Tracing Anti-Colonialism in the Writings of Giacomo Leopardi

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Giacomo Leopardi, one of the biggest names in Italian Romanticism, has left many think pieces in the world aside from his poetry, such as the *Zibaldone*. Critical literature on his musings is even more copious. His interest in the New World and America has been noted extensively in Leopardian commentary, yet the connection between this interest and his stance on colonialism is rarely discussed. I would like to posit Leopardi as an anti-colonialist by referring to his poetry, among other writings. This manifests chiefly through his preference for nature over civilization, where Indigenous people, being the closest to nature, are presented as the closest to perfection. Along with this, his disapproval of slavery and destruction of nature also plays a role in his anti-colonial stance.

To analyze what exactly Leopardi opposes, we must first understand what is meant by "colonialism." To define this, I turn to one of the earliest anti-colonial thinkers, the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire. In his seminal work, *Discourse on Colonialism*, he answers his own question of "what, fundamentally, is colonization?":

> To agree on what it is not: neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny, nor a project undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law. To admit once and for all, without flinching at the consequences, that the decisive actors here are the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and force, and behind them, the baleful projected shadow of a form of civilization which, at a certain point in its history, finds itself obliged, for internal reasons, to extend to a world scale the competition of its antagonistic economies.[1]

The first sentence describes the supposedly benign reasons colonists have presented to justify colonization: 1) to spread the word of god, 2) to educate and industrialize 3) to help combat disease and tyranny. Instead, the true reasons were to explore, extract resources and exploit labor. Leopardi condemns these pursuits at length in his poetry and in *Operette Morali*, and explicitly in the *Zibaldone*.

Before we begin analyzing how Leopardi's ideas can be seen to be anti-colonial, we must first understand his idea of the antithesis between nature and civilization. This antithesis – a common theme in Romanticism, which (as the name suggests) romanticizes nature – bears the seed of Leopardi's first anti-colonial sentiments.

[1] Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 32-33. ProQuest Ebook Central. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1114598.

Writing on this topic in the last months of 1820, he establishes a "system of regarding man and everything else as entirely, or almost entirely, the work of nature, and scarcely or not at all the result of reason, or the work of man or any other creature."[2] Additionally, he believes that "the true and essential perfection of man [is] in his primitive state." [3]Although his later writing derides nature for her villainy, earlier in his career, Leopardi "judg[es] the work of nature to be perfect,"[4] with perfection implying true happiness of a being for the duration of its life. He then posits that man, as well as all beings, "having emerged substantially perfect from the hand of nature, by changing […] can only change for the worse."[5] Thus, any change is contradictory to nature and "nothing is barbarous apart from what is contrary to nature, […] so that nature and barbarism are opposites, and nature cannot be barbarous in essence."[6] If everything that is in opposition to nature is barbarous, and change is effectively opposing nature, it follows that any change from the original perfection produced by nature is barbarous. He adds "that reason is often the source of barbarism (indeed is barbarous in itself) and an excess of reason always is,"[7] which is, in his eyes, the cause for "man's corruption and his fall from a primitive state of happiness."[8] He contextualizes this in the Christian

[2] Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino, trans. Kathleen Baldwin et al., (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), [393].
[3] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [435].
[4] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [394].
[5] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [407].
[6] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [356].
[7] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [356].
[8] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [394].

doctrine using the story of the original sin. Commenting on God's command to refrain from eating of the tree of knowledge, he writes:

> Is not this a clear command to man not to seek knowledge, a wish to place above all other things (for this was the sole command or injunction) an obstacle to the growth of reason, as that which God recognized as being, by its very nature, and bound to be the destroyer of the happiness, and true perfection of that creature, as he had made him, and as he meant him to be?[9]

Adam and Eve's desire for knowledge was a desire to change, to acquire something that was not ordained for them by God or nature. Thus, the first change, the first corruption, the first barbarous act of the true "natural man" was his acquisition of knowledge and reason. And since all the changes that followed, chiefly the building of civilized society, occurred only as a result of man's attainment of reason, they all originated from barbarity and could therefore only be barbarous in nature. It follows then that civilization, being the opposite of the loose society nature (or God) prescribed to man, is barbarous. The process of civilizing, then, must be a barbarous one as well.

This train of thought is heavily influenced by Jean-Jacque Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Mankind*. Writing in 1755, Rousseau argues that the optimal state for man is the natural state. Writing of human woes, Rousseau believes that "we might have avoided them all by adhering to the simple, uniform and solitary way of life prescribed to us by nature."[10] It is easy to

[9] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [395-396].
[10] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality: On the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Mankind," in *The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses*, trans. and ed.

see how Leopardi's thoughts were shaped by Rousseau as he too cites society and civilization as the perpetrators of the decline of mankind.

