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rites of spring

1922 and 1822

ABSTRACT: This paper reads in tandem two major poems: Giacomo Leopardi's *canzone Alla Primavera, o delle favole antiche* ("To Spring, or on the ancient myths") and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Composed almost exactly one hundred years apart, the two works display some curious affinities in the "rites of Spring" they ironically enact. Eliot never expressed interest in Leopardi, but both poems meditate on classicism, romanticism, and myth, and both are produced in a period of personal and national turmoil for their writers. Read together they might be taken to dramatize the passage between the "modern" work of 1822 and the "modernist" one of 1922, each legible (as Eliot wrote of Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*) either "as a collection of entertaining myths, or as a revelation of that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuation."

KEYWORDS: *The Rite of Spring*, Leopardi, T. S. Eliot, Mythology, Spring, Noonday Demon.

In June 1921, T. S. Eliot attended the first London production of Igor Stravinsky's newly choreographed ballet *The Rite of Spring*. He reviewed the performance several months later in one of his "London Letters" for the *Dial* magazine (Eliot 1921, 452-455). As one who had earlier described himself as an exponent of "The classicist point of view," with its "belief in Original Sin" and in "the necessity for austere discipline" (1916, in Moody 1980, 44), Eliot might not have seemed an obvious admirer of the ballet Stravinsky described as "a scene of pagan ritual in which a chosen sacrificial virgin dances herself to death" (Eksteins 1989, 39).¹ He would have known, though, of the first performance of *The Rite* back in 1913 which had been so memorably riotous and unbridled; and, he would also have known that, for many who saw it then, the violence of the dancing and the dissonance of the music had later seemed darkly prophetic of the global violence soon to come.²

The Rite that came to London in the early 1920s wasn't quite as wild as that opening performance and some of the Russian color of the original had faded a little, with non-Russian dancers adopting Russian stage names (Taruskin 2017, 435). It remained, though, an early example of the modernist Total Work, "a mixed-media synthesis" that

¹ Craft 1966, 33 observes of the ending that "the elders stand like witnesses at an execution, and extend their hands to the victim as she falls in time with the flute scale."

² See Eksteins 1989, xiv. The Rite "with its rebellious energy and its celebration of life through sacrificial death, perhaps the emblematic oeuvre of a twentieth-century world that, in its pursuit of life, has killed off millions of its best human beings. Stravinsky intended initially to entitle his score *The Victim*."

would have a prominent place in future “histories of dance and stage design, as well as music” (417). Eliot’s review certainly showed his responsiveness to the performance – the choreography, he said, was “admirable,” and he especially praised the principal dancer, Olga Sokolova (Eliot 1921, 452-455). At the same time, though, Eliot was troubled by a sense of disjunction between the ballet and its music. “To me,” he wrote, “the music seemed very remarkable – but at all events struck me as possessing a quality of modernity which I missed from the ballet which accompanied it [...] The spirit of the music was modern, and the spirit of the ballet was primitive ceremony.” In the ballet, he concluded, “one missed the sense of the present,” and he went on to suggest that the work be understood “in two ways,” like Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*: “as a collection of entertaining myths, or as a revelation of that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuation.” In contrast to the “primitive ceremony” of the content, the dissonance of Stravinsky’s music struck him as fully modern in its way of “transform[ing] the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor horn,” of realizing a “sense of the present” in “the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric cries of modern life; and to transform these despairing noises into music.” This way of emphasizing the modernism of *The Rite’s* music was not unusual.³ Indeed, Stravinsky himself would tire of the work’s primitive “scenario,” and after 1920 he would increasingly prefer concert performances of the piece. The split between ancient and modern that troubled Eliot would thus disappear as Stravinsky recast *The Rite* as a form of “absolute music,” as he called it, progressively dissociating it “from its scenic and choreographic ties” and realigning it with post-war neo-classicism rather than with modernism’s earlier primitivism.⁴

Primitive and modern might thus be separated as content and form for Stravinsky but for Eliot they were inextricably linked (both, he suggests in his review, are “barbarous” and “despairing”). By 1922, he was conceiving the “vanished mind” less as a tranquil array of existing “monuments” in an ideal order (that was how he had described it in the earlier essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (Eliot 1972, 15) than as an expression of a modernity whose disposition to violence and nihilism had hardly been assuaged by the

³ See, for example, Rosenfeld 1920, 194 for a view of the work’s sonic and rhythmic effects as expressing “the whole mad phantasmagoria of the modern city.”

