

## Leopardi Beyond Spinoza: Hegel's Logic of Essence

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### Abstract

The essay illustrates the meaning of the Absolute that leads Hegel's Logic of Essence to its conclusion by bringing Leopardi's conception of Nature to the center. Hegel's Absolute, I contend, can be best understood as the Nature that appears in Leopardi's 1824 *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* (*Operette Morali*) and in his late poem *La Ginestra* (1836). Hegel claims that the Absolute of the Logic of Essence "corresponds" to Spinoza's monistic Absolute expressed as *Deus sive natura*. This "correspondence" and the criticism of Spinoza it entails have stirred reactions against Hegel's alleged misunderstanding of Spinoza. Leopardi's intervention will help us understand the core of Hegel's position with regard to Spinoza's substance, and will ultimately allow us to put in a novel perspective the crucial transition from necessity to freedom that this stage of the development of Essence represents.

*Keywords:* Absolute, Nature, Hegel, Logic, Leopardi, Spinoza.

My task in this essay is to illustrate the meaning of the Absolute that concludes Hegel's Logic of Essence, the second part of his *Science of Logic*, by bringing Leopardi's conception of Nature to the center. Hegel's Absolute, I contend, can be best understood as the Nature of Leopardi's *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* (1824) and the late poem *La Ginestra* (1836). Hegel claims that the Absolute "corresponds" to Spinoza's substance: *Deus sive natura*. This "correspondence" and the criticism of Spinoza it entails have often stirred reactions against Hegel's alleged misunderstanding of Spinoza.<sup>1</sup> Leopardi's intervention will help us understand Hegel's position toward Spinoza, and ultimately put in a novel perspective the transition from necessity to freedom entailed in the conclusion of Essence.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately,

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1. For such criticism, see for all Birgit Sandkaulen, *Die Ontologie der Substanz, der Begriff der Subjektivität und die Faktizität des Einzelnen. Hegels reflexionslogische "Widerlegung" der Spinozischen Metaphysik*, in *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus / International Yearbook of German Idealism* 5 (2007), Berlin, New York: 2008, 235–275. See also Angelica Nuzzo, "Truth and Refutation in Hegel's Begriffslogik," in *Die Begründung der Philosophie im Deutschen Idealismus*, ed. E. Ficara (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011), 91–105.

2. I have developed an extensive argument for the claim put forward in this essay in Angelica

I suggest that Leopardi's view of Nature proves to be a better candidate for the transition to the Concept's "realm of freedom" than Spinoza's *Deus sive natura*.

### I. The Absolute and the End of Essence

In the Logic of Essence, the second book of the *Science of Logic*, Hegel presents the Absolute as Essence itself in its concluding movement. The Absolute is the identity and totality of its determinations, a "solid" and "substantial" identity that is "absolute" in a sense that anticipates the concept, yet falls short of the concept.<sup>3</sup> It is a totality such that "each of its parts is itself the whole," just as each moment of the concept is "the whole concept."<sup>4</sup> In the absolute, however, difference has vanished. The absolute is sheer *Abgrund*: the "end" of all things. This "negative exposition" of the absolute is essence's first, unsatisfying because merely negative attempt to reach the concept and thereby its end.<sup>5</sup>

There is, however, a more promising strategy than this merely negative one. Hegel suggests that the absolute is "drawn out" of the preceding movement of Being and Essence as its necessary conclusion. Now, the logical "content" is neither imposed contingently from without nor plunged by external reflection into the absolute as *Abgrund*. The content has instead developed according to its own "internal necessity" as "being's own becoming and as the reflection of essence," and thereby *has returned into the absolute as into its ground*.<sup>6</sup> Herein the absolute seems to make an adequate end to essence: it is the necessary and immanent end–result of the preceding overall logical movement, the *Grund* to which such movement "has gone back," not simply *Abgrund* in which difference is dissolved.

