a rimedi naturali.[440]

On the one hand, Leopardi proposes a narrative of human existence as moving towards necessary *dolore* and *malattia*. On the other, a hope to 'return' to some *naturalità perduta*, brightens and highlights the nuances of an increasingly dark revelation. Nor does it matter whether, in the text in question, that 'health' is mourned as historically lost (like in the notes of the index 'Malattia, debolezza corporale') or whether 'le posizioni di Leopardi si stanno orientando decisamente verso una visione radicalmente negativa della natura umana, in ogni tempo e luogo', like in the *Operette morali*.[441] This conflict identifies the problematic essence of Leopardi's exploration of humanity and its precarious health. According to D'Intino, this manner of tension encapsulates a 'malcelata, incerta ma tenace *speranza* di un *ritorno alla salute*' that 'non abbandonò mai, fino alla fine, Leopardi' – a narrative of poetic 'regressione' that counteracts, contaminates, and

[438] Polizzi, 'Corpo sano e Corpo malato', pp. 142; 153. In exploring that index, Polizzi cites an exemplary 1821 note, which argues that all 'le malattie, la debolezza, l'impotenza, la fragilità e suscettibilità somma' of humanity stem from the premise that 'tutto nella natura è armonia, ma soprattutto niente in essa è contraddizione' – it is by abandoning that harmony that humans developed their illnesses. See *Zib*. 1597-1599. This general model comes to be contaminated, problematized, and interwoven with later visions on nature and on its absurd dynamics and painful forces – as this thesis has explored in chapter III, with the 1826 notes on the 'Garden of illness'.
[439] See Polizzi, '"Debolezza corporale" e "incivilimento"', p. 163.
[440] Ibid.
[441] Ibid.

interweaves with a harsher vision and 'esperienza radicale della malattia'.[442] The next sections will argue that Leopardi's tensions find counterparts in Svevo's own contaminated writings – from 'La corruzione' to 'L'uomo e la teoria darwiniana' to the quintessentially oscillating pages of *La coscienza di Zeno*. Let us start with the former Svevian text, whose narratives can be compared to other Leopardian stories.

2.2 Leopardian tensions and Svevian counterparts

In 'La corruzione', Svevo explains that humans, at the dawn of creation, developed 'per un caso, un caso che sarebbe inesplicabile se non si dovesse pensare che sia stato tentato più volte'.[443] They expanded into '[t]utte le ore del giorno e tutti i climi della terra', creating habits that could only be supported via new inventions: disease requires medicine, and medicine creates novel disease.[444] In terms of principles and implications, this passage shares the coordinates of one of the crucial notes of the index 'Malattie, debolezza corporale ec. prodotte dall'incivilimento'. Summarised by Polizzi as the 'lunga riflessione dell'11 ottobre 1823' on 'la casualità delle invenzioni', this Leopardian passage tackles the dilemma of human disease and ultimately diverts its trajectory into how 'la diffusione del genere umano fuori dai suoi limiti naturali' and 'in luoghi e climi inadatti produca una degenerazione della razza umana'.[445] In this case, too,

[442] D'Intino, 'Il funambolo sul precipizio. Leopardi *verso* Montaigne', *Critica del testo*, 20.1 (2017), 179-217 (p. 211).
[443] Svevo, 'La corruzione', p. 886.
[444] Ibid.
[445] Polizzi, 'Corpo sano e Corpo malato', pp. 132-133. A parallel model of randomness, unexplainable corruptions, and shaping discoveries can also be found in an earlier 1821 *Zibaldone* note, which is not included in Leopardi's index. We can cite this, too, due to its potential comparability with Svevo's discourse of *ordigni* ('[d]a che nacque l'invenzione del canocchiale che ha tanto influito sulla navigazione, sulla

both writers start from the model of 'excessive conformability' and develop narrations with comparable themes and tensions.

Leopardi starts with one of the first discoveries of humanity, that of fire, arguing that nature had done all it could to make that discovery as absurd as possible. He concludes that humans must have done this *by accident*:

> Or tanto è lungi che la natura l'abbia insegnato all'uomo, che fuor di un puro caso, e senza lunghissime e diversissime esperienze, ei non può averlo scoperto nè concepito – E non possono neppure i filosofi indovinare come abbia fatto l'uomo non pure ad accendere, ma a vedere e scoprire il primo fuoco. […] E conosciuto il fuoco, come avrà l'uomo trovato il modo di accenderlo sempre che gli piaceva? […] Quanto avrà egli dovuto tardare a sapere e a trovar tutte queste cose. […] Non solo la natura non ha insegnato l'uso del fuoco, nè somministrato pure il fuoco agli uomini se non a caso, ma ella lo ha fatto eziandio formidabile, e pericolosissimo il suo uso. E lasciando i danni morali, quanti infiniti ed immensi danni fisici non ha fatto l'uso del fuoco sì all'altre parti della natura sì allo stesso genere umano.[446]

Not only is fire a dangerous discovery, but it also identifies an 'ardire […] contro' some 'natura' that, in fact, wanted people to remain in a place of health. In the same manner, the discovery of 'la navigazione' that made people expand into new climates should be considered as 'cagione di altrettanti mali e morbi'.[447] We are arguably facing one of those Leopardian narratives of *male* and *malattia* where speculative tensions encounter each

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stessa filosofia metafisica, e quindi sulla civilizzazione? Dal caso. E l'invenzione della polvere che ha mutato faccia alla guerra, ed alle nazioni […] insieme col valore individuale ec. ec.? Dal caso. Chi sa che l'aereonautica non debba un giorno sommamente influire sullo stato degli uomini? E da che cosa ella deriva? Dal caso. E quelle scoperte infinite di numero, sorprendenti di qualità, che furono necessarie per ridurre l'uomo in quel medesimo *imperfetto* stato, in cui ce lo presenta la più remota memoria che ci sia giunta delle nazioni; scoperte che hanno avuto bisogno di lunghissimi secoli […] per essere poi perfezionate come lo sono oggidì; scoperte che oggi medesimo, dopo ch'elle son fatte da tanto tempo, dopo ch'elle sono perfezionate, dopo che la nostra mente vi s'è tanto abituata, lo spirito umano si smarrisce cercando come abbiano potuto mai esser concepite; le lingue, gli alfabeti, l'escavazione e fonditura de' metalli, la fabbrica de' mattoni, de' drappi d'ogni sorta, la nautica e quindi il commercio de' popoli, la coltura de' formenti, e delle viti, e la fabbrica del pane e vino […] tutte queste maravigliose e quasi spaventose invenzioni, da che cosa crediamo che abbiano avuto origine? Dal caso. […] Se dunque porremo attenzione all'andamento delle cose, e alla storia dell'uomo, dovremo convenire che tutta quanta la sua civilizzazione è pura opera del caso. […] La perfezione del primo essere vivente doveva dunque essere dalla natura incaricata all'azzardo?') See *Zib*. 1737-1739. Italics in the original.

[446] *Zib*. 3643-3645.

[447] *Zib*. 3646.

other, interweave, and short-circuit. It is almost obvious, Leopardi admits, that humans are predisposed to travel, conform, and discover more than other animals. Fire, itself, seems all too quintessential and natural a human discovery ('il fuoco è necessario all'uomo anche non sociale, ed alla vita umana semplicemente. Come si vivrebbe in Lapponia o sotto il polo, anzi pure in Russia ec. senza il fuoco?').[448] However, the 'explosive potential' of this contradiction is temporarily diffused, here, via a whirlpool of redirections and questioning.[449] 'Primieramente', Leopardi iterates that several generations of humans had probably lived without the need for fire – even though not even philosophers can imagine that.[450] 'Secondariamente', he diverts from that impasse via a more familiar (and less asphyxiating) version of the *storia del genere umano*:

> chiunque non consideri il genere umano per più che per una specie di animali, superiore bensì all'altre, ma una finalmente di esse […] [e s]'egli v'ha […] una specie di pianta, che rispetto al genere de' vegetabili ed alla propria natura loro generale, sia di tutti i vegetabili il più perfetto, […] non p[er] questo […] seguirà nè sarà necessario ch'essa pianta nè si trovi nè prosperi, nè debba nè pur possa prosperare nè anche allignare nè nascere in tutti i paesi e climi della terra.[451]

[448] Ibid.
[449] Far from being resolved – as Leopardi hopes in the piece above –, the same dilemma is brought forward and reformulated, in the following year, in 'Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese'. There, Leopardi probably chooses Iceland (a land in a subpolar climate) as a place where humans should not have travelled or settled. The *Islandese* ponders whether nature had perhaps wanted humans to remain in their original location. Yet, he immediately retracts that narration, realising that, in fact, no area of the natural world, hot or cold, could be endured without *malattia* ('mi posi a cangiar luoghi e climi […]. E a questa deliberazione fui mosso anche da un pensiero che mi nacque, che forse tu non avessi destinato al genere umano se non solo un clima della terra […]. Ma io sono stato arso dal caldo fra i tropici, rappreso dal freddo verso i poli, afflitto nei climi temperati dall'incostanza dell'aria, infestato dalle commozioni degli elementi in ogni dove. […] [I]o non ho potuto fare di non incorrere in molte e diverse malattie [….]. E certo, benché ciascuno di noi sperimenti nel tempo delle infermità, mali per lui nuovi o disusati, e infelicità maggiore che egli non suole […]; tu non hai dato all'uomo, per compensarnelo, alcuni tempi di sanità soprabbondante e inusitata'). See Leopardi, 'Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese', pp. 119-121. Vacante has identified some of the potential connections between this *operetta* and Svevo's 'La corruzione'. However, her study does not discuss the Icelander's *pathological* conclusion on nature. See Vacante, 'Favole, apologhi, aforismi', pp. 119-120. The connection between 'Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese' and Svevo has also been considered in chapter III, specifically comparing the fundamental 'ambivalence' and 'unreliability' of both writers' representation of *natura*. On similar themes, see Stasi, 'Favole e porcheriole, pp. 25-26.
[450] *Zib*. 3646-3647.
[451] *Zib*. 3647-3649.

In chapter II, we connected this text to Svevo's own narratives of biological ambivalence. More specifically, this model can be identified in another contaminated essay, 'Ottimismo e pessimismo', where humans are described as 'born' in fundamental impasse, and the 'germi […] strangolati nel nostro animo […] somigliano i germi […] portati dai venti ai poli, quando avrebbero avuto bisogno dell'equatore per prosperare, o nell'oceano quando avrebbero allignato soltanto su terra secca.'[452] The Leopardian 'version' above can, thus, be additionally connected to models and tensions developed throughout the Svevian *oeuvre*. Humans are portrayed as they are scattered away by the forces of nature – namely, as they are forced to *allignare* and *prosperare* in environments where they gradually sicken and perish. More can be said about the tensions at play, here. Leopardi proceeds to explain that, indeed, 'la specie umana […] volendo poter conservare il suo ben essere, non doveva propagarsi più che tanto, e non era destinata senon [sic] a certi paesi e certe qualità di paesi, de' limiti de' quali non doveva naturalm[ente] uscire'.[453] And yet, the history of humanity has recurrently moved in that direction, and the race 'si moltiplicò e propagò strabocchevolmente' into societies that brought about new illnesses and inventions.[454] Several of those – fire, navigation, and even the '[m]irabilissima scoperta […] della favella' (indeed, 'il linguaggio […] divenne più potente che la natura non voleva') and the 'scrittura alfabetica'[455] – participate in this alternative Leopardian version of *storia del genere umano*. Leopardi further empowers his meditation with an analogy:

> Io considererò tali costumi ec. come i rimedii dolorosi o disgustosi de' morbi, i quali tanto sono naturali quanto essi morbi, che non sono naturali o avvengono contro le intenzioni

[452] Svevo, 'Ottimismo e pessimismo', pp. 882-883.
[453] *Zib*. 3654-3655
[454] *Zib*. 3655.
[455] *Zib.* 3669.