These sentiments are also present in Leopardi's earlier work. Being a Romantic at heart, he exonerated nature in many poems, such as in "The Solitary Life," written in the summer of 1821. He opens the poem with a serene natural scene:

> the Sun shoots glistening rays
> among the falling droplets gently
> beating on the roof – the morning rain
> wakes me; and as I rise, I bless
> the puffy little clouds,
> the birds' first cooing,
> and the cool air and the sunstruck hills[11]

Everything is 'glistening' and blissful; the morning is truly idyllic. Such examples are copious in the *Canti*. Leopardi particularly prefers the company of nature to that of civilization, as he explains in the next lines: 'for I have seen enough of you, / unhappy city walls, where hate / treads on the heel of his companion, pain.'[12] His attitude towards the city is anything but blissful, and these lines agree with statements made in the *Zibaldone* about his disdain for civilized society, for what is a better metonym for civilization than a city? His contempt for cities is evident also in the "Hymn to the Patriarchs:"

Susan Dunn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 93.
https://rtraba.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/rousseau_discourses_1_2_socialcontract.pdf

[11] Giacomo Leopardi, "The Solitary Life," in *Canti*, trans Jonathan Galassi (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 123, lines 4-10.

[12] Leopardi, "The Solitary Life," 123, lines 11-13.

> Wandering in fear, the fratricide,
> fleeing lonely shadows and the hidden winds
> that rage deep in the forest,
> builds the first houses in the city, home and realm
> of gnawing worry; and for the first time
> desperate repentance, gasping, miserable,
> gathers and pens blind mortals up
> in hiding together[13]

Here Leopardi is referring to Cain, the so-called progenitor of civilization. Since Cain is the one who built the first cities – which, as we have established, are a metonym for civilization – Leopardi reveals that civilization was borne from murder, and being borne from this barbarity, it cannot be anything short of barbarous itself. He explains this further in the *Zibaldone*: "The first author of the city, or, in other words, of society was, according to Scripture, the first criminal, namely Cain, after his guilt, remorse, and punishment. It is good to think that the corruptor of human nature and the source of most of our vices and wickedness can somehow be regarded as the effect and child of and the consolation for guilt."[14] Luigi Blasucci notes that "Resta così confermata l'idea della società come figlia di una trasgressione. Tale trasgressione è da intendersi però non solo nel senso biblico (il fratricidio), ma anche in un senso 'leopardiano', come violazione appunto delle leggi della natura."[15] The motif of cities borne from

[13] Leopardi, "Hymn to the Patriarchs, or On the Origins of the Human Race," in *Canti*, 77-79, lines 43-50.
[14] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [191].
[15] Luigi Blasucci, "Inno ai Patriarchi o de' Principii del Genere Umano," *Per Leggere* 8, no. 15 (2008): 17, https://ojs.pensamultimedia.it/index.php/pl/article/view/1218. ["Thus, the idea of society as the offspring of a transgression is confirmed. This transgression, however, is to be understood not only in the biblical sense (fratricide) but also in a 'Leopardian' sense, specifically, as a violation of the laws of nature."]

transgression and murder appears again in "To Spring," where Leopardi describes 'someone, fleeing corrupt crowds / and the city's murderous shame and rage, / clung to shaggy trees in a dark forest.'[16] Once again, the individual is seen preferring the company of nature to the city.

The antithesis between nature and civilization is evident in Leopardi's poems. The only remedy Leopardi presents from barbarous civilization is an escape to nature. This view is still in keeping with Romanticism's main idea. What is particular, however, is Leopardi's belief in the "savage" man as the epitome of a "natural man." Although he calls for a return to nature, Leopardi asserts that doing so would be impossible in actuality: "The absolutely natural state could not, therefore, return without a miracle."[17] However, he believes some groups of people still retain that primitiveness which he ascribes to the "natural man," namely, the Indigenous peoples of newly colonized lands. Since their societies were "founded on more extensive and deeper ignorance, they kept man closer to the natural state. In short, they were more in keeping with nature, and gave less space to reason,"[18] which is the main source of corruption and unhappiness in humans. He continues, "Between barbarism [in this case Leopardi means primitive barbarism] and excessive civilization, there is no doubt that the former is more in keeping with nature, and is less unhappy, if for no other reason than that it has less

[16] Leopardi, "To Spring or On the Ancient Myths," in *Canti*, 71, lines 47-49.
[17] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [404].
[18] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [421].

knowledge of its unhappiness."[19] He believes them to have a better society than any urban population since they are closer to how humans were originally meant to be, as ordained by nature. He points this out "Hymn to the Patriarchs:"

