Progress: Croce, Gramsci, and Leopardi

Progress as one idea in the history of ideas or as the definitive idea of history itself is, no matter how grandly conceived, involved in the vicissitudes of everyday life. Progress, as it is felt and understood by the individual, is inevitably conflated with the discourses of theology, philosophy, science, literature, and political theory. This insight into the relationship of history and consciousness, mediated by language, is credited to Giambattista Vico’s *New Science*. Antonio Gramsci, in his multilayered analysis of culture and society, saw progress similarly but with an emphasis on class. For him, progress was an idea whose history was bound to those social groups and classes who benefitted from its influence. In this sense, progress was associated, for Gramsci, with Liberal historiography as present above all in the works of Benedetto Croce, and with the Italian bourgeoisie whose interests it had served. But Gramsci had his own commitments to progress. As a post revolutionary Western Marxist, living in Fascist Italy, he, no less than Croce was faced with both intellectual and political challenges to his belief in and will towards teleological change. This paper which consists of critical readings of Croce and Gramsci, each writing on progress in relation to the work and reputation of the anti-progressivist literary figure, Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837), argues that the work of both reflects the historical crisis of progress for the Italian intellectual in the 1920’s and 1930’s and suggests that the crisis of progress is, at the same juncture, a crisis of subjectivity and of discourse.

Compared to his reputation in his own country as the greatest lyric poet after Petrarch, Leopardi’s work is relatively unknown in the United States. The interpretive tradition in which he might be understood in terms of present-day polemic around his work is even less familiar to students of the same period in English and comparative studies, so it may be useful to describe its relevance here. From his first major critic, Francesco De Sanctis, the interpretation of Leopardi has been in Italy associated with national “new history,” and ongoing social critiques involving concepts of...
modernity and progress of various kinds. It was De Sanctis who first posed the question of Leopardi’s position vis-à-vis progress in a literary sense and in a political sense. In the first instance, he hailed Leopardi as the “poet of the young” and insisted vehemently that had Leopardi lived until 1848, he would have joined the revolutionary ranks and struggled for a new Italian nation, but subsequently he seemed to founder in a sea of confusion whenever he approached the question of how the lyric poet who had set himself so staunchly against the modern age could inspire so strongly a moral and poetic courage and hopefulness. He expressed this contradiction most compellingly in a famous passage from his essay on Schopenhauer and Leopardi:

... Leopardi produce l’effetto contrario a quello che si propone. Non crede al progresso, e te lo fa desiderare; non crede alla libertà, e te la fa amare.... È scettico, e ti fa credente; e mentre non crede possibile un avvenire men tristo per la patria comune, ti desta in seno un vivo amore per quella e t’infiamma a nobil fatti.2

Most recently, the work of Sebastiano Timpanaro, which deserves more attention that can be given here, has interpreted the anti-progressive progressiveness of Leopardi’s work and proposed the “materialist–pessimism” of Leopardi as a vital correction to the “idealist excesses of Western Marxism and to the misanthropy and mystification of European pessimism from “Schopenhauer to Freud.”3 He sees Leopardian pessimism as both an elaboration upon the principles of the Enlightenment and a radical critique of their contemporary (in his time and ours) mistakes; he prefers the characterization of Leopardi’s work as “classical–illuminist” rather than enlightened romantic, as De Sanctis would have him. Following Cesare Luporini’s formulation of the “historical disappointment”4 in the aftermath of the French revolution, Timpanaro understands Leopardian pessimism as the critical spirit of the enlightenment in resisting religious or secular “rationalizations” of human suffering, including the consolatory myth of progress. What Leopardi offers, according to Timpanaro, is not only critique: his view of nature suggests a more solidly materialist base for a social philosophy which would be both critical and scientific. This intervention is but the latest in a series of studies in Italy which have reconsidered early nineteenth century culture in light of political polemics, often involving Marxian thought.5 Often these studies, as they treat of Leopardi, have been mediated by a strong historicist tradition of literary study. Although this paper is not about Leopardi so much as about his
interpretation, it may be useful to suggest that his writing is particularly resistant to models of historical determinism and continuity: his insistence upon the permanence of rupture (personal, historical, and poetic), the illusoriness of narrative structure (whether in regard to the past or to the future), contradictions in the representation of nature as referrent and natural object seem (in a phrase Leopardi would despise) strikingly modern. But these are the suggestions of contemporary "modernism" and post-structuralist thought. The questions which arise here and throughout the following discussions are the old ones: how is it that Leopardi's negation of progress has led so often and so ambivalently to its reassertion and how is it that these interpretations are inextricably caught up in the progress of our ideas of ourselves and our discourse as (however mistakenly) modern.

**Croce on Leopardi: Progress and non-progress**

In 1923, in the volume of practical criticism dedicated to nineteenth century European writers, *Poesia e non poesia*, Croce reprinted his remarkable essay on Leopardi: in Italy, it was something of a cultural event. The essay had appeared a year before in a learned journal, and, like everything Croce wrote in those years, it was received with great seriousness and consideration by the academic establishment; now it was available to a greater audience — one that was intensively involved in the national self-consciousness associated with what, in Gramscian terms, was the second (and hegemonic) moment of Fascism.