> e l'ordine generale della natura. La natura non ha insegnato i rimedii perchè neanche ha voluto i morbi, così […] p[er] e[sempio] il fuoco.[456]

Overall, this reflection can be seen to encapsulate different tensions, and to divert away from a fundamental problem. Humans are predisposed to expand; indeed, no one can imagine humans before the development of fire, society, or basic medical remedies. Yet, if they stayed in their 'natural condition', they would not need such development and would preserve their wholesomeness intact. 'La corruzione', too, shares some elements with this exploration. Like Leopardi, Svevo also places *puro caso* at the beginning of human expansion and development – specifically, a *caso* that can neither be explained, placed in time, or generally justified. Furthermore, like in the *Zibaldone*, humans are described by Svevo as colonizing environments where 'nacquero i grandi popoli' that were powerful and unhealthy 'perché' they possessed 'ordigni migliori e in grande quantità'.[457] In general, Svevo does not propose models of 'reversibility', nor does he put forward suggestions on how humans could have avoided their ancient corruption. And yet, the last lines of 'La corruzione' display an incongruous proposition ('non doveva mai venire per l'uomo l'epoca in cui il tempo si fermi e i suoi ordigni opera della sua anima non più si sviluppino?');[458] namely, one that seems to move against the narrative developed up to that moment, and that opens up to manners of hypothesis returning in the finale of *La coscienza di Zeno*. For now, we can conclude that both writers engage with similar models (conformability, inventions, disease) and similar problems on human

[456] Zib. 3658-3659. In this case, too, the dilemma survives, still unresolved and 'fertile', in Leopardi's later works. The previous chapter has discussed how, in 1826, the *Zibaldone* presents and intertwines similar narratives via contaminated models of nature as the source of all poisons and cures ('[s]i ammiri quanto si vuole la provvidenza e la benignità della natura per aver creati gli antidoti, per averli, diciam così, posti allato ai veleni, per aver collocati i rimedi nel paese che produce la malattia. Ma perchè creare i veleni? perchè ordinare le malattie? E se i veleni e i morbi sono necessari o utili all'economia dell'universo, perchè creare gli antidoti? perchè apparecchiare e porre alla mano i rimedi?') See *Zib*. 4206.
[457] Svevo, 'La corruzione', p. 886.
[458] Ibid.

health. As Volpi explains for Leopardi, while 'la civilizzazione sembra introdurre nuove malattie', Leopardi is aware from early *Zibaldone* notes that such a 'perdita di sanità' ultimately stems from the superior '*assuefabilità*' of the 'macchina organica dell'uomo'.[459] Both writers describe humans as evolving by chance, and pathologically, and developing inventions/*ordigni* that ultimately poison their users. Yet, the origin of this process seems to lie at the origin of life, itself: more specifically, in a conformability that makes humans more likely to create and corrupt than all other creatures. It is now time to reconsider and expand on a passage considered in the first section of this chapter.

In developing a model of comparability between similar models and scenarios, we mentioned Spignoli's connection between Svevo and a *Zibaldone* extract on the powers of conformability.[460] We can now empower that model and look at the tensions enlivening the passage at hand. Spignoli does not cite the entire text of that passage – probably due to its considerable length, and to its tortuous reasoning. However, these elements are instrumental in clarifying the connection with Svevo's narratives. Composed before the *Operette*, the starting point of the *Zibaldone* is, still, that of nature as a source of harmony. However, a fundamental tension complicates this narrative:

> E veramente io così penso. L'uomo non è per natura infelice. […] Perocchè l'uomo potrebbe conservarsi nello stato suo primitivo puro, come gli altri esseri si conservano nel loro, e conservandocisi, sarebbe così felice, o così non infelice, come gli altri esseri sono felici o non sono infelici durando nel naturale stato. […] Ma l'eccessiva o, diciamo meglio, la *suprema* conformabilità e organizzazione dell'uomo, che lo rende il più mutabile e quindi il più corruttibile di tutti gli esseri terrestri, lo rende eziandio per conseg[uenza] il più infelicitabile, […] cioè lo rende il più disposto a potersi, e più d'ogni altro essere, allontanare dal suo stato naturale, e quindi dalla sua propria perfezione, e quindi dalla sua felicità; perch'essa stessa conformabilità umana è più d'ogni altra disposta e facile a poter perdere il suo primitivo stato, uso, operazioni, applicazioni e simili. Talchè difficilmente l'uomo si conserva in effetto nel suo naturale e primitivo stato, e però difficilmente si salva in fatti dalla infelicità. Stante le quali considerazioni, e stante appunto la *somma* conformabilità e organizzazione dell'uomo, […] diremo che l'uomo è il più imperfetto degli esseri terrestri, anche per natura. […] [A]nzi se volete, in

[459] Volpi, 'La malattia incolpevole', p. 12-15.
[460] Spignoli, 'Tra Freud e Leopardi: modelli intertestuali', p. 140.

> natura e per natura egli è il più perfetto degli esseri; ma in natura e per natura egli è più di tutti disposto a divenire imperfetto; e ciò per ragione appunto della somma sua perfezione naturale; come quelle macchine o quei lavorii compitissimi e perfettissimi, che per esser tali, sono minutamente lavorati, e quindi delicatissimi, e per la somma delicatezza più facilmente degli altri si guastano, e perdono l'essere e l'uso loro.
>
> Ma ad essi si trovano forse artefici che possono ripararli, a noi, guasti e snaturati una volta, non si trova mano che ci riponga nel primo stato, (nè da noi medesimi siamo atti a farlo). Poichè nè la natura ci ripiglia in mano per riformarci, come l'artefice il suo lavoro sconciato, nè altra potenza v'ha che ci possa restaurare come un nuovo artefice il lavoro altrui.[461]

This is a beautifully convoluted passage, and a perfect case of Leopardian 'oscillation'. Let us try to follow its movement. *If only* humans could remain in their natural state, they would be happy and wholesome. That condition would be primitive and pure – like other animals, humans would be content in being at one with their environment. *However*, humans are also provided *in nature and by nature* with so supreme a conformability that they cannot linger in that condition for protracted segments of time. Acting like some corruptive magnet, the nature of mankind can be seen to lure them away into corruption and misery. On the one hand, a scenario of 'preservation' is presented in hypothetical and conjectural forms. On the other hand, this is counteracted by explaining that the human machine is, in fact, naturally predisposed to break. This passage presents no solution to the impasse at hand. There is no way of returning humans to their abandoned 'health', nor can that broken machine find the technical *potenza* that would fix it. This identifies a model of immense fictional potential. Campana lists the Leopardian reformulations and 'recupero della tematica dell'automa' as '*exemplum* dell'uomo […] indebolito nelle sue forze vitali', or 'l'"uomo alterato" […] dal progresso storico'.[462] Amongst the *Zibaldone* analogies cited, one dating to 1821 presents the following development:

[461] *Zib*. 2900-2903. Italics in the original.
[462] A comprehensive outline and interpretation of this Leopardian theme can be found in Campana, 'Macchina, orologio, corpo', in *Leopardi e le metafore scientifiche*, pp. 329-359 (pp. 339; 349). Leopardi's

> Scomponete una macchina complicatissima, toglietele una gran parte delle sue ruote, e ponetele da parte senza pensarvi più; quindi ricomponete la macchina, e mettetevi a ragionare sopra le sue proprietà, i suoi mezzi, i suoi effetti: tutti i vostri ragionamenti saranno falsi, la macchina non è più quella, gli effetti non sono quelli che dovrebbero, i mezzi sono cambiati, indeboliti, o fatti inutili; voi andate arzigogolando sopra questo composto, vi sforzate di spiegare gli effetti della macchina dimezzata, come s'ella fosse intera; speculate minutamente tutte le ruote che ancora lo compongono, ed attribuite a questa o quella un effetto che la macchina non produce più, e che le avevate veduto produrre in virtù delle ruote che le avete tolte ec. ec.[463]

One year later, Leopardi also suggests that 'una macchina dilicata […] è più facile a guastarsi che una rozza: […] supponendole anche tutt'e due in uno stesso genere, come due orologi. Così l'uomo è più dilicato assai di tutti gli altri animali, sì nella costruzione esterna, sì nelle fibre intellettuali'.[464] In general, it is almost inscribed in the order of nature that humans would eventually succumb to their conformability, and produce all manner of discombobulation. While this chapter has already identified comparable models in Svevo's essays, these are also dramatized in *La coscienza di Zeno*. Let us consider, for example, the encounter between Zeno and his friend Tullio, who:

> s'era rimesso a parlare della sua malattia ch'era anche la sua principale distrazione. Aveva studiato l'anatomia della gamba e del piede. Mi raccontò ridendo che quando si cammina con passo rapido, il tempo in cui si svolge un passo non supera il mezzo secondo e che in quel mezzo secondo si movevano nientemeno che cinquantaquattro muscoli. Trasecolai e subito corsi col pensiero alle mie gambe a cercarvi la macchina mostruosa. Io credo di avercela trovata. Naturalmente non riscontrai i cinquantaquattro ordigni, ma una complicazione enorme che perdette il suo ordine dacché io vi ficcai la mia attenzione.
>
> Uscii da quel caffè zoppicando e per alcuni giorni zoppicai sempre. Il camminare era per me divenuto un lavoro pesante, e anche lievemente doloroso. A quel groviglio di congegni pareva mancasse oramai l'olio e che, movendosi, si ledessero a vicenda. […] [A]ncora oggidì, che ne scrivo, se qualcuno mi guarda quando mi movo, i cinquantaquattro movimenti s'imbarazzano ed io sono in procinto di cadere.[465]

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interest in this topic can be detected in his scientific dissertations (namely, in the 1811 *Dissertazione sopra l'anima delle bestie*, where examples of automaton are presented vis-à-vis wider philosophical and physiological dilemmas). A later and more famous reformulation of that 'scientific analogy' appears in the 1824 *operetta* 'Proposta di premi fatta dall'Accademia dei Sillografi', which proposes an (ironic) return to ancient virtues and vigour by engineering impossible replicas. See Leopardi, 'Proposta di premi fatta all'Accademia dei Sillografi' in *Operette*, pp. 78-81.

[463] *Zib*. 1837. This is also cited in Campana, 'Macchina, orologio, corpo', p. 349.

[464] *Zib*. 2567-2568. This is also cited in Campana, 'Macchina, orologio, corpo', p. 348.

[465] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 731.

Both writers start from comparable ideas of adaptation and conformability to external corruption – circumstances, places, people – and move towards parallel fictionalizations of *ordigni* and *malattia*. With his own inner restlessness growing, Zeno loses the 'original function' of his body and mind. We can even describe the process at hand via Leopardian terms. As Zeno fixes his attention on the bodily machine, it begins to *arzigogolare* and limp around like some alienated *orologio guasto* and *macchina dimezzata*. In this moment of crisis, we even can glimpse the *malcontento uomo* that 'La corruzione' describes as hardly able to stand on his own two feet.[466] Once more, we can expand the limits of our investigation beyond individual texts, places, and perspectives. The movement of Leopardi's dialectics between 'disease and health' can be compared with several moments in Svevo's works – from his contaminated essays to Zeno's adventures. The next sections will identify parallel tensions throughout the Svevian *oeuvre.* Alongside

[466] D'Intino argues that a similar model of 'crookedness' also 'condensa […] l'elemento quintessenziale della biografia leopardiana, quel progressivo inesorabile allontanamento dalla natura, dalla terra, dalle regole certe dell'istinto animale, dovuto all'ipertrofia dell'attività cerebrale (il continuo esercizio de' nervi) e da una postura scorretta'. The critic also cites an interesting *Zibaldone* note from 1821, which describes how hyperawareness and overthinking can make one lose balance and health. Instead of moving along a straight line, an excessively analytical 'walker' is compared to (and almost transformed into) an individual leaning over a precipice. As Leopardi wonders, '[c]hi di noi volendosi mettere per una stanza a camminare dentro due linee in uno spazio di un palmo e mezzo, ed anche meno, non è capace di farlo, senza neppur pensare di squilibrarsi? (Eccetto il caso che vi pensino, per qualche circostanza che li metta o nel puntiglio, o nella necessità ec. di non isquilibrarsi; perocchè allora correranno parimente rischio di patirlo). Or ponete che questo medesimo spazio sia una trave, o una tavola posta a modo di ponte sopra un altissimo precipizio, o sopra un fiume, senza ripari nè appoggi da veruna parte. Quanti sono coloro che non si fiderebbero di passarvi, o passandovi perderebbero l'equilibrio o correrebbero più volte vicinissimo rischio di perderlo! E pure a questi medesimi non manca nè la facoltà nè l'abito giornaliero, di far tutto quello che bisogna perchè quel passaggio non faccia loro alcun male; cioè l'abito di camminare allo stessissimo modo tuttogiorno senza punto squilibrarsi, quando lo squilibrarsi non è pericoloso'. See *Zib*. 2296-2297. This thesis does not directly explore the connection between Leopardi's and Svevo's narratives of 'psychological' disease and/or mental *ordigni*, which would require a substantial and different kind of interdisciplinary approach. However, hoping that future studies will explore this fertile topic, we should iterate that D'Intino's observations (he argues, for example, that the *Zibaldone*'s 'funambolo ridisceso sulla terra, *zoppo e infermo*' identifies 'un uomo grammaticalizzato e addolorato, nel quale il male prodotto […] da un'immaginazione forte e profonda […] finisce per coincidere con un irrimediabile male fisico') can be fruitfully adopted to build a connection with Svevo's narratives of psychophysical *malattia*. See D'Intino,'Il funambolo sul precipizio', pp. 199; 211. For an insightful perspective on parallel aspects of Svevo's works, specifically on models of clockworks, *ordigni*, and *fisiologia letteraturizzata*, see also Federica G. Pedriali, 'Opportunismo biochimico. Zeno, l'orologio e il righello', in *Italo Svevo and His Legacy for the Third Millennium*, I, 226-238.

possible models of literary filiation with Leopardi – some of which may have already been addressed by previous studies – this chapter will claim that the fundamental connection within these narratives lies in their 'hybrid perspective' on a common dilemma of *malattia*.

