

Poetics of Sublime. The *Coro di morti* from Leopardi's *Operette morali* to Goffredo Petrassi

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Abstract

Although Leopardi as an author inclined almost entirely toward the serious and was not devoted to the dramatic arts, it is nevertheless in a small tragicomic masterpiece of his where relevant traces of a personal and fully modern aesthetic of the sublime can be found. A metapoetic reading of the *Coro di morti*, in the *Operette Morali*, reveals the strong convergence between his deepest philosophical persuasions, such as the inscrutable but unavoidable lack of happiness of the human condition, and the shaping of a personal poetics, alternative to both the classicistic mimesis and the romantic sentimental.

The last part of the paper focuses on an episode of the critical and creative reception of Leopardi's *Coro di morti* in order to investigate the dissemination of his poetry through the twentieth century, between acknowledgment and misinterpretation. From this perspective, the aesthetic paradigm of the sublime provides an ideal frame of reference for a critical investigation of Goffredo Petrassi's 1941 musical adaptation of the Leopardian poem.

1. In the *Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie*, Leopardi imagines that at the stroke of an undefined «mathematical year»¹ the mummies of the well-known Dutch embalmer experience a miraculous resurrection, during which they reacquire, for a quarter of an hour, the faculties of singing and talking. Without any other dramatic or narrative introduction, the operetta begins with the *Coro di morti*, a universal chant sung by all the dead «in ogni cimitero, in ogni sepolcro, giù nel fondo del mare, sotto la neve o la rena, a cielo aperto, e in qualunque luogo si trovano»². In this paper, I investigate the Leopardian imagination of the figures of the dead and of their condition, to show how they represent not only the fictional premise for a desecrating refutation of the common belief that death is painful – as in the dialogical part of the operetta – but above all: (1) an extreme case-study meant to prove the law of direct proportionality between unhappiness and life; (2) a dramatic invention which sustains a relevant metaliterary reflection.

¹ My translation, as in the following citations where not otherwise indicated.

² «In every cemetery, in every sepulchre, down at the bottom of the sea, under the snow or sand, in the open, and wherever they are located».



Finally, with reference to these observations on Leopardi's philosophical thought and the metaliterary strategies that support it, (3) I propose a reading of Goffredo Petrassi's adaptation of the *Coro*, written in 1940-1941.

Leopardi's invention of the character of the dead in the *Coro di morti* is a fascinating case, because in this interlude he combines a very high imaginative density with the stringent consistency of logical reasoning. The representation of death in this universal choir is based, in fact, on an operation of logical and systematic denial of the definition that, in his *Zibaldone*, Leopardi provides for the antonym of death: life. Given the formula according to which life is «the feeling of existence»³, the essential character of the dead is, consequently, the radical lack of any subjective perception of its own existence, be it intellectual, sentimental, or of memory.

These three complementary deficiencies are presented in the first lines of the *Coro*:

(1) deficiency of intellect:

Profonda notte
nella confusa mente
il pensiero grave oscura⁴; (vv. 6-8)

(2) of sentiment, including hope and desire as well as suffering and fear:

alla speme, al desio, l'arido spirto
lena mancar si sente:
così d'affanno e di temenza è sciolto,
e l'età vote e lente
Senza tedio consuma⁵. (vv. 9-13)

(3) of memory:

Vivemmo: e qual di paurosa larva,
e di sudato sogno,
a lattante fanciullo erra nell'alma
confusa ricordanza:
tal memoria n'avanza

³ *Zib.* 2411. Cfr. *Zib.* 2737 (1 giugno 1823), 3923 (27 novembre 1823) e 4137 (3 maggio 1825).

⁴ «Deep night in our troubled minds / obscures the terrible idea», translation by Jonathan Galassi (2010).

⁵ «The arid spirit lacks / breath for hopes and desire: / freed thus from strife and fear, peaceably it spends / the empty, inexorable years», translation by Jonathan Galassi (2010).

del viver nostro⁶. (vv. 14-19)

Neither in the *Coro* nor in the prose part of the operetta is any other element added to further specify the condition of the dead – except, as will be further explained, for the clarification of the implications of their condition on their degree of happiness or unhappiness.

2. In the dialogue that follows the *Coro* and quantitatively constitutes the greater part of the operetta, the fictional-deductive structure of the character of the dead is activated in ways that are fully consistent with the figure outlined in the poem and its peculiarities. At the same time, however, there are some moments of apparent oddity.

A seemingly capricious maneuver occurs when, immediately after the conclusion of the chant, the irruption on the dialogic scene of the character of Ruysch forces an abrupt shift of the thematic focus to an issue previously untouched in the *Coro*. Between traded witticisms, boldly superstitious on the part of the living, in the tone of an Enlightenment-style rational refutation of the antiquated and erroneous persuasions of the representative of the dead, the dialogue between Ruysch and the revived mummies focuses on a new question: that of the actual painfulness of dying. On the one hand, the embalmer, despite his ‘expertise’ on corpses and their preservation⁷, expresses the common belief that «tutti, o la più parte, concorrono [...] nel credere che la morte sia per natura propria, e senza nessuna comparazione, un dolore vivissimo»⁸. On the other hand, the resolute negative response of the dead reaffirms the thesis of the insensitivity of death, which, since it consists in a numbing of the senses, cannot rationally be painful⁹.

The peculiarity of the conception of the dead expressed in the *Coro* is a fundamental ingredient for the comic outcome of the dialogue. The comic effect of this part of the operetta is largely due to a recurring pattern in which the implicit expectations behind Ruysch’s questions are regularly disregarded. The point is that between the figure of the dead conceived by Leopardi and the one present in the traditional imagination, as well as in the mind of Ruysch, there is a substantial and irreparable difference. Ruysch, from the point of view of the ordinary man, conceives of the dead as individuals who have reached a further stage of existence, and who live in a somehow advanced condition, in a chronological and experiential sense. This assumption emerges clearly in certain points of the

⁶ «We lived, and like / a terrifying ghost / a nursing infant’s fitful dream, / a vague memory of living / flickers in the soul», translation by Jonathan Galassi (2010).

⁷ Cf. the first line of Ruysch’s dialogue: «Io non mi pensava perché gli ho preservati dalla corruzione, che mi resuscitassero» («I did not think that because I saved them from corruption, they would resurrect on me»).

⁸ «All, or most of them, concur [...] in believing that death is by its very nature, and without any comparison, a very intense pain».