> but the human race lived ignorant
> of its fate and troubles then,
> free of sadness; sweet illusions,
> fantasies, the gentle, pristine veil possessed the power
> to cloak the hidden laws of heaven and nature;
> and happy in hope our calm ship came to port.
>
> So in the boundless California forests
> a blessed race is born, whose breast
> is never nursed by pallid care, whose body
> implacable disease does not destroy;
> and with the woods for food, the hidden crags for nests,
> and the irrigated valley giving water,
> the day of dark death hangs over them unseen.[20]

They are 'a blessed race,' untroubled by diseases, 'happy in hope' and 'free of sadness.' Marco Balzano explains that the Californians in particular seem to be "una specie di popolo eletto leopardiano, intoccato sempre e comunque, lasciato immune dalla distruttività della *raison*, dalle testimonianze: dalla stessa razionalità leopardiana."[21] This is where we finally arrive at Leopardi's anti-colonial idea. If these Indigenous people are more perfect than "civilized" people because they are closer to what nature intended for humans, and if changing natural things (which the process of civilizing is

[19] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [423].
[20] Leopardi, "Hymn to the Patriarchs," 81-83, lines 98-110.
[21] Marco Balzano, "Il Selvaggio Americano e le Sue Fonti nell'Opera di Leopardi," in *Rivista Di Storia Della Filosofia* 60, no. 2 (2005): 227, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44024500. ["a kind of Leopardian chosen people, always and in every respect untouched, left immune to the destructiveness of *raison*, to the evidence: to Leopardian rationality itself."]

an example of) is barbarous, then the performative attempt to civilize Indigenous peoples must be barbarous as well. Leopardi ridicules this "philanthropic enterprise," as Césaire put it, in "Recantation for Marchese Gino Capponi." In this satirical poem, Leopardi mocks the belief of his contemporaries in the advent of a 'golden age.'[22] He writes:

Universal love,
railroads, expanded commerce, steam,
typography and cholera the most far-flung
peoples and climates will embrace together;
and it will be no marvel if pine or oak
drip milk and honey, or even dance
to the music of a waltz.[23]

If, by chance, the reader had never seen any of Leopardi's work prior to this, they certainly could have been fooled by his praising sarcasm in this poem, that is, until the word 'cholera' creeps up. Leopardi is of course referring to how the colonists brought many diseases to 'far-flung peoples.' This is a clear indicator of how the advent of civilization worsened the natural man. Previously, the natural man, exampled by Indigenous peoples, consisted of people 'whose breast / is never nursed by pallid care, whose body / implacable disease does not destroy.'[24] And in the *Zibaldone* he notes that "The nosology of savage peoples [ran] to very few pages, and their ordinary state of health and robustness is plain to all who visit them, even in the harshest climates,"[25]

[22] Leopardi, "Recantation for Marchese Gino Capponi," in *Canti*, 263, line 38.
[23] Leopardi, "Recantation," 263-265, lines 42-48.
[24] Leopardi, "Hymn to the Patriarchs," 83, lines 105-107.
[25] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [1601].

but now they were struck with dozens of unencountered diseases that colonists brought over together with their "civilization." In "Hymn to the Patriarchs" Leopardi notes that the founding of civilization had the following outcomes: 'minds decayed, / sluggish in torpid bodies, their native strength / gone slack.'[26] He concludes that "In short, it is more than obvious that the nosology increases in volume, and that human health decreases, in proportion to civilization."[27] Nevertheless, the excerpt from the poem serves another duty besides pointing out historical facts. In using the rhetorical device of asyndeton, Leopardi equates the seemingly positive qualities of 'railroads, expanded commerce, steam' with 'cholera,' essentially saying that these innovations are a disease to the "natural man." Commerce is specifically mentioned again in the poem "To Count Carlo Pepoli," where Leopardi decries those who out of 'immortal boredom'[28] 'trouble the age-old peace of distant shores / with commerce, armies, and dishonesty."[29] The 'distant shores' are peaceful before the arrival of colonists, meaning 'commerce' is one of the things that will 'trouble' them. Here again Leopardi employs a rhetorical device, a tricolon, to equate 'commerce' with 'armies, and dishonesty.' The apparently generous introduction of commerce is yet another facet of the harmful process of civilizing. In Leopardi's mind, the colonists are condemning the happy primitive people of 'far-flung' places to the misery of civilized society; they are 'hunt[ing] down

[26] Leopardi, "Hymn to the Patriarchs," 79, lines 53-55.
[27] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [1601-1602].
[28] Leopardi, "To Count Carlo Pepoli," in *Canti*, 153, line 71.
[29] Leopardi, "To Count Carlo Pepoli," 155, lines 98-99.

fleeting, fragile happiness'[30] of Indigenous people. Hence, the most heavily cited "benign" reason for colonization – that of civilizing other nations – proves to be barbarous according to Leopardian thought; and this is before we even consider any of the true and truly vicious reasons for colonization.