In the same theoretical mode as his essay on the poetry of Dante, which separated the secular (poetic) elements in the *Commedia* from the theological and political thought which structure the whole of the work, Croce begins his comments on Leopardi with a separation of what seemed to him valid poetically from those readings of Leopardi which centered in inappropriate biographical or philosophical considerations — "non-existent or extraneous problems." In relation to the still young tradition of Leopardi interpretation this meant a direct attack on two prevalent currents of criticism: first, the positivistic scholarship of the turn of the century (which tended towards such biographical questions as the identity of his beloved Silvia etc.) and second, the serious philosophical attention of Gentile and others to Leopardi's prose work in the *Operette morali* and the *Zibaldone* (published and available for criticism only in 1898). Of the positivistic scholarship, Croce was merely contemptuous; he reserved
his more serious critique for those, like Gentile, who had taken Leopardi's "philosophy" seriously.

Croce's attack on Leopardi's philosophy, his aesthetics, and even his poetry was devastating. For Croce, Leopardi's thought (reduced to "pessimism") was not philosophy or system at all, but rather sentiment or pseudo-philosophy:

La filosofia in quanto pessimistica o ottimistica è sempre intrinsecamente pseudo-filosofia sia a uso privato. . . .

Moreover, Leopardi's aesthetics, his observations on art and poetry were given scant attention and dismissed as personal and unoriginal. Finally, as is well-known, the poetry itself was in great part dispatched to that Crocean limbo known as "non-poesia." The sole positive judgement — on certain lyrical passages — represented a return to De Sanctis' preference for the early poems, although he is quiet adamant in insisting that De Sanctis overestimated Leopardi even in this regard.

If we consider more closely the general objections of Croce, we might begin conceding that he is, in a certain sense, correct in his assertion that pessimism is better understood as a sentimental attitude rather than a philosophy. (The same, of course, is true of progressive optimism). With Hegel as model, Leopardi's pessimism per se is easily shown to be unsystematic and undeveloped. In retrospect, it is less the assertion that Leopardi's thought was not genuinely philosophical or speculative which is so striking, but rather the rhetorical extremes to which Croce was willing to push his own argument until finally, with the disdain and hyperbole typical of this essay, he reduces most of Leopardi's prodigious accomplishment to "an emotional block."

Some explanation of Croce's tone may come, as some critics have suggested, from a professional defensiveness. Croce was not willing to admit many to the Company of professional philosophers. In his own lifetime, he enjoyed great privilege, even from the government which he opposed. Part of his faith in the transcendence of Ideas, depended on the exclusion of thought or thinkers who were not consonant with his own sense of "what was living" or immortal in the progress of humanism. Leopardi was not easily placed in this progressive tradition, as we shall see, for several reasons. From Gramsci's viewpoint, of course, it was precisely this sense of transcendence and exclusivity that he was seeking to reverse in his own formulation that all men, in so much as they are, at some time, intellectually critical, are philosophers of their own era.
Historically, Croce was ambivalent regarding Leopardi’s position as a nineteenth century figure. On the one hand, his essay restates a long-standing antipathy to a certain gloomy fashion of thought connecting Goethe’s Werther, Byron, De Vigny, Leopardi, and Schopenhauer. It was Leopardi’s “emotional and pessimistic content” that earned him “European notoriety” and place among what Croce calls “the pleiad of tortured and disconsolate souls”\(^{15}\) which arose during the last years of the 18th century as a part of European Romanticism. (In Italy, as Croce mentions, Leopardi was known as a classicist and opponent of literary Romanticism). On the other hand, though he acknowledges Leopardi’s reputed affinities with a wide-spread cultural and historical phenomenon, Croce’s position seems to be that Leopardi’s relation to Romantic thought had been falsely construed, and in fact, that his ideas were not historically understandable at all but “a reasoned projection of his own unhappy state” — the inevitable and idiosyncratic result of a “strangled life.”\(^{16}\) Insisting as he does on the subjective nature of Leopardi’s intellectual motivation, Croce attributes the genesis of Leopardi’s unhappiness and reactionary sentiment to his physical debility: in Croce’s critical portrait, the poet’s writing emerges as a deformed and exasperating anomaly: “narrow of spirit, obstinate, reactionary in its antipathy for the new and the living.”\(^{17}\) Centrally, it is Leopardi’s absolute refusal of the “new and living” spirit of progress\(^{18}\) (though, for Croce, a purely individualistic refusal) which infuriates Croce. It is well-known that Croce despised Romanticism aesthetically, but ideologically, as Gramsci will note in his own comments on Leopardi, the Liberal historiographer was deeply committed to currents of Bourgeois reform which flourished in that context. Croce himself pointedly disassociates Leopardi from Liberal thought and objects to his undeserved acceptance by those progressives of his own era and by the youthful liberals (most notably De Sanctis) of the Italian Risorgimento. It was especially galling to Croce that the “scoffer at liberals had all his friendships among liberals.”\(^{19}\) It is interesting to note here as well, that although Croce attributes Leopardi’s negation to an historical and idiosyncratic sickness of body and soul, he not only asserts that Leopardi denied history in general (“The solemn movement of history which brings the whole drama of humanity before the soul of man and moves it to admiration or enthusiasm . . . was not for him.”) but he enumerates very specifically the concrete elements of history which Leopardi also denied, including Liberalism, nineteenth century optimism, progress, reform, revolution, economics, sociology and even German Idealism:
Leopardi’s refusal of Progress, whether in relation to Nature, cultural community (Viesseux and l’Antologia,) technological science, politics [Tuscan moderates and Lombard progressives], literary or historiographic Romanticism is and has been a critical crux of the interpretive tradition around his work since its inception, here we would only underline Croce’s intense approach to the problematic of progress in Leopardi, and his equally intense avoidance of explanations which might be historically or ideologically commensurate with his statements of it. This avoidance, which as we shall now attempt to demonstrate, goes beyond the initial reduction of Leopardi’s radical critique of Restoration culture to a psychological deformity (a move which diffuses its significance) and towards a positing of the problem of progress in terms of life and death for the individual; surprisingly he trivializes both Leopardi’s contemplations of mortality in relation to nature, and the dilemma of living in the face of death for all men.