⁹ Cfr. *Zib.* 281-283 (17 ottobre 1820) and 290-293 (21 ottobre 1820).

dialogue. In the opening part, for example, Ruysch replies to the dead by saying to them: «Io mi pensava che sopra questa faccenda della morte, i vostri pari ne sapessero qualcosa di più che i vivi»¹⁰. And again, a little further on, acceding with little conviction to the stringent logical arguments of the dead, the embalmer notes:

Sia come voi dite: benché tutti quelli coi quali ho avuta occasione di ragionare sopra questa materia, giudicavano molto diversamente: ma, che io mi ricordi, non allegavano la loro esperienza propria¹¹.

Witticism aside, Ruysch proves repeatedly – and hence comically – that he has not understood at all that even the dead cannot actually experience death, since the experience of death is, properly speaking, a contradiction in terms. In Leopardi's imagination, and with a much stronger logical consistency, the dead are not individuals with a 'surplus' of knowledge and memories deriving from having lived and gone beyond the experience of death. Instead, they are, by strict definition according to the rules of the thought experiment, beings whose essential characteristics are the result of the annihilation of the faculties that allow living beings to perceive their own existence. Remaining stubbornly attached to the common vision, Ruysch inevitably ends up in the ridiculous position of repeatedly asking for explanations from an interlocutor who is neither able to respond, nor even to be cognizant of the subject.

Death is not something that can be experienced, as Ruysch naively believes; it is just the extinguishing of the faculties that allow individuals to have a perception of their own existence and experiences. As a scientist, he could perhaps grasp a better image of the actual nature of death in the deficiencies that structure the figure of the dead: the dimming of memory, the fading of sensation, the flattening of the intellect. But he is unable to do it. The overall comic physiognomy of the character thus acquires the serious vein of a lost opportunity, of a miraculous revelation that could but did never does take place. Like someone who looks at the pointing finger instead of the moon, Ruysch does not grasp the exceptional nature of the encounter with the dead and does not appreciate their song, which he humorously compares to the rooster's daily crow¹². He engages them in a vain discussion about the painfulness of dying while spending no word or attention on their puzzling eternal condition nor on the terrible declaration which they pronounce at the conclusion of the *Coro*, universally extended to the living and the dead. Certainly, although the dead do not have a positive knowledge of death, the simple rationality of their answers is enough to refute the errors of common belief¹³. However, in the dialogical part of the operetta the

¹⁰ «I thought that about this matter of death, your peers knew more than the living».

¹¹ «Be it as you say: although all those with whom I reasoned on this matter judged very differently: but, as I remember, they did not refer to their own experience».

¹² «Diamine! Chi ha insegnato la musica a questi morti, che cantano di mezza notte come galli?».

deepest and most problematic puzzles of the *Coro* do not find an explicit development.

3. The seemingly fantastical invention of the character of the dead, in fact, is firmly based on Leopardi's own logical reasoning on the problem of "the impossibility of happiness"¹⁴.

The frequent Zibaldonian annotations of the second half of 1823 testify to the wide speculative movement – which would later serve as the conceptual basis for the upcoming *Operette morali*¹⁵ – which led Leopardi to the extreme logical consequences of his «Theory of Pleasure», conceived first in 1820¹⁶. In its most rigorous formulation, his extreme deduction takes the mathematizing form of a law of direct proportionality between the degree of life and that of unhappiness¹⁷:

questa si é una conseguenza dei principii posti nella mia teoria del piacere [...]; dove é più vita, quivi é maggior grado di amor proprio, o maggiore intensità e sentimento e stimolo e vivacità e forza del medesimo; e dove é maggior grado o efficacia di amor proprio, quivi é maggior desiderio e bisogno di felicità; e dove é maggior desiderio di felicità, quivi é maggiore appetito e smania ed avidità e fame e bisogno di piacere: e non trovandosi il piacere nelle cose umane é necessario che dove n' é maggior desiderio quivi sia maggiore infelicità, ossia maggior sentimento dell'infelicità; quivi maggior senso di privazione e di mancanza e di vuoto; quivi maggior noia, maggior fastidio della vita, maggior difficoltà e pena di sopportarla, maggior disprezzo e noncuranza della medesima¹⁸.

¹³ Cfr. *Zib.* 2709-2712 (21 maggio 1823): «la filosofia moderna non fa ordinariamente altro che disingannare e atterrare [...] i filosofi moderni, sempre togliendo, niente sostituiscono. E questo é il vero modo di filosofare, non già, come si dice, perché la debolezza del nostro intelletto c'impedisce di trovare il vero positivo, ma perché in effetto la cognizione del vero non é altro che lo spogliarsi degli errori, e sapientissimo é quello che sa vedere le cose che gli stanno davanti agli occhi, senza prestar loro le qualità ch'esse non hanno. La natura ci sta tutta spiegata davanti, nuda ed aperta. Per ben conoscerla non é bisogno alzare alcun velo che la cuopra: é bisogno rimuovere gl'impedimenti e le alterazioni che sono nei nostri occhi e nel nostro intelletto; e queste, fabbricateci e cagionateci da noi col nostro raziocinio [...] tutte le scoperte fondate sulla nuda osservazione delle cose, non fanno quasi altro che convincerci de' nostri errori, e delle false opinioni da noi prese e formate e create col nostro proprio raziocinio o naturale o coltivato e (come si dice) istruito. Più oltre di questo non si va. Ogni passo della sapienza moderna svelle un errore; non pianta niuna verità».

¹⁴ Cfr. Blasucci 1985: 193.

¹⁵ Cfr. Blasucci 1985; Melosi 2008: 14-16.

¹⁶ Cfr. *Zib.* 165-183 (12-23 luglio 1820).

¹⁷ «Un rigore geometrico di teorema senza scampo» (Blasucci 1985: 190).

¹⁸ *Zib.* 2737, 1 giugno 1823 («And this is indeed a consequence of the principles laid down in my theory of pleasure. Because in the young there is more life or more vitality than in the old, that is, greater consciousness of existence and of oneself. And where

Or still a little further on, more succinctly:

L'amor proprio e quindi l'infelicità sono in proporzione diretta del sentimento della vita¹⁹.

Happiness consists in the satisfaction of the desire for pleasure, generated in a living being by the love he feels for himself. Since, on the one hand, the contrast between the inexhaustible indefiniteness of desiring and the finiteness of every concrete pleasure makes a full satisfaction impossible, and since, on the other hand, even the smallest fraction of unsatisfied desire produces effective unhappiness²⁰, then the more an individual is alive, the more he perceives his own existence, the more unhappy he is.