Of the true reasons for colonization – namely, to explore, extract resources and exploit labor – the most harmless is exploration. It is why zoologists and geologists alike joined colonists on naval missions, and why the time between the 15th and the 17th c. is dubbed the Age of Exploration. It can be summed up as curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge, about which Leopardi writes extensively: "Is curiosity or the desire to distinguish between good and evil (which is to say knowledge) intrinsically absurd or wicked? […] to the author of Religion it seems that it is."[31] Leopardi believes that it is connected to "the sin of pride in wanting to know what they should not know."[32] The pursuit of knowledge is intrinsically connected to violence, as Maria de las Nieves Muñiz Muñiz explains: "nel vocabolario leopardiano del viaggio, «peregrino» e «furore» –la deambulazione senza meta e la violenza distruttiva – sono termini associate."[33] In his poetry, Leopardi links the pursuit of knowledge to the loss of imagination, which is a violent act because imagination is the only escape from societal

[30] Leopardi, "Hymn to the Patriarchs," 83, line 116.
[31] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [396].
[32] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [397].
[33] Maria de las Nieves Muñiz Muñiz, "Le Quiete E Vaste Californie Selve (sullo spazio immaginario in Leopardi)" in *La Rassegna Della Letteratura Italiana* 8, no. 1-2 (1993): 87, https://www.academia.edu/75168267/Le_quiete_e_vaste_californie_selve_sullo_spazio_imaginario_in_Leopardi_. ["In the Leopardian vocabulary of travel, 'pilgrim' and 'fury' – aimless wandering and destructive violence – are associated terms."]

misery as it helps us connect with nature. In "To Angelo Mai" he describes the voyage of Christopher Columbus:

> you ventured out onto the boundless ocean
> and happened on the light of the gone Sun,
> and the day that starts when He's reached the end of ours;
> and having broken nature's every bond,
> a boundless, unfamiliar earth was the glorious
> reward for your voyage and your perilous return.
> Alas, the world when once known doesn't expand:
> it shrinks; and the echoing heaven
> and the gentle earth and sea
> seem far vaster to the infant than to the sage.
>
> Where have they gone, our happy dreams
> of the exotic homelands
> of exotic peoples, or the stars' diurnal
> resting place, or young Aurora's distant bed,
> or the hidden sleep of the great planet?
> Look, they vanished in a moment,
> and the world's described in one brief page;
> look, now everything's the same,
> and discovery only adds to nothingness.
> Truth is taken from us
> in the moment it arrives,
> O sweet imagination; our mind's cut off
> from you forever; the years removed us
> from your stupendous primal power;
> and the comfort for our troubles died.[34]

Leopardi poses that this exploration 'shrinks' the world. This is because in one's imagination, the world is infinite, it seems 'far vaster to the infant than to the sage,' because the infant lacks knowledge compared to the sage. So once the "truth," i.e. knowledge, is discovered, one can no longer imagine the world to be bigger than they

[34] Leopardi, "To Angelo Mai," in *Canti*, 35, lines 81-105.

know it is, so 'our happy dreams / of the exotic homelands / of exotic peoples' disappear. This idea is thoroughly explained in "History of the Human Race,"[35] where Leopardi explains that humanity becomes miserable when the gods forced Truth to live among them. In this poem too, the acquisition of knowledge, that is, truth, brings about sorrow. He writes, 'Look, they vanished in a moment, / and the world's described on one brief page.' By making the 'boundless, unfamiliar earth' familiar, one loses the illusion that the world is 'boundless;' instead, it has become finite and can now be 'described on one brief page.' This is a tragedy because, as Leopardi declares time and time again, imagination is the only 'comfort to our troubles,' since it is the only medium which is infinite. Essentially, "Man desires infinite pleasure in everything, but he cannot experience certain infinity, other than by conception, because everything that is material is limited. […] He cannot feel infinitely, except […] with his imagination."[36] This goes back to the discussion of the primitive man and the original sin. Man lived "in a paradise of pleasure"[37] which "[gave] him the happiness ordained for him,"[38] but which he cannot access anymore due to his fall. Thus, the only way for the fallen man to obtain pleasure is through imagination. So the loss of imagination undoubtedly leads to misery. Therefore, the process of exploration, which was so romanticized in the

[35] Giacomo Leopardi, "History of the Human Race," in *Operette Morali: Essays and Dialogues*, trans. Giovanni Cecchetti, 22-55, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520341135.
[36] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [384].
[37] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [395].
[38] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [396].

colonial period, by way of discovering truths and disillusioning humans, brings further misery. In her discussion of Leopardi's idea of California, Muñiz Muñiz describes exploration as "quello del viaggio come conquista e «invitto furor», dove la trasformazione dell'ignoto nel noto viene vista non già come un sogno dileguato, bensì come la distruzione effettiva del mondo (e del sogno altrui),"[39] so the process of discovery brings about the destruction of the world.

