

Fabio A. Camilletti, *Classicism and Romanticism in Italian Literature: Leopardi's Discourse on Romantic Poetry*. Warwick Series in the Humanities. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013. Pp. 204. £62.81. ISBN 9781848932876.

Fabio Camilletti's book comes to fill a gap in studies on European Romanticism and nineteenth-century literary history not only by providing the first complete English translation of Giacomo Leopardi's *Discourse of an Italian on Romantic Poetry* (with Gabrielle Sims) but by offering an original and stimulating discussion of its potential contribution to the famous Classicist/Romantic polemic which dominated the Italian literary scene in the late 1810s and early 1820s (Leopardi's essay wasn't published until 1906). The study makes us alert to the 'puzzling nature of Italian Romanticism' (9) as well as to the fact that the critical debate surrounding the concept of Romanticism at the time points to questions beyond those of nomenclature and literary definition. Indeed, as Camilletti persuasively argues in his lucidly structured introduction, Leopardi's 1818 text does not merely reflect the author's loyalty to classicism and his enmity towards the Milanese Romantics whose position he sees as an affront against Italian identity and tradition, but has a much broader scope in that it 'proposes itself as an artistic manifesto for a renovation of Italian culture' (7). Indeed, the negotiation of a revolutionary classicism is one of the most far-reaching ideas of the *Discourse*, and one which further testifies the text's resistance to easy categorisation: classicism, according to Leopardi, is the only truth because the only natural one. At the same time, the *Discourse* critiques modernity and discloses 'the tensions that arise in the aftermath of political, social and cultural trauma' (10) in Bourbon Restoration Italy. The analysis of this last point constitutes one of the definite strengths of this book.

The English translation of Leopardi's *Discourse* which lies at the heart of this study is preceded by two chapters which place the essay in the context of the Classicist/Romantic debate and usefully relate it to the Italian author's thought, ideas, and literary output in the years surrounding its composition. Even though Leopardi's early foray into literary politics was written as a riposte to Ludovico di Breme's review of Byron's *The Giaour* (translated into Italian by Pellegrino Rossi), Chapter 1 thoughtfully anchors the essay's intellectual origins in the wider debate conducted among European intellectuals about the terms 'Romantic' and 'Romanticism': Madame de Staël, Byron, Goethe, Foscolo, Manzoni, Breme, Borsieri, Pellico and Berchet – whose views are duly cited here – were all confronted to various degrees with the ambiguities and uncertainties of a literary quarrel which, as Camilletti contends, concerned in effect the 'troubled transition from *Ancien Régime* Italy to the process of *Risorgimento*' (46) and the painful 'cultural fracture produced by the Enlightenment at the dawn of modernity' (7). This chapter illustrates its point by weaving together selected writings of the protagonists of the dispute into a meaningful mosaic which reflects the cross-fertilization of ideas as well as the extraneousness of Leopardi's position. Accordingly, Leopardi's polemical defence of poetry is considered by the author to move beyond polarities and dichotomies and articulate the narrative of the post-revolutionary subject – a narrative which raises significant questions about 'legitimacy and tradition, usurpation and subversion, and ultimately ... about father-son relationships' (15).

This last premise is further pursued in Chapter 2. Camilletti deploys the insights of psychoanalysis to interpret the culture of a traumatized post-revolutionary Europe as well as Leopardi's vexed relation to Italian tradition and identity. Reading the Classicist/Romantic polemic as an Oedipal story, Camilletti claims that Leopardi in his *Discourse* attempts to resolve the dichotomy precisely by refusing to dichotomize; his text, thus, configures a post-Oedipal narrative which can be performed only through the subject's self-destruction enacted

in Leopardi's symbolic self-sacrifice near the end of the *Discourse*. This challenging read offers a new perspective on Leopardi's sensibility and on his relationship with language, politics, authorship and authority. It also lends insight into the years following the *Discourse* which register his gradual change in perspective on antiquity and modernity as revealed in the *Operette morali* and the *Zibaldone*, both briefly mentioned in the book's conclusion.

The translation of the *Discourse* rewards the reader in every way. Despite the syntactical complexities, asyndeta and heavy lexical figurativeness that characterize the Italian text, its English version is graceful, fluent and confident, capturing in large measure the essay's distinctive but often ambivalent style. However, the reader would have benefited more if the translation had been annotated and supplemented with explanatory notes, textual and contextual information. This caveat aside, Camilletti has made a substantial contribution to studies in the field, one which is bound to incite further research in areas of related interest. Significantly, this study establishes Leopardi's *Discourse* as a seminal text in the history of ideas which offers important vantage points from which to view the shifting literary and political setting of Italy (and Europe) after the 1815 restoration.

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