How does Croce develop this common sense discourse of mortality? Ironically, Croce, hardly a populist himself, chose to contrast Leopardi’s negation and despair with cliché and folk wisdom. In a move which is dangerously close to the positivistic explanations of Leopardi as a poor dancer and dull conversationalist, Croce dramatizes Leopardi’s life predicament as that of the perpetual spoiler who, because of his own wretchedness is constantly embittered by the gaiety which is the natural state of man. Men, observes Croce, are cheerfully unconscious of death, living out the proverb which states that death is not relevant to the living because they are not dead, and not relevant to the dead, because they are. Croce dramatizes Leopardi in dramatic conflict with this human and presumably natural attitude:

Giudicava che la vita fosse un male, da essere vissuta con l’amara coscienza di questo male radicale; e si trovava di fronte altri uomini che per questa parte pensavano ossia sentivano diversamente da lui, perché potevano disporre delle loro forze fisiche, i loro nervi erano calmi, l’animo equilibrato, e la gioia del vivere li dominava e animava, la speranza loro sorrideva, l’azione li infervorava, l’amore li inebriava, e ai dolori e alle avversità resistevano mettendoli tra le eventuali difficoltà da affrontare, quando non ne erano attualmente colpiti, e con l’affrontarli e superarli quando ne erano colpiti, e alla morte non pensarono, conformandosi consapevolmente o inconsapevolmente al detto antico, che la morte non concerne i vivi, perché sono vivi, né i morti perché sono morti.21
To further dramatize his indictment of Leopardi, Croce offers yet another popular saying, this one supposedly written — albeit unreadable except in Croce’s own book of memory. In a nostalgic anecdote, he recalls a rustic cottage somewhere in the Tyrol where once was written (thought the writing may have vanished) a saying (written in a foreign tongue) which Croce seems to offer as an illustration of the dominant, normal, common-sensical reality:

Nel fronte di una rustica casetta del Tirolo si leggeva anni or sono (e non so se si legga ancora) una scritta in versi tedeschi, che diceva: “Vivo ma per quanto tempo? Morì senza sapere né dove né quando. Vado e non so dove, e con tutto ciò, stupisco di essere così gaio. Signor Gesù, proteggete la mia casa!”

Given his attack on Leopardi’s excessive subjectivity, it is interesting not only that Croce offers a very personal (and by his own admission unverifiable) experience at this juncture in the essay, but that he evokes language as talisman or fetish to ward off the obvious threat which he seems to sense in Leopardi’s attitude. The saying itself actually lacks the lapidary quality which is the power of these convincing sententiae. But Croce takes pains to forestall this stylistic objection which might otherwise cast doubt on his whole story by distancing his own reader from the original experience (only Croce’s), by distancing the language which pointedly is not in Italian, and by distancing the writing itself whose geographical, historical and physical traces are erased and not available for more direct interpretation or rhetorical scrutiny.

In contrast with this verbal “directness” and simplicity, Croce again dramatizes the jaded sensibility of Leopardi who confronts this natural gaiety and optimism with verbal insults, “irony, sarcasm, and the grotesque.”

Il Leopardi non si stupiva, ma si sdegnava che gli uomini fossero con tutto ciò, così gai; e li chiamava codardi, voleva confonderli e farli vergognare e convertirli, cioè infondere in essi, sotto specie di raziocini, il suo personale stato d’animo, e ricorreva perciò, come a motivi oratori, all’ironia, al sarcasmo e al grottesco.

The rhetorical drama which Croce constructs fails to neutralize the power of Leopardi’s negation; in fact, the trivialization of the courageous struggle of mankind to live fully in the face of consciousness of mortality, if anything strengthens Leopardi’s insistence that the facts of life and death, mortality and unhappiness be faced by more than mindless proverbs and nostalgia for idealized peasant culture. The serious failing of Croce’s essay, however, is
in his confusion over Leopardi’s negation of the possibility of general happiness, given the universal condition of death, illness, and loss, with the specific denial of the optimism of progress (“la fede del nuovo secolo,” “liberalismo” e “riforme”). This confusion, which persists in more recent criticism, is compounded by the rationalizations of Leopardi’s attitude asserted first on the basis of his relationship to other “tortured spirits” of the late 18th and early 19th century, and then contradicted by an insistence on Leopardi’s pathology and eccentricity — “il suo personale stato d’animo.” On the other hand, what emerges clearly from Croce’s reading of Leopardi is his own anxiety.