However, I would hesitate to say that Leopardi condemns curiosity as a whole. He only explains that there are different kinds, the one of natural man and the one of the civilized man:

> Indeed, natural curiosity leads a man, a child, etc., to wish to see, feel, etc., something that is beautiful or extraordinary or remarkable in relation to the individual. But in no way does it spur him or goad him to learn the cause behind a particular effect that he likes to see, hear, etc. Indeed, in the ordinary run of things, natural man settles for wonder, enjoys the pleasure that derives from it, and is content with it. Thus, original curiosity merely leads man to naturally desire and obtain knowledge of those things which because they are easy to know […] and are not therefore hidden by nature, *do not harm the original order*, do not alter man, do not oppose his nature, and do not jeopardize his happiness and perfection.[40]

Thus, it seems curiosity that does not result in change is natural. But it is well-documented that the curiosity of colonists *did* bring change and "harm to the original order." Historian John Richards explains that "Accumulating scientific insights and

[39] Muñiz Muñiz, "Le Quiete E Vaste Californie Selve," 85. ["that of the journey as conquest and 'unconquered fury,' where the transformation of the unknown into the known is viewed not as a vanished dream, but rather as the actual destruction of the world (and of the dreams of others)."]
[40] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [657-658]. (My emphasis.)

technical advances stimulated an appetite for intervention in the natural world."[41] Once again, their pursuit of knowledge causes them to commit the sin of pride in allowing themselves to change the natural order of things. As we have established, "perfection lies in the natural state"[42] for Leopardi, and any deviation from this state is barbarous. Of the three discussed reasons for colonialism – to explore, to extract resources, to exploit labor – the latter two can be grouped under "make changes to nature." Colonialism necessarily derives from anthropocentrism, the belief that humans alone possess intrinsic value. This manifested as vast and heedless destruction of nature, widespread animal slaughter, and the culling and exploitation of Indigenous populations in the colonies.

Starting with the first, whether to deplete resources or to make space for houses and fields, colonists completely transformed the natural landscape of the New World. For example, "Before European settlement, forests covered nearly one billion acres of what is now the United States. Since the mid-1600's, about 300 million acres of forest have been cleared, primarily for agriculture during the 19th century."[43] Such large-scale transformation of the environment could not be anything but barbarous according to Leopardian thought. Indeed, Leopardi laments changing landscapes in several poems, such as in "To Angelo Mai" where he asks:

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[41] John F. Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 22. ProQuest Ebook Central. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=223397#.
[42] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [588].
[43] "Forest Resources of the United States," NationalAtlas.gov, last modified April 29, 2008, https://web.archive.org/web/20090507195541/http://www.nationalatlas.gov/articles/biology/a_forest.html.

what survives,
now that the green has leached out of things?
The certain, lonely knowledge
that everything is vain but grief.[44]

Now that greenery and vegetation has left, there is nothing remaining but grief, because nature gave humans happiness. The current landscape is unforgiving:

Although the sun is working to repair
the damage in the sky,
a breeze is freshening the sickly air,
and the clouds' dark shadow, chased away, dispersed,
fades in the valley[45]

Compare the 'sickly air' to 'the holy air'[46] of Adam's time. The environment here is undesirable, with 'dappled woods and cattle / restless,'[47] leaving animals 'defenseless.'[48] So the poet pleads for a restoration:

can that sweet time return perhaps
for weary human minds shut up in sadness,
the time calamity and the dark fire
of knowledge ended too soon?[49]

He would rather go back to the past, to the time before knowledge, in other words, before the fall of man. He describes the beautiful landscape of earthly paradise in "Hymn to the Patriarchs:"

the newborn flowering fields,
the wind that blows across the freshened meadows,
when the cascading alpine waters

[44] Leopardi, "To Angelo Mai," 37, lines 117-120.
[45] Leopardi, "To Spring or on the Ancient Myths," in *Canti*, 67, lines 1-5.
[46] Leopardi, "Hymn to the Patriarchs," 77, line 41.
[47] Leopardi, "To Spring," 67, lines 9-10.
[48] Leopardi, line 6.
[49] Leopardi, lines 11-14.