It is noteworthy how in the *Zibaldone* this reflection develops in a continuous relationship between passages that advance theoretical formulations of synthesis and other quite numerous annotations dedicated to the 'experimental' consideration of specific cases, in which the thesis in question is observed and subjected to verification. This method of continuous development and systematic verification of the thought operates in two intertwined and complementary directions: in one sense, a theoretical and general outcome is derived from specific and experiential triggers; in the opposite sense, the reflection moves from absolute principles towards their implementation in concrete and experienceable situations²¹. According to this characteristic process of Zibaldonian reflection, the

there is more life, there is a higher level of self-love, or higher intensity and consciousness and stimulus and vivacity and force of the same, and where there is a higher level or efficacy of self-love, there is a greater desire and need of happiness, and where there is a greater desire of happiness, there is a greater appetite and craving and avidity and hunger and need of pleasure. And when this pleasure is not found in human things it is inevitable that where there is a greater desire for it, there is greater unhappiness, or greater consciousness of unhappiness, therefore a greater sense of privation and lack and emptiness, therefore greater boredom, greater vexation in life, greater difficulty and torment in bearing it, greater scorn and indifference toward the same», translation from the edition by Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino, 2013).

¹⁹ *Zib.* 3922, 27 novembre 1823: «Self-love and therefore unhappiness are in direct proportion to the feeling of life», translation edited by Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (2013). Cfr. *Zib.* 2753 (4 giugno 1823); 3846-3847 (del 7 novembre 1823).

²⁰ Cfr. *Zib.* 3550-3552 (29 settembre 1823): «dove non v'ha piacere, quivi ha patimento, perché v'ha desiderio non soddisfatto di piacere, e il desiderio non soddisfatto é pena. Né v'ha stato intermedio, come si crede, tra il soffrire e il godere; perché il vivente desiderando sempre per necessità di natura il piacere, e desiderandolo perciò appunto ch'ei vive, quando e' non gode, ei soffre. E non godendo mai, né mai potendo veramente godere, resta ch'ei sempre soffra, mentre ch'ei vive, in quanto ei sente la vita».

²¹ «Benché impossibile sia lo specificarli e spiegarli a uno a uno, e benché, stante la molteplicità e sfuggevolezza delle cause che contribuiscono a modificarli in questa e

law of proportionality between life and unhappiness is expressed in a group of annotations which, not infrequently interweaving different themes, range from the conceptual oppositions young/old and ancient/modern, northern/southern, to the observation of the effects of seasonal variety; from the comparison between more or less evolved animals to those concerning the differences among personalities and individual characters, strong *vs* weak, males *vs* females, or contemplative activities *vs* material ones²².

In such an expansive series of observations proving the theorem of the unhappiness of living beings, those relating to the extreme cases of a minimum degree of life stand out for their particular relevance. In fact, according to the law of proportionality, they correspond to the minimum degree of unhappiness. Numerous passages in the *Zibaldone* attest to Leopardi's wide reflection on this subject. He considers the states of psychophysical alteration and dizziness caused by alcohol and drugs, muses on drowsiness and on sleep, and again on fainting and on the loss of consciousness²³. In these notes he does not fail to observe the

questa e questa forma [...] sieno anche bene spesso difficilissimi a spiegarsi, e a rivocarsi ai principii, ed a conoscerne il rapporto e somiglianza cogli altri risultati, chi non sia abilissimo, acutissimo e industriosissimo nel considerarli; nondimeno in sostanza corrispondono ai principii da me esposti, e non se gli debbono riputare contrarii, come non dubito che potranno parere mille di loro e in mille casi, alla prima vista, ed anche dopo un accurato, ma non idoneo né giusto né sufficiente esame. Bisogna aver molta pratica ed abilità ed abitudine di applicare i principii generali agli effetti anche più particolari e lontani, e di scoprire e conoscere e d'investigare i rapporti anche più astrusi e riposti e più remoti» (*Zib.* 3926-3927). Cfr. Distefano 2016.

²² «Accanto a queste formulazioni assolute [...] si possono registrare come proprie di questi mesi, sempre nell'ambito del dibattito vita-felicità, alcune applicazioni particolari in cui la considerazione di fattori condizionanti come l'età, la complessione corporea, la stagione, il clima, il cibo, conferisce alla purezza della "teoria" una concretezza di sviluppi sensistici sempre più articolata» (Blasucci 1985: 190-191). Cfr. *Zib.* 2736-2738 (1 giugno 1823); *Zib.* 2752-2755 (4 giugno 1823); 2926-2928 (9 luglio 1823); 3265-3269 (26 agosto 1823); 3347-3349 (del 3 settembre 1823); 3676-3682 (13 ottobre 1823); 3835-3836 (5 novembre 1823); 3921-3927 (27 novembre 1823); 3936-3937 (28 novembre 1823); 4250 (2 marzo 1827).

²³ *Zib.* 3551 (29 settembre 1823): «nel sonno, nel letargo [...] ei non soffre perché la vita non gli é sensibile»; 3842-3843 (6 novembre 1823): «stato di assopimento, di letargo, di certe ebbrietà, nell'accesso e recesso del sonno, e in simili stati in cui la proporzione, la somma, la forza del pensare, l'esercizio del pensiero, la libertà e la facoltà attuale del pensare, é minore, più impedita, scarsa»; 3846-3848 (7 novembre 1823) «in una ebbrietà letargica, in uno alloppiamiento, come quello de' turchi, debolezza non penosa, ec. negl'istanti che precedono il sonno o il risvegliarsi ec. [...] quando ei non sente in niun modo la vita, cioè nel sonno, letargo, svenimento totale, negl'istanti che precedono la morte, cioè la fine del suo esser di vivente»; 3895 (20 novembre 1823) «Il sonno e tutto quello che induce il sonno, ec. é per se stesso piacevole, secondo la mia teoria del piacere ec. Non c'è maggior piacere (né maggior felicità) nella vita, che il non sentirla»; 3905-3906 (24 novembre 1823); 3924-3925 (27 novembre 1823): «Tra' vari stati degl'individui, quello p.e. di ebbrietà, benché più vivo quanto al corpo, essendo però men vivo quanto allo spirito (che in quel tempo é obruto dalla materia, e le sensazioni spirituali dalle materiali,

paradox of a negative conception of happiness, consisting merely in the «lack of unhappiness» (*Zib.* 3847-3848) caused by a decrease in sensitivity. At the same time, however, his appreciation for the pleasure that a decrease in sensitivity is able to bring remains quite relevant²⁴. In this regard, consider the following passages, which I have arranged in chronological order:

Il punto o lo spazio dell'addormentarsi definitivamente (sebbene impercettibile), é dilettevole. Questo quando anche la cagione del sonno, come il languore, il travaglio, la malattia, la semplice debolezza, non siano dilettevoli, anzi l'opposto; e però i momenti più lontani dal sonno siano penosi. Anzi anche il letargo proveniente da infermità, anche mortale, é dilettevole. Che il torpore sia dilettevole l'ho notato già in questi pensieri nella teoria del piacere, e assegnatane la ragione [...] non dubito che l'uomo (e qualunque animale) non provi un certo conforto, e un tal qual piacere nella morte. Non già che le cagioni di lei, e perciò i momenti più lontani da lei, siano dilettevoli; ma sibbene i momenti che la precedono immediatamente, e quello stesso punto o spazio impercettibile, e insensibile, in cui ella consiste²⁵.