Dialectically, the act whereby "the finite founders" in the absolute

Nuzzo, *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely. Melville, Molière, Beckett* (Albany: SUNY, 2018), chapter 6. Obviously, I do not make any historical claim here. I propose instead a systematic and interpretive "intervention" of Leopardi in order to put this passage of Hegel's Logic in a novel perspective. Notice also that henceforth I capitalize "Essence" to indicate the entire logical sphere of *Wesen*, i.e., the Logic of Essence as a whole, and use "essence" to indicate the protagonist of the immanent development of this sphere in the chapter on The Absolute that I am analyzing. A similar use is made of the capitalized "Concept" as designating the sphere of the Logic of the Concept (*Begriff*). Ultimately, I suggest that Leopardi's view of Nature proves to be a better candidate for the transition to the Concept's "realm of freedom" than Spinoza's *Deus sive natura*.

3. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bände*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and H.M. Michel (Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1986), voll. 5–6 (henceforth TW followed by volume and page number); here TW 6, 188.

4. TW 6, 273.

5. TW 6, 190.

6. TW 6, 189.

“demonstrates that its nature is [. . .] to contain the absolute within itself.”<sup>7</sup> The finite comes to an end in the absolute; this very act, however, is the mark of its eternity, of its identity with the absolute. This is, indeed, Essence’s solution to the problem of finitude that has plagued Being first, and then Essence’s reflection. By ending in the absolute, the finite is eternal. In its indifferent identity of *Abgrund–Grund*, the absolute destroys finitude but also contains it as identical with itself: *Deus sive natura*. The absolute is the perfectly and incessantly identical activity of production and destruction, the pure repetition in which no manifold, no otherness (hence no change) takes place.

This, however, is not the true end of Essence since the act of going back to the absolute cannot move forward beyond a merely repetitive identity. There is no new beginning after (and from) this end — only incessant repetition or a beginning forced arbitrarily by “external reflection.”<sup>8</sup> It follows that the absolute is not *das Absolut–Absolute* — the repetition signaling the stalled predicament of essence at this point.<sup>9</sup> Thus, essence downsizes the identical absolute first to “absolute attribute” and then to mere “mode.”<sup>10</sup> Spinoza again.

The attribute appears as the “expression” but also as the externalization of the absolute.<sup>11</sup> The “mode” instead is its sheer alienation, its “loss of itself in the changeability and contingency of being.”<sup>12</sup> The end, this time, is the absolute’s self-alienation and disintegration. It is not the end of all finite things but far more radically the end of the absolute itself. By revealing the disintegration of the absolute in the “most external exteriority,” Nature is the end of the absolute. And yet, Hegel argues that it functions as the end because it is *posited* as exteriority *by the absolute*. There is, however, no escape from identity, which is now repeated and repeated, indifferently, again and again. In the mode, the absolute determines itself but does not determine itself as “an other.” It only identically reproduces that “which it already is.” The absolute has not come to an end, after all. In fact, as the Logic of Being has already revealed, infinite repetition is the opposite of the true end.

At this point, essence moves from mode to modality becoming “blind necessity,” the “destiny,” and “Nemesis” that decides the limits of existence and action by assigning the non-negotiable limits and thereby the end

7. TW 6, 189.

8. TW 6, 190.

9. TW 6, 190.

10. TW 6, 191 and 192–ff. respectively.

11. TW 6, 192.

12. TW 6, 193.

of all things.<sup>13</sup> As “the form of the absolute,” absolute necessity has left the thought of the absolute behind or has advanced beyond it. Absolute necessity is “blind” and entirely self-enclosed. Differences are present in a new modality unknown heretofore to essence: they are “free actualities” as they refer neither to each other as semblances nor stand in any relation. Essence no longer posits and no longer reflects, no longer manifests itself in something other or even in itself.<sup>14</sup> It abandons entirely the binary logic that has dominated even its self-exposition in the monistic absolute. Essence now “lets go free” its own actuality as absolute necessity. Truly, essence finally lets go of itself and lets itself go. And this is the act that makes the true end of this sphere. Necessity joins freedom in the act whereby essence ends in letting actuality go free. Only at this point can the transition to the Concept finally take place.