> struck the cliffs and uninhabited
> valleys with unheard sound; when unheard-of peace
> reigned in the pleasing future habitats;[50]

Notice the emphasis on this land being 'uninhabited,' 'unheard,' retaining 'unheard-of peace.' Leopardi is insinuating that this peace was only possible because the lands were uninhabited; that once humans settled and established civilizations, they enslaved the earth and changed it to fit their needs. This idyll ends quickly and 'new madness stains / the parched fields with the blood / of a brother's murder,"[51] referring to Cain, the progenitor of civilization. Compare the land boasting of fecundity with its 'newborn flowering fields' and 'freshened meadows,' to 'this worn-out, arid land of mine'[52] in modern times, what Leopardi elsewhere calls 'this miserable human home."[53] It is clear Leopardi is against human intervention in nature. He discusses the harm caused by modifications to natural things at the hands of humans in the *Zibaldone*:

> the bloodlines of horses, bulls, etc., which gradually grow weaker and degenerate when they have passed from the woods to our stables, and to a less uncivilized life. The same is true of carefully cultivated plants, etc. They will gain delicacy, etc. etc., but will always lose strength, etc. etc., and if through delicacy they are better adapted to our uses (especially in our present state, which is so different from the natural one), that does not prove that they are not degenerate. In effect, the principal natural quality, the principal material perfection intended and ordained by nature in all that lives or grows is not delicacy etc., but vigor *relative* to each kind of being. […] Vigor, in short, is everything in nature.[54]

[50] Leopardi, "Hymn to the Patriarchs," 77, lines 25-30.
[51] Leopardi, lines 39-41.
[52] Leopardi, "To Angelo Mai," 39, line 157.
[53] Leopardi, "The Solitary Life," 129, line 103.
[54] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [1602].

Human intervention in nature makes plants and animals weak and lame, meaning they lose the natural faculties prescribed to them. This is especially barbarous when done to suit human needs. Richards explains that "The ultimate civilizing mission became that of exploring, comprehending, and controlling the wild places of the earth in order to make them agreeable to human life and work."[55] However, they didn't just *change* nature and cause plants and animals to adapt, they actively drove hundreds of species to extinction. A study published in 2023 estimates that human intervention caused 73 genera of animals, amounting to over 200 species, to go extinct since 1500,[56] the majority of which lived outside of Eurasia. This means that through habitat destruction or introduction of predators, or simply through hunting, colonists caused the extinction of several hundreds of animal species in Africa, Oceania and the Americas. A famous example is that of the dodo bird, which lived on the previously uninhabited island of Mauritius off the eastern coast of Africa. It was hunted to extinction in a mere century and a half as a source of food, with the last bird being killed in 1681.[57] Unfortunately, animals weren't the only ones who suffered at the hands of colonists.

[55] Richards, *The Unending Frontier*, 22.
[56] Gerardo Ceballos, and Paul R. Ehrlich, "Mutilation of the Tree of Life via Mass Extinction of Animal Genera," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 120, no. 39 (September 26, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2306987120.
[57] Julian P. Hume, *Extinct Birds*. 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Natural History, 2017), 155-157. https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=0d372a8f-fe0a-4abd-8e0e-73fcd9b0ac86%40redis&vid=0&format=EB.

It is well-known that colonization brought about mass genocide. Colonists wiped out entire ethnic groups and enslaved or exploited the remaining ones. For example, Richards notes that "Mortality from smallpox, added to other causes of death, brought the Hispaniolan Taínos to near extinction." The Taíno people of the island of Hispaniola numbered around 60,000 in 1508. By 1542, there were only 2,000 left.[58] That means 97% of the Taíno population died either from smallpox or "from malnutrition, overwork, injury" due to "Spanish violence and brutality."[59] However, these numbers are nothing compared to the recent estimates. A 2019 study places the number of Indigenous deaths in the Americas between the years 1492 and 1600 at "54.5 million […] or 90% of the pre-contact population."[60] Leopardi utterly condemns these actions in several poems. In "Recantation for Marchese Gino Capponi," when he abandons his satirical voice for a moment, Leopardi writes this:

Nor will our noble sons
abstain from shedding the beloved blood
of their own. Indeed,
Europe and the Atlantic's other shore,
the new nurse of pure civilization,
will be bathed in slaughter every time
that it sends bands of brothers on the field
against each other, let the cause be pepper,
cinnamon, another spice, or sugarcane,
or whatever can be turned to gold.[61]

[58] Richards, *The Unending Frontier*, 321.
[59] Richards, 322.
[60] Alexander Koch et al., "Earth System Impacts of the European Arrival and Great Dying in the Americas after 1492," *Quaternary Science Reviews* 207, no. 1 (March 1, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.quascirev.2018.12.004
[61] Leopardi, "Recantation," 265, lines 59-68.