Il languore del corpo alle volte é tale, che senza dargli affanno e fastidio, affievolando le facoltà dell'animo, affievolava ogni cura e ogni desiderio. L'uomo prova allora un piacere effettivo, massime se viene da uno stato affannoso ec. e lo prova senz'alcun'altra cagione esterna, ma per quella

e le azioni stesse dello spirito, benché più forti ec., hanno allora più del materiale che all'ordinario), e quindi la vita essendo allora più materiale, e quindi propriamente men vita (come in tempo di sonno o letargo, benché questo sia inerte, e l'ebrietà più svegliata ancora e più attiva talvolta che lo stato sobrio), é meno infelice»; 3931 (27 novembre 1823); 4080 (23 aprile 1824).

²⁴ «Dalla mia teoria del piacere [...] risulta che infatti, stante l'amor proprio, non conviene alla felicità possibile dell'uomo se non che uno stato o di piena vita, o di piena morte. O conviene ch'egli e le sue facoltà dell'animo sieno occupate da un torpore da una noncuranza attuale o abituale, che sopisca e quasi estingua ogni desiderio, ogni speranza, ogni timore; o che le dette facoltà e le dette passioni sieno distratte, esaltate, rese capaci di vivissimamente e quasi pienamente occupare, dall'attività, dall'energia della vita, dall'entusiasmo, da illusioni forti, e da cose esterne che in qualche modo le realizzino. Uno stato di mezzo fra questi due é necessariamente infelicissimo» (*Zib.* 1585, 29 agosto 1821); «O distrazione o letargo: ecco i soli mezzi di felicità che hanno e possono mai aver gli animali» (*Zib.* 3848, 7 novembre 1823).

²⁵ *Zib.* 290-291, 21 ottobre 1820 («it is certain that the moments immediately preceding sleep, and the point or interval of definitively falling asleep (although imperceptible), are pleasant. This is true even when the cause of sleep, whether languor, exhaustion, illness, or simply fatigue, is not pleasant, indeed the opposite, and so the moments furthest from sleep are painful. Indeed, even the lethargy arising from illness, even when it's mortal, is pleasant. That torpor can be pleasurable I have already mentioned in the theory of pleasure in these thoughts, giving my reasons [...] I do not doubt that man (and any other animal) experiences a certain comfort, and therefore pleasure, in death. Not that the causes of it or, therefore, the moments furthest from it are pleasant, but rather the moments immediately preceding it, and the actual imperceptible and insensible point or interval in which it consist», translation edited by Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (2013)).

semplice dimenticanza de' mali, e trascuranza de' beni, desideri e speranze, e per quella specie d'insensibilità cagionatagli da quel languore²⁶.

Il piacere, a differenza del dolore, opera languidamente sui sensi, anzi osservate che il piacer fisico per lo più consiste in qualche specie di languore, e il languor de' sensi é un piacere esso stesso. Però i sentimenti ne son capaci anche estinguendosi, e perciò medesimo che si estinguono²⁷.

Il piacere non é che un abbandono e un oblio della vita, e una specie di sonno e di morte. Il piacere é piuttosto una privazione o una depressione di sentimento che un sentimento, e molto meno un sentimento vivo. Egli é quasi un'imitazione della insensibilità e della morte, un accostarsi più che si possa allo stato contrario alla vita ed alla privazione di essa, perché la vita per sua natura é dolore. Onde é piacevole l'esserne privato in quanta parte si può, senza dolore e senz'altro patimento che nasca o sia annesso a questa privazione. Quindi il piacere non é veramente piacere, non ha qualità positiva, non essendo che privazione, anzi diminuzione semplice del dispiacere che é il suo contrario²⁸.

Il dolore è cosa viva, e i sensi dell'uomo [...], cominciata che è la morte, sono moribondi, che è quanto dire estremamente attenuati di forze. Può bene essere causa di piacere: perché il piacere non sempre è cosa viva; anzi forse la maggior parte dei dilette umani consistono in qualche sorta di languidezza. Di modo che i sensi dell'uomo sono capaci di piacere anche presso all'estinguersi; atteso che spessissime volte la stessa languidezza è piacere; massime quando vi libera da patimento; poiché ben sai che la cessazione di qualunque dolore o disagio, è piacere per se medesima²⁹.

²⁶ *Zib.* 1581, 28 agosto 1821 («The languor of the body is sometimes so great that, without causing distress and vexation to the mind, by weakening its faculties it weakens every care and every desire. Man then experiences an actual pleasure, especially if he is coming from a distressed, etc., state. And he experiences it without there being any other external cause, but simply by virtue of his *forgetting* ills and ignoring goods, desires, and hopes, and by virtue of that kind of insensibility brought about in him by this languor», translation edited by Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (2013)).

²⁷ *Zib.* 2566-2567, 16 luglio 1822 («pleasure, unlike pain, works languidly on the senses, in fact note that physical pleasure for the most part consists in some sort of languor, and the languor of the senses is itself a pleasure. Therefore feelings are capable of it even as they are dissolving, and for the very reason that they are dissolving», translation edited by Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (2013)).

²⁸ *Zib.* 4074, 20 aprile 1824 («pleasure is none other than an abandonment and forgetfulness of life, and a kind of sleep and death. Pleasure is rather the privation or the depression of feeling than a feeling as such and still less an intense feeling. It is like an imitation of insensibility and of death, the drawing as near as possible to a state contrary to life and to the privation of it, because life by its nature is pain. Hence it is pleasurable to be without life as much as one can, without any of the pain and suffering that comes from or is attached to such a privation. Therefore pleasure is not really pleasure, it does not have positive qualities, because it is only privation, indeed a simple diminution of displeasure which is its opposite», translation edited by Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (2013)).

The first note, dating back to 1820, explains Leopardi's conceptualization of pleasure as a kind of a suspension or attenuation of suffering, like sleep or death. The sensory basis of this line of thought is reaffirmed between 1821 and 1822, in the second and third excerpts reported here, by the insistence on the experiential origin of these 'observations': Leopardi begins by considering cases and situations that can be experienced («The languor of the body is sometimes such»; «observe» etc.) and progresses by trying to explain the corresponding sensations of pleasure or suffering («Man then experiences» etc.; «for the most part consists in» etc.). In the context of this reflection, an appreciation emerges for the "actual" and "physical" pleasures conferred by a decrease in sensitivity, which «by weakening its [the mind's] faculties it weakens every care and every desire».

