

## A 'ROMANTIC' ICELANDER?

by Riccardo Scarcia, University of  
Roma Tor Vergata

Giacomo Leopardi published his *Operette Morali* in 1827, otherwise an important year for the Italian prose of the early XIXth century because of Alessandro Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi* first issue. The *Operette Morali* were a sort of collection of different philosophical pieces (twenty, in this first edition), however treated with the typical Leopardi's poetical elegance of style and brilliance of colours. Although new for the Italian readers, this book, with its title in pure classical taste, belonged anyway to a well-known topic of the European literature of the previous century, that of the 'Moral Essays' (or also of the 'Philosophical Epistles'). But the contents of the work, a real masterpiece, are well varied if compared with those of the tradition, in accordance to Leopardi's excellent art of writing. So we may find in it, for instance, alternatively short dialogues in dramatic style between abstract entities (*Dialogue Between Earth and Moon*), or between fictitious or historical or even mythological characters (*Dialogue Between A Calendar Seller and A Traveller*; *Dialogue Between Friedrich Ruysch and His Mummies*; *Dialogue Between Cristoforo Colombo and Pedro Gutierrez*; *Dialogue Between Hercules and Atlas & c.*), and peculiar 'monologues' in disguise (*The Song of the Wild Cock*; *Praise of the Birds & c.*), meant to offer an immediate as well as a picturesque opportunity to the author to express his own feelings. There are also some 'autobiographical' pages (*Memorable Sayings of Filippo Ottonieri*, a clear double of the writer), or more extended scenarios, which open a larger space to the fantasy (*History of Human Kind*, or *The Bets of Prometheus*).

One of the best pieces of the last group, not devoid of an authentic humour, is entitled: *Dialogue Between Nature and An Icelander*. The 'Icelander' of the story is a poor man, who tries to escape his cruel destiny running through the whole world, and to get away

from the scarcely fruitful country to which he has been originally assigned by the incomprehensible resolution of Nature. In his endless search for a more acceptable corner in which to survive, wandering from land to land he arrives to an internal region of Africa (so to say, the heart of the earth, and, as we will see, also the end of the Icelander's life), where he encounters Nature itself. Nature is presented as an enormous woman, with dark eyes and coalblack hair, having both a beautiful and terrifying face, sitting on the soil, leaning her elbow against a mountain, in the middle of a vast forest. The personification of a Concept or of an Ideal is a rhetorical figure frequently used in classical literature, especially in Late Antiquity (compare, ex.gr., Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, probably the direct pattern of the narrative structure of this 'Operetta', together with Voltaire's *Dialogue entre le philosophe et la Nature*, and Leopardi's poem *To Italy*). Here 'Nature' and 'Destiny' are, of course, the same 'Person': Nature is quietly waiting for that man, because despite all his efforts he cannot escape from her laws ("So the squirrel cannot escape from the rattlesnake, and falls by itself into its throat", Nature says abruptly in her introductory words...).

The following conversation develops the usual pessimistic ways of Leopardi's thought: to summarize it, we may say that the Icelander substantially complains in a quite long speech about all the contradictions he found during his continuous wandering (everywhere ice, heat, rains, hurricanes, illnesses, accidents, risks, various perils, despite an irreproachable personal behaviour towards all his similar people he was in touch with in different times: "at the end - he says - I don't remember having spent a single day without some pain..."). He arrives as a logical inference to this conclusion: "You are openly a foe to humankind, and to all your creatures, including other animals, and to all your works... You are the true executioner of your own offspring, and I am right in feeling wholly hopeless".

Nature's answer is chilling: "Did you be-

lieve that this world was made for your own sake? Never I aimed at bringing happiness or unhappiness to you: and if your race should become completely extinct, I would not even notice it. I am not aware of what I happen to do. You don't realize that this universe lives in an alternance of production and destruction, which must be considered so strictly connected to each other that the world would fall into a complete dissolution if one of them should be missing: any painless thing should be, consequently, a damage for this universe". Note that in a contemporary remark in his private *Miscelany* (the so called *Zibaldone*: see there p.4099) Leopardi refers to the topics of this dialogue as "l'orribile mistero delle cose e della esistenza universale". But when the debate is still going on (the Icelander is just about to ask the fatal question: "But tell me now to whom is such a devastating system of any use?"), the narrative voice breaks it reporting with nonchalance the two different versions of the sudden Icelander's death: some people relate - Leopardi tells us - that two lions came about, which were so thin and so exhausted by starvation that they had hardly the strength to devour him ("they were restored by this food, and survived a while thereafter..."). But other people maintain that on the contrary it was a very stormy wind that rose up, knocked the man down, and buried him under a very pompous mausoleum of sand ("... un solennissimo mausoleo di sabbia"), which dried him up perfectly, making a magnificent mummy of his corpse, that is nowadays preserved in the main museum of an undefined important European town for the curiosity of the tourists (a parallel way of matter recycling!). Out of the very simple metaphor of the tale, the Icelander is the Human Being, regardless to any real country, that is, as an any living Creature, a true toy in the hands of the mere 'Chance' (rather than of those of the classical 'Fate', which depends, on the contrary, on a religious vision of the events). But why did Leopardi choose as an exemplary moral prototype an inhabitant of such a mysterious land, a land, after all, in its reality no so strictly essential to his purposes? In Count