Once again, the Indigenous peoples of America ('Atlantic's other shore') are portrayed as 'the new nurse of pure civilization,' uncorrupted by industrialized society. But Leopardi paints a gruesome image of them 'bathed in slaughter' for the selfishness of colonists desiring spices. Herein lies the "merchant" described by Césaire, who will stop at nothing to get what he wants – and what he wants is everything that 'can be turned to gold.' Colonial selfishness and greed comes up again in "Hymn to the Patriarchs:"

> Oh kingdoms of wise nature, undefended
> from our evil greed! Our boundless rage
> storms her shores and caves and peaceful forests,
> drives her assaulted natives to strange labor
> and desires they never knew,
> and hunts down fleeting, fragile happiness
> till the sun sets.[62]

Leopardi is well aware that the reasons for colonization are not benign; they are born not out of a need to help, but out of 'greed' and 'boundless rage.' Whether it be the desire to explore, to plunder or to exploit, the reason for colonists to 'storm her shores' is driven by selfishness, a selfishness which drives them to violence and cruelty, in other words, barbarism. Leopardi is against brutality and war as a whole, as he explains in the *Zibaldone*: "war between individuals of the same species, reciprocal killings, and all sorts of evils carried out by like against like, are things evidently against nature,"[63]

[62] Leopardi, "Hymn to the Patriarchs," 83, lines 111-117.
[63] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [3784].

and if they are against nature, they are barbarous. A similar gruesome image is found in "To Count Carlo Pepoli," where 'out of immortal boredom'

> Others choose to spend their days
> doing the cruel work of Mars, and idly
> stain their hands with their brothers' blood;
> some take comfort in the woes of others,
> and think that making others miserable
> makes them less sad, and so they spend their time
> doing evil.[64]

Leopardi is once again denouncing war, calling it 'evil' and 'cruel work,' but the battles on new lands can hardly be called wars. In referring to the aftermath of the ancient Battle of Cunaxa, Leopardi writes that "It is reasonable to admire the retreat of the ten thousand Greeks."[65] Since Cyrus the Younger, on whose side they were fighting, lost the battle, the Greeks had to make their way back home through the hostile territory, chronicled in the *Anabasis*. Then Leopardi turns to the conquest of Mexico as a comparison:

> Now, what should we say not of a retreat but of the conquest of a kingdom, also immense, as Mexico was, carried out not by ten thousand but by one thousand, or not many more, Spaniards, who were at a much greater distance from their country, by sea, etc. etc.? The more time goes by, the more the difference between men and men increases, and the superiority of the civilized to the barbarians. Although the Persians were very different from the Greeks, and vastly inferior, they were not so different or inferior as the Mexicans […] with respect to the Spanish. And the Persians and the Greeks did not differ much in particular with regard to weapons, whereas the Spanish differed greatly from the Mexicans. And likewise respectively in Tactics.[66]

[64] Leopardi, "To Count Carlo Pepoli," 155, lines 88-94.
[65] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [2479].
[66] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [2480].

I believe this is an incredibly astute observation on the part of Leopardi. He is pointing out the vast disparity in military prowess between the Spanish and the Mexicans. He explains that although the Greeks were also superior to the Persians, their differences could not have been so drastic back in the 5th c. BCE. In contrast, "the Spanish differed greatly from the Mexicans," especially since they had been accustomed to employing guns in wars for over a century – weapons that the Aztecs had never come across before and had no viable means of defense against. Moreover, Leopardi's continued emphasis on how 'peaceful' and 'undefended' American shores were shows that they were unused to and unprepared for combat. Therefore, the conquest of Mexico by the Spanish could hardly be called a war: it was a genocide. And Leopardi recognizes this, though he doesn't state it explicitly. By comparing the two historical events, and by calling one admirable, he is quite clearly implying that the other is the opposite of admirable. If "It is reasonable to admire the retreat of the ten thousand Greeks," then it is likewise reasonable to denounce, to scorn, to abhor the conquest of Mexico. This is as far as Leopardi goes in making anti-colonial statements, but the message is nevertheless clear.