Rosenfeld continues “Everything is angular, cubical, rectilinear. The music pounds with the rhythm of engines, whirls and spirals like screws and fly-wheels, grinds and shrieks like laboring metal.” (202) Craft 1966, 35 also recalls “the semblance of mechanisation in the robotic beat” of *The Rite* that “must have seemed as modern as airplanes in 1913”. Cfr. Austin Graham 2016, 147 for the view that in the period “the ‘rattle’ of machinery was seldom heard in Stravinsky’s music.”

⁴ Van den Toorn 1987, 13. Cfr. Roberts 2016, 158: “Stravinsky’s stage works for the Ballets Russes after *The Rite of Spring* chart his journey from Dionysian abandon to his conception of a perennial Apollonian order and measure”. On “absolute music”, see Stravinsky 1936, 84.

“[M]usic is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature, etc.” (his emphasis). Cfr. Eliot 2015, I, 590-1: “no interpretation of a rite could explain its origin [...] the rite may have originated before ‘meaning’ meant anything at all” (his emphasis).

slaughter of the Great War. His response to *The Rite of Spring* thus exhibits a certain ambivalence. There is the “modern” sense of ancient myth as, now, merely “entertaining,” as old stories that have little more than antiquarian relevance to the present, and there is also the more complicated and perhaps guilty sense of the modern mind having to wrestle with its own atavistic residues (as, perhaps, in its fascination with the spectacle of Stravinsky’s virgin dancing herself to death). But if modernism were to be shaped by “tradition,” as Eliot had already argued it should, what future life could classicism have if its very marrow, the ancient myths, were somehow toxic or at the least irrelevant?

When it comes to thinking about Eliot and modernity, it is usually Baudelaire who provides a point of reference. Eliot spoke of him, after all, as “the greatest exemplar in *modern* poetry in any language, for his verse and language is the nearest thing to a complete renovation that we have experienced” (426; his emphasis). I want to speak here, though, not of Baudelaire, but of another poet, Giacomo Leopardi, who found himself, like Eliot, caught between tradition and modernity, and who, while seeking a poetry responsive to what Eliot called “the sense of the present,” found in the modern world none of the intoxication that would offer occasional consolation to Baudelaire.⁵ The contemporary world contained for Leopardi no hope of transcendence; modernity appeared to him rather as something already ruined by the failure of Enlightenment values and the French Revolution.

I am not suggesting any kind of influence here – Eliot showed no interest at all in Leopardi and, as far as I know, never mentioned him except to call him “a gloomy cuss” in a letter to Ezra Pound.⁶ But one poem of Leopardi’s makes for an interesting comparison with *The Waste Land*, the *canzone* called *Alla Primavera, o delle favole antiche*, “To Spring, or about the ancient fables.” As it happens, the poems were completed almost exactly one hundred years apart, in January 1822 and January 1922 respectively. Both were triggered in part by their authors’ recent psychological and physical breakdowns, and both sought, in Eliot’s words, “to transmute [these] personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal” (Eliot 1972, 137).⁷ Leopardi expressed the same thought, if a little more dramatically: “In its poetic career, my spirit has followed the same course as the human spirit in general,” he said, the

⁵ See Eliot 1972, 426 “It is not merely in the use of imagery of common life, not merely in the use of imagery of the sordid life of a great metropolis, but in the elevation of such imagery to the first intensity—presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent something much more than itself—that Baudelaire has created a mode of release and expression for other men” (his emphasis).