3. Svevian tensions and contaminations

In the years of 'La corruzione', Svevo produced other important essays. One of these, the unfinished 'L'uomo e la teoria darwiniana', additionally manipulates elements of the Darwinian debate into novel philosophical solutions.[467] Svevo is preoccupied with the possibility of preserving the 'original condition' of human transformability – like an embryo suspended in time – without, in fact, acting on that potential. Adaptation, Svevo explains, is a sign of biological and existential power; yet, once one comes to use it, that power is lost and the organism 'crystallizes' forever:

> Nella maggioranza degli uomini lo sviluppo per loro fortuna e per fortuna dell'ambiente sociale, s'arresta. […] Questi uomini somigliano a certi animali che hanno un maggior numero di gambe di noi. Lo sviluppo di queste gambe è evidentemente un maggior sviluppo ma d'altra parte rappresenta per sé solo un arresto definitivo di sviluppo. […] Io credo che l'animale più capace ad evolversi sia quello in cui una parte è in continua lotta con l'altra […] e l'animale […] abbia conservata la possibilità di evolversi da una parte o dall'altra in conformità a quanto gli sarà domandato dalla società di cui nessuno può ora prevedere i bisogni e le esigenze.[468]

[467] Minghelli discusses how 'L'uomo e la teoria darwiniana' 'opens with the conference held by the famous entomologist Erich Wasmann in 1907 in Berlin on the symbiotic behaviour of parasites and hosts in different ant families. On this occasion, the Jesuit scientist stressed the importance of cooperation, or "amicable selection," while downplaying the role of natural selection in the evolution of the species.' In this essay, Svevo begins by discussing more orthodox elements of Darwinism and Darwinian theory, and, then, develops them into ways that have nothing to do with the original theory. See Minghelli, 'Between Darwinian Origins and Modernist Ends', p. 34.

[468] Svevo, 'L'uomo e la teoria darwiniana', pp. 849.

When it comes to conformability, Leopardi shows comparable tensions – namely, as conjectural regressions or conservations of a *stato primitivo puro*. If only people could 'resist' their conformability (and the ensuing short-circuits) they would remain wholesome and open to possibilities. Similar narratives and analogies recur throughout the *Zibaldone*. For example, that of the human *pasta molle*, initially capable of all forms, but which eventually hardens beyond repair.[469] Another important analogy, from 1821, describes humans as a sheet of paper, which could contain many possible life stories, and can also be folded into infinite shapes ('come la carta contiene la disposizione ad essere scritta, a prender questa o quella forma').[470] A parallel fascination with vagueness and possibility – with purity and power – lies at the heart of Svevo's discourse. In a final hyperbole, Svevo claims that he himself is that 'man of many ways', as he has never even *begun* to crystallize ('nella mia mancanza assoluta di uno sviluppo marcato in qualsivoglia senso io sono quell'uomo. Lo sento tanto bene che nella mia solitudine me ne glorio altamente e sto aspettando sapendo di non essere altro che un abbozzo').[471] However, while Svevo, the man, wished to keep that glorified condition for himself, the characters of his fiction struggle to meet that standard and remain 'intact'. We have encountered and diagnosed some of these in chapters I and III of this thesis. The first one is Alfonso Nitti, the *inetto* protagonist of *Una vita*, whose life (and novel) ends in organic

[469] We can repeat here this important passage of 'Leopardian physiology': '[c]iascun uomo è come una pasta molle, suscettiva d'ogni possibile figura, impronta ec. S'indurisce col tempo, e da prima è difficile, finalmente impossibile il darle nuova figura ec. Tale è ciascun uomo, e tale diviene col progresso dell'età. Questa è la differenza caratteristica che distingue l'uomo dagli altri viventi'. See *Zib*. 1452. This thesis has cited and amply discussed this model and its comparable fictionalizations when exploring cases of 'ineptitude' in chapter I. We are about to iterate some 'diagnoses' of Svevian characters and further compare them to Leopardi's tensions on the possibility of preserving health.

[470] *Zib*. 1821. On this analogy and Leopardi's expansion of 'la portata di quest'immagine […] dal piano gnoseologico a quello antropologico', see Aloisi, 'Assuefazione, memoria, conformabilità', in *Desiderio e assuefazione*, pp. 93-129 (pp. 97-99)

[471] Svevo, 'L'uomo e la teoria darwiniana', p. 849.

failure. Like Leopardi, in 'Vita abbozzata of Silvio Sarno', Svevo follows Alfonso as he tries to retain his purity somehow, but eventually succumbs to the world and its circumstances. The analogy of *vita-abbozzo* emerges, in both writers, as a prelude to a conflict between conformability and the difficult preservation of 'health'. We should point out that we are not suggesting to interpret this (indeed significant) connection in terms of literary filiation, as the unfinished and posthumously published 'Sarno' can be seen as too obscure a text even for an unorthodox reader like Svevo. What is important, here, is that this further 'formula' can be added to our expansive model of comparability between contaminated tensions and fictional scenarios. The second character of Svevian fiction does not seem to preserve his health, either. Bond argues that Emilio Brentani is more skilful in keeping his inner world intact; namely, by transferring his corruptions onto his sister Amalia.[472] However, the choice of preserving that energy intact results in aggravating his unstable interiority. As Svevo closes *Senilità*, we find an Emilio somewhat 'preserved', but who has completely lost his mind. A more complicated case, and indeed the only one drafted after 'L'uomo e la teoria darwiniana', is that of Zeno Cosini. Described by Valdemarca as the quintessential man 'indeterminato, incompleto, critico feroce degli "ordigni"' and, yet, ever so at risk of being transfixed in them (like in Tullio's case), Zeno can be seen as one of the most successful examples of Svevo's *abbozzi*.[473] Chapter III has surveyed some of Zeno's survival techniques in the face of the impasses caused by problems of existence and adaptation. One should never commit to one single way, to one obsession, or to one specific cure – overall, Zeno praises the power of flexibility and movement, because 'in qualunque punto dell'universo ci si stabilisca si

[472] Bond, 'Hidden Voices', p. 40.
[473] Gioia Valdemarca, 'La macchina mostruosa. Zeno come cyborg', in *Italo Svevo and His Legacy for the Third Millennium*, I, 213-225 (p. 222).

finisce coll'inquinarsi'.[474] Indeed, this Svevian specimen preserves his acrobatic and aerial 'lightness' for most of his story – that is to say, until the last page of the book. As Stellardi notes, that 'possibilità di allontanarsi dall'impasse, di osservarla con quel tanto di ironia', which is 'la più segreta carta vincente dell'inetto Zeno' is, in fact, not the card played at the end of *La coscienza*.[475] Here, Zeno, too, claims to have finally conformed to circumstance. And, yet, a cascade of contradictions, opposing visions, and hopes for return follow and undermine that statement. The next section will engage with this moment of ambivalence, comparing it to the 'oscillations' of Leopardi's narratives. As Bertoni stresses, it is particularly via those 'versioni alternative di quella che Lavagetto, evocando la prima delle *Operette morali* leopardiane, ha chiamato una "*Storia del genere umano* secondo Italo Svevo'" that we can elucidate that 'finale apocalittico della *Coscienza*[,] che sembra scaturire da queste riflessioni sull'origine e sul destino dell'umanità'.[476] This section will accordingly connect the fluctuations of that finale to *versioni alternative* of Leopardi's narratives of human history and of its associated diseases and health. More than one narration, and more than one solution, will be identified within Zeno's contradictory and (allegedly) conclusive speech. Alongside models of direct filiation and intertextuality, it will be, yet again, in common tensions and contaminations that this thesis will connect these narratives of life and its mysterious ills.

[474] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 958.
[475] Stellardi, 'Dialettica salute/malattia e suggestioni ecologiche nella *Coscienza di Zeno*', *Otto/novecento*, 3 (2000), 75-104 (p. 98).
[476] Bertoni, 'Apparato genetico e commento', p. 1664.

4. The end of the *genere umano*: contradictory pages

The end of *La coscienza* puzzles readers and critics alike. After years of therapy, Zeno claims that he is now finally cured. But an ominous voice (that does not sound like Zeno, or at least not his voice as we know it) reveals that there is no cure for human existence. The world is prophesized to explode and return to a purified nebula. And yet, this vision stems from conjectural premises: the finale begins with a whimsical 'Forse'.[477] This section does not aim to resolve or oversimplify a discourse so intrinsically elusive and open-ended. Instead, we will follow it in its contradictory and recurrent 'oscillations', proposing a model of comparability with several moments in Leopardi's works. We can begin with the first passage:

> Io sono guarito! […] Io soffro bensì di certi dolori, ma mancano d'importanza nella mia grande salute. Posso mettere un impiastro qui o là, ma il resto ha da moversi e battersi e mai indugiarsi nell'immobilità come gl'incancreniti. […] Ammetto che per avere la persuasione della salute il mio destino dovette mutare e scaldare il mio organismo con la lotta e soprattutto col trionfo. Fu il mio commercio che mi guarì e voglio che il dottor S. lo sappia. Attonito e inerte, stetti a guardare il mondo sconvolto, fino al principio dell'Agosto dell'anno scorso. Allora io cominciai a *comperare*.[478]

The war breaks out in Trieste and a man that, up to that point, had never truly entered the world of business, finally abandons his irresolution and conforms his organism to the circumstances. As Minghelli explains, Zeno 'decides with an ironic reversal to embrace neo-Darwinian position and chooses to be "healthy" like […] animal[s]'[479] – for example, as he later claims, like a swallow, migrating when the weather changes, or like a horse, roaming free through open meadows. Adapting to the environment himself, Zeno claims to have 'heated' his organism into the picture of health. And yet, it is perfectly clear that

[477] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 1085.
[478] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 1082. Italics in the original.
[479] Minghelli, 'Between Darwinian Origins and Modernist Ends', p. 31.

what remains of *La coscienza* does not confirm this assessment. Minghelli also points out that Zeno's *grande salute* is counteracted by a harsher narrative and realization about life: namely, that this further man in '*abbozzo* […] not unlike other man' carries within himself a quintessential and ambivalent kind of disease.[480] We can compare this first articulation of *La coscienza* to other familiar tensions. Leopardi, too, conjectures and expands on vague 'returns' to natural manners of existence. A feature of Leopardian writing through the years, this tension recurrently interweaves with visions of life as arcane, inborn, and unjustifiable *malattia*. In this sense – in D'Intino's words – such Leopardian returns identify more of a palliative, or a coping 'strategy', rather than an actual solution to a painful problem.[481] The scholar further explains his thesis by discussing passages that are largely comparable, in terms of physiological ambivalence, to *La coscienza di Zeno*. An 1821 page of the *Zibaldone* argues that an indecisive individual can be transformed by a change in circumstance – and proceeds to show how that change can be connected, by analogy, with fleeting visions of animal vigour. Leopardi explores how '[l]'uomo riflessivo ha spessissimo bisogno di esser determinato […] da circostanze imperiose. […] [N]on perchè non veda abbastanza da se, ma perchè troppo vede, dal che segue un'irresoluzione abituale e penosissima'.[482] In a passage from the same day, he also observes how 'la velocità, p[er] es[empio] dei cavalli', that is, 'la vivacità, l'energia, la forza, la vita di tal sensazione […] sublima l'anima, la fortifica, la mette in una indeterminata azione, o stato di attività più o meno passeggero'.[483] We can argue that this 'contaminated' discourse – connecting new forms of ineptitude, sudden changes in environment, and ephemeral recoveries of liveliness – identifies the ingredients of Zeno's

[480] Ibid.
[481] D'Intino, 'Il Consumo', p. 105-111.
[482] *Zib*. 1998-1999.
[483] *Zib*. 1999.