## 2. Remarkable Essay of His

Nature’s “exposition” takes place, paradigmatically, in Giacomo Leopardi’s 1824 *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* [*Dialogue Between Nature and an Icelander*], one of the most remarkable works of his *Operette morali*. Nature is the end of the human species and of all living creatures, it is the destiny of destruction from which, ironically and tragically, the Icelander has tried to escape his entire life. On a collective scale, the Icelander’s efforts define human civilization, which purports to flee and transform Nature and is instead doomed by her. Leopardi’s view in this essay is reinforced in his penultimate lyrical piece, *La Ginestra* (1836), written the year before his death. These texts offer a picture of the poet’s late account of Nature and human civilization that embodies as a real figure the way in which Essence makes the end in Hegel’s Logic of Essence. In the *Dialogo*, Nature replaces all transcendent, spiritualistic or theological “absolute,” which for Leopardi is the product of abstraction and intellectualism, expressing a distinctly modern form of rationalism.<sup>15</sup> Nature is the material, immanent, all embracing, and pervasive “absolute” (in fact, Leopardi concludes with Hegel, not “absolutely absolute”), a force endowed with negative, destructive power. *La Ginestra*, however, goes a step further revealing the possibility of a new creative beginning achieved by the transforming power of poetry. This is

13. TW 6, 201.

14. These are all modalities of determination that have successively characterized essence in its sphere.

15. See, among the many Zibaldone’s texts, *Zibaldone* [p. 1619–ff.], in Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, Turin, Einaudi, <http://www.letteraturaitaliana.net>, 1135–ff., for Leopardi’s view of the absolute in a 1821 note.

the point where Leopardi goes beyond Spinoza offering the true transition to the Concept.

At the beginning of the *Dialogo*, Nature appears to the Icelander as a gigantic presence, seemingly displaying all the features of the (Kantian) sublime — magnitude, might, eternity, infinity. And yet, significantly, she does not generate any moral reverence (rather, she triggers moral condemnation).<sup>16</sup> Nature is a sublime presence, an enigmatic mix between the beautiful and the terrifying; she is living (she is neither an artifact nor an illusory imitation) and utterly detached in her dominating posture. And she is Woman. Although, when seen more closely, Nature displays “the measureless form of a woman,”<sup>17</sup> but neither the conventional traits of womanhood nor the common analogy of nature and woman are invoked. Nature is not the productive, nurturing source and origin of all things but their destructive, pitiless, indifferent end. Nature is *Abgrund* as much as *Grund* of all things. Nature, as *La Ginestra* later maintains, *Madre è di parto e di voler matrigna*.<sup>18</sup> Nature is this contradiction of a productive force that annihilates the very productions in which she is immanent and which constitute her. Nature’s negative “exposition,” i.e., her indifferently destructive attitude with regard to all living creatures, is at the same time her positive “exposition,” i.e., the display of her “absolute” (indeed despotic) power over everything.

The Icelander’s encounter with Nature takes place in the inner, wildest heart of Africa — in its uninhabited and heretofore unexplored regions. In its fully displayed actuality, Nature is indeed everywhere, immanent in all its parts (just as everything is inescapably in nature, the Icelander will soon find out at his own expense). And yet she is directly faced and encountered only in its most disquieting, terrifying, and wild manifestations: in the innermost regions of Africa or on the desolate slopes of Vesuvius, for example (*sull’arida schiena / del formidabil monte / sterminator Vesevo*).<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Nature seems to thrive the most where the “human species is unknown,” away from the human being and its civilization. For, herein Nature’s *potenza* — her infinite power and might — is “better demonstrated than anywhere else.”<sup>20</sup>

The Icelander introduces himself as “a poor Icelander fleeing from Nature; and having fled her for almost my entire life in a hundred regions of the earth, I am now fleeing her in this one.” Nature ironically responds:

16. See also *La Ginestra* vv. 158ff. for nature’s infinity and immensity against which man “is nothing” (v. 173).

17. Giacomo Leopardi, *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*, in *Operette Morali* (Milan: Mondadori, 1988), 115–122, here 115.

18. *La Ginestra*, v. 125.

19. *La Ginestra*, vv. 1–3.

20. *Dialogo*, 116.