⁶ Eliot 2019, 688, letter to Ezra Pound, 16 October 1937: “I haven’t any a priori objection to Leopardi [...] except that he is a gloomy cuss and I like cheerful light reading [...]”.

⁷ Compare Moody 1980, 80: “He [Eliot] is completing the objectification and analysis of his experience by magnifying it into a vision of the world. If he presents a crisis or breakdown of civilisation, this has to be understood as first of all a crisis or breakdown in himself. If he achieves a cure it will be by reintegrating and transforming himself in poetry”.

breakdown of his health in 1819 effectively marking “my passing from ancient to modern” (Leopardi 1997 and Leopardi 2013, 143, 144).

In both cases, personal disaster is taken as symptomatic of some sort of traumatic fall into modernity. That fall, glimpsed in the literal “descent” of *The Waste Land*’s opening lines and in Leopardi’s idea of the human spirit “nel dolor sepolte” (“entombed in grief”) at the beginning of his, performs a “rite of Spring” that is anything but regenerative.⁸ The two poems share a pessimism that regards modernity as immune to fantasies of renewal and to the myths in which these traditionally had found expression. And perhaps not surprisingly, for in 1822 Leopardi’s Italy was drifting into a dreary period of “restoration” following the failed insurrections of 1820-21 in Naples and Piedmont. The mission of international politics was now to return to a version of pre-Napoleonic stability (Napoleon had died the year before). Metternich’s series of Congresses – Vienna in 1814-15 through to Verona in 1822 – sought to neutralize revolution in Greece and Spain, and to ensure Austrian rule in Northern Italy. Leopardi’s country, it seemed, was doomed once more to repartition and to despotic government, and his hometown, Recanati, far from experiencing Springtime renewal, would continue to sleep the sleep of the Papal States, paralyzed by censorship and byzantine travel restrictions. As if to honor this spirit of anachronism, his father, Monaldo, continued to wear a sword around the Palazzo, and Leopardi, age 24, was still not allowed to leave home unaccompanied (not until late in 1822 was he able to make his first escape from Recanati to Rome).

In 1922, Eliot also found himself in a painfully deadlocked world. Having committed to staying in Europe, he was now unhappily settled in London, embroiled in a marriage dogged by anxiety and illness. His doctoral thesis remained unfinished and the aspiring poet found himself toiling away in Lloyds’ Bank, his duties requiring him to confront on a daily basis the chaos left by the recent war. The map of Europe was being dramatically redrawn again, this time by the 1919 Treaty of Versailles and its panoply of reparations and peace treaties; the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires were being dismantled and new countries created, including Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and Austria (Tearle 2019, 83; Tate 2013, 161). Drafting *The Waste Land* three years later, Eliot lamented “the present decay of eastern Europe” and conjured anxiously with the specter of “hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains” (Eliot 2015, 76, 69). His own breakdown and troubled convalescence on “Margate sands,” where he could “connect / Nothing with nothing,” seemed intimately if obscurely related to the larger apocalyptic vision of “Falling towers” in the poem’s next section (Eliot 2015, 66, 69).

For both poets, then, the conventional tropes of Spring no longer announced jubilant recovery. Leopardi, emerging from the worst period of his 1819 breakdown, wrote to his friend and mentor Pietro Giordani that “I too am fervently longing for fair springtime as the only hope of medicine left for my exhaustion of spirit”. But Spring brought to his

⁸ For Leopardi’s larger handling of this theme, see Nicholls 2023, 32-48. The translation of Leopardi’s poem used throughout is Leopardi 2008. The more usual choice would be Leopardi 2010, though the former (by Tim Chilcott) is more generally responsive to the Latinate features of *Alla Primavera* which are especially relevant in the present context.

mind not thoughts of the future, but rather “certain old images” of antiquity and the age of myth, times of “imagination and enthusiasm” that, Leopardi realized with, he said, “an icy fear,” were no longer available to him. He now felt “stiff and withered like a dry reed,” preoccupied with a “feeling of nothingness” while “wretched would-be philosophers take comfort in the boundless increase in reason” (Leopardi 1998a, 95; Leopardi 1998b, I. 379-80).