own ‘potion of health’. Furthermore, like Leopardi’s *uomo riflessivo*, Zeno, too, is wide-eyed before change (‘[a]ttonito e inerte, stetti a guardare il mondo sconvolto’), but then he convinces himself, via movement (‘movendomi e battendomi’), to have recovered some primeval animal qualities.[484] It is interesting to observe that Leopardi, one year later, returns to that ‘parabola’ and suggests that, when everything seems lost, then:

> Bisogna […] considerar la propria vita […] come un capitale da cui non si può più tirare alcun frutto notabile, […] e metter tutte queste cose a rischio per bagattelle, e con poca considerazione, e senza mai lasciarsi cogliere dall’irresoluzione neanche nei negozi più importanti, nemmeno in quelli che decidono di tutta la vita, o di gran parte di essa. In questo solo modo si può goder qualche cosa. Bisogna vivere εἰκῇ, *témere*, *au hasard*, alla ventura.[485]

This understanding of life as capital already lost can be aptly compared to Zeno’s own ‘energetic strategy’. Zeno gambles in the most unfortunate of conditions, and even derives some degree of gratification from his movements. But it is hard to be persuaded that his health constitutes a concrete achievement, or that it would last beyond his present circumstances. Stellardi points out that the same trust given to the Zeno who ‘incessantemente smette di fumare’ should also be given to this new ‘Zeno sano’ – and perhaps even less so, if we consider how he boasts ‘con ampio e, date le tragiche circostanze, singolarmente incurante dispiego di cinismo […] le qualità terapeutiche dell’accaparramento’, without being ‘minimamente preoccupato delle possibili conseguenze negative’.[486] It is more appropriate, then, to interpret this change as a Leopardian ‘surrogate’ of health – a condition of animality ‘più o meno passeggero’.[487] Overall, D’Intino’s description of Leopardi and his ambivalence can be adopted for Zeno, too: in other words, ‘[a]ttraversare d’impeto la vita, con forza, senza curarsi delle vittime

[484] Svevo, ‘La coscienza’, p. 1082.
[485] *Zib*. 2528-2529.
[486] Stellardi, ‘Dialettica salute/malattia’, p. 80.
[487] *Zib*. 1999.

[…] [n]on sembrerebbe affatto il ritratto' of the characters in question. In fact, the critic continues: '[q]uando elogia la velocità Leopardi sta infatti semplicemente rovesciando [il] profilo di un "uomo riflessivo" in cui non si fatica a riconoscerlo com'era […]. In Leopardi […] c'è dunque uno sdoppiamento' in narrative trajectories and even character representation.[488] We can, thus, connect this section of *La coscienza* to Leopardi's dialectics between 'imaginary returns' to nature and impossible, or denied, 'health'. And yet, this is but the beginning of a wider contamination of Leopardian narratives. Indeed, after his declaration, Zeno begins to transition into alternative 'versions' of the same story: namely, into visions portraying 'health' as a condition hardly retrievable for humanity as a whole. This part of Zeno's speech, too, identifies an amalgam of clarifications, conflicts, and hypotheses.

Despite its length, the end of *La coscienza* can be better followed in its (conflicting) unity. We will cite the whole passage below, and then compare individual moments to the trajectories of Leopardian writing:

> Naturalmente io non sono un ingenuo e scuso il dottore di vedere nella vita stessa una manifestazione di malattia. La vita somiglia un poco alla malattia come procede per crisi e lisi ed ha i giornalieri miglioramenti e peggioramenti. A differenza delle altre malattie la vita è sempre mortale. Non sopporta cure. Sarebbe come voler turare i buchi che abbiamo nel corpo credendoli delle ferite. Morremmo strangolati non appena curati.
>
> La vita attuale è inquinata alle radici. L'uomo s'è messo al posto degli alberi e delle bestie ed ha inquinata l'aria, ha impedito il libero spazio. Può avvenire di peggio. Il triste e attivo animale potrebbe scoprire e mettere al proprio servizio delle altre forze. V'è una minaccia di questo genere in aria. Ne seguirà una grande ricchezza... nel numero degli uomini. Ogni metro quadrato sarà occupato da un uomo. Chi ci guarirà dalla mancanza di aria e di spazio? Solamente al pensarci soffoco!
>
> Ma non è questo, non è questo soltanto.
>
> Qualunque sforzo di darci la salute è vano. Questa non può appartenere che alla bestia che conosce un solo progresso, quello del proprio organismo. Allorché la rondinella comprese che per essa non c'era altra possibile vita fuori dell'emigrazione, essa ingrossò il muscolo che muove le sue ali e che divenne la parte più considerevole del suo organismo. La talpa s'interrò e tutto il suo corpo si conformò al suo bisogno. Il

[488] D'Intino, 'Il vortice', in *La caduta e il ritorno*, pp. 155-210 (p. 171).

> cavallo s'ingrandì e trasformò il suo piede. Di alcuni animali non sappiamo il progresso, ma ci sarà stato e non avrà mai leso la loro salute.
>
> Ma l'occhialuto uomo, invece, inventa gli ordigni fuori del suo corpo e se c'è stata salute e nobiltà in chi li inventò, quasi sempre manca in chi li usa. Gli ordigni si comperano, si vendono e si rubano e l'uomo diventa sempre più furbo e più debole. Anzi si capisce che la sua furbizia cresce in proporzione della sua debolezza. I primi suoi ordigni parevano prolungazioni del suo braccio e non potevano essere efficaci che per la forza dello stesso, ma, oramai, l'ordigno non ha più alcuna relazione con l'arto. Ed è l'ordigno che crea la malattia con l'abbandono della legge che fu su tutta la terra la creatrice. La legge del più forte sparì e perdemmo la selezione salutare. Altro che psico-analisi ci vorrebbe: Sotto la legge del possessore del maggior numero di ordigni prospereranno malattie e ammalati.
>
> Forse traverso una catastrofe inaudita prodotta dagli ordigni ritorneremo alla salute. Quando i gas velenosi non basteranno più, un uomo fatto come tutti gli altri, nel segreto di una stanza di questo mondo, inventerà un esplosivo incomparabile, in confronto al quale gli esplosivi attualmente esistenti saranno considerati quasi innocui giocattoli. Ed un altro uomo fatto anche lui come tutti gli altri, ma degli altri un po' più ammalato, ruberà tale esplosivo e s'arrampicherà al centro della terra per porlo nel punto ove il suo effetto potrà essere il massimo. Ci sarà un'esplosione enorme che nessuno udrà e la terra ritornata alla forma di nebulosa errerà nei cieli priva di parassiti e di malattie.[489]

Zeno begins to darken, problematize, and reformulate his previous statement. He admits that life constitutes a manifestation of illness, from the cradle and in every form. However, immediately after this realization, he also immediately diverts from it, digressing on how that 'disease' developed through history, and how it could hypothetically vanish. The coordinates of this movement can be followed, step by step, via a patchwork of Leopardian tensions. Let us disentangle this passage.

'La vita attuale è inquinata alle radici'.[490] Zeno explains that it is by an 'alliance' with 'altre forze' that the human race has acquired a 'grande ricchezza... nel numero degli uomini'.[491] Humans systematically replaced plants and beasts, covered every square inch of land, and created societies that suck up air like gas chambers. We have seen similar perspectives on human health in previous sections of this chapter. It is particularly when

[489] Svevo, 'La coscienza', pp. 1083-1085.
[490] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 1084.
[491] Ibid.

exploring the problem of human discoveries that the *Zibaldone* portrays fire as one 'di quegli agenti terribili […] che la natura sembra avere studiosamente […] rimosso dalla vista'.[492] Here, Leopardi, too, claims that it is via a connection with dangerous agents that humanity 'contro natura si moltiplicò e propagò strabocchevolmente' into unnatural societies.[493] The kind of society visualised by Zeno is one where man has stolen space and oxygen from his fellow man, and where there is no cure for 'mancanza di aria e di spazio […] [s]olamente al pensarci soffoco!'.[494] In describing selfish organisms and populated societies, Leopardi, too, had proposed a parallel analogy in an earlier 1821 *Zibaldone* note:

> Oggi l'uomo è nella società quello ch'è una colonna d'aria rispetto a tutte le altre e a ciascuna di loro. […] L'uno premendo l'altro, quell'individuo che cede in qualunque maniera, o per mancanza di abilità, o di forza, o per virtù, e perchè lasci un *vuoto di egoismo*, dev'esser sicuro di esser subito calpestato dall'*egoismo* che ha dintorno per tutti i lati: e di essere stritolato come una macchina pneumatica dalla quale, senza le debite precauzioni, si fosse sottratta l'aria[.][495]

In both writers, parallel models of 'expansion' develop into parallel perspectives of doom, intrapersonal conflict, and suffocating scenarios. This further moment of Zeno's speech, too, can be compared with Leopardian trajectories of the *storia del genere umano*. However, this is not the only version of the story at play, here. As Zeno admits, there is something darker, and more profound.

'Ma non è questo, non è questo soltanto. Qualunque sforzo di darci la salute è vano.'[496] A significant change can be perceived at this point. Zeno's voice assumes the ominous and almost prophetic modalities of 'La corruzione dell'anima'. As Bertoni

[492] *Zib*. 3645.
[493] *Zib*. 3655.
[494] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 1084.
[495] *Zib*. 930. Italics in the original.
[496] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 1084.

observes, this passage brings the perspective back to that fable, and, in so doing, also reveals a manner of narration and 'catena aggettivale' that:

> non lascia dubbi sull'approccio di Svevo alla 'storia del genere umano' *malcontento, torvo, occhialuto, inerme, imperfettissimo, disgraziatissimo*: l'uomo non è affatto, come voleva Darwin, il vanto e il coronamento della natura […] ma è un essere – come diceva piuttosto Leopardi – 'così lontano dallo stato che gli conviene, che più, quasi, non potrebb'essere, e quindi, laddove tutte l'altre cose sono in natura perfettissime, l'uomo è in natura imperfettissimo. Pertanto la specie umana, lungi da esser la prima in natura, è anzi l'ultima di tutte le specie conosciute'.[497]

We can expand on this by comparing Zeno's speech with multiple *Zibaldone* narratives.[498] For example, Zeno explains how *ordigni* have made 'l'uomo […] sempre più furbo e più debole' – to the point that 'non ha[nno] più alcuna relazione con l'arto'.[499] One of the implications of this is that some man *could* steal one of them and turn himself into destructive yet liberative bomb. In these lines, one can follow several Leopardian trajectories. For example, in 1821, the *Zibaldone* makes parallel points on explosive discoveries, such as:

> L'invenzione e l'uso delle armi da fuoco, [che] ha […] uguagliato il forte al debole, il grande al piccolo, il valoroso al vile, l'esercitato all'inesperto […]. E l'artifizio, sottentrando alla virtù, ed agguagliandola, e anche superandola, e rendendola inutile, ha pareggiato gl'individui, tolta la varietà, spento quindi anche nella guerra, l'entusiasmo quasi del tutto, spenta l'emulazione, e toltale la materia, spento l'eroismo, giacchè tanto vale un soldato eroe, quanto un Martano, o se anche non l'ha spento, l'ha confuso colla viltà, e reso indistinguibile, e quindi senza eccitamento e senza premio: in fine ha contribuito sommamente anche per questa parte a *mortificare il mondo e la vita*.[500]

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[497] Bertoni, 'Apparato genetico e commento', p. 1670. The *Zibaldone* note cited is *Zib*. 2898-2899.

[498] We will not, however, iterate the comparability between the development of *ordigni* and the unhealthy conformability of humans. Zeno argues that even though 'di alcuni animali non sappiamo il progresso', it is reasonable to think that this 'non avrà mai leso la loro salute.' We already explored parallel discourses in Leopardi; namely, when the *Zibaldone* explains the limited conformability of animals *versus* the supreme variability of humans. There, Leopardi, too, hints that '[n]oi conosciamo poco la natura degli animali' – yet, he concludes that humans become corrupted more than animals because they expand into *cose* and *oggetti*. Further research would be required on the vaster theme of animality in both writers, and on the problem on whether animals can be seen as adopting healthy or serene manners of existence. This, too, identifies a tension reformulated and problematized through Leopardi's and Svevo's careers. See Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 1084. See *Zib*. 1960.

[499] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 1084.

[500] *Zib*. 659-660. Italics in the original.

