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Frank Rosengarten. *Giacomo Leopardi's Search for a Common Life through Poetry: a Different Nobility, a Different Love*. Madison (NJ): Fairleigh Dickinson U. P., 2012. Pp. xix & 264.

This book by Frank Rosengarten is a useful introduction to the biography and work of the Italian 19th century author, Giacomo Leopardi, an author whose greatness is still not given its due in the English-speaking world, not so much by a professional and academic audience, but by the wider reading public.

The book is divided into five sections: on his family, background and class of origin, on his love interests, on his writings dedicated to the Risorgimento, on his work and thought as a poet-philosopher, and finally on his humanistic research and friendships. Part of the title of this work might strike the reader as ambiguous: the phrase “*a Common Life*” is certainly not meant to imply that Leopardi’s was in any way ordinary, but rather that one of his goals, despite and as an overcoming of his aristocratic origins, was the improvement of the life human beings live “in common” with their fellow humans, as well as a recognition, celebration and dedication to this common purpose in the face of what Leopardi often considered a hostile Nature.

Rosengarten’s work will be especially helpful for students in the English-speaking world who are still not deeply acquainted with Leopardi’s works and life. It discusses some of the translations into English Rosengarten found most useful, and provides English versions of the texts discussed throughout. The author also attempts to provide an all-rounded approach to Leopardi, therefore not only to the scholarly, literary, philological, philosophical and humanistic aspects of his life. Rosengarten discusses Leopardi’s relations with his father, his siblings and his mother (to a lesser extent) in some detail, in a manner that the author believes also sheds light on the interpretation of the intellectual biography and work of the poet-philosopher from Recanati.

When discussing the more philosophical aspects of Leopardi’s writings, Rosengarten resorts to some comparative/contrastive readings with the works of other philosophers (Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Lucretius, Epictetus to some extent) as well as more contemporary scientists and ‘thinkers’ (Stephen Hawking, Teilhard

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de Chardin and Antonio Negri). Finally in the concluding section Rosengarten also compares some of Leopardi's deepest convictions with those of contemporary humanism, showing where they overlap and where they differ.

Rosengarten's book is ambitious in scope and broadly encompassing in the many themes and aspects of Leopardi's life and work it attempts to cover. For this reason also it should be especially recommended to students who are still just beginning to examine the work of Giacomo Leopardi. Rosengarten's efforts to make the work(s) relevant to the concerns of a contemporary reader are successful, and some of the discussions of the possible implications of his familial relationships are very stimulating. His discussions of the relationship between the values Leopardi derived from classical antiquity and his enthusiasm for some of the goals of the Risorgimento—if not always a practical support or adherence to some of the groups fighting for it (the 'carbonari' for instance)—is also informed by this belief in the relevance of the past for the present (or 'life').

In the very complex and somewhat still controversial area of Leopardi's constantly evolving philosophical beliefs, and his particular version of materialism, Rosengarten provides an overall account that is useful and, in its general outline, I personally believe beyond dispute, although it is perhaps less precise than some others. For instance, in the chapter devoted to a comparison of Schopenhauer's thought and Leopardi's, Rosengarten emphasizes Schopenhauer's evaluation of human knowledge of nature as being a distinctive contribution that is not available to other species or nature itself. But this mostly falls into the philosophical divide between epistemology and gnoseology on the one hand (the area that Schopenhauer is evaluating positively) and ontology (the actual nature of being, of the 'world,' 'Nature,' or matter) on the other. I believe Leopardi did not discount the human contribution to the former area, but he emphasized the limitations and the inescapable foundation(s) we were/are tied to in the latter.

Though one of the great scholars of Leopardi's thought, and especially of his classical philology, Sebastiano Timpanaro never formulated his adherence to 'Leopardian materialism' in very philosophical or logical formulas, I think that what he emphasized both in his interpretation of Leopardi's thought, and in classics of

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his such as *Sul materialismo*, was that even should we decide not to emphasize the ‘negative’ aspects of the constraints our natural-material foundations and being imply for our existence (though both Leopardi and Timpanaro did), but instead emphasize the ‘positive’ ones, the most human beings can lay claim to, scientifically, philosophically, and practically is a greater or lesser degree of transformation of that material foundation, but never its transcendence. This is an extremely important, fundamental, philosophical point, especially in the many debates regarding religious belief, freedom, etc. And I think Timpanaro chose to emphasize its importance precisely in debates with parts of the ‘progressive’, social-democratic, political movement of his time, just as Leopardi had deflated the liberal 19th century hopes in the automatic meliorism implicit in the “magnifiche sorti e progressive”.

One small question which personally I find it a pity Rosengarten did not address—since he did take the somewhat bold and very important step of a comparison with current scientific thought (Stephen Hawking and Bertrand Russell among others)—is that there is no discussion regarding Leopardi’s arguments in favor of the human race making a ‘common cause’ in a struggle against ‘Nature,’ and the contemporary situation our immediate environment, and therefore ‘Nature,’ finds itself in because of ‘human’ activity. Of course this generic abstraction does not accurately pinpoint the forces and causes ultimately responsible for this environmental destruction, but I think it does raise some interesting questions about the applicability of the ‘human’ vs. ‘Nature’ antagonism, and the degree to which ‘Nature’ is a historical and ‘local’ phenomenon in our lives (as well as an essential component of our ‘inner’ selves), and the degree to which in destroying our own lives (living in the current social formations we do) we are also ‘destroying Nature,’ not contributing to its more ‘positive’ transformation(s), and not really ‘conquering Nature’ except very nominally and superficially.

All things considered I think many readers and students in English-speaking countries will find this book a very useful and stimulating introduction to Leopardi, and a welcome one, while we await the appearance of the English translation of the *Zibaldone* in 2013.

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