The Waste Land's evocation of a “dull” and sluggish Spring also finds April the “cruellest month” in the false hopes it brings. “Winter kept us warm,” the opening fondly recalls, and the specter of the new provokes fear and anxiety rather than optimism. As the character Harry would later say in Eliot's play *The Family Reunion* (1939), “Is the spring not an evil time, that excites us with lying voices?,” a question met with Mary's declaration that “the moment of birth / Is when we have knowledge of death / I believe the season of birth / Is the season of sacrifice” (Eliot 1970, 309-310). So, in *The Waste Land*, a vista of burgeoning lilacs abruptly yields to a desert landscape of “stony rubbish” and “broken images, where the sun beats.” In both poems, Spring's “cruelty” is evoked in a verse that is strained and intermittently opaque. Like Eliot's desert, the language of *The Waste Land* offers little shelter or relief, instead deforming consolatory tropes of flowering and renewal into motifs of violence and sacrifice. To begin with April in this poem is, unexpectedly, to begin with “The Burial of the Dead.”

Leopardi's *Alla Primavera* also inverts the rite of Spring, returning to a visionary, mythopoeic world only to show how it has been disastrously sacrificed to the false enlightenment of what he calls the “dark torch of truth” (“l'atra / Face del ver”, lines 12-13).⁹ This first stanza, famous for its obstructive Latinate syntax, alludes to an ode by Horace (IV. 7) in which the poet speaks of Spring as the time when “the quickly changing moons recoup their losses in the sky” (“damna tamen celeres reparant caelestia lunae”) and Winter's “damage” is “repaired” by the arrival of the new season. But Horace cautions against taking this seasonal recurrence as some sort of guarantee of human immortality: the seasons may endlessly revolve, he says, but the mortal span is fixed; nothing will bring *you* back from death. That, too, will be a dominant motif of Leopardi's poem. Nature and humanity are doomed henceforth to separateness and the old myths now serve only to remind us of a harmony that is lost forever. Note that Leopardi does not share at all the popular 19th century fantasy of a return of the gods; the “fables” to which *Alla Primavera* alludes in stanzas 2 through 4 tell not of harmony, but rather of loss and pain – of Actaeon torn to pieces by his dogs, of Daphne imprisoned in the laurel's bark, of Phaeton hurtling to his death, of Echo doomed endlessly to repeat herself. These tales have always been painful, but once they had seemed to speak to humanity's need, they had “made our sorrows known” to us (“Nostre querele [...] insegnava”). Now, however, the immortals have vanished and such experiences have become merely “some trick played by the wind,” “vano error de' venti.”

⁹ Horace's phrase “atra cura” (Odes, III. 1. 40) to which Leopardi alludes is the “black anxiety” that “sits behind the horseman” (“post equitem sedet atra cura”).

Even more troubling in this context is the myth of Philomela, a dark and bloody rite of Spring that sits uneasily at the center of both our poems (Philomela is the “musical bird,” the “musico augel”, of Leopardi’s fourth stanza). In Ovid’s version of the story – and it is important to Leopardi and to Eliot that this legend is enveloped in the background noise of many other tellings:

Philomela was raped and her tongue cut out by Tereus, husband of Procne, her sister. In revenge Procne slaughtered her son, Itys, and with Philomela’s help cooked and served him to his father for dinner. The sisters in turn were slaughtered by Tereus and turned into nightingale and swallow respectively, and Tereus into the hoopoe, bird of war. (Musa 1999, 691)