In terms of starting models and fictional developments, this section can be juxtaposed onto Zeno's speech. Firearms have replaced strength with the *viltà* (in Svevo, *furbizia* and *debolezza*) of a soldier Martano – a knight from Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, who literally *steals* weapons instead of proving himself in battle. The consequences of this, in *La coscienza*, is a universe where 'natural selection' is turned on its head and the world turns into a short-circuiting trap. Indeed, amongst his reformulations of the model above, Leopardi postulates that '[p]er l'invenzione della polvere l'energia che prima avevano gli uomini si trasportò alle macchine, e si trasformarono in macchine gli uomini'.[501] And again, in one of the early 'explosions' in the universe of the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi depicts a repressed organism deflagrating in a world in which 'il grande e il bello e il vivo' is 'spento':

> L'ardor giovanile, cosa naturalissima, universale, importantissima, […] materia vivissima e di sommo peso, ora non entra più nella bilancia dei politici e dei reggitori […]. Frattanto ella esiste ed opera senza direzione nessuna, senza provvidenza, senza esser posta a frutto […] e laddove anticamente era una materia impiegata e ordinata alle grandi utilità pubbliche, ora questa materia così naturale, e inestinguibile, divenuta estranea alla macchina e nociva, circola e serpeggia e divora sordamente come un fuoco elettrico, che non si può sopire nè impiegare in bene nè impedire che non iscoppi in temporali in tremuoti ec.[502]

This thesis has already connected this formidable note to other 'crises' in the Svevian *oeuvre* – namely, when looking at how excessively malleable and inept individuals can be corrupted and eventually implode, due to external circumstances. But we can now place the passage above within a more comprehensive context of comparability between *ordigni* and the restlessness of the *genere umano* and its *storia*. The dinamicity described by D'Intino as the 'cuore dell'immaginario leopardiano' reveals its quintessential

[501] *Zib*. 978.
[502] *Zib*. 195-196.

'significato ambivalente, distruttivo o creatore'.[503] The corrupted organism tries to free itself, heal, and find a conclusion to a *storia* that would otherwise only keep degenerating. This model, or strategy, is an attempt to regain a glimpse of that *naturalità perduta* that Leopardi chases throughout his career. However, this strategy works no better than a mere plaster placed on an infected wound. There is something deeper, here, and more profound. Similar models of 'return', destroying the self and the environment around it, become the sign of the ultimate disease of the organism and world in question. This final solution is another 'Leopardian version' at play in *La coscienza*.

'Forse traverso una catastrofe inaudita prodotta dagli ordigni ritorneremo alla salute'.[504] When not even toxic gasses and general suffocation will suffice, some madman will perhaps explode the world back to health. If previous passages can be compared to the versions of human history in the *Zibaldone*, it is in the *Operette* that this moment finds its quintessential counterparts. At the beginning of his speech, Zeno had recognized that 'health' is an illusion, a persuasion, and that 'purity' is a condition that humans can never retrieve. He has also avoided lingering on that unadorned truth, almost circumnavigating it via alternative trajectories. However, as Zeno admits, he had known all along that '[l]a vita somiglia un poco alla malattia come procede per crisi e lisi ed ha i giornalieri miglioramenti e peggioramenti' – actually, this is even more tragic, because 'è sempre mortale. Non sopporta cure.'[505] This realization, as well as the solution proposed by Zeno, can be additionally compared to a bleaker take on the *storia del genere umano*. Cortellessa has paralleled *La coscienza* to the 'materialismo annichilente […] sui suoi lembi estremi e visionari' of the most apocalyptic *operette*: specifically, Svevo here

[503] D'Intino, 'Il Consumo', p. 111.
[504] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 1085.
[505] Svevo, 'La coscienza', pp. 1083-1084.

shares the nuances of the 'finale del *Cantico del Gallo Silvestre*' (1824), where the general enigma of existence is resolved via a spectacular proposition.[506] Felici points out that this *operetta* was designed as an ending that 'circolarmente ricollega al quadro fantastico e mitico dell'operetta di apertura', and concludes that narration into a 'profezia apocalittica di […] rara potenza e suggestione, tra quelle che più si sono impresse nella memoria dei lettori di Leopardi'.[507] As we will argue, 'Cantico del Gallo Silvestre' encapsulates essential Leopardian tensions; portraying a model of existence as 'mystery and illness' and, then, resolving that impasse with a contradictory 'return to health'. Let us look at this text in detail, comparing its memorable tensions to the end of Zeno's story.

In the 'Cantico', Leopardi concedes that there are moments when life feels energetic and almost wholesome, and others where the illness of existence is profoundly felt: namely, 'il primo tempo del giorno suol essere […] più comportabile' and 'dispost[o] più che negli altri tempi alla pazienza dei mali', while the 'sera' of life is 'trista, scoraggiata e inchinevole a sperar male'.[508] Yet, the *Gallo* reveals that those are only deceptive modifications of a model that, in truth, always moves towards pain and death:

> pare che l'essere delle cose abbia per suo proprio ed unico obbietto il morire. […] Certo l'ultima causa dell'essere non è la felicità; perocché niuna cosa è felice. Vero è che le creature animate si propongono questo fine in ciascuna opera loro; ma da niuna l'ottengono: e in tutta la loro vita, ingegnandosi, adoperandosi e penando sempre, non patiscono veramente per altro, e non si affaticano, se non per giungere a questo solo intento della natura, che è la morte.[509]

This vision of existence as a fundamental *male*, or biological *malattia*, identifies the

[506] See Andrea Cortellessa, 'L'aldilà del Novecento', in *Leopardi e la cultura del Novecento; Modi e forme di una presenza: Atti del XIV Convegno internazionale di studi leopardiani* (Recanati 27-30 settembre 2017), ed. by Luca Chiurchiù and Maria Valeria Dominioni (Florence: Olschki, 2020) pp. 3-19 (p. 9).
[507] Lucio Felici, 'La voce dell'Origine. Il "Cantico del Gallo Silvestre"', in *L'Olimpo abbandonato: Leopardi tra 'favole antiche' e 'disperati affetti'* (Venice: Marsilio, 2005), pp. 167-183 (pp. 168; 181).
[508] Leopardi, 'Cantico del Gallo Silvestre', in *Operette*, pp. 186-189 (pp. 188-189).
[509] Leopardi, 'Cantico', p. 188.

quintessential proposition of the *Operette morali*. Furthermore, this revelation can be juxtaposed with a suspicion that Zeno had all along: namely, that life proceeds by *giornalieri* ameliorations and depressions, yet it ultimately behaves like a *malattia* that eludes explanations, cures, or fantasies of improvement. We can, thus, confirm that *La coscienza* shares the tensions of several instances in Leopardi's *oeuvre*, from *Zibaldone* narratives to the *Operette*'s revelation of life as an arcane, unstoppable *male*. Like Leopardi, Zeno has recurrently moved towards imaginary returns to health, energy, or nature, and has recurrently clashed against a harsher and more *vero* 'wall' – like a moth, moving towards the light, and finding instead the glass of a window, or some trap. Humanity is quintessentially unhappy, corruptible, and diseased, and this version of the story knows no 'returns' – both Leopardi and Svevo share this perspective, too. In analysing Svevo's novel, Stellardi has called this the 'double vision' at play in Zeno's final discourse. One side of this identifies a perspective 'secondo la quale l'uomo è un animale il cui grado di salute, adattamento e successo deve essere valutato sulle stesse basi su cui si valuta quello delle altre specie'.[510] As we argued, this is one of the fundamental 'oscillations' of the Leopardian discourse – recurring in 'older', yet immensely productive, notes in the index 'Malattie, debolezza corporale'. But Stellardi explains that Zeno's discourse assumes another perspective, too. This is 'interna alle coordinate specifiche dell'essere umano' as the most trasformable and corruptible of beings, 'incomparabile dunque ai metri di valore vigenti per le altre specie e per la natura in generale'.[511] The critic continues: 'da questo punto di vista, la nozione stessa di malattia va in frantumi […] non è altro che la trama stessa di un particolare tipo di vivente: l'uomo. Non si può ritornare a uno stato di salute che […] non c'è mai stato come possibilità

[510] Stellardi, 'Dialettica salute/malattia', p. 96.
[511] Ibid.

concreta', [512] insofar as 'non c'è uomo, neppure il più primitivo, senza ordigni: cosa sono, infatti, il calcolo, la società, la scrittura, se non strumenti con cui l'essere umano supplisce alla propria debolezza?'[513] We should point out that this latter 'vision', too, identifies an axis of the Leopardian discourse on health. A fundamental connection in 'ambivalence' and 'double vision' appears in both writers' dialectics of *salute* and *malattia*. Like Zeno, the Leopardian *oeuvre* wrestles with what Volpi describes as the 'labilità del confine fra forza vitale e malattia' – where the very idea and 'condizione della salute' of the human race 'tende costantemente a contraddirsi'.[514] Indeed, as Aloisi observes, throughout Leopardi's *oeuvre*, 'assottigliandosi il confine tra natura e cultura, sembra dissolversi, al tempo stesso, anche la possibilità di parlare di una degenerazione, pensata come una presunta perfezione voluta dalla natura e che diventa sempre più problematico identificare'.[515] We are finally landing at the problem of how to conclude comparable stories of *malattia* that do not seem to admit clear solutions. In both writers, comparable tensions recurrently interweave, between porous notions of 'purity' and 'corruption', 'health' and 'disease', 'physical predisposition' and 'inborn malady'. These models, generating continuous questioning and contradiction, are at the core of what this thesis has explored under the label of *male*, or *malattia*. We can conclude that the comparability between these 'movements' goes beyond individual texts and perspectives, generating an ampler profile of *genere umano* as a contradiction in terms. The next section will argue that this model is confirmed by the conclusions proposed by these texts above. It is time to look at another connection between *La coscienza* and Leopardi's 'Cantico': their ambivalent endings.

[512] Stellardi, 'Dialettica salute/malattia', pp. 96; 83.
[513] Stellardi, 'Dialettica salute/malattia', p. 93.
[514] Volpi, 'La malattia incolpevole', p. 20.
[515] Aloisi, 'Assuefazione, memoria, conformabilità', p. 106.

5. More than one conclusion

Let us summarise the different movements in *La coscienza*. Zeno first hopes to go back to a state of natural health. Then, he realizes that human life is a manifestation of disease beyond redemption. Humans have always sickened because that discontent, that pain, that restlessness is, in fact, their essence. In other circumstances, Zeno would have laughed the problem away, admitting the profound originality of it all. To some extent, this last section enacts a parallel technique. Of course, most of this section has a rather ominous manner of narration, with humanity gradually being consumed in nightmares of asphyxiation and corruption. The discourse, itself, is too suffocating, too intense, too panicked – until the last lines. There, the problem explored throughout Zeno's adventure is resolved in a quick and easy formula: 'ci sarà un'esplosione enorme che nessuno udrà e la terra ritornata alla forma di nebulosa errerà nei cieli priva di parassiti e di malattie.'[516] In other words: existence does not seem to admit cures, or possible resolutions; yet *forse* the whole problem will simply disappear. This further hypothesis encapsulates the themes and ambivalences of central importance to 'Cantico del Gallo Silvestre'. Let us see why and, in so doing, better explain the comparability between these elusive endings.