It would in fact, be tempting here to question the emotional motivation of the denial of death by Croce, a man whose own life experience including several symbolic deaths and rebirths (he was named after a brother who died; was rescued from the ruins of an earthquake; saved from a severe depression supposedly by the inspiration of his teacher, Labriola etc.) and who had written histories and articles on precisely “what was living and what was dead.” The question more significant to our discussion, however, is another: was it not in the interest of a bourgeois intellectual, who had begun his own historical account of the history of Europe with the calm aftermath of the revolution, to now, in 1923, in the wake of the first historical surge of fascism (in Gramscian terms “the movement of force”) to try to purge the history of the Restoration of its darker meditations on social change and its radical refusals to accept the promise of reform and the consolations of liberalism in the name of Progress? In other words, was it not a question of class interest and politically timely to reassert a mellow optimism based reassuringly on “buon senso,” an ideology which, however inadvertently would consolidate the status quo? This, of course, is the “hegemonic” moment of which Gramsci writes so often. Croce, as we have mentioned, considered himself and his work above such political uses though postwar scholarship has interpreted his relationship to the “black decades” otherwise. What is undeniably in Croce’s writing here is the profound need to defend culture and patriotic history against Leopardi’s influence either in the Romantic enthusiasms of De Sanctis or in the serious considerations of his thought in Croce’s own time. When economic and political conditions become critical a decade later, some intellectuals will return to Croce’s essay and evaluate it in just such terms of ideological assertion and defensiveness.
Gramsci on Leopardi: Progress

Il progresso è una ideologia, il divenire è una concezione filosofica. Il "progresso" dipende da una determinata mentalità, a costituire la quale entrano certi elementi culturali storicamente determinati; il "divenire" è un concetto filosofico, da cui può essere assente il progresso. . . La nascita e lo sviluppo dell’idea progresso corrisponde alla coscienza diffusa che è stato raggiunto un certo rapporto tra la società e la natura (incluso nel concetto di natura quello di caso e di "irrazionalità") tale per cui gli uomini, nel loro complesso, sono più sicuri del loro avvenire, possono concepire "razionalmente" dei piani complessivi della loro vita. Il Leopardi deve ricorrere alle eruzioni vulcaniche, cioè a quei fenomeni naturali che sono ancora "irresistibili" e senza rimedio.

— Gramsci

If Croce’s vigorous attack on Leopardi was inconsistent in its elaboration, at least the thrust of his argument was plain to those who wrote after him. Unlike De Sanctis before him and countless others afterward, Croce took Leopardi’s denial of progress quite literally and made no attempt to reconstruct Leopardi’s thinking, which he saw as pure Reaction, to match his own Liberal faith. Gramsci, mediated by Croce’s essay, also accepted Leopardi’s refusal of progress in a rather unqualified way. Gramsci cites the awesome image of Vesuvius from the famed poem “La Ginestra” as a desperate resort on the part of the poet to spiritually block the flow of those forces of progress (“magnifiche sorti e progressive”) which swelled to encompass the whole of Risorgimental life and culture. Though he seems very close to Croce in his understanding of what Leopardi meant, Gramsci’s own interpretation of Leopardi’s significance as an intellectual in relation to the political culture of the early Risorgimento is far from unambiguous. Writing almost one hundred years after the composition of “La Ginestra,” in the context of the Fascist appropriation (or realization) of the ideals which Leopardi steadfastly disdained, Gramsci was confronting not only Leopardi’s opposition to “progress” as an idea and cultural phenomenon, but also, counterposing that 19th century situation with the crisis of the concept of progress for the intellectuals of his own time.

With this double historical focus in mind, the task of understanding Gramsci’s formulation of the problematic of progress is further complicated by the dialectical relation he proposes between the idea of progress and the historical phenomenon of the intellectuals whom he identifies with it. Leopardi is mentioned most often by Gramsci in the Notebooks in the context of progress considered as a bourgeois ideology, which is observable both in
its historical development and through the influence of Croce's philosophy. Typically Gramscian, the dissemination and development of the faith in progress is as important in Gramsci's analysis as the etiology of the concept, which he sees arising with (though not identical to) German philosophy and French politics of the eighteenth century. According to Gramsci, it was through the former — in the translation of idealist philosophy — that the concept was transmitted to Italian culture and reinforced in his own day, by the intellectual presence of Croce.