This tale is especially striking since, as Leopardi noted on the manuscript of *Alla Primavera*, while Tereus is the very embodiment of evil, the two avenging sisters are also portrayed as both victims *and* perpetrators; only Itys, the sacrificial victim, is innocent.¹⁰ The song of the nightingale has echoed down the ages to recall these multiple acts of “wicked vengeance” (“scellerato scorno”) but the unspeakable crimes told in the story, the *antichi danni* of the fourth stanza’s last lines, echo the seasonal round announced in the *celesti danni* of the poem’s first line, suggesting a perennial recurrence of desire, slaughter, revenge and sacrifice. In *The Waste Land*, the “inviolable voice” of the nightingale endlessly names the one by whom Philomela was so “rudely forc’d” (“Tereu”) but to little effect (“and still the world pursues [...]"). “The change of Philomel,” then, her metamorphosis into the nightingale, has lost its ancient aura and she now sings like any ordinary bird rather than weeping as a mythic character (Carpi 2005, 35). “Grief does not modulate / Your song,” Leopardi concludes in the opening lines of stanza 5, “quelle tue varie note / Dolor non forma”.¹¹ As Eliot puts it with an allusion to Edmund Spenser, the “nymphs are departed [...] Departed, have left no addresses” (Eliot 2015, 62).

At the time Leopardi wrote *Alla Primavera*, he was also hoping to publish a volume of his *Canzoni* that would have concluded with this poem. The project was delayed but it has been noted that if *Alla Primavera* had closed the volume, it would have acquired something of the force of a manifesto, announcing the end of one way of being classicist and the beginning of a new one (Italia 2016, 38-41). The old way was clear in the works of Vincenzo Monti, the leading classicist poet of the time and an early mentor of Leopardi. But Leopardi was critical now of Monti, whose poems, he allowed, could be graceful and dignified, but whose deference to the classics left them as “really a cento of pieces from [...] Homer, Hesiod, Callimachus, Virgil, Horace, Ovid [...]” (Leopardi 2013, 37 and 1997, I. 37). The result, Leopardi continues, is an assemblage of quotations

¹⁰ See Leopardi 2009, I. 212: “Non mi finisce, perchè questo affetto par che si riferisca solam. allo scellerato scorno, cioè al fatto di Tereo, e non a quello di Progne ecc.” Carpi 2005, 33 notes that in this story “no one was innocent,” while Connor 1998, 221 observes that “Philomela and Procne are the perpetrators as well as the victims of a violation.”

¹¹ See Tateo 1993, 43 for the suggestion that Leopardi associates Philomela with Echo following the passage in Poliziano’s *Stanze* where Echo is said to repeat the song of the nightingale.

– of bits and pieces – that simply *refer* to ancient authors rather than adding to what they said.

Interestingly, the authors Leopardi names in this passage are all present in his own “*Alla Primavera*,” but the difference between his way with the classics and Monti’s is that they function in his poem as sources of *allusions* rather than as just *references*, as a weave of signs and traces that depart from Ovid’s original narrative so as to transform its elements into something new.¹² And this is necessary, says Leopardi, because Ovid’s “manner of depiction is enumeration (like modern sentimental or descriptive poets, etc.) [and] leaves almost nothing for the reader to do, whereas Dante, who conjures up an image with two words, leaves plenty for the imagination to do. [...] the imagination conceives that image spontaneously and adds what is missing to the lines drawn by the poet, which are such as almost necessarily to evoke the idea of the whole [...]” (Leopardi 2013, 57 and 1997, I. 57).¹³ The poet, then, should not give us the “whole” directly, but should rather evoke it – this is the function of allusion which, unlike direct reference, creates an excess of interpretive possibilities for the reader to pursue.