There will be a time, the *Gallo* claims, when 'non rimarrà neppure un vestigio' of life and its 'infinite vicende e calamità'.[517] After promising an eternity of arcane and unexplainable pain, the text proposes a 'sweet release' from the curse of living. Leopardi's prophecy ends with the suggestion that 'un silenzio nudo, e una quiete

[516] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 1085.
[517] Leopardi, 'Cantico', p. 189.

altissima, empieranno lo spazio immenso. Così questo arcano mirabile e spaventoso dell'esistenza universale, innanzi di essere dichiarato né inteso, si dileguerà e perderassi'.[518] A high and uncontaminated silence fills the universe, a new post-biological world is visualized, and the enigma of existing (before being understood, or even heeded) is resolved into the vastitude of the sky. These apocalyptic models are also at play at the end of *La coscienza*. It is certainly possible, as has been done by other scholars, to suggest a literary filiation between these narratives of 'liberation'. We hope that future research will find, in this section, observations comprehensive enough to better expand on such perspectives. What we will particularly focus on, in this section, is that there is, as Stasi puts it, a 'gesto sovversivo' both "'tragico' ma anche sdrammatizante' in narratives of this nature – both 'dark' and 'light', both philosophically strict and poetically uplifting.[519] As for Leopardi in particular, Aloisi observes that '[n]essuna disperazione, nessuno sgomento attraversa o incrina questa sublime visione della fine – di una fine che […] si presenta come finalmente definitiva e libera dalla minaccia di un nuovo inizio'.[520] However, as Aloisi also observes, the problem of existence, its transformations, and its inner tensions, in fact, remains a fundamental *arcano* throughout Leopardi's works. Felici explains that 'Cantico', itself, should be considered as a 'meditazione altamente dubitativa, caratterizzata da affermazioni […] messe […] in crisi da ripensamenti e sussulti contraddittori' – with reformulations able to encapsulate the hybrid essence 'del

[518] Ibid.
[519] Stasi, 'Prima dello *Zibaldone*: il Leopardi di De Roberto', in *Apologie della letteratura: Leopardi tra De Roberto e Pirandello* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995), pp. 15-61 (p. 59). Stasi does not directly explore, here, *La coscienza di Zeno*, and primarily focuses on Leopardi and Federico De Roberto. Yet, in looking at models of comparable apocalyptic tone, the scholar underlines that these share key 'analogie col finale della *Coscienza di Zeno*'. More on such Leopardian presences, and on De Roberto's developing the same 'conclusione […] a cui arriverà, ma in forma ironica e dubitativa, Zeno Cosini, lo sconsolato protagonista dell'ultimo romanzo di Svevo' can be found in Lavagetto, 'Introduzione', in Federico De Roberto, *I Viceré*, 5th edn (Milan: Garzanti, 1983), pp. i-xxi (pp. xix-xx).
[520] Aloisi, 'Il desiderio di felicità', p. 80.

poeta-filosofo'.[521] This manner of ambivalence enlivens the last minute of Zeno's speech, too. Indeed, Stellardi underlines how that moment 'sembra stridere aspramente con quanto […] la precede, soprattutto con l'acuta e intricata (e a tratti anche autocontraddittoria) riflessione sulla malattia'.[522] That final dissipation into space looks like a cathartic 'fuoco d'artificio […] per concludere […] una narrazione che intrinsecamente non sopporta conclusioni'.[523] One comes to wonder whether Zeno has actually healed, whether a madman will return the world to health with a bomb, or whether the same depressions and excitements will continue to alternate, as always, through the protagonist's autumn years. If we look at Svevo's career, the latter option is probably the most accurate scenario. In his *Continuazioni*, Svevo narrates the adventures, the ebbs and flows, and the incurable *malattia* of an older Zeno Cosini, and of a world that has not (yet) collapsed, restarted, nor healed in fire. A comparable 'continuation' characterises Leopardi's writings after 'Cantico del Gallo Silvestre'. Like *La coscienza*, that conclusion leaves one struggling to understand what to think of the narrative as a whole. The Leopardian reader, too, as Perfetti explains, cannot 'determine the extent to which the final shocking images of the self-destruction of the universe are a physical hypothesis, philosophical truth, or figurative hyperbole'.[524] This determines another element of comparable ambivalence in both writers.

More can be said about comparable impasses and fictional continuations. Like *La coscienza*, the 'Cantico' also leaves 'traces' on the oddity, or hybridity, of the conclusion at hand, and of its potential for 'posthumous' expansions. In the second edition of the

[521] Felici, 'La voce dell'Origine', pp. 177-178; 181.
[522] Stellardi, 'Dialettica salute/malattia', p. 95.
[523] Stellardi, 'Dialettica salute/malattia', p. 94.
[524] Stefano Perfetti, 'Posthumanism, Materialism and Midrash: the dissolution of all hopes in Giacomo Leopardi's *Canticle of the Wild Cock*', *Teoria*, 23.2 (2013), 29-45 (p. 37).

Operette (Piatti, 1834) Leopardi adds a footnote to the *operetta*, explaining that his apocalypse identifies, in fact, a 'conclusione poetica, non filosofica. Parlando filosoficamente, l'esistenza, che non è mai cominciata, non avrà mai fine'.[525] By adding this, Leopardi arguably stresses the fundamental aspects of his works. Primarily, its recurrent tension to combine the darker philosophical visions of the *Operette* with wider and more poetic narrations of 'return' – a hybridity in perspectives, this, that this chapter has followed in Leopardi's wider explorations of *malattia*. Furthermore, indeed like Svevo, Leopardi opens the way to new possible forms of existence and of continuations on the same subject matter. The footnote in question famously connects the *operetta* to forthcoming pieces. As Felici explains, that postscriptum creates a 'legame concettuale con "Frammento apocrifo di Stratone da Lampsaco"', composed in 1825 and 'pubblicato postumo nell'edizione del '45', where 'si affermerà con decisione non solo l'eternità della materia, [ma] anche il suo inesauribile potere di dare forme di vita'.[526] Of course, we are not about to engage in another reading of Leopardian apocalypses vis-à-vis *La coscienza di Zeno*. Nor will we consider whether Svevo was familiar with that later text – which, of course, is a possibility, given the attention dedicated to it by critics dear to Svevo, like De Sanctis.[527] It will suffice to say that in that Leopardian reformulation, too, the world is forecast to burn up ('doven[do] alla fine questo presente mondo perire di fuoco […] [n]elle quali fiamme […] individui […] generi e […] specie […] saranno distrutte insino, per dir così, dalla stirpe').[528] Yet, this time, from that destruction, 'si formeranno […]

[525] Leopardi, 'Cantico', p. 189.
[526] Felici, 'La voce dell'Origine', pp. 181-182.
[527] A mention of this text, and of its problem of physical *male*, appears in De Sanctis' 'Schopenhauer e Leopardi'. See Francesco de Sanctis, 'Schopenhauer e Leopardi: Dialogo tra A. e D.', in *Leopardi*, ed. by Antonia Perna and Carlo Muscetta, 1st edn 'Struzzi' (Turin: Einaudi, 1983), pp. 417-477 (p. 446). As posed in the introduction of this thesis, there are many reasons to believe that Svevo knew that piece, and that this constitutes one of the elements at play in his reflection on 'poetic' and 'philosophical' contaminations in 'Soggiorno londinese'.
[528] Leopardi, 'Frammento apocrifo di Stratone da Lampsaco', in *Operette*, pp. 190-194 (p. 193).

nuove' and original forms of existence and 'creature' whose 'qualità […] non possiamo noi né pur solamente congetturare'.[529] This creative duplicity in perspectives, leading to posthumous and original reformulations, is certainly a feature of Svevo's later works. Zeno, a man only hypothetically finding health in catastrophe, poetically 'survives' his own disintegration, and presents his problems through new forms. We can, thus, conclude that an *expansive model of comparability* – between physiological themes, fictional scenarios, and creative tensions – can be adopted to isolate and explain the elusive presence of Leopardi in Svevo's contaminated narratives of human history. Let us, then, return to Lavagetto, and clarify his thesis further via the perspectives of this chapter. Beyond a contamination of scientific and poetic sources, it is, in fact, in a more *comprehensively ambivalent and hybrid manner of narration*, and even in the resulting 'ironia, nell'uso un po' incredulo della voce raccontante' that one can find the '"tono" comune e quasi perfetta coincidenza dei grafici in cui Svevo e Leopardi inscrivono i loro più segreti umori, e insieme, "la dextre amenité" con cui tengono a distanza i propri soggetti'.[530] This ambivalence, or double vision, productively combines a bleaker perspective on human life and a more 'humorous', 'open-ended', and narratively 'unreliable' approach to the same set of problems – creating a concoction, perhaps a therapy, against the asphyxiations of a problem that has no possible ways out. Beyond individual texts, positions, and even beyond familiar models of comparability, this chapter has followed the 'oscillations' of these writers' works, and connected them via ampler, sometimes vertiginous, ways of narrating the same *storia*, and the same idea of *vita* as *malattia*.

[529] Leopardi, 'Frammento apocrifo', p. 194.
[530] Lavagetto, 'Storia del genere umano', p. 177.

Conclusions

'son guarito e sano come un pesce in grazia dell'aver fatto a modo mio, cioè non aver usato un cazzo di medicamenti'
Leopardi to his brother Carlo, 5 February 1823[531]

This thesis began by claiming that Leopardi's presence in Svevo is a confusing matter. That statement can be finally reconsidered. The presence of Leopardi in the Svevian *oeuvre* – mostly, in his essays, short stories, and three major novels – might not always consist in provable readings, identifiable sources, or 'uncontaminated' (that is, clear of third-party interferences) filiations. Both writers intercept ideas and texts, they 'humanise' and interweave notions foreign to the literary into pages of fiction: within such patchwork, the positioning of each piece can be pondered again, the fabric is stretched and expanded, the resulting pattern changes. This thesis has considered such writing and, in so doing, it has fashioned a methodology able to cast light on the relationship between the authors and texts in question.

The intersection of medical and humanistic discourses (medical handbooks becoming fictional sagas, microscopic visions projected onto universal battlegrounds, footnotes of physiology chanted like narrations of doom) is identified as a *modus operandi* in both writers; specifically, in texts revealing parallel premises, developments, and conclusions. Such contamination acts as vehicle for a crucial theme/philosopheme, which Lavagetto hints as a 'segret[o] umor[e]' of both Leopardi's and Svevo's poetics.[532]

[531] Leopardi, 'A Carlo Leopardi. [Roma] 5 Febbraio [1823]', in *Lettere*, pp. 384-387 (p. 387).
[532] Lavagetto, 'Storia del genere umano', p. 177.

This thesis identifies this 'dark humour' in the problematic notion that *vita* is *male* or *malattia*. In this formulation, *vita* conflates ideas of *life* (in its physical and corporeal dimension) and *existence* (both the existential choices of characters and existence in ontological terms), while *male* acts as a *fil rouge* for a series of 'impasses' (physiological, medical, philosophical, anthropological, cosmic) recurrently presented in both writers' works. Medicine, and all those disciplines aiming to soothe, address, or at least explain, the wounding contradictions of existence, are adopted to better describe the wounds in question: to enter and exit their recesses, moving from the literary to the medical and *viceversa*. The *arcano* of existence is embodied in concrete manifestations of illness, while suffering bodies lend fresh words to narratives of higher contradiction. Leopardi and Svevo are writers of 'disease' because they are writers of such contradictions, and it is via modalities of translation and contamination between humanistic and scientific ideas (from *male* to *malattia* and back, in a continuous empowerment and overcoming of discursive boundaries) that their works are compared and understood in this thesis.

The Leopardi-Svevo connection may *seem* confusing. Despite their self-professed asininity or *dilettantismo* in specific aspects of their production or reflection, Leopardi and Svevo are proficient interdisciplinary authors – they almost act as rhabdomantists when it comes to identifing (not only via documentable reading, also via conversations, frequentations, hearsay, skimmed-through booklets) ideas that could allow for reimaginations of what is already known. They believe in contamination as a matter of poetics and knowledge. Sources (scientific, literary, philosophical – they are all treated in an analogous manner, both democratically and instrumentally) are digested in the awareness that miscellaneous elements, if allowed to germinate, illuminate the nature of things (Leopardi) and cast light on the roots of existence (Svevo). Words different for

subject, place, and time are allowed to forget their past (author, name, function) and to operate as keys to unexpected doors. Leopardi and Svevo act as catalysts in this process, and their writing as medium for the acceleration and communication of ideas into novel circumstances. Not unlike Russian dolls, these writers specifically integrate figurines/sources of similar structure, which had, themselves, integrated previous and compatible dolls. But this is no simple repetition. The previous model is hidden within, undetectable to those who do not know the rules of the game, and secretly participates in the latter's expanded identity and function. Leopardi and Svevo play similar games with their sources, and Svevo, in turn, does the same with Leopardi. Eighteenth-century vitalism abandons the boundaries of medicine and is re-told as a nineteenth-century Garden of poisons and smiles; the roots of that life, in turn, participate in a twentieth-century rephrasing of universes deprived of good or bad. Discourses are passed on and altered *en route.* These processes are hard to contain or follow with philological tools. Even when one has proof, which is not the case for the Leopardi-Svevo connection, there is a risk of oversimplifying the process, or misunderstanding how information mutates via the medium of writing and time. As an author believing in the (unforeseen) *tertium quid* of this process, Svevo intercepted Leopardi as a compatible model to be integrated, rethought, and concealed within own work.