In this deconstruction of Croce's writing, Gramsci considered it essential to isolate those elements which revealed the presence of class or aggregate interest. So, while admitting the concept of "Becoming" as a valid philosophical term, he distinguished between that term and the less coherent notion of "Progress," which, he asserted, had a particular historical and social operation — namely, to stabilize a certain relationship between Nature (human and physical) and society in the minds of a great mass of people. In certain junctures of history, observes Gramsci, a faith in the ability of man to control his environment and his happiness is widely diffused; the history and development of progress as an ideology corresponds to this diffusion of consciousness. In these historical periods, the presumption of a control over natural forces allows for the possibility of rational planning for social goals. In the specific context in which it evolved historically, that is, as a real force and not merely as an important idea, Gramsci saw it function negatively as a powerful mystification of economic and historical realities which were at work in the industrialization of Western Europe — one of the important consequences of this mystification being the state of Italy in the 1930's.  

As a cultural phenomenon at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Gramsci associates the ideology of progress with a specific political function in the formation of the modern constitutional state. In his analysis, the faith that the ills of mankind would be cured gradually and inevitably by social planning and the advance of technology consolidated a certain democratic consent from the population to be governed nationally — in other words, it was linked to the exercise of hegemony by the intellectual and cultural leaders of the historical blocs which dominated the Risorgimento.

It is a feature of the classical Marxist critique of Liberalism that a generalized faith in progress substituted in countries like Italy for a more radical critique or intervention in the processes (conceived as benign and ameliorative) of history. Though others before him had made the association between the idea of progress and the
Bourgeois ideology which facilitated the organization of national capitalism, the task which Gramsci set for himself was to identify the specific historical blocs which propagated the idea in Italy and to trace the historical transformations of the idea in relation to concrete social and political forces.

**Leopardi, Vieusseux, and Progressive Culture**

As a cultural force during the life time of Leopardi, Gramsci in his notes on the formation of the intellectual life of the *Risorgimento* observed that those subjects which were most interesting to the progressives — social reform, public instruction, science, agricultural development, literary and cultural journalism — were treated most prominently in that time by the group led by Giovan Pietro Vieusseux in Tuscany around the internationally known journal called *L'Antologia*. Politically associated with the Moderate party (as opposed to Mazzini's Action Party) Gramsci characterized the activities of the Palazzo Buondelmonti as:

un centro di propaganda intellettuale per l'organizzazione e la condensazione del gruppo intellettuale dirigente della borghesia italiana del Risorgimento.\(^{28}\)

Vieusseux and many of those associated with *L'Antologia* were not themselves members of the emerging middle-class, in fact they were wealthy landowners but they were able to attract a mass of intellectuals and patriots who constituted the bourgeois hegemony of the *Risorgimento*.\(^ {29}\)

Vieusseux tried for years, beginning in 1824, to persuade Leopardi to collaborate in the journal and symposia which he envisioned as a necessary effort in the direction of a truly national culture — as he wrote of *L'Antologia*, "Italian rather than Tuscan."\(^ {30}\) Leopardi refused. His fullest statement on the subject of his own reluctance to associate his work with the journal or other modern attempts at cultural or social consensus is contained in a letter to Vieusseux written in 1826. Explaining that the circumstances of his personal life had made him a solitary and that his own social relations of necessity had been of a very superficial nature, he confessed society was, to him only an infinitesimal part of the universe which he contemplated in the relation of the individual to nature. He concluded with a typically aggressive modesty that not only was he truly ignorant of "filosofia sociale" but that his own philosophy was not in any way esteemable in the
19th century, much less useful for such a journal:

Però siate certo che nella filosofia sociale io sono per ogni parte un vero ignorante. Bensì sono assuefatto ad osservar di continuo me stesso, cioè l'uomo in sè, e similmente i suoi rapporti col resto della natura, dai quali, con tutta la mia solitudine, io non mi posso liberare. Tenete dunque per costante che la mia filosofia (se volete onorarla con questo nome) non è di quel genere che si apprezza ed è gradito in questo secolo; è bensì utile a me stesso, perché mi fa disprezzar la vita e considerar tutte le cose come chimere, e così mi aiuta a sopportar l'esistenza; ma non so quanto possa esser utile alla società, e convenire a chi debba scrivere per un Giornale.31

Umberto Carpi in his study of the intellectuals of the Antologia group, has documented the commentary and correspondance of Leopardi on the subject of the writer and society. In a series of letters and notes in the Zibaldone, Leopardi bitterly contests the sub-ordination of the autonomy of ancient culture and the modern tendency towards practical application of literature to the detri- ment of style and beauty.32 Carpi’s own historical (and neo-Gramscian) appraisal of Leopardi’s attitude in relation to Vieuusseux is at variance with the opinion of Binni, Luporini, Timpanaro and others who cite contradictory evidence to charac- terize Leopardi’s relation to the culture of his time; nonetheless, that Leopardi did not collaborate with those progressive cultural influences and that he bitterly criticized aspects of their produc- tion is well-documented.33

Leopardi’s public disassociation from the Antologia group like his opposition to other Modern (Romantic) cultural phenomena has always been problematical in its interpretation. Marxists have traditionally regarded Romanticism as a cultural outgrowth of the new middle-class and Gramsci associates it clearly with the pro-gressives whose work disseminated the Bourgeois aspirations of the Risorgimento.34 That Gramsci cast a cold eye on Romanticism and the activity of organizers of culture such as Vieuusseux or Manzoni, regarding them as organic intellectuals whose cultural struggle determined not only what the Risorgimento was but also what it was not (that is, revolutionary) did not automatically imply that he valorized either Leopardi’s practical disdain of their collab-orative efforts or his theoretical rejection of the idea of progress.