At last, in the note from 1824, we see how this set of considerations is progressively integrated into an objectifying conceptualization of pleasure – formally observable in the prevalence of nominal predicates – and, above all, more oriented to its intrinsically negative character – as demonstrated by the privative semantics of most of the lemmas and by the litotic 'commoratio' of the type «pleasure is not really pleasure, it does not have positive qualities, because it is only privation, indeed a simple diminution of displeasure which is its opposite». Under a substantial affinity of themes and topics, the investigative perspective is here almost overturned: the point is no longer to investigate the experiences of attenuation of sensitivity to establish if and for what reasons they are pleasant, but to satisfy an ontological question about the nature of pleasure. The theorem of the proportional unhappiness of living beings is eventually remodeled in this perspective.

Finally, the last passage, thematically akin to the previous ones, is not drawn from the *Zibaldone* but from the lines of the representative of the dead during the dialogue with Federico Ruysch. It demonstrates the continuation in the 'operetta' of Leopardi's reflection on how pleasure derives from a decrease in sensitivity.

In Ruysch's mummies we can thus, first of all, recognize a further element of the considerable series of "observable" cases considered by Leopardi as supporting evidence for the theoretical aspects of his philosophy. In the wide set of degrees, ways, and circumstances of life examined in the investigation of the correspondence between life and unhappiness, the dead stand out as an extreme case of diminishing the perception of existence to the dizzying limit of the total absence of life. To continue the mathematical analogy, they figuratively represent the result of the limit for life tending to zero of the unhappiness proportionality function. The "result" of such an operation is, on the one hand, a further confirmation of the pleasure inherent in the attenuation and suspension of the senses and therefore, a fortiori, also of death; on the other, it is a dramatic

²⁹ «Pain is a living thing, and man's senses [...], once death begins, are dying, which is to say extremely weakened. It may well be cause of pleasure: because pleasure is not always a living thing; indeed perhaps most human delights consist of some sort of languor. Thus man's senses are capable of pleasure even when they are near extinction; since very often the same languor is pleasure; especially when it frees you from suffering; since you well know that the cessation of any pain or discomfort is pleasure in itself».

invention, which, through the voice of the dead, can speak with an icastic force supported by the rigor of the underlying logical calculation.

So it is, as long as only the dialogical part of the operetta is considered. A different conclusion emerges instead in the *Coro*. The poetic text, containing the peculiar description of the dead considered at the beginning, can also be read as the account of an 'observation' conducted on the condition of the dead and aimed at certifying the corresponding degree of happiness/unhappiness. The result of the 'Gedankenexperiment' is enclosed in the rhymed couplet which repeats identically in the initial and in the final part of the composition:

nostra ignuda natura;
lieta no ma sicura³⁰ (vv. 4-5 e identica vv. 29-30)

The absence of life – strictly speaking, the absolute lack of perception of one's own existence – preserves the dead from the pain that life entails. Consequently, their nature, "ignuda" in the sense of lifeless, is safe from the unhappiness that oppresses the living ("sicura/dell'antico dolor" vv. 5-6). However, their condition is not happy ("lieta no"). The emphasis is no longer placed on the relative happiness generated by the decrease in sensitivity and life, as in the aforementioned Zibaldonian passages and in the dialogical part of the 'operetta' itself, but rather on its radical and inevitable absence. The same thesis is reaffirmed in the conclusion of the poem, to be expanded into a final declaration of the common destiny that unites the living and the dead:

nostra ignuda natura;
lieta no ma sicura;
però ch'esser beato
nega ai mortali e nega a' morti il fato³¹. (vv. 29-32)

Thanks to their suggestive apophtegmatic quality – markedly more portentous in tone than is the comic dialogic part that follows --, these closing lines support the universal value of the conclusion without providing an explanation.

The unhappiness that now extends over the entire range of conditions of existence, both the living and the dead, is no longer simply the final datum of a sensory-psychological observation of the perilous dynamics of pleasure, which still admit some sort of positive happiness in the diminution of sensitivity. In the *Coro*, unhappiness eventually appears a necessary and irrefutable quality of existence: «L'infelicità necessaria de' viventi è certa»³² reads an important note

³⁰ «Our naked being [...] / not happy, no, but safe», translation by Jonathan Galassi (2010).

³¹ «Our naked being [...] / not happy, no, but safe; / since fate bans happiness / for mortals and the dead», translation by Jonathan Galassi (2010).

³² *Zib.* 4099-4101 («the necessary unhappiness of living things is certain», translation edited by Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (2013)).

dated 3 June 1824, written just a few weeks before the *Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie*:

il non potere in alcun modo esser felice, e ciò per impotenza innata e inseparabile dall'esistenza, anzi pure il non poter non essere infelice, [è] verità tanto ben dimostrata e certa intorno all'uomo e ad ogni vivente, quanto possa esserlo verità alcuna secondo i nostri principii e la nostra esperienza³³.

The novelty, even more than in the contents, is in the perspective assumed by the philosophical investigation. The shift is similar to that observed in the comparison of the Zibaldonian annotations from 1821-1822 with that from 1824, contemporary to the last quoted passage, wherein Leopardi moved, from the observation of the relative pleasantness of the conditions of attenuation of sensitivity, to a negative conceptualization of pleasure as a suspension of pain. The change in perspective is analogous to that masterfully described by Luigi Blasucci in reference to the *Dialogo della Natura e di un islandese*

Forse il Leopardi, giunto colla sua analisi al limite estremo delle ragioni 'interne' della 'vita', ossia dell'individuo, perpetuamente frustrato nella sua richiesta di felicità, tentò di mettersi finalmente dal punto di vista 'esterno' dell'esistenza³⁴.

In the closing lines of the *Coro*, as in the last quotation from the *Zibaldone*, the emphasis falls on the determination in an ontological sense of the 'truth' of what exists, and no longer on the analysis of the subject's experience. According to this new perspective, in the 'Gedankenexperiment' of the *Coro* the dead no longer take on the contours of representatives of a possibility of relative happiness, coinciding with the maximum degree of decrease in vitality. They are rather witnesses of the radical impossibility of happiness, common to the living and the dead, universal. The two perspectives of philosophical investigation are not divergent (cf. Blasucci 1985: 221-222); but the fact remains that it is the second that constitutes here a crucial turning point towards the definitive convictions of Leopardi's philosophy. The figure of the dead in the *Coro* crystallizes a pure state of unhappiness which is no longer seen as a consequence of the dynamics of pleasure acting on living people, but rather recognized as an essential property of existence. The dead must therefore be acknowledged as one of the most ideologically-advanced turning

³³ *Ibid* («Effectively being, and not being able to be happy in any way, because of an innate impotence which is inseparable from existence, rather not being able not to be unhappy, are two truths as well demonstrated and certain about man and every living being as any truths can be according to our principles and experience», translation edited by Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (2013)).