The ramifications of this idea would be complex, inviting comparison with French Symbolism and with Eliot’s later modernist proposal that “the poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (Eliot 1972, 289).¹⁴ For Leopardi, allusion and indirectness offer a way of redeeming ancient myth from modern disenchantment by adapting it to his new poetics of the “vague” and the “indefinite,” a poetics employing suggestive words (*parole*) rather than abstract terms (*termine*) (see, for example, Leopardi 2013, 109-11 and 1997, I. 109-11).¹⁵ While the word *incerte* appears only once in the *Canti* (in line 29 of *Alla Primavera*, as it happens), Leopardi uses it regularly in the *Zibaldone* to describe the poetic effects of *parole*: “For a scientist, the most appropriate words are those which are more precise and express a barer idea (“più nuda”). For the poet and man of letters, on the contrary, words that are vaguer and express more uncertain ideas (“idee più incerte”), or a great number of ideas, etc.” (Leopardi 2013, 1226 and 1997, I. 1226). The “frozen heart” (“Questo gelido cor”, l.18) of modernity is

¹² For the distinction between “reference” and “allusion,” see Nicholls 2010, 10-24. See also Leopardi 2013b, 144: “we do not have [the Greek fables] in common with the ancients, for they belong to them. We should not usurp others’ images, unless we make them our own in some way”.

¹³ See also Leopardi 2013b, 152.

¹⁴ Leopardi’s praise of “vagueness” and “indirectness,” may seem to align him with the later Symbolists, but his criticism of Italian Romanticism shows how his own emphasis is in fact quite different. See Leopardi 2013b, 115 “they [the Romantics] wish to make poetry consort with the intellect, and to transplant it from the visible to the invisible and from things to ideas, and to transform it from the material, imaginative, corporeal substance that it was into something metaphysical, reasonable and spiritual.”

¹⁵ Cfr. Brose 1983, 54 “Parole. . . do not present a precise idea of a given object or concept, but are polysemic and call up clusters of images that, by virtue of their indefiniteness, suggest the infinite and the sublime.” On Leopardi’s derivation of the distinction from Cesare Beccaria’s *Ricerche intorno alla natura dello stile*, see Nencioni 1981, 71-72.

constantly constrained by “truths,” by totalizing (“bare”) explanations that restrict an imaginative faculty that would otherwise delight in what is fluid and unfixed.¹⁶ Leopardi’s allusions work to create that fluidity, in this case the extended allusion to Horace in the opening lines combining with other echoes of, for example, Petrarch, Virgil, and Ugo Foscolo, and thus preparing for the even more intricate texture of the second stanza. Here idyllic images of home, of nymphs and crystal springs, give way to a landscape starkly devoid of any divine presence: the forbidding mountains and woods are haunted only by the wind, like the “empty chapel,” perhaps, in Eliot’s “What the Thunder said” that is now “only the wind’s home.” Later, in Leopardi’s final stanza, there is the “blind” (“cieco”) thunder that prefigures “the dry sterile thunder without rain” of *The Waste Land* (Eliot 2015, 68). Leopardi’s manuscript shows, incidentally, that he was thinking here of images of the Underworld in Virgil and Dante and of “the very home of the living” having become “the seat of death,” much as it will later do in Eliot’s images of the dead flowing over London Bridge and of the deserted place where the “sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter.”¹⁷

But the second half of Leopardi’s stanza 2 takes us back to primordial times, melding together allusions to the dance of the nymphs (from Horace’s Ode again, but also invoking lines from Virgil and Homer, and perhaps from Porphyry’s Cave of the Nymphs), and to the unfortunate shepherd who spies the goddess Diana bathing. Importantly, it is noon, the hour of *ombre incerte*, of flickering shadows, the “uncertain shade” (“incertas umbras”) of Virgil’s fifth *Eclogue*.¹⁸ This is the time when the sun is at its highest and when, according to many legends, gods, nymphs and other supernatural beings may appear on earth. It’s the so-called “blind hour” when we can’t see because there’s actually too much light – ¹⁹ a disorienting time (later, monks were warned about the “meridian demon” that would overpower them with drowsiness)²⁰ but also a very dangerous one for any mortal who happens to disturb a god taking a bath at noon.²¹ This moment of temporal suspension and sensory confusion is also implied in the shadowless desert landscape of *The Waste Land*’s opening and later in the twilight vision of the “violet hour”, another time of “transitions and transformations” (Cole 2012, 74).