Any negation of bourgeois reform or faith in progress can be ideologically nuanced in various ways: as pre-bourgeois, reaction-ary, enlightened, eccentric, or as negative dialectic. The interpr-etive tradition around Leopardi’s refusal to participate in the domi-nant intellectual movements of his own time has, as we have outlined, relied upon all these labels and related strategies at one
time or another. This is not to say that the arguments employed or the material generated amounts merely to political name-calling or that these are all of relative merit. This is not the place to sort out these positions; here we are primarily interested in Gramsci's complex appreciation of the need to at once isolate and identify the concrete historical situation of pre-Risorgimental cultural forces and to simultaneously situate his own position in the critical process as an intellectual in the 1930's. It is interesting in this regard that Gramsci does not confront Leopardi’s literary or political ideology directly but rather through a metacritical operation.

Introducing a rather long passage which he has transcribed from an article by Aldo Capasso, published in 1932 in Italia letteraria, Gramsci returns to the idea of progress under siege in present day Italy. He insists that the “crisis of progress” is not a crisis of the idea itself but rather that of the standard-bearers of the idea — the middle-class intellectuals who transmitted the idea in Italy. First, they failed to reach the peasant population who because of regional and class differences retain a superstitious sense of fatality that places their lives at the mercy of change. Second, the technological “progress” which is the inheritance of the nineteenth century ideology has brought with it new ills which created a new “nature” to be dominated including, according to Gramsci, the very class which was served by industrial progress. In his reservation of criticism of the idea of progress, Gramsci already reveals what will be his own ambivalence towards radical critique of the neo-hegelianism which, as he has written, carried the notion under the aegis of “becoming” into Italian culture. The failure of the intellectuals to reach the peasant population was also a sensitive topic for Gramsci since he himself in his political writings was constantly returning to the problems of organizing the South in any significant rational political movement. Given Gramsci’s own philosophical and political formation, it is not surprising that he views any assault on progress with suspicion and that his comments on the review article of Capasso reveal some of the problems of the Marxist intellectual in Italy in the ‘30’s. His own attachment to the idea of progress shows through the large space he gives to Capasso’s own words on Leopardi and Croce:

Anche da noi è comune l’irrisione verso l’ottimismo umanitario e democratico di stile ottocentesco, e Leopardi non è un solitario quando parla delle “sorti progressive” con ironia; ma s’escogitato quell’astuto travestimento del “Progresso” ch’è l’idealistico “Divenire”: idea che resterà nella storia, crediamo, più ancora come italiana che come tedesca. Ma che senso può avere un Divenire che si prosegue ad infinitum, un migliora-
mento che non sarà mai paragonabile ad un bene fisico? Mancando il criterio di un ultimo gradino stabile, manca, del “miglioramento,” l’unità di misura. E inoltre non si può arrivare nemmeno a pascersi della fiducia di essere, noi uomini reali e viventi, migliori, che so io, dei Romani o dei primi Cristiani, perché il “miglioramento” andando inteso in un senso del tutto ideale, è perfettamente ammissibile che noi oggi siamo tutti “decadenti” mentre, allora, fossero quasi tutti uomini pieni o magri santi. Sicché, dal punto di vista etico, l’idea d’ascesa ad infinitum implicita nel concetto di Divenire resta alquanto ingiustificabile, dato che il “miglioramento” etico è fatto individuale e che nel piano individuale è proprio possibile concludere, procedendo caso per caso, che tutta l’epoca ultima è deteriore. . . . E allora il concetto del Divenire ottimistico si fa inafferrabile tanto sul piano ideale quanto sul piano reale. . . .

È noto come il Croce negasse il valore razionativo del Leopardi, asserendo che pessimismo e ottimismo sono atteggiamenti sentimental, non filosofici. Ma il pessimista . . . potrebbe osservare che, per l’appunto, la concezione del Divenire idealistica è un fatto d’ottimismo e di sentimento: perché il pessimista e l’ottimista (se non animati di fede nel Trascendente) concepiscono allo stesso modo la Storia: come lo scorrere di un fiume senza foce; e poi collocare l’accento sulla parola “fiume” o sulle parole “senza foce,” secondo il loro sentimento. Dicono gli uni: non c’è foce . . . ma come in un fiume armonioso c’è la continuità di un fiume ma non c’è foce. . . . In somma, non dimentichiamo che ottimismo è sentimento, non meno del pessimismo. Resta che ogni “filosofia” non può fare a meno di atteggiarsi sentimentalmente, come pessimismo o come ottimismo ecc. ecc. 37

Capasso’s language and analysis of the impossibility of a sense of progress which excludes teleological or eschatological endpoints and a source of origin bears resemblance to Derrida’s reading of Rousseau on these topics. 38

Capasso’s polemic against Crocean idealism carries his primary assertion which is that “becoming” is a clever disguise (“astuto travestimento”) for the “Progress” of the nineteenth century democratic ideology. Gramsci had, in his introduction to Capasso’s remarks, similarly linked Progress and Becoming although with an entirely different valorization since his own commitment to “saving that which is most concrete in the concept of becoming” by means of substituting dialectical movement for the “improvement ad infinitum” (as Capasso correctly identifies it) of Crocean historiography. Capasso characterizes “becoming” as an optimistic ideal which, unless it is animated by a Trascendent faith, conceives of history in much the same way as the pessimist (Leopardi) conceives it: the optimist and the pessimist both conceiving of history as a river without endpoints in either direction the difference being that the optimist emphasizes the flow of the river and the pessimist emphasizes the absence of origin or telos.