“So flees the squirrel from the rattlesnake, until in its haste and by its own doing runs into the snake’s mouth. I am the one from which you are fleeing.”<sup>21</sup> The Icelander’s plan is doomed from the start, just as human civilization is in its grandiose yet vain pretension of progress away from Nature. Herein lies Leopardi’s poetic refutation of the anthropocentric view that sees the human being as Nature’s final end. For, Nature is the indifferent, non-teleological End-*Abgrund* of all things. Such an end is the immanent action of Nature itself, not the intervention of an external final purpose. Indeed, Essence rejects the assumption that its development is guided by the Concept as its end-purpose. And Essence combats this proposition precisely by positing the absolute as its end. Nature is the End (*Ende*); it has no end (*Zweck* or *Endzweck*). The human being (along with its culture, history, and civilization) is neither the end of Nature nor does it occupy a privileged place within it. The relation is rather the opposite. Nature is the End — the absolute termination and limit — of the human being and the human species as such.

Nature is indifferent to human actions and purposes just as she is to the existence of all creatures. Contrary to the Icelander’s argument, Nature’s indifference is morally neutral, properly beyond morality and devoid of intentionality. Nature simply “posits” the finite beings that constitute her with no will and no purpose. However, if she does not create them as a caring mother with their interest, happiness, and welfare in view, Nature does not have malevolent intentions either. What man construes as Nature’s hostility is, quite simply, indifference. Nature is the power and manifestation of Cosmic Indifference. In this sense, it is “absolute.” This is indeed the hardest thought for the Icelander to accept, and, on Leopardi’s view, the hardest thought for human reason and for philosophy more generally: it seems that Essence cannot be thought without appealing to the Concept, the end cannot be grasped without recurring to a purpose laying beyond it. But Leopardi’s Nature as the material all-powerful absolute rejects this view.<sup>22</sup> Nature’s answer to the Icelander is a straightforward rejection of anthropocentrism: “Did you perhaps imagine that the world was made for your sake?”<sup>23</sup> As hard as it is for the human being to accept, Nature has neither awareness nor knowledge of what is supposedly good or bad, beneficial or harmful to individuals in what she does, she has no intention and no aim. Her action is simply and utterly indifferent to all these things.

Nature is an interconnected whole in which all parts work for the sake of

21. *Dialogo*, 116.

22. In the *Dialogo della Natura e di un’Anima*, in stressing the same a-teleological and anti-anthropocentric view of Nature, Leopardi suggests that Nature itself is subject to “blind fate” in all its actions (see *Operette Morali*, cit., 75).

23. *Dialogo*, 120.

the whole. Herein, Nature posits that toward which it acts with destructive power. This is what Nature does and what Nature is. Philosophically, this “truth” leaves the Icelander as puzzled as ever. His exchange with Nature has no resolution as no philosophy seems able to offer an account of Nature that answers the question: Whose gain is the suffering in the universe? Leopardi’s conclusion is quite simple: “No philosopher can tell.”<sup>24</sup> This is indeed only a human question, to which Nature puts a swift and pragmatic end. “While they were discussing these and similar issues, two lions are said to have suddenly appeared. They were so enfeebled with hunger that they were scarcely able to devour the Icelander. They accomplished the feat, however, and thus gained sufficient strength to live to the end of the day.”<sup>25</sup>