The critic investigating these writers is faced with a set of problems, which can be summarised as the three elements that dominate this relationship: 1) a common transformative use of scientific notions into narratives of ampler scopes; 2) references to Leopardi in some of Svevo's gloomiest (and darkly humorous) texts, where life reveals itself as deprived of meaning, pleasure, or health; 3) specific hints at medical schools and/or doctors, whose theories date back to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century

thinking. This thesis has shaped its methodology after these aspects, revealing that what may appear as confusion is, in fact, a matter of complexity. While the methodology of this thesis is novel and perhaps daring, it is also largely empirical and respectful of the subject at hand. Tasked with picking a lock, we shaped the pick according to the complexities of the lock, instead of forcing and jamming the system with prefabricated tools. Three perspectives are brought together, alternated, intersected, and gradually empowered in these chapters: namely, the investigation of comparable physiological models and 'tensions' developed into comparable solutions ('comparability'), of Leopardian references ('literary'), and of creative reformulations of nineteenth-century medical schools and experiments ('medical'). Each of them redirects to the other. Comparable narratives reveal and explain literary presences, references reveal richer routes of comparability. These, together, allow us to reconstruct bridges of reformulation for schools of medical thought. The most recurrent methodology is that of comparability – which indicates that Leopardi and Svevo, from their early reflections to their more mature production, engage with similar problems, develop similar solutions, and keep reformulating 'diseases' which are impossible to resolve and, therefore, allow endless reformulations.

Leopardi appears in Svevo's three major novels, and, more generally, in moments where Svevo (or his characters) derive revelations from circumstances, fictionalizations, or reflections on 'disease'.[533] Chaotic souls *versus* the pressures of the world, the lures of

[533] Alongside *Una vita*, *Senilità*, and *La coscienza*, Leopardian 'presences' (in terms of comparability, literary filiations, and common medical lineages) have been detected in the following Svevian texts: the essays or fables 'Soggiorno londinese', 'Ottimismo e pessimismo', 'La corruzione dell'anima', 'L'uomo e la teoria darwiniana'; and the fictional works 'Lo specifico del Dottor Menghi', 'Una burla riuscita', 'Madre natura', 'Il mio Ozio', and a 1928 'Prefazione' to the *Continuazioni*. The Leopardian texts mentioned in this thesis in relation to Svevo are: several *Operette morali* ('Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico', 'Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie', 'Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese', 'Elogio degli

intensity *versus* senile existences, microscopic bodies fighting within the depths of life, organisms clashing against their environment – these are the core scenarios considered in this thesis. Leopardian dilemmas, quotations, and 'traces' appear in such Svevian instances of contradiction. Alfonso Nitti is devastated by a Leopardian predicament, that of the impossible balance between inner and outer forces, and laments that one should have one life 'per sé e l'altra per gli altri'.[534] Emilio Brentani describes his and Amalia's illness via Leopardian quotations, concluding how 'metà dell'umanità esista per vivere e l'altra per essere vissuta'.[535] Zeno Cosini obsesses over Ada's thyroid disorder by adopting Leopardian titles, manners of reasoning comparable to *Zibaldone* narratives of *malattia*, and even mentions Leopardi when reporting that some organisms are born to attack and other to be crushed, in a universe where the poison is as natural as the remedy, and everything feels funny and unbearable.[536] Leopardi also appears in shorter pieces like 'La corruzione'; namely, in the *malcontento* that makes human history eminently transformable and corruptible via *ordigni*. The ultimate fictionalization of this model emerges in the last pages of *La coscienza di Zeno*, where a poetic (not a philosophical) explosion manifests the ambiguities of the human disease, also postponing the end of that story and of its writing. Alfonso and Silvio, Amalia and Silvia, Menghi and the *Fisico*,

uccelli', 'Dialogo di un venditore d'almanacchi e d'un passeggere', 'Storia del genere umano', 'Dialogo di un cavallo e un bue', 'Cantico del Gallo Silvestre', 'Frammento apocrifo di Statone da Lampsaco'); a limited selection of *Canti* ('La sera del dì di festa', 'Il pensiero dominante', 'Il sogno', 'Lo spavento notturno', 'Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia'); the draft of 'Vita abbozzata di Silvio Sarno'; and a selection of *Zibaldone* passages on themes of physiology, medicine, and natural contradictions (specifically, the 1826 Bolognese notes and a series of 1821-1823 ones, respectively culminating in the 'Garden of illness' and in the the anthropological note of 3 October 1823 on human inventions). It is envisaged that future studies will find here material for potential comparisons and investigations. This thesis, however comprehensive, does not claim to cover all the Leopardian presences in the Svevian *oeuvre*: this is only the beginning of a major field of investigation between two authors and reformulators of nineteenth-century Italian culture.

[534] Svevo, 'Una vita', p. 202.

[535] Svevo, 'Senilità', p. 618.

[536] Svevo, 'La coscienza, pp. 957-958; 972.

Ada and the Garden, Leopardi under a cascade of *stimuli* and Zeno poisoned by his own cure, the *genere umano* and the *torvo uomo* exploding into flame: these are the protagonists (and victims) of a *malattia fisica* and *metafisica* that is now identified as a *leitmotif* of both Leopardi's and Svevo's works.

Leopardi – that is, Leopardi as an element of contamination, and with a specific function – constitutes a dominant presence throughout the Svevian *oeuvre*. Perhaps even more consistently than in other nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors gathered under the umbrella of *leopardismo*, Svevo adopts Leopardi to explore his core theme, that of illness, and placing him in cardinal points of writing. Rusi's suggestion that 'la memoria di Leopardi si rivela […] dislocata in luoghi strategici nel percorso che da Alfonso Nitti e attraverso Emilio Brentani conduce verso Zeno Cosini' can now be substantiated via a comprehensive study of the Svevian *oeuvre* contaminated by Leopardian texts, interdisciplinary reformulations, and historically interconnected models of medical thought.[537] Such presences are no longer, as Rusi worries, 'tendenzialmente minacciat[e] dal rischio di venire assorbit[e] sotto l'egida schopenhaueriana'.[538] Leopardi appears too recurrently, too strategically, and leaving traces too meaningful within contexts of medicine/disease, to disappear under a third *egida*. Leopardian discourses or phrases could be seen, perhaps, to be contaminated with Schopenhauer, whose influence on Svevo has been explored by traditional scholarship – as it may be the case for philosophical (not physiological) ideas of ineptitude or visions of humanity as a dissonant note in the harmony of creation. But this element does not undermine the importance and the distinctiveness of the Leopardian component within Svevo's fictional and philosophical laboratory. Like other quintessential writers for Svevo (Schopenhauer, Darwin, and

[537] Rusi, 'Svevo e la funzione Leopardi', p. 219.
[538] Ibid.

Freud, amongst others), Leopardi can be finally inserted in the Svevian mental economy and canon of reformulated authors.

Leopardi's presence in Svevo is, thus, one of contamination and performs a function of disease. Following these coordinates, and the threefold methodology proposed in this thesis, one appreciates the complexity that dominates this relationship, and can see how and why Leopardi is, in fact, a Svevian author. Of course, such an important presence begs a challenging question. Why is Leopardi never openly declared by Svevo as one of his influences? On this we can only hypothesise. We know that Svevo tends to belittle the presence of some of his sources. The most clamorous example is Freud. According to Svevo, the paradigm of Freudianism allows for interesting fictional games, but is not a valid scientific model, and ultimately only some of Freud's ideas came to fertilize the writing of *La coscienza*.[539] Although this statement can be partially true, it is beyond doubt that Freud – mediated, mocked, transformed – is no presence to be belittled in Svevo. Leopardi, too, is recurrently scaled down throughout Svevo's works. For example, Svevo mentions him in conjunction with others in 'Soggiorno londinese', and directly after a tentative 'magari' in *La coscienza* when Zeno lists thinkers and authors that could bewitch one's imagination.[540] However, in terms of quotations disseminated throughout the Svevian *oeuvre*, of existential questioning, cosmic perspectives, anti-anthropocentrism, contamination of styles, mocking of scientific models, and original and humorous conclusions, Leopardi reveals himself to be a

[539] 'La psicanalisi. Non temete ch'io ve ne parli troppo. Ve ne dico solo per avvertirvi che io con la psicanalisi non c'entro e ve ne darò la prova. Lessi dei libri di Freud nel 1908 se non sbaglio. Ora si dice che io *Senilità* e *La Coscienza di Zeno* le abbia scritte sotto la sua influenza. Per *Senilità* m'è facile di rispondere. Io pubblicai *Senilità* nel 1898 ed allora Freud non esisteva o in quanto esisteva si chiamava Charcot. In quanto alla *Coscienza* io per lungo tempo credetti di doverla al Freud ma pare mi sia ingannato. Adagio: Vi sono due o tre idee nel romanzo che sono addirittura prese di peso dal Freud'. See Svevo, 'Soggiorno londinese', p. 894.
[540] Svevo, 'La coscienza', p. 957.

formidable presence. It may be possible that the similarities between these two nineteenth-century Italian writers are, in fact, so significant (and sometimes very visible, almost blatantly so) that Svevo decided to downplay this recurrent presence in his life and works. After all, Leopardi was a point of reference for Svevo from his formative years at Segnitz, where young Ettore tried his hand at poetry, which Barilli defines as showing an all-too-clear Leopardian influence.[541] This thesis hinted that Svevo might be integrating Leopardi's contaminated prose as early as *Una vita*, with the presence of the *Operette* disseminated in capital moments, like the *Apologo dei gabbiani* (Leopardi's 'Elogio degli uccelli'), and in Alfonso's impasse between the temperance of the 'old masters' and an existence full of passions and corruptions ('Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico') – and these are, indeed, pieces that Svevo reworked more explicitly in his later works, too.[542] Of course, these are but hypotheses, and there is no way of knowing why Svevo never fully admitted the importance of Leopardi. We can only say that these circumstances are not unique to Svevo and also apply to other authors seeing Leopardi as a contaminant towards interdisciplinary directions – as we will see momentarily.

This thesis is the first comprehensive study of Leopardi and Svevo, the first study to associate them from the perspective of the medical humanities, and proposes and outlines a hybrid methodology for future investigation. Although the focus of this investigation lies in the presence of Leopardi in Svevo, this thesis brings forward fresh perspectives to Leopardi studies, too. These chapters are the most extensive work on Leopardi's writings on the *theme* of disease. This is not to say that this thesis should be read as monographic study on the subject of Leopardi alone. However, the materials, perspectives, and conclusions gathered here point towards a fact: the times are ripe for

[541] Barilli, *La Linea Svevo-Pirandello*, p. 23.
[542] Svevo, 'Una vita', pp. 104-105; 350.

renovated discourses on this author, beyond outdated scholarly bias (Leopardi as a pessimistic writer primarily due to his condition of illness) or, conversely, beyond overtly virtuous discourse denying disease the role it deserves within Leopardi's reflections and works. A personal condition of suffering can lead, as Timpanaro suggests, to insight and knowledge.[543] These, in turn, can allow for imaginative and original revelations. In a 1926 letter, Svevo describes *La coscienza* to Eugenio Montale by stating that it is, in fact, possible to imagine 'un'autobiografia e non la mia'.[544] We can dare to push this further. Like for Svevo, disease is indeed for Leopardi a conduit and a modality of vision. The man gifted with high imagination, Leopardi writes, will see behind a tower 'un'altra torre' behind the harsh truth of reality, he will reconfigure another infinite and poetic world.[545] However, such processes can go both ways. The man of high mental intensity is also one who can daydream about a Garden so much to see, behind that, *another garden* crawling with horrors and revealing the arid reality of life. Nature reveals itself, in relation to the quality of this vision, as either poetic or philosophical, either bountiful or horrid, and sometimes – in line with Leopardi's and Svevo's distinctively 'dark humour' – as both. This thesis has highlighted similar tensions in Leopardi via a comparison with the Svevian *oeuvre*; specifically with Zeno, who, in Stellardi's words, is indeed 'colui […] che di ogni medaglia vede il rovescio' and that knows that life and disease are one and the same: they are two perspectives of the same Garden.[546] This model of 'disease' as a double-vision of the fabric of reality itself (imagination can lead to either dreams or nightmares, to revelations or obsessions, to poetic resurrections or to paralysing *ordigni* of the mind) can be found in both writers, and we hope that this further Svevian perspective will solicit

[543] Timpanaro, 'Alcune osservazioni sul pensiero del Leopardi', p. 158.
[544] Svevo, *Epistolario*, p. 779.
[545] *Zib*. 4418.
[546] Stellardi, 'Dialettica salute/malattia', p. 103.

new studies on Leopardi and disease from new perspectives – medical, physical, psychological, or metaphorical.[547]

This thesis lays down a path to future directions of research. The most obvious ones are, of course, those on the Leopardi-Svevo connection itself. Throughout our chapters, we underlined, either in the body of the text or in footnotes, possible new studies: the novelty of this thesis makes it easy to list possible titles.[548] While we will conclude by suggesting studies *beyond* the Leopardi-Svevo connection, there is (at least) one element, recurrently emerging throughout this thesis, that deserves a more extensive consideration. In chapters I and IV – two chapters running on similar ideas of conformability, corruption, and pathological endings – we underlined a correlation between themes of illness and metaliterary aspects. From draft-like 'novels of failure' to the adoption of illness to preserve autobiographical characters and narrating perspectives,

[547] This thesis recurrently argues that D'Intino's studies on Leopardi can be productively adopted for Svevo's narratives of psychophysical misfirings and modern *mutazioni.* In particular, see the sections 'Il Consumo', 'L'equilibrio', and 'Il vortice' in D'Intino, *La caduta e il ritorno*, pp. 83-154; 211-274; 155-210. Amongst the studies developing 'psychological' readings of Leopardi, see Fabio Camilletti, *Leopardi's Nymphs: Grace, Melancholy, and the Uncanny* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013). Furthermore, a collection of essays on pre-Freudian discourses on the unconscious in Italian literature, including but not limited to Leopardi, can be found in the already quoted collection of essays *Archaeology of the Unconscious*, edited by Aloisi and Camilletti.