If Gramsci had admitted Capasso’s argument relativizing both
Croce and Leopardi, one assumes that he would have clarified his own position as being antithetical to them both. And, if one considers the whole of Gramsci’s writings this is implicitly true: as a Marxist he is committed to the view (present influentially in Rousseau) that the moral condition of man depends on the social order in which he lives and that society until now, has corrupted and alienated man from his own “lost” nature.

But Gramsci neither admits Capasso’s version of Crocean optimism of progress, nor Leopardi’s negation of it; furthermore, he avoids a direct criticism or analysis of Capasso’s characterization of Leopardi or the concept of “becoming,” though one may assume that these are elliptically present in his terse comment, written after the transcription of perhaps the longest passage of the words of another writer in the entire Quaderni, that Capasso’s tendentious critique is not coherent though it is “expressive of a widespread state of mind, snobistic and uncertain, very unconnected and superficial.”

A reader of the Prison Notebooks becomes accustomed to a certain critical strategy in regard to the thought of the others which is here absent. It is as if Gramsci, having begun by introducing this passage with a typical grounding of the problem in the specific history of the times as a crisis of the standard bearers of progress themselves, and confronted in Capasso’s long text with the implicit argument that the crisis may be in the idea itself, must now retreat from this text into a new vocabulary, of immanent “possibility.”

La questione è sempre la stessa: cos’è l’uomo? cos’è la natura umana? Se si definisce l’uomo come individuo, psicologicamente e speculativamente, questi problemi del progresso e del divenire sono insolubili o rimangono di mera parola. Ma se si concepisce l’uomo come l’insieme dei rapporti sociali, intanto appare che ogni paragone tra uomini nel tempo è impossibile, perché si tratta di cose diverse, se non eterogenee. D'altronde, poiché l’uomo è anche l’insieme delle sue condizioni di vita, si può misurare quantitativamente la differenza tra il passato e il presente, poiché si può misurare la misura in cui l’uomo domina la natura e il caso. La possibilità non è la realtà, ma è anch’essa una realtà: che l’uomo possa fare una cosa o non possa farla, ha la sua importanza per valutare ciò che realmente si fà. Possibilità vuol dire libertà.” La misura della libertà entra nel concetto d’uomo. Che ci siano le possibilità obiettive di non morire di fame, e che si muoia di fame ha la sua importanza a quanto pare. Ma l’esistenza delle condizioni obiettive, o possibilità o libertà non è ancora sufficiente: occorre “conoscerle” e sapersene servire. Volersene servire. L’uomo in questo senso è volontà concreta, cioè applicazione effettuale dell’astratto volere o impulso vitale ai mezzi concreti che tale volontà realizzano. Si crea la propria personalità. . . . Trasformare il mondo esterno, i rapporti generali, significa potenziare se stesso, sviluppare se stesso.
Gramsci begins his commentary by asserting the intellectual hopelessness and confusion of any discussion of progress or becoming which considers man as an individual rather than as an ensemble of human relations. So far this is a standard historical materialist grounding of problems of historical movement and one expects the argument to develop, as it does elsewhere in Gramsci, in terms of intervention and "will" as political activity.42 To some extent it does, but the discourse is imbued with Bergsonian vocabulary of "possibility" and "vital impulse" and "potentiating the self." Orthodox Marxists have often pointed out the tendency towards idealism in Gramsci's work as his basic weakness, and passages such as this one might substantiate such a charge. What seems more interesting here for our purposes is the turn which Gramsci's discourse has taken from the clear, predictable, historicist criticism of progress as a bourgeois ideology towards what he himself has warned is the extremely unstable ground of the human subject's experience of progress; the earlier discourse is involved in and critical of Crocean Liberalism, while the vitalist vocabulary would seem to be in reaction to the radical negations of progress by Leopardi and Capasso.

It can be argued that many times in the course of his prison writings, Gramsci uses non-Marxian conceptual vocabulary and dialectically transforms it; his use of the idealist sense of "Becoming" works in this direction. However, in the introduction of the language of "possibility" and "vital impulse," he does not really effect any such transformation either of the text to which he is reacting or of the basic materialist view of will as political-social action to which he returns after having mentioned these Bergsonian categories. The relations of critical negation to Bergsonian vitality is here set as an unresolved contradiction or juxtaposition — a kind of rhetorical stasis. In his first comments on the Capasso article, after he has taken great pains to transcribe it at length, he warns against the dangers of discussions of progress which, because they involved individual psychology or speculation, are ultimately statements of problems which are "unsolvable" (referring to a mysterious, unknowable subject) or "merely verbal" (caught in the mesh of language). And yet, his own discourse has opened and rapidly closed upon just such a moment: negation and possibility — a very Leopardian mode. In postwar criticism of Leopardi, "possibility" is translated into "velleity" by some critics and extended to "utopia" but this opposition forms, as we have argued elsewhere, the internal drama of the Leopardian lyric.