*La Ginestra* entails Leopardi’s final poetic answer to the question philosophically left open by the *Dialogo*. It is now clear that poetry alone can address the issue. Or perhaps, more accurately, poetry alone succeeds in changing the question entirely. For the question may very well be unanswerable other than by the act whereby the two emaciated lions devour the argumentative Icelander. Indeed, there is a sense in which Essence’s reclaiming an end of its own against the Concept is fully justified and must be let stand. Herein is the truth of Spinoza’s substance. There is, however, another aspect to the problem. At least some creatures posited by Nature in existence so as to be annihilated are also the positive manifestation of something that exceeds the destructive power of Nature, although they are themselves inescapably nature. Essence recognizes this point the moment when it overcomes the absolute by declaring it not “absolutely absolute.” Importantly, for Leopardi, the human being is not one of these creatures. The poet addresses instead the solitary, “fragrant broom [*la ginestra*],” which is content with her existence on the desolate slopes of the menacing volcano, “innocent” in the acceptance of her “mortal” fate.<sup>26</sup> Far from questioning Nature’s alleged “reasons” and from imposing human morality on Nature in order to condemn her in the name of our human entitlement to happiness, the “fragrant broom” accepts her own fate sternly, thereby actively and poetically transforming the end that Nature imposes on her. With her sweet fragrance, the “gentle flower” offers “consolation” to the desert around her, and almost “commiserates” *i danni altrui* — the harm afflicting others but also the harm inflicted by Nature.<sup>27</sup> Suffering cannot be avoided; the end cannot be revoked. It can, however, be poetically accepted and thereby dignified. Nature’s action can neither be changed by culture and civiliza-

24. *Dialogo*, 122.

25. *Dialogo*, 122.

26. *La Ginestra*, vv. 6, 14–15, 305–306.

27. *La Ginestra*, vv. 34–37.

tion nor justified with higher reasons or final purposes. Instead, Nature's absolute indifference should be recognized by a sober a–teleological, non–anthropocentric materialism. This is Leopardi's late poetic conception of Nature as the indifferent and necessary *Abgrund* of existence.

Neither reason nor (utilitarian) morality but the comfort offered by poetry and individual beauty, along with the human compassion and solidarity they engender, are Leopardi's final answer to Nature.<sup>28</sup> At issue is now the way in which Nature's hostility must be acknowledged and transformed. This is the task of poetry — the task of the Concept. At the end of the lyric, the *lenta ginestra* becomes the ally of the poet's fight against the *hubris* and arrogance of human culture,<sup>29</sup> against the foolish progressivism of Enlightenment rationalism (its famously mocked *magnifiche sorti e progressive*),<sup>30</sup> and against the misplaced blame that humans place on one another, thereby inflicting gratuitous harm fighting one another in a Hobbesian way instead of forming a bond of solidarity against their only true enemy. The solitary wild broom carries a message of dignity, consolation, and perhaps solidarity for all human beings who are wise enough to accept their place in Nature with humble Stoicism. This is also the only possible form of freedom available to the human being. Freedom lies in the act of acknowledging necessity, in accepting one's negligible position within Nature and the destiny of destruction that is common to all creatures.

Poetry can achieve what no theology and no rationalist philosophy can. Its achievement is the transformation of the necessary end into a new possibility of life — not its justification, not its postponement or acceleration, not its negation in the search for an impossible eternity. Only poetry — and *le opere di genio* more generally — is able to shake the absolute indifference and insensitivity that in the human being are equal to death. Only the artwork can offer a plausible human response to Nature's cosmic indifference.<sup>31</sup> This is Leopardi's final message. Herein, in the work of poetry, lies the liberating transition to the Concept.

28. Presently, I want to stress the first (poetry and beauty) over the second point (solidarity); for this, see Cesare Luporini, *Leopardi progressivo* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1993), 83, 94.

29. *La Ginestra*, vv. 297, 300.

30. *La Ginestra*, v. 51.

31. *Zibaldone*, [259–261], 271f.



### 3. Leopardi Beyond Spinoza

Hegel explicitly considers the Absolute of Essence as corresponding to Spinoza's substance.<sup>32</sup> At this juncture, what Hegel criticizes in Spinoza can be considered instead as the perfectly justified merits of his conception of substance. For, while Hegel's criticism is carried out from the more advanced standpoint of the Concept, the destruction of finitude, the absolute's indeterminateness and lack of subjectivity, its rigid and petrified eternity are among the characters that have their necessary place precisely *at the end of Essence*. They are necessary in order to articulate the specific way in which *Essence* makes the end. And there is no other way from Being to the Concept than to pass through the *Abgrund-Grund* of Spinoza's substance. Herein lies, for Hegel, the unsurpassed value of Spinoza's Substance–Absolute. And yet, Spinoza's substance is unable to make the transition to the Concept. This is precisely what Leopardi's Nature does.

