

At Leopardi's house

What happens when a writer loses faith in a community of readers? Last week, I took advantage of a trip to Ancona to visit the house of Giacomo Leopardi in the hilltop town of Recanati, twenty miles to the south. Born in 1798, Leopardi grew up a child prodigy in the library of his eccentric father, Monaldo. "There are 20,000 volumes", our guide says, waving at the antique shelving in three small rooms. Determined to be philanthropic, Monaldo declared the library open to the public in 1812. The first reader turned up forty years later. Not a good omen.

Spurred by his father's Christian rationalism, and already able to read Latin and Greek, German and French, English and Hebrew, the teenage Leopardi embarked on the huge *Essay on the Popular Errors of the Ancients* (1815). But his use of modern science to deconstruct ancient creeds only prompted the consideration that Christianity was equally flawed. Existence, he concluded, was "a solid nothing". Distressed that the pursuit of truth had merely made life more difficult, he turned to poetry and quickly became Italy's most sublime bearer of ill tidings.

"Over there", says the guide, pointing to a wine-stuccoed facade across the piazza, "is where Silvia lived. Giacomo could hear her singing at her loom as he read in the library. She's a symbol of hope in his most famous poem." In fact, Silvia, who died too young to realize how "nature tricks us with promises it will not keep", is emblematic of Leopardi's loss of hope. And our guide exhibits exactly that tendency the poet was so familiar with: to shy away from harsh reality. A later fable he wrote about a man who refused to subscribe to the community's shared illusions begins: "Filippo Ottonieri ... lived most of his life, in Nubiana ... where there is no memory of his ever having injured anyone, in word or deed. He was generally hated by his fellow citizens ...".

But nobody, Leopardi believed, could live without illusions of some kind. The trick was to cultivate them, knowing they were no more than that. And the illusion Giacomo most pursued was literary glory. He felt rebuffed at every

stage. In Rome, the writers he met only “took away any desire to meet others. They all suppose they can drive to immortality in their carriages”. His poems brought him little income, and his wonderfully whimsical *Moral Fables* (1827) even less. In an ironic address to a youngster embarking on a literary career, he warns that only a “tiny minority” are capable of recognizing a genuinely original work of literature, and even then only on a good day. For the multitude, it’s a matter of fashion and celebrity. One sets one’s hopes on posterity – the “ultimate refuge and comfort of great minds” – but there is no guarantee future generations will get the message. And anyway, you’ll be dead.

It’s not hard to list authors who felt the literary community let them down. “No more novel-writing for me”, Thomas Hardy vowed after scathing reviews. “A man must be a fool to deliberately stand up to be shot at.” D. H. Lawrence complained that readers judged on ideological grounds, Jorge Luis Borges, too, that they put politics before aesthetics. “Though I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter”, declared Herman Melville, despairing at the reception of *Moby-Dick*. Stendhal expected to be appreciated only by “a happy few”. Still, a few is not none. I know people who write pretty well and can’t get published at all. The breakdown of a collectively shared vision of reality, argued the Italian critic Giacomo Debenedetti in the 1960s, was responsible for a growing alienation between writer and reader.

In the entrance to Leopardi’s house, there is a “selfie corner” where you can pose beside his bust. The surrounding streets and piazzas are named after him or his poems, lines of which appear in many shop windows. Yet none of those visiting the house with us seemed to have more than a classroom memory of him. “Some even think he was atheist”, says our guide timidly. Utterly godless, in 1833, Leopardi gave up his attempts to penetrate literary society, retreating with a friend to an obscure life in Naples where his greatest pleasure was the local ice-cream. Earlier, in a prophetic moment in the *Moral Fables*, he had posited the invention of a super-intelligent robot that would be a man’s perfect friend, never betraying or contradicting him. “It seems impossible to think”, he reflects, that we “cannot teach a machine to speak”.

Worst comes to worst, disillusioned writers might turn to AI to have their work appreciatively read.

Tim Parks's latest book is Across Sicily with Garibaldi's Thousand: An adventure in landscape and Italian memory, 2026.

