

The core of my project here at the Academy is the critical edition of Giacomo Leopardi's moral prose translations from Greek. In particular, I am writing the introductions to the four main translations: 1) Isocrates's four orations (first volume of the 'Moralisti greci'); 2) Epictetus' *Encheiridion* (second volume of the 'Moralisti greci'); 3) the funeral oration for Helena Paleologina by Georgios Gemistus Plethon (1355-1452), the Byzantine philosopher and scholar called "the second Plato" by Marsilio Ficino, and known for having incorporated Christian elements into his Neo-paganism; and 4) a famous hagiographic narrative by Nilus Monachus (I AD), to which Leopardi gave the title *Martirio de' SS. Padri*.

This last text inaugurated the whole series of translations in December 1822/January 1823, and this makes us think that the interest Leopardi took in ancient Greek moral theories (that is, the project of the "Moralisti greci") was prompted by a reconsideration of Christian ethics. Leopardi was in search of an ethical system which could combine, as it were, Christian values and ancient Greek morals following in Pletho's footsteps.

The strong interest Leopardi maintained in the translations after finishing the *Operette morali* shows that the nihilism expressed in that work does not invalidate the ethical problems he faced in the translations, nor his desire to affirm and consolidate the idea of Virtue. The proof of this connection is a statement of which we have no record except for what Leopardi's friend Francesco Puccinotti, a doctor and a scholar of the history of medicine, recalls of a conversation between the two. Puccinotti writes to Leopardi the 29<sup>th</sup> of July 1827 (the very month in which the *Operette morali* were published): "Io però penso, sebbene non l'abbia letta, che la tua Traduzione del Gemisto ti avrà servito come di un mezzo dirò quasi alla moda onde esporre qualche tua massima morale che più importi ai nostri miseri tempi: siccome mi dicesti aver fatto col ragionamento che accompagna il tuo Epitteto".

This recollection by Puccinotti is crucial because it tells us about Leopardi's approach to his work as a prose translator, which parallels his creative work as author of the *Operette morali*. The crucial word is here *morali*, which recurs in both projects (*Operette morali* and *Moralisti greci*, and, more specifically, in the title *Operette morali* given to the four orations by Isocrates in the *Moralisti greci*).

The difference between the two is this: in his *Operette*, written in 1824 and published in 1827, Leopardi doesn't hesitate to eradicate the very basic structures of classical and Christian ethics. The radicalism of his critique of all received values (and of the idea of Virtue in particular) is such that it anticipates what Nietzsche did some decades later. But, then again in the same years (that is between 1823 and 1827) Leopardi was also working

in his capacity as translator, and asked himself this question: is it still possible, in these modern times (“ai nostri miseri tempi”), to believe in the values that have formed the main frame of Western culture and society for centuries? And again: is there a continuity between Ancient and Modern times as to the possibility of establishing moral values? In other terms, Leopardi was trying to explore, and perhaps to restore, in his translations, some fundamental values (and the idea of Virtue itself) shared by classical philosophers of the Socratic tradition and Christian thinkers; the same values that he himself had contributed to destroying as a modern philosopher in his *Operette morali*.