In Spinoza's system, substance is the monistic whole; it is «one substance, one indivisible totality.» Hegel underlines that “there is no determinateness that is not contained and dissolved into it.” Precisely to this extent, Spinozistic substance is posited at the same level of or as the same totality that essence is, and more precisely, as the absolute with which essence attempts to conclude its movement. There is no determinateness that is not *contained* in the absolute as its *Grund*. But there is also no determinateness that is not *dissolved* in the absolute as its *Abgrund*. Indeed, Hegel recognizes that a valuable insight of Spinozism is that “anything that to the natural way of representing and to the determining understanding appears as self-subsistent (*Selbständiges*) is entirely reduced in this necessary concept to a mere *positedness* (*Gesetzsein*).”<sup>33</sup> Against the abstract freedom common to the formality of Kantian autonomy or the arrogant and illusory independence of Leopardi's Icelander — a freedom that amounts to the stubborn pretension of the finite to claim some form of “independency” or “self-subsistence” of its own, i.e., to claim its being a *Selbständiges* — Spinoza's substance shows the true destiny of annihilation that inescapably awaits the finite within the whole (Nature as the absolute). Freedom lies rather in the acceptance of the necessary identity with the whole. The finite is posited as such as to be annihilated. And it is posited with no further purpose in view. Indeed, this is the hard truth that Nature (substance or the absolute) reveals to the Icelander. There is no need for a Kantian dualism to soften this hard truth, that is,

32. “The concept of Spinozistic substance *corresponds* (*entspricht*) to the concept of the absolute,” TW 6, 195.

33. TW 6, 195.

no need to see an unchanging autonomous supersensible character as oddly coexisting with the conditioned natural progress of humanity.

Hegel famously expresses the “absolute principle” of Spinoza’s substance in the proposition “determinateness is negation,” a proposition that he considers “true” but also limited. For it remains at the view of “negation as determinateness or quality” and does not advance to negation as self-negation. Ultimately, this means that the individual does not recover from — or does not survive — the negation or annihilation within the absolute; that it does not subsist *as individual* within it. Moreover, for Spinoza, the “manifold act of determining” lies in “an external thinking.”<sup>34</sup> While thinking is one with extension, it does not “separate” itself from it. Hence thinking is “not as determining and informing (*als Bestimmen und Formieren*), nor as a movement of return that begins from itself.”<sup>35</sup> The absolute’s end is not a turning back to a new beginning. Thinking radically ends in the absolute substance but does not make a return back into itself; hence it does not make a new beginning out of itself (which is the nature of the action of subjectivity). Despite its definition as *causa sui*, the absolute is not a creative self-determining power. It is the repetitive power that reproduces itself in a self-identical position, with no otherness and no difference:<sup>36</sup> Nature repeating itself, but truly unable to imagine an utterly different order; thinking identical with extension but unable to differentiate itself from it. However, the capacity to make a new beginning *out of itself* and *after the end* is, for Hegel, the dialectical meaning of the end: not a standstill but an utterly new beginning.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the end entails the creative act that requires the production of otherness as otherness. Herein we meet the true limit of Spinoza’s position. Thinking stalls in the absolute, unable to turn back to itself and unable to gain the “concept of an other by which it would have to be formed” anew, as different from itself.<sup>38</sup> Only the Concept overcomes the limit of Essence. “The concept is not the abyss (*Abgrund*) of the formless substance [...] but as the absolute negativity it is that which forms and creates (*das Formierende und Erschaffende*).”<sup>39</sup> This activity of forming and creating is precisely that which Essence’s absolute and Spinoza’s substance as well as Nature in Leopardi’s *Dialogo* lack. They are, however, identical with the productive and transformative power of poetry that, in Leopardi’s *La Ginestra*, disclose the only saving possibility beyond the destructive force of Nature.

34. TW 6, 195.

35. TW 6, 195 (my emphasis).

36. TW 6, 196.

37. For a full-fledged development of this point, see Nuzzo, *Approaching Hegel’s Logic*, chapter 6.

38. TW 6, 196.

39. TW 6, 277 referring to 195.