³⁴ Blasucci 1985: 216 («Perhaps Leopardi, having reached with his analysis the extreme limit of the 'internal' reasons of 'life', that is of the individual, perpetually frustrated in his request for happiness, finally tried to put himself at the 'external' point of view of 'existence'»).

points in the *Operette morali*. Thus the *Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie*, interpreted from the opening *Coro*, can be grouped with the *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* and the *Cantico del gallo silvestre*, which critics have more often recognized in this sense³⁵.

4. To take up some key elements of the 'turning point' that characterizes the *Coro*, it is useful to return to page 4099 of the *Zibaldone*. Consider the opening words of the note:

Non si può meglio spiegare l'orribile mistero delle cose e della esistenza universale (v. il mio Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese, massime in fine) che dicendo essere insufficienti ed anche falsi, non solo la estensione, la portata e le forze, ma i principii stessi fondamentali della nostra ragione. Per esempio quel principio, estirpato il quale cade ogni nostro discorso e ragionamento ed ogni nostra proposizione, e la facoltà istessa di poterne fare e concepire dei veri, dico quel principio. Non può una cosa insieme essere e non essere, pare assolutamente falso quando si considerino le contraddizioni palpabili che sono in natura³⁶.

In the lines immediately following, already cited, Leopardi will dwell on the "proven and certain" truth of the radical impossibility of happiness – the same, as we have seen, that stands out in the enclosure of the *Coro*. The incipit, on the other hand, clarifies another aspect, decisive but not at all obvious, of his intellectual attitude: more than the definitive shipwreck of any eudaemonic perspective, more than the demonstration of the necessary imperfection of existence, what really strikes Leopardi is the intrinsic contradiction of the conclusions he has reached, «contraddittorie allo stesso principio di contraddizione» (Cellerino 1995: 327). It is an ineluctable contradiction that renders his conclusion – the truth of the impossibility of happiness – properly incomprehensible, strictly speaking, and for this reason all the more shocking³⁷.

Leopardi's philosophical exploration here reaches an extreme limit, beyond which the impulse to grasp a complete meaning, albeit inexhaustible, is destined to remain unsatisfied³⁸. The real proves to be effectively and intrinsically incomprehensible. It is not possible to summarize here the many reasons why this

³⁵ Cfr. Blasucci 1985: 211-218 e 220-226; Cellerino 1995: 326.

³⁶ «It is not possible to explain better the awful mystery of things and of universal existence than by saying that not only the range, compass, and power of our reason are insufficient and even false, but also its fundamental principles themselves. For example that principle, which once rooted out puts an end to every discourse, every line of reasoning, every proposition, and the very faculty we have through them to form and conceive of truths, that fundamental principle "A thing cannot both be and not be" seems absolutely false when you consider the palpable contradictions there are in nature», translation edited by Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino (2013).

³⁷ «Eppure questo punto acerbo [...] ha attaccato a sé, quasi suo inalienabile attributo, l'interrogazione: è infatti l'enigma l'orizzonte nel quale la vita prende forma, ritmo, presenza, ma anche sparizione e oblio» (Prete 2008: 188).

point in Leopardi's philosophy is so important; instead, I will try to trace some of the metapoetic novelties of the *Coro di morti* back to the need to express indubitable but at the same time incomprehensible truths³⁹.

Some stylistic and formal features of the composition are not extraneous to this aim, such as the hieratic tone of the chant of the dead – abruptly interrupted by the dialogical part of the operetta – and the dogmatic character of their declarations, distinct from both the conversational and reasoning tone of the dead in his dialogue with Ruysch, and from the observational-experimental style of the Zibaldonian notes of 1821-1823. The hieratic tone and dogmatism are both figures of the incomprehensible, expressive shades of the 'mystery', to be understood «in senso asetticamente filosofico» (Cellerino 1995: 327) as an ineliminable and essential contradictoriness. However – once again – it is to the characteristics of the collective character of the dead that I would like to come back, to read them in a metapoetic key.

First of all, as lyrical-dramatic protagonists of the *Coro*, the mummies can be assumed as the poet's fictional 'alter ego'⁴⁰. It would then be plausible to deduce some distinctive traits of the poetics of their chant, of the song to which they give voice, from the essential characteristics that define their condition. In other words, following this working hypothesis, the condition of the dead of the *Coro* would be interpreted, not only as a relevant thematic object, but as an encoded definition of poetics as well.

The condition of the dead, as already noted, is defined by a triple lack of perceptive faculties: they do not know, they do not feel, and they do not remember. Correspondingly, one can deduce an idea of poetry proceeding by exclusion, discarding the poetic inclinations that would be based on such prerogatives. Devoid of passions and memories, the dead are not the bearers of a poem that could be called sentimental. Their singing does not claim the lyrical exuberance that gives voice to passions imprinted on the subject's sensitivity by living experience or by memory. It does not seek the pathetic nor the horrifying. Deprived of intellectual understanding, the dead of the operetta are the carriers of

³⁸ Cfr. Luporini 1993: 76-77.

³⁹ Cfr. Cellerino 1995: 316.

⁴⁰ «L'infelicità abituale, ed anche il solo essere abitualmente privo di piaceri e di cose che lusinghino l'amor proprio, estingue a lungo andare nell'anima la più squisita ogn'immaginazione, ogni virtù di sentimento, ogni vita ed attività e forza, e quasi ogni facoltà. La cagione é che una tale anima, dopo quella prima inutile disperazione, e contrasto feroce o doloroso colla necessità, finalmente riducendosi in istato tranquillo, non ha altro espediente per vivere, né altro produce in lui la natura stessa ed il tempo, che un abito di tener continuamente represso e prostrato l'amor proprio, perché l'infelicità offenda meno e sia tollerabile e compatibile colla calma. Quindi un'indifferenza e insensibilità verso se stesso maggior che é possibile. Or questa é una perfetta morte dell'animo e delle sue facoltà» (*Zib.* 4105, 29 giugno 1824). Cfr. also *Zib.* 4149 (3 novembre 1825): «Io sono, si perdoni la metafora, un sepolcro ambulante, che porto dentro di me un uomo morto, un cuore già sensibilissimo che più non sente ec.». Cfr. Severino 2006: 32 («Al culmine dello sradicamento delle illusioni, il genio è il vero morto»).

a radical gnoseological uncertainty. Their poem, therefore, is not mimetic-representative in the Aristotelian sense, which would presuppose some form of understanding, since it operates by organizing the real into unity of sense objectified within referential relations⁴¹. No longer a meaningful copy of a unity of reality appropriately reconfigured in order to communicate its meaning, their poetry is instead «cosa arcana e stupenda»⁴², to quote the most famous verse of the *Coro*: the object of poetry is a truth incomprehensible to reason, and communicable only in the open form of an inspired manifestation, not in any mediated and objectified reconfiguration of reality.