Anything is possible at this time of day, and the shepherd in *Alla Primavera* now hears the “shrill piping” (“arguto carme”) of many Pans, as, disastrously, he comes upon the

¹⁶ Cfr. Leopardi 2013b, 124 on “the science that opposes it [the imagination], barring every path with truth [...] nor is the harsh light of truth beneficial for that which is a wanderer in nature.”

¹⁷ See the marginal notes in Leopardi 2009, I. 215 which refer to Aeneid, VI, 407ff. and Inferno, III, 78. Savarese 2003, 12 notes that while these do not appear in the final version of the poem the motif seems to surface again in lines 20-21 of “Inno ai patriarchi” with their reference to “il disperato erebo in terra.”

¹⁸ Eclogues, V. 5, “sive sub incertas Zephyris motantibus umbras.” Leopardi 2009, I. 202 notes the allusion: “Sul fervido meriggio. Sul meriggio cocente. incerte. Virg. ecl.5 v. 5.”

¹⁹ See Ungaretti 2000, 1494 on “l’ora cieca’ per troppa luce, l’ora dei deliri e dei miraggi.”

²⁰ For a biblical warning, see Psalms, XCI, 6 on “the destruction that wasteth at noonday.”

²¹ See Ungaretti 2000, 904. Ungaretti planned but did not ultimately publish a book-length dossier of accounts of the Demonio meridiano (1494). The draft can be found in Giuseppe Ungaretti 2010, 1035-1174.

goddess taking her bath.²² Leopardi acknowledges the mirage-like effect of noonday by departing from Ovid's narrative and grafting several tales together. First, the shepherd boy becomes Actaeon as he advances into the grove with "uncertain step" ("non certis passibus errans", as Ovid puts it). The "uncertainty" describes the boy's gait but it also provides a figure for the way in which elements of the myth are being associatively recombined in a form in which the vision is powerfully evoked but still remains somehow unclear. The boy sees the surface of the pool trembling or shimmering, but he cannot see the goddess herself even though she is tantalizingly glimpsed by us, the readers. And, by analogy, this glimpse triggers other intertextual effects, the phrase "snow-white side" ("Il niveo lato" of the last line) echoed from yet another ode by Horace (III. 27. 25-6) in which the purity of Europa's skin is praised.

All this is "uncertain" as, paradoxically, the light of noonday is ("all'ombre / Meridiane incerte"), and Leopardi makes the whole scene more "vague" (to use his favorite word) by melding together different stories while omitting their protagonists' names.²³ It *looks* as if this is Actaeon seeing Diana, but in Ovid's account, of course, Actaeon is torn apart by his hunting-dogs, not blinded. In fact, this story of the goddess bathing is being elided with an earlier one that Callimachus tells in his *Fifth Hymn*, of the Bath of Pallas in which the goddess is disturbed while bathing by Tiresias.²⁴ We know of this second allusion because Leopardi deliberately draws our attention to it in the "Annotations" he published along with his poems (like Eliot in his notes for *The Waste Land*, Leopardi was always fond of self-commentary).²⁵ Tiresias is blinded for his indiscretion but then partially compensated by being given second sight.²⁶ This will be the Tiresias of *The Waste Land*, though he appears there from yet another story in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (III, 330-38) where he is made to adjudicate a dispute between the gods about human sexual pleasure. With just this metamorphic fluidity, the characters in *The Waste Land*, Eliot explains in one of his notes, "melt" into each other.²⁷

I won't continue to read in this kind of detail, but the point I want to make is that Leopardi – and Eliot too, perhaps – after relegating ancient fables to the past, manages in that act of overcoming them to reformulate them elliptically and "uncertainly" in a way that might allow the imagination room to "wander" (in Leopardi's terms, "spaziare")

²² Compare Jacques Rivière's 1913 account of "the 'panic' terror of the rise of sap" in Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (Rivière 2017, 145).