The remaining Indigenous peoples who did not die at the hands of colonists were enslaved and exploited. In the prior excerpt from "Hymn to the Patriarchs," Leopardi mentions how the 'evil greed'[67] of the colonists 'drives [nature's] assaulted

[67] Leopardi, "Hymn to the Patriarchs," 83, line 112.

natives to strange labor,'[68] meaning slavery. Earlier in the poem he names slavery as one of the outcomes of civilization: 'slavery, the worst of evils, / became the rule for cowardly human life.'[69] It is as though slavery was inevitable. In fact, Leopardi claims that 'Nature and fate / inscribed this law in adamant at the outset.'[70] Here 'nature' refers to the nature of human beings after the fall of man. It is our destiny to live in a constant unequal society:

> Calumny and hate and rage will dog
> the footsteps of true honor, and the weak will be
> fodder for the strong, the starving beggar
> the rich man's flatterer and slave, in every form
> of social order[71]

The reason why this fate is inescapable is linked to our neglect of nature, as Leopardi explains:

> Man is naturally, originally, and essentially free, independent, and equal to others, and these qualities belong inseparably to the idea of nature and constitutive essence of man, as of other animals. Society is by the same token originally and essentially dependent and unequal, and without these qualities it is not perfect; indeed, it is not a true society. Hence man in society must necessarily divest himself of, and lose, some qualities that are essential, natural, inborn, constitutive, and inseparable from what he himself is.[72]

Thus, all roads lead to Rome – every injustice, every cruelty has its origin in the same event: man's forsaking of nature.

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[68] Leopardi, line 114.
[69] Leopardi, 79, lines 55-56.
[70] Leopardi, "Recantations," 267, lines 80-81.
[71] Leopardi, lines 89-93.
[72] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [579-580].

Overall, Leopardi's condemnation of colonialism stems from his personal philosophy. To put it differently, colonialism goes against everything Leopardi believes in. It is a metonymic event standing in for the whole history of mankind. Indigenous people represent antiquity and the natural man, and the colonists represent modernity and the civilized, corrupted man. So through colonialism this history of man's corruption, this "sin of pride […] seems to me is being committed again."[73] Let us recapitulate the three benign reasons for colonization: 1) to spread the word of God, 2) to educate and industrialize 3) to help combat disease and tyranny. The third one is almost ironic, since disease and tyranny were introduced by the colonists. The second one, being a rephrased version of "to civilize" is evident in its harm. The first one is the only reason that was true – Europeans aimed to spread the word of God and that is indeed what they did, though the repercussions of this are complex. Out of the true reasons, that is, to explore, extract resources and exploit labor, Leopardi denounces all three. Or rather, his philosophy, his system of thought forbids them. Because nature is perfect and "nothing is barbarous apart from what is contrary to nature,"[74] Leopardi holds a strong "deplorazione della scelleratezza degli uomini, e quello di una disapprovazione del loro persistente operare contro le leggi di natura, includendo in questa violazione lo stesso incremento dei viaggi e delle esplorazioni marittime,

[73] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [397].
[74] Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, [356].

propagatrici insieme di malvagità e di infelicità «a novi liti e a nove stelle»,"[75] as Blasucci puts it. Thus, colonial actions are entirely opposed to the natural law and to Leopardian beliefs as a whole. I believe it is reason enough to call Leopardi an anti-colonialist.

How much of condemnation is rooted in his Romantic ideology and how much of it is rooted in his political beliefs? It is hard to say. Leopardi explicitly denounces slavery in his work, as well as the blatant abuse of military power against societies who lack modern weaponry. At the same time, he also perpetuates primitivist perspectives and subscribes to the idea of "the noble savage." A significant reason for his opposition to colonization is its corruption of "the noble savage," who is closer to nature, thus being closer to the true human condition. Although Leopardi sympathizes with their plight, he still views Indigenous populations through the lens of primitivism, therefore denying them their autonomy. There is undoubtedly much more to be said on this nuance, especially as it was a contradiction that characterized many progressive poets of the Romantic era, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

There has been a growing body of scholarship on the anti-colonial views of the English Romantics,[76] but less attention has been paid to their Italian counterparts.

[75] Blasucci, "Inno ai Patriarchi," 17. ["lamentation over the wickedness of men, and an expression of disapproval regarding their persistent actions against the laws of nature, a violation that encompasses even the very increase in maritime travel and exploration, which serves to propagate both wickedness and misery 'to new shores and new stars'."]

[76] Though a little old, a good example is Timothy Fulford's and Peter J. Kitson's *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire 1780-1830* (1998), which examines the relationship between Romantic-era writing and British imperial expansion.

Perhaps it is because Italy's colonial history started much later. Italy only became a colonial power towards the end of the 19th c. with its acquisition of Eritrea, whereas England had been part of the colonial enterprise since the late 16th c. Another reason might be the fact that post-colonial theory is a predominantly Anglo-Francophone field, having arguably remained quite marginal in Italian academic circles. Thus, it is my hope that this paper brings more attention to the presence of anti-colonial sentiments among figures in Italian Romanticism. It would be interesting to see if ideas similar to Leopardi's appear in the works of his contemporaries, such as Alessandro Manzoni or Giovanni Berchet.

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