In the *Coro di morti* it is thus possible to read the emergence of a poetics of the sublime, out of any poetological formula as in the acceptation specified by Gianni Carchia in the following terms:

il tendersi 'più che artistico' dell'opera all'interno stesso della sua immanenza, ovvero il trascendersi della forma dall'intimo della sua costituzione.⁴³

Outstretched beyond the limit of comprehensibility, the sublime poetry of the dead aims not to be the representation of some reality, but rather «la realtà stessa colta nella sua dimensione espressiva»⁴⁴. Elevating the most evocative and eloquent of words (the verses of the song), images (the dead revived, devoid of intellect, sensitivity, memory) and thoughts (the intrinsic impossibility of happiness), a poetry of the sublime does not aim to objectify one or more units of meaning: it manifests an absolute mystery making it at least perceptible, if not communicable.

Two more aspects need to be considered before the conclusion. The first concerns the transient character of the sublime. A sublime poem, writes Carchia, «è sempre parola in situazione, l'attimo destinato a svanire di un contatto, un tempo magico»⁴⁵. The second aspect concerns the exclusion, within the aesthetic paradigm of the sublime, of any formal guarantee that could ensure the success of poetic communication. The 'success' of a poetic message does not depend on its intrinsic and formal properties, but on the unpredictable event of a happy disposition of all the participants involved during the communication – the “magic time”.

Both aspects are relevant with respect to the complex of the *Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie* and to the heterogeneous composition, in the two parts of the operetta, of poetry and dialogue, serious and comic-grotesque,

⁴¹ Cfr. Carchia 1999: VII.

⁴² «A secret, fearful thing», translation by Jonathan Galassi (2010).

⁴³ Carchia 1990b: 115 («the 'more than artistic' striving of the work within its immanence itself, or the transcending of the form from the depths of its constitution»).

⁴⁴ Carchia, 1990a: 34 («reality itself captured in its expressive dimension»)

⁴⁵ *Ibid* («is always word *in situ*, the moment destined to vanish from a contact, a magi time»).

sublime and reasoning argumentation. Choosing to place the dramatic invention of the awakening of the dead and the dialogue between the mummy and Ruysch around the poetic nucleus of the *Coro*, Leopardi brought on the scene of the operetta the entire set of a poetic performance. The *Coro* – a unique case in Leopardi's production – is proposed to the reader not in the 'direct' form of the poem, but in the mediated form of the representation of its performance, so as to manifest the peculiarities of a poetics that is essentially performative, inspired, transient. On the set of the poetic performance the salient features of the "magic time" of the sublime are present, still recognizable but turned in a parodic key: the fatality and unpredictability of the epiphany of the poem is evoked in the phantom stroke of the mathematical year with which the action begins; the short duration of an authentic poetic communion in the ironic fifteen minutes of speech granted to the dead by a grotesquely horological fate. Moreover, the parodic degradation of poetry's "magic time" is evident in the stylistic and above all thematic and philosophical lowering that characterizes the dialogic part of the operetta. Neither Ruysch nor the dead say anything that could be characterized as inspired, enrapturing, sublime. The point is that if, on the one hand, the poetry of the sublime only lives in a short magical time, on the other, the striking of a happy poetic disposition is an event that is not only unpredictable and precarious but, in Leopardi's view, almost impossible. Numerous notes in the *Zibaldone* attest to Leopardi's opinion of the intrinsically unpoetic nature of modern times; the same desperate conclusion lurks behind his choice of the prose of the *Operette morali* instead of the poetry of his *Canti*. The *Coro* is no exception. The unequivocal reaction of Ruysch, poetry's one and only beneficiary in the 'operetta', stages the 'flop' of the poem sung by the dead. The sublime poetic situation is fully evoked, but it does not trigger; the "magic time" of poetry is consumed without actually being fulfilled; the sublime fails to fully arise. However, this is for Leopardi the only way in which a poem of the sublime can actually be given in the present times: ironically, obliquely, accidentally. In the two tempos of the operetta, *Coro* and dialogue, sublime and comic, Leopardi brings to the stage, for the use of his reader, the poetry of the sublime and its failure.

5. A poetics of the sublime re-establishes the substantial historical affinity between poetry – not mimetic, inspired, transient – and performative arts, such as dance or music. From this perspective, the musical adaptation of the *Coro di morti* created by Goffredo Petrassi between 1940 and 1941 acquires a specific interest beyond its claim to fame as an illustrious twentieth-century reprise of Leopardi's work.

Petrassi's work is linked to Leopardi's *Coro* by a very close adaptive relationship, which provides for the full performance of the song of the dead by a real choir of voices. The fundamental intent of the Petrassian composition is thus, at least apparently, an actualization of the performative potential already present in Leopardi's text. Two main characteristics of the adaptive relation support this conclusion: (1) an absolute respect for the literal integrity of the text and for its centrality, obtained in the composition through the prevalence of a concentrated and linear homophony, with a sparing and classical use of polyphony that

ennobles the verse without compromising its comprehensibility⁴⁶; (2) a tonal selection that plays almost entirely in the lower ranges of the register to evoke a funereal, solemn, and opaque atmosphere; the composer uses only male voices and excludes woodwinds and upper strings.