Leopardi's palace there was a very rich library, and Leopardi, a poet and an esteemed classical scholar, had certainly also some knowledge of geographical literature of his times (on the other hand he had compiled when he was sixteen a *History of Astronomy Since its Origins Down to the Year 1811*, and more or less at the same time a conspicuous *Essay on the Vulgar Mistakes of Ancient People*), and of updated accounts of modern explorations (he was certainly familiar with scientific newspapers: he wrote one of his more charming 'Canti', the *Song of a Shepherd Roaming Through Asia*, having read, as a starting point, a paper about popular customs of Kirghizian shepherds). He confirms this knowledge here too, for example, when he mentions the big Stone Heads of Easter Island, taking the hint from the famous report about Oceanic voyages of La Pérouse: to one of these "ermi colossali" (literally "colossal steles with human head") he compares, indeeds, the first appearance of Nature, seen at a distance from the point of view of the miserable refugee. In the same way he speaks through his Icelander's mouth about the climatic contrasts of his native Island, and about the extreme frost of it, which forces people either to live too near to fire and smoke at home or to die in the outside; Leopardi adds also some details about the vulcanic area of Mount Hekla (but this perhaps derives from Voltaire's *Histoire de Jenni*). Besides Leopardi makes elsewhere (in the *Zibaldone* quoted above: see p.2559) a passing reference to Lapps "who maybe are born and live in a climate not assigned by Nature to the human species", just in accordance with the Icelander's complaints. But apart from all that, since Iceland does not occur anywhere else in Leopardi's extant writings, we may suggest that Iceland is the occasional 'translation', into terms of geographical precision, and with an artificial flavour of science, of that fantastic land of remote North, which ancient authors named - as it is well-known - the undetermined 'ultima Thule': in other words, here Iceland is located, so to say, with all its exact longitude and latitude, in an ordered relationship with other, concrete regions of the Earth

(through which the man runs desperately), but it stands all the same as a place of the common imagery, the synthesis of all the features of a repulsive setting for the development of human civilization (at least, in no industrial times!): that is, conveying inevitably the reader to the paradoxical deduction that Life itself does not help to live. And this so far as the physical space is concerned. But regarding time, 'Iceland', or this transfigured 'Thule', is just the symbol of the hard, terrific and endless series of years of primeval humanity, always struggling for its existence against the blind hostility of the environment, and exposed night and day to the perils of wild beasts: a strong contrast with the legends of Lost Paradises and Golden Ages. And this refers back exactly to some fundamental verses of Lucretius' description of the continuous dangers and awful difficulties of life of primitive men in his materialistic poem *De Rerum Natura*, which was obviously, among Latin classical authors, the Leopardi's 'livre de chevet'.



### THE 'ALVIDA' BY GIACOMO CORTONE

by Antonella Perelli, Liceo B. Russell,  
Rome

After the success of Torquato Tasso's *Torrismondo*, other Italian tragedies were placed in mysterious Northern Europe. One of them was Giacomo Cortone's *Alvida*, applauded in Udine in 1614, printed in Padova in 1615, and quite forgotten now. This tragedy is mentioned, among the Italian imitations of *Torrismondo*, by Umberto Renda in a long essay published in 1905-6. Although the quality is rather poor, literarily speaking, it is worth reading as a document of Nordic spell - combined in this case with the violent atmosphere of XVIIth century's tragedies. The male protagonist is Orcano, Count of Flanders, who seeks Alvida in mar-

riage from her father Lico, King of Norway. For Lico does not accept, Orcano leaves for Egypt thinking of revenging himself. In the meanwhile Lico promises his daughter to Ormondo, King of Denmark. Orcano, coming from Egypt with an army under the name of Arcesio, seizes the town and takes Alvida prisoner. Alvida is killed by Odrisia (but she had already maimed herself, biting her tongue and spitting it at Orcano, according to the violence of Giraldi's tragedies), Orcano's sister, who had been seduced by Ormondo (IV 8 p. 110: she had fallen in love with him when he was wounded, as Angelica with Medoro in *Orlando Furioso* XIX 20-30; but Ormondo, behaving himself ignobly as many characters of the Italian tragedy of that period, refused to marry her). All the *dramatis personae* die a violent death.

I shall always quote the text according to G. Cortone, *Alvida*, Padova 1615, referring to the pages of this edition. From the first lines (I 2, 4-5) it is clear that Norway's distance from the rest of the world is not warranty of peace and safety. Lico and his court are waiting for Ormondo and are ready to celebrate the marriage, but Alvida is upset by her dreams (her nurse tries to reassure her, saying that dreams are not true, like in Tasso's *Torrismondo* I 1, 125-126). As a matter of fact Vaffrino, Orcano's lieutenant, plans to insinuate himself into the Court changing his voice and his language (like his homonymous, Tasso's Vaffrino in *Gerusalemme Liberata* XVIII 57-60). In spite of the nurse's gossiping about kissing (I 6, 13-19) according to *Aminta*'s model, the atmosphere becomes soon tragic not only because of Alvida's dreams (I 6, 20-23) but also of the counsellor's topical considerations about Fortune (II 3, 32-33). The dialogue between Odrisia and her waiter Locro is also gloomy, being constructed on that between Clorinda and Arsete in *Gerusalemme liberata* XII 18-20 and 39-40 (even if here Odrisia will not die fighting with her ancient lover Ormondo, as Locro has dreamt and is afraid of).

The sad destiny of Norway is strictly connected with its king's personality. The