²³ A trick learned, perhaps, from Petrarch on whose habit of not naming mythic characters, see Hainsworth 1979, 29.

²⁴ As noted by, for example, Gavazzeni-Lombardi in Leopardi 2018, 196, the passage also alludes to Ugo Foscolo's use of Callimachus in Hymn III of *Le Grazie* and in the Ode *A Luigia Pallavicini caduta da cavallo*.

²⁵ "Annotazioni alle Dieci Canzoni stampate a Bologna nel 1824," in Leopardi 1987, 193.

²⁶ Leopardi temporarily lost his sight during his period of ill-health in 1819 and this adds painful nuance to these fables.

²⁷ Eliot 2015, 74 "Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias."

even within the rational constraints of modernity. Hence the importance of the poet's appeal to Nature in the closing lines of the poem to "Rekindle now the ancient flame in me," where the fables of the poem's title ("le favole antiche") are transformed into the flame or spark of inspiration in the present ("la favilla antica"). Traces and signs are valued here above full disclosure, for they are what give the imagination space to move forward, to project a future even when what is most valued seems wholly lost.²⁸ *The Waste Land* moves in this same zone of uncertainty which, like Leopardi's poem, it acknowledges in a series of hesitations and rhetorical questions. For even uncertainty can have value in a world that seems in each case blankly unresponsive to human misery. Leopardi's poem ends with the hope that nature, even if it no longer has "pity" for humanity, may at least *witness* its suffering – "Pietosa no, ma spettatrice almeno" – while *The Waste Land* relays the commands of the Thunder even though these are heard with "London Bridge [...] falling down" and the plain still "arid behind me." Both express a fundamental pessimism, though the "uncertainty" of poetic expression postpones absolute negation and instead makes these poems places of anticipation, a waiting for rain, as Eliot has it, or, as Leopardi puts it in his notebook, "The primitive and literal meaning of [the Latin word] *spes* was not *to hope*, but *to wait*, for good or ill indiscriminately" (Leopardi 2013, 3751 and 1997, II. 3571).

Both poets would eventually put an end to that kind of waiting, Leopardi by abandoning hope altogether, Eliot, arguably, by surrendering everything to it, but this moment, in 1922 as in 1822, represents a peculiar hiatus when something beyond totality may be glimpsed, and when the poem generates so many layers of allusion that reading feels almost endless. We've seen this exuberantly at work in *Alla Primavera* and it's also a feature of *The Waste Land* that the annotated edition of Eliot's poems by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue strikingly illuminates. Take as just one example, two lines from Eliot's *The Fire Sermon*, "At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives / Homeward, and brings the sailor home from the sea" (Eliot 2015, 663). Ricks and McCue find allusions here to Sappho, Dante, Milton, Thomas Gray, Whitman, Robert Louis Stevenson, A. E. Housman, John Davidson... The list could probably go on, and if it seems excessive that is because it invites the reader to abandon the apparent certainties of interpretation in favor of what Leopardi calls in the *Zibaldone*, "Variety, uncertainty, not seeing everything, and therefore [being] able to wander ["spaziare"] in one's imagination, through things unseen" (Leopardi 2013, 1745 and 1997, I. 1745). Leopardi and Eliot both tempt us to this "wandering," in part by the allusive texture of their verse but also by the self-commentaries they half ironically supply to their poems. Encouraged by allusion, then, our reading might also become a kind of commentary, moving in unexpected directions and with the promise of an open and perhaps regenerative horizon that conventional rites of Spring no longer afford.

²⁸ As noted in Squarotti 1996, 153-4, Leopardi will not return to the allegorical classicism of Monti, abandoning that whole apparatus in favor of the "perpetuo canto" of figures like Silvia and Nerina who express the "spark" ("favilla") of original inspiration from which the old mythologies were born.

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