Petrassi himself explicitly claimed a direct derivation of his compositional choices from Leopardi's work:

Nessun testo, come questa "canzonetta" leopardiana che fa da prologo al *Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e le sue mummie* nelle *Operette morali*, mi parve più adatto ad esprimere ciò che provai il 10 giugno 1940. Il testo, quindi, ha una importanza determinante; condiziona la sostanza musicale e la struttura della composizione, oltre che la particolare aggregazione sonora (tre pianoforti, ottoni, contrabbassi e percussione). Il coro è formato da sole voci maschili, sembrandomi il timbro femminile non pertinente, una intrusione, all'ambiente sonoro generale.⁴⁷

Era l'unico insieme di timbri che potesse compatire musicalmente con la natura della pagina leopardiana.⁴⁸

The general impression is that the composer approaches Leopardi's composition with considerable respect, moved by a feeling of inner consonance with the wisdom it expresses. In the tragic contingencies of Italy's entry into World War II, the *Coro di morti* met Petrassi's desire to respond creatively and

⁴⁶ «L'opera conferma e rafforza la centralità della parola, accolta nella sua integrità formale e semantica, presente nell'intera produzione vocale del compositore [...]. Il testo, centro intelligibile dell'opera vocale, non può divenire per il musicista un pretesto [...]. Questa tipologia di rapporto parola-musica risulta affatto opposta alla frantumazione e desemantizzazione del testo verbale che avrebbe praticato la neoavanguardia musicale postbellica» (Pozzi 2005: 132); «la melodia vuol dichiararsi in proprio, con immediatezza assoluta. E spesso si accontenta dell'omofonia, né comunque i brani polifonici la trascinano mai ad amplificazioni» (D'Amico 1986: 86); «Passando alle voci, è agevole rimarcare la riduzione sensibilissima della virtuosità contrappuntistica, sicché, ove essa intervenga (specie nel secondo episodio), l'improvvisa rottura della costanza ritmica, o addirittura omofonica, diviene elemento semantico di prim'ordine, a potenziare il peso di un tempo immobile, di un'esistenza sbiadita [...] Per il resto, le voci procedono di preferenza insieme, talvolta in un unisono quasi costante» (Bortolotto 1983: 48); «l'espedito polifonico antico, d'una parola ripetuta e riecheggiata e palleggiata dall'una all'altra voce, conferisce alla composizione una sua patina di antica nobiltà che si accorda ottimamente con la nobiltà dell'endecasillabo» (Mila 1953: 4).

⁴⁷ Petrassi 2008a: 119, «No text, like this Leopardian "song" which is the prologue to the *Dialogue by Federico Ruysch and his mummies* in the *Operette morali*, seemed to me more suitable for expressing what I felt on 10 June 1940. The text, therefore, has a decisive importance; it determines the musical substance and the structure of the composition, as well as the particular sound aggregation (three pianos, brass, double bass and percussion). The choir is made up of male voices only, as the female timbre seems irrelevant, an intrusion to the general sound environment».

⁴⁸ Petrassi 2008b: 134, «It was the only set of timbres that could musically sympathise with the nature of the Leopardian page».

originally to the historical, individual, stylistic crisis of his present, not with «una musica di protesta, come tante ne sono state scritte», but with:

un testo che di quella angoscia fosse una sorta di sublimazione, che non si riferisse ad un evento particolare del momento, ma che lo trascendesse, e perciò si ponesse — in un certo senso — gli stessi eterni interrogativi, sempre presenti nell'uomo: che siamo, dove andiamo, da dove veniamo?⁴⁹

The *Coro* then as a «mistica laica, non troppo distante dagli interrogativi che ci può porre la religione»⁵⁰, gives proof of a personal sensitivity for the philosophical sublime of the trans-historical and trans-subjective truths that constitute the central fulcrum of Leopardi's poetry. Listening to the Petrassian choir provokes «un'emozione umana non volgare, ma anzi rara e peregrina»⁵¹, the sense of an elevation of thought and soul which is one of the most relevant features of the sublime.

At the same time, however, the Petrassian transposition only apparently can be considered the faithful staging of a dramatic score latent in Leopardi's text. In fact, it largely reduces the complexity of its source, taking the path of a drastic narrowing of its tonal and stylistic spectrum. In the adaptation, most importantly, the juxtaposition of sublime-serious and of dialogical-farcical that structures the 'operetta' is completely missing. The figure of the dead is consequently embossed in a much more univocal way: in the adaptation they sound rather like 'zombies' possessed of wisdom, giving up much of the complex allure that they had in Leopardi's invention. Petrassi's tonal choices, so neat in characterizing the work as a whole, insistently mark the composition in favor of a sublime which is purely stylistic, with all its solemnity and grandiloquence. The *Coro di morti* could instead be interpreted, imaginatively, by shrill or weak voices or, again, impure and nasal ones⁵², and it would not lose its conceptual and imaginative strength. Indeed, such a strategy would perhaps even take advantage of a tragicomic patina.

In further proof of the centrality assigned by Petrassi to the letter of the poetic text, his musical piece is essentially divided into three choral episodes, interrupted by two instrumental 'intermezzi' that coincide with the major pauses

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*: 135, «a text that was a sort of sublimation of that anguish, that did not refer to a particular current event, but that transcended it, and therefore posed – in a certain sense – the same eternal questions, always present in man: who are we, where do we go, where do we come from?».

⁵⁰ Restagno 2008: 320, «a secular mystic, not too far from the questions that religion can pose».

⁵¹ Mila 1953: 6, «a human emotion that is not vulgar, but rather rare and peregrine».

⁵² Like the voice of the dead in Leopardi's *Paralipomeni alla Batracomiomachia*: «Come un liuto rugginoso e duro / Che sia molti anni già muto rimaso, / Risponde con un suon fioco ed oscuro / A chi lo tenta o lo percota a caso, / Tal con un profferir torbo ed impuro / Che fean mezzo le labbra e mezzo il naso, / Rompendo del tacer l'abito antico / Risposer l'ombre a quel del mondo aprico» (VIII, 28).

of the logical-syntactic structure of the poem⁵³. The instrumental component is entrusted with the expression of an unreal and hallucinatory atmosphere and of a sense of suspension of time and space, intended as ideal scenographic elements of the adaptation. The accompaniment parts achieve this result by organizing themselves in the form of counterpoints with a tonally centrifugal outcome⁵⁴, without excluding melodic ideas and recurring themes, sometimes with an exchange between vocal parts and instrumental parts, as in the evident case of the formula «lieta no ma sicura» and the melodic motif associated with it. The instrumental scherzos interspersed within the song, with their «slightly ridiculous» trend, pervaded by a certain «formal swagger» with «its canons, its inversions, increases and decreases» and «all the normal paraphernalia of a good pupil of counterpoint»⁵⁵ – the description is by the author himself – are perhaps the only parts of the composition which are able to return something of the combination of sublime and comic of Leopardi's operetta, as the sign of a refined «frigida rationale ironia metafisica»⁵⁶.

⁵³ Cfr Mila (1953: 3): «il respiro della musica e quello della poesia concordano»; Petrassi (2008: 134): «i due intermezzi si pongono come necessità strutturale per creare le varie sezioni, interrompere il "continuum" del coro e realizzare così i suggerimenti del testo poetico: sono infatti collegati in due punti precisi in cui questi morti fanno un riferimento alla vita».

⁵⁴ Cfr. D'Amico 1986: 87.

⁵⁵ Cfr. Petrassi 2008b: 134.

⁵⁶ Bortolotto 1983: 48, «frigid rational metaphysical irony».

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