

**THE POEMS
("CANTI")
OF LEOPARDI**

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The Poems ("Canti") of Leopardi by J. M. Morrison

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J. M. MORRISON

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LEOPARDI

Done into English
BY
J. M. MORRISON, M.A.



GAY AND BIRD
22 BEDFORD STREET, STRAND
LONDON
1900
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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE.

GIACOMO LEOPARDI was born on June 29, 1798, at Recanati, a small country town in the March of Ancona. He was of noble descent on both father and mother's side, but the family was in somewhat straitened circumstances. His father, Count Leopardi, lived retired from the world, a pedant of narrow views, but of considerable erudition; a bigot who held ultramontane and mediæval notions as to the prerogatives and position of the clergy and the Church, whose almost servilely devoted son he was; a father who utterly failed, if indeed he ever tried, to understand his gifted son, or win his sympathy and affection. He destined Giacomo for the Church, and could never forgive him for his refusal to devote his life to her service.

The young Leopardi was sickly as a boy even, and his over-studious habits from his earliest years utterly undermined a constitution which would never have been robust. He spent his boyhood's days unchecked in his father's well-stocked library, omnivorously devouring and assimilating all that came to his hands, till at the age of sixteen already he had become a self-taught prodigy of learning. He had read through all the ancient classics, and mastered several European modern languages and Hebrew besides. At the same age, too, he had imposed on the ripest Italian scholars with two Anacreontic odes which he composed, and which were received as genuine ancient classics, and he had also written, besides other works giving evidence of precocious intellectual powers, a commentary on Porphyry's

Life of Plotinus. At eighteen he wrote the *Appressamento alla Morte*, a panegyric on the universal might and sway of Death.

For years Leopardi had chafed under the almost petty tyranny of his father and the restraint of his ungenial surroundings, and he sighed for Rome which seemed to his restless youthful dreams the only spot where his ambitions could find their fulfilment, and where he could devote to the service of his poor distracted Italy that intense patriotic fervour which burned within him, and which is so finely expressed in his first four *canzi* (*To Italy*, etc.). It was not till 1822, however, that he could obtain his father's grudging consent to depart; but, alas! after a year's stay in the Eternal City, he returned disillusioned and broken-spirited to Recanati. During that interval he had made acquaintance with the German historian Niebuhr, then Papal Ambassador of Prussia at Rome. In 1825 Leopardi left Recanati a second time for Bologna and Milan, having been engaged by a publishing house of the latter city to edit Cicero and Plutarch for them. He also resided for some time in Florence before returning once more to his ancestral home, bowed down with disappointment and ill-health and threatened blindness. A rude awakening in Florence from a dream of love, whose object is referred to with such mingled despite and tenderness in *Aspasia* (page 113), proved the final shattering of whatever illusions and dreams he had left, and a death-blow to his last hopes. His ardent soul, imprisoned in a sickly, unattractive frame, craved and thirsted for love. He had to own, after bitter experience, that a woman's love was not for him. Can we wonder that with his supersensitive nature this conviction brought, if not humiliation, at least the depths of despondency? In 1832 he was again in Florence, where he met Ranieri, in whose intimacy he spent the last years of his life, and who was afterwards to act the part and gain the questionable dis-

tion of another Trelawney to another equally ill-starred Byron. Leopardi died at his friend's house in Naples rather suddenly on June 15, 1837, a few days before the completion of his thirty-ninth year.

Besides the precocious works mentioned and the *canti* here translated, we have from Leopardi a considerable amount of youthful poems and translations from the classics, notably his long *Continuation of the Battle of Frogs and Mice*. His fame rests, next to his *canti*, on his prose *Operette Morali*, a series of dialogues on philosophy. These are characterized throughout by the same pessimistic view of life and human destiny as runs through his *canti*—the conviction that all is vanity, that life is an empty thing and death desirable; that man's best efforts are vain, and human nature as a whole addicted to and content with cringing and sloth and vileness. He is the only true man who has emancipated himself from the vulgar illusions of pleasures and the things of sense, and has lifted himself up to the calm, clear height where intellect reigns supreme and sole. But Leopardi's is never a whining, pining despair; we are never offended by it; we feel that his was a lovable nature, as indeed his best friends have told us. Whilst we pity his sad, unhappy fate, we feel sure that under happier auspices and with better health and more congenial environment, his genius would have postulated a saner and less one-sided view of life, and that though it could not have embraced a more perfect expression and classic form, it would have taken a more expansive range.

With regard to the present translation, if it is any justification for one's temerity in attempting what one of our greatest living authorities and critics has pronounced to be a task never likely to be accomplished adequately in our language, may I say that several able renderings of the *canti* have appeared in German, whilst they have been practically ignored with us? It seemed to me strange that England

should be left behind in an honest attempt at least to interpret the great Italian classic of the nineteenth century to a wider public in this country than those who can approach him in the original.

It has been my aim in this translation that it should not be in the remotest sense a paraphrase, but far rather a faithful and a close, though not servile, rendering of the original. Hence I cherish the hope that it may not prove useless to students of the Italian language in enabling them to elucidate the intricacies and difficulties of Leopardi's style and language.

Of the thirty-four *canti*, ending with *The Genista*, that last and most mature and most sublime product of Leopardi's genius, I have omitted three from this translation; two (*Consalvo* and the *Palinode*) as being likely to seem of little interest or even trivial to English readers, the third (*On the Marriage of My Sister Pauline*) as being, though fine in itself, mainly repetitious of the lofty sentiments and of the fervour and passion of Leopardi's other patriotic odes. The desire not to swell too much this small volume was also of weight with me, and may prove, I hope, my exoneration from reproach.

I have retained Leopardi's form and metre, employing the same regular, and sometimes intricate, sequences of rhyme wherever he does. Leopardi, however, latterly almost discarded this artificial aid to verse, as if it were a base fetter which impeded the free soaring of his genius. But as more frequent rhyme seemed essential to our less plastic and less musical northern tongue, I have ventured to increase the number of rhyming lines where the poet used such irregularly and sparingly, as, for instance, in *The Genista*.

The numbers in parenthesis above the titles of the poems indicate the sequence of the latter in the Italian edition.

J. M. MORRISON.

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