At this juncture in the Prison Notebooks, Gramsci is detained though only temporarily by metacritical discourse. He more char-
acteristically proceeds directly towards an historical class analysis in his interpretation of individual authors. His uses of Leopardi are not typical or figural like his uses, for instance, of Manzoni. In this regard he has followed in the path of his predecessor, De Sanctis, who it has been noted achieved a theoretical definitiveness and clarity in writing about Manzoni (who is continuously contrasted with Leopardi in these discussions of literary and social progress) while his enormous feeling for Leopardi’s "modernity" resulted in a much lesser degree of success in structuring his critical thought. And Gramsci and De Sanctis are here like in one other way: De Sanctis, as we have mentioned, was the first critic to note the contradiction between Leopardi’s negation of progress and the social discourse he inspires; Gramsci, in spite of his own assertions to the contrary, has suggested the very move which he had warned against, that is, towards a social poetics which may be defined as the self-conscious realm of the "insolubili" and "mera verbale." The conflation of historical-cultural and subjective-formal (hermeneutical) experiences of progress is perhaps more interestingly observable in the poetic constitution of the Leopardian lyric itself than in a critical discourse around it; nonetheless, both Croce’s nostalgic descriptions of the commonsensical writing on the wall (undecipherable except through ideological remembering) and Gramsci’s meditation on Capasso on Leopardi (a confusion and paralysis of multiple discourses of progress) suggest the difficult tasks of a literary history which would be both genuinely sociological and responsive to the complexities of language, ideology, and consciousness. In Gramscian terms, the readings of Croce and Gramsci of Leopardi have reflected their own crises of modernity and progress for the Italian intellectual (Liberal and Marxian) in the cultures of the 1920’s and 1930’s; they have suggested, as well, the necessity of theorizing further the subjective and discursive practices within whose material confines such crises take place.

Hampshire College.

NOTES

4 Cesare Luporini, “Leopardi progressivo,” in Filosofi vecchi e nuovi (Firenze, 1947), pp. 185-279.
5 For a critical review of the most recent leftist studies, see Sebastiano Timpanaro, “Antileopardiani e neomoderati nella sinistra italiana,” Belfagor XXX (1975), 129-56 and 395-428; XXXI (1976), 1-32 and 159-200.
7 Published in Critica (1922).
8 These two stages are called respectively “the war of the movement” and “the war of position” (or passive revolution).
9 Croce, Poesia e non poesia, p. 104.
10 Giovanni Gentile, Proemio alle Operette morali (Bologna, 1918). Gentile’s commentary was published two years earlier in Annali delle Università toscane. See Marti, p. 31.
11 Croce, op. cit., p. 102.
15 Croce, op. cit., p. 100.
18 Croce is anxious to detract from Leopardi’s reputation through the legacy of De Sanctis as the “poeta dei giovani” of the Risorgimento. See esp. Poesia e non poesia, p. 101.
19 The critical avoidance of typicality or model prevents political or moral judgements based on a totality; hence his consideration of Leopardi as an invalidated eccentric (though among other wretched anomalies) rather than as a critic of the Restoration or pre-Risorgimental period.
20 Croce, op. cit., p. 108.
21 Croce, op. cit., p. 107.
22 Croce, op. cit., p. 108.
23 Croce, op. cit., p. 108.
28 Gramsci, op. cit., p. 821.
29 See Umberto Carpi, Letteratura e società nella Toscana del Risorgimento: Gli intellettuali dell’Antologia (Bari, 1974).
30 Carpi, p. 111.
31 As quoted by Carpi, p. 112.
32 Carpi, p. 111.
33 Carpi cites evidence that Leopardi, though he lived in isolation was well-informed of the activites of the “Antologia” group, p. 118.
34 Carpi’s general conclusion is that Leopardi’s idea of the role of the intellectual was “substantially aristocratic and prebourgeois.” For another, contradictory interpretation, see Il capitale e il Poeta: storia dei rapporti fra il capitalismo e la letteratura italiana dall’illuminismo a Pirandello (Milano, 1963).
35 Gramsci, op. cit., p. 1336.
36 Gramsci, op. cit., pp. 2040-41.
37 Gramsci, op. cit., p. 1337.
38 "Rousseau wants to say that progress, however, ambivalent, moves whether towards deterioration, or towards improvements, the one or the other. . . . But Rousseau describes what he does not want to say: that progress moves in both directions, towards good and evil at the same time. This excludes eschatological and teleological endpoints, just as difference — or articulation at the source — eliminates the archeology of beginnings." Translated and quoted by Paul de Man in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York, 1971), p. 120.
40 Gramsci, op. cit., p. 1337. Translation mine.
41 Gramsci, op. cit., p. 1338.
42 This point is made by Geoffrey Nowell Smith in *Selection from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, p. 360.