[548] A study on the dialectics between *vero* and *illusioni*, *sogno* and *vita vera* – as already noted – could start from Leopardi's 'Dialogo di Torquato Tasso' and move towards investigations of common psychological mechanisms and obsessive rituals in both writers (such as that of the *anniversari* mentioned in chapter III). Further studies on Leopardi and Svevo could certainly include: the theme of animality and the (doubted) serenity of the animal state, with reference to Leopardi's 'Canto notturno di un pastore dell'Asia' ('Forse s'avess'io l'ale / da volar su le nubi, […] più felice sarei, dolce mia greggia, / più felice sarei, candida luna. / O forse erra dal vero, / mirando all'altrui sorte, il mio pensiero: / forse in qual forma, in quale / stato che sia, dentro covile o cuna, / è funesto a chi nasce il dì natale), 'Elogio degli uccelli', and *Zibaldone* passages on how, in fact, humans do not know much about the animal world (*Zib*. 1961) vis-à-vis Svevian texts like 'Una burla riuscita', and 'Rapporti difficili' and 'Argo e il suo padrone' (both circa 1927) – which come to infect animals with human corruptions and question the purity of the animal world. See Leopardi, 'Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia', pp. 453-454.
Another productive study would cover Leopardi's interaction with pre-Darwinian models – mostly Erasmus Darwin and Jean-Baptiste Lamark (1744-1829) and Svevo's own use of Darwinian theory in his own works. This study could lead to points of contact, in the terms of comparability described in this thesis, between Leopardi and Svevo and, perhaps, even to elements of filiation undetected by this thesis. This study, looking at pre- and post-Darwin *biological* sciences and their effect on literary narration, would probably deserve a monographic study of its own.

to pathological apocalypses allowing for open-ended conclusions and additional postscripts and continuations, the model of 'disease' can be seen to serve a recurrent metaliterary function in Leopardi and Svevo. It is envisaged that future studies will find in this thesis elements to further illuminate this aspect, which would both reinforce the importance of such themes in the orchestration of Leopardi's *oeuvre*, and create further connections – this time, in terms of poetics and style – between both writers.

This thesis offers a methodological approach that can be employed to explore further cases of comparable writings, literary presences, and reformulations of medical thought. In Leopardi and Svevo, this method has been confirmed by literary references found while moving along the route of comparability. This proved that, despite Svevo's reticence, Leopardi should indeed be considered as one of his authors. The same methodology can be used to explore another case of comparability and reticence: namely, Primo Levi. Although Levi declared that Leopardi should not be considered as one of his sources, Piperno argues that the *Operette morali* acted, for Levi too, as a creative model of scientific-humanistic recombination.[549] According to Mengoni, narratives of prolongevity can be found in Levi's 'Verso occidente' – a short story included in *Vizio di forma* (1971) – with references to fictional animals (lemmings) and human tribes orchestrating mass suicides and rejecting protracted forms of existence. Even when provided with medical therapies for longer life, they preferred to continue in their natural ways.[550] Elements of comparability with the Leopardian 'Dialogo di un fisico e di un metafisico' can also be found in Levi's 'Dialogo di un poeta e un medico' (in *Lilìt e altri*

[549] Martina Piperno, 'Primo Levi e Giacomo Leopardi: l'uomo, la macchina, l'artificio', in *Innesti: Primo Levi e i libri altrui*, ed. by Gianluca Cinelli and Robert S. C. Gordon (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019), pp. 179-196 (pp. 179-186).
[550] Primo Levi, 'Verso occidente', in *Opere*, ed. by Marco Belpoliti, 2 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), I, 578-587 (p. 587). This is discussed in Martina Mengoni, '"Doktor" Primo Levi. Arte medica e scienza fantastica, con una trama leopardiana', *Intersezioni: Rivista di storia delle idee*, 34.1 (2014), 115–133 (p. 126).

racconti, 1981) which Mengoni sees as carrying a recognizable Leopardian trace, together with a medical/humanistic interaction on the very theme of this thesis: in Levi's words, the idea of universal existence as an indifferent and 'immensa macchina inutile'.[551] Like in Svevo, comparable medical propositions and fictional developments, under the flag of *malattia*, can help clarify Leopardi's presence and function in Levi.

The methodology of *historically interconnected* medical reformulations, leading to original comparisons between texts, can also be applied beyond the Leopardi-Svevo connection. In 1827 both the *Operette morali* and *I promessi sposi* are published. As Camilletti points out, these are books with two different destinies within Italian culture: the former is largely criticised and ultimately banned, and the other becomes a touchstone for the collective identity of a new nation.[552] And yet, although the darkness of Leopardi's philosophy in the late eighteen-twenties *may seem* remote from the philosophical orchestration of *I promessi sposi*, common models of *vita* as *malattia* are fictionalized in critical moments of both. In the 1826 passages of the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi fictionalizes Italian models of Brunonianism (Tommasini and his *milieu*) into a hell-like *Giardino/ospitale* of biological selfishness, a microscopic society of mutually afflicting organisms embodying the *male* and absurdity of it all. Manzoni's portrayal of the *Peste* in *I promessi sposi*, too, derives its physiological coordinates from, and further fictionalizes, theories of Brunonian derivation: mostly, those of Giovanni Rasori, who, in

[551] Levi, 'Dialogo di un poeta e un medico', in *Opere*, II, 114-116 (p. 114). See again Mengoni, '"Doktor" Primo Levi', pp. 124-126.

[552] '1827 sees the concurrent publication of Leopardi's *Operette morali* and of the first edition of Alessandro Manzoni's novel *I promessi sposi* (The Betrothed), two works that – although produced from completely different angles and with divergent ideological aims – aimed to become the foundational texts of new Italian literature (and the following vicissitudes, witnessing an overwhelming supremacy of Manzoni's masterpiece, would open interesting possibilities for speculating about alternate cultural histories: but this would be a topic for another book)'. See Camilletti, 'Introduction', in *Classicism and Romanticism in Italian Literature: Leopardi's Discourse on Romantic Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1-19 (p. 14).

Mazzitelli's words, was '[l]a sovrana autorità scientifica lombarda' in matters of epidemics in Manzoni's time.[553] For both writers, a common model of correlation between life and disease/contagiousness leads to texts engaging with problems of lack (or confusion) of providential order, short-circuiting of meaning, and profound unfairness: in other words, with the existence of *male*. The three-fold methodology of this thesis could serve, here, too, for unexpected yet potentially productive comparisons: reformulations of historically interconnected schools of medicine allow for parallels between (micro or macro) societies and scenarios where *male* and *malattia* interweave and open the narration to insoluble dilemmas.

A final line of enquiry can be proposed, projecting this thesis' methods and results towards wider European perspectives. Starting from a *Zibaldone memoria* and the *Encylopédie*'s definitions of INEPTIE, the first chapter of this thesis proposes a new physiological paradigm to interpret 'ineptitude' in nineteenth- and early-twentieth century literature. For Silvio Sarno, Alfonso, and Emilio, ineptitude is revealed as a matter of impotence due to *energetic overcharge* – a 'riunione impossibile' between a buzzing (but also chaotic, malleable, and expansive) inner constitution and the dissipating, hardening, or paralysing energetic requests of the world.[554] As a pathology

[553] See Michele Mazzitelli, *I promessi sposi visti da un medico* (Rome: Angelo Signorelli, 1952), p. 171. As Hilary argues, '[e]ven though Manzoni had no personal experience with plague conditions, […] he relies on the expertise of his close friend and family physician, Dr F. Enrico Acerbi (1785-1826), who was the author of *Del morbo petecchiale e degli altri contagi in generale* (Milano, 1822).' However, as Mazzitelli explains further, '[l]e conoscenze epidemiologiche del Manzoni, sono come si vede, complete così come l'Acerbi le possedeva, per essere a conoscenza degli studi di […] Giovanni Rasori (1766-1837) il quale da tempo affermava che l'elemento contagiante non poteva essere che *vivo* e *animato*. […] La scienza di Rasori dominava l'ambiente medico al tempo di Manzoni. Era un grande maestro, anche se lo stuolo dei nemici cresceva sempre più contro di lui. Fra i nemici figurava anche l'Acerbi', who, in claiming that the element 'infettante non era di elementi morti, ma vivi, capaci di riprodursi e moltiplicarsi […] non s'accorgeva che non faceva che sostenere le idee sui contagi affermate dal Rasori; quelle stesse che furono di poi riaffermate qualche anno dopo da Agostino Bassi. Possiamo perciò dire che quella fu la scuola di Milano essendo Rasori professore a Pavia e Bassi lodigiano'. See Richard B. Hilary, 'Manzoni's Plague: Bibliographic Resources for a Literary Device', *Romance Notes*, 31.3 (Spring 1991), 251-256 (p. 263). See Mazzitelli, *I promessi sposi visti da un medico*, pp. 53; 164-176.
[554] *Zib*. 4420.

of ups and downs, of flat-lines and flareups, it can be adopted to follow the behaviour of fictional characters and the general plots of their associated works of fiction. Another aspect identified is the physiological 'softness' of inept protagonists – and the unexpected skill set associated to this. This acts as both weakness (and therefore does not threaten stronger parties or antagonists) and an uncanny *facilità d'imitare* (that is, to imitate stronger and more predatorial parties, and almost adopt their force and abilities against them). At least two lines of research stem from these considerations and results. Via Leopardi and the *Encyclopédie*, the paradigm of ineptitude, normally explored for nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, can be moved back and explored within the context of Enlightenment culture. This new and vast line of enquiry, falling within the field of the history of ideas, considers the origins and predecessors of the theme of ineptitude in fields as diverse as literature, moral philosophy, natural sciences, and medicine – probably connecting it to the investigation on depression/melancholy and their labels, transformations, manifestations, and cures throughout time.[555] But it is arguably in terms of literary interpretation that this model brings its most original results. Can a common 'physiological graph' (medically diagnosed debilities, conflicts between energies, behavioural splits, astonishing adaptation abilities) be used to study ineptitude in modern European literature at large – that is, for instance, to study protagonists from Leopardi and Svevo, from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1869) to Mann's *The Magic Mountain*

[555] As suggested by Jurisic, '[l]a genealogia dell'inetto coincide dal punto di vista scientifico con la storia della depressione'. A study on the medical origins of ineptitude, then, could find a starting point in the rich literature on the history of depression/melancholy. Although the scholar does not engage in this line of research, he refers to a comprehensive study on the subject: Donatella Lippi, Francesca Lovari, and Pier Luigi Cabras, *Due millenni di 'melancholia': Una storia della depressione* (Bologna: Clueb, 2005). Jurisic's paper, also presented on the occasion of the celebration of Svevo's birthday in 2019 at the Svevo/Joyce Museum of Trieste, can be found amongst the 'provisional working versions' of the '150th Anniversary of the Birth of Italo Svevo International Conference on *Italo Svevo and his legacy*'. See Srecko Jurisic, 'La fenomenologia dell'inetto da Svevo a D'Annunzio'. <https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/access/content/user/5076/ATTI/JURISIC.pdf>. [accessed 28 August 2022]

(1924), from Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927) to Musil's *The Man without Qualities* (1930-1942)? How do such unexpected heroes survive within that Darwinian struggle for existence that is modern society? Do they merely survive, like a parasite or *ombre d'existence*, or use their umbratile and shapeshifting skills to mimic and overcome stronger counterparts? Those are but general and perhaps daring questions, yet they seem to be potentially fruitful lines of research for an interdisciplinary take on ineptitude, its origin, and its development. This thesis offers results in terms of Leopardi-Svevo scholarship and new models of methodology. Starting from these two writers, new perspectives can be mapped, as well as new connections between texts, ideas, and writers previously not attempted or, in fact, never considered possible.

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