

**Time in the Piazza: A Reading of
Il Sabato del Villaggio (The Village Saturday)
by Giacomo Leopardi**

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IL SABATO DEL VILLAGGIO

The Village Saturday

La donzelletta vien dalla campagna,
In sul calar del sole,
Col suo fascio dell'erba; e reca in mano
Un mazzolin di rose e di viole,
5 Onde, siccome suole,
Ornare ella si appresta
Dimani, al di di festa, il petto e il crine.
Siede con le vicine
Su la scala a filar la vecchierella,
10 Incontro là dove si perde il giorno;
E novellando vien del suo buon tempo,
Quando ai di della festa ella si ornava,
Ed ancor sana e snella
Solea danzar la sera intra di quei
15 Ch'ebbe compagni dell'età più bella.
Già tutta l'aria imbruna,
Torna azzurro il sereno, e tornan l'ombre
Giù da' colli e da' tetti,
Al biancheggiar della recente luna.
20 Or la squilla dà segno
Della festa che viene;
Ed a quel suon diresti
Che il cor si riconforta.
I fanciulli gridando
25 Su la piazzuola in frotta,
E qua e là saltando,
Fanno un lieto romore:
E intanto riede alla sua parca mensa,
Fischiano, il zappatore,
30 E seco pensa al di del suo riposo.

Poi quando intorno è spenta ogni altra face,
E tutto l'altro tace,
Odi il martel picchiare, odi la sega
Del legnaiuol, che veglia
35 Nella chiusa bottega alla lucerna,
E s'affretta, e s'adopra
Di fornir l'opra anzi il chiarir dell'alba.

Questo di sette è il più gradito giorno,
Pien di speme e di gioia:
40 Diman tristezza e noia
Recheran l'ore, ed al travaglio usato
Ciascuno in suo pensier farà ritorno.

Garzoncello scherzoso,
Cotesta età fiorita
45 E' come un giorno d'allegrezza pieno,
Giorno chiaro, sereno,
Che precorre alla festa di tua vita.
Godi, fanciullo mio; stato soave,
Stagion lieta è cotèsta.
50 Altro dirti non vo'; ma la tua festa
Ch'anco tardi a venir non ti sia grave.

The country girl is coming from the fields
Before the sun has set.
Her head is balancing trussed hay, her hand
A bunch of blooms, the rose, the violet,
5 Which she intends to put
(Tomorrow's holiday
Demands such great display) on breast and hair.
With all her neighbours near
The old crone settles on the steps to spin,
10 Facing that quarter where the day goes down;
She spins the story of her own best days,
Of dressing as she did for holidays,
Lovely and lively then.
And dancing all the night away with those
15 Who were companions of her happy time.
The air begins to gloom,
Sky turns a deeper blue, the shades return
That hills and roof project
Against the whiteness of the risen moon.
20 The bell shrills out to signal
The coming holiday;
And at that sound you'd say
The heart was comforted.
The small boys crowd and shout
25 Throughout the tiny square,
They crowd and leap about,
They leap about and cheer.
Meanwhile returning to his frugal meal
The whistling labourer
30 Thinks happily about his day of rest.

Then when around all other lights are out,
And all things else are mute,
You hear the hammer striking, hear the saw:
That is the carpenter;
35 His shop is shut; inside a lamp is burning;
He works on through the night
To make his work complete before the dawn.

This day of seven is the best of all,
So full of hope and joy:
40 The hours will bring ennui
Tomorrow, and sadness, making everyone
Return in thought to his accustomed toil.

Playful boy, full of zest,
Know all that flowering time
45 Of yours is like the splendour of a day,
That clear, unclouded day
Which tends to come before life's festal prime.
Enjoy it, little boy: a happy state
Is yours, a pleasant lull.
50 I say no more; but if your festival
Delays, that is no reason for regret.

Translation by J. G. Nichols, from Giacomo Leopardi, *The Canti with a selection of his prose*, trans. J. G. Nichols (New York: Routledge, 2003)

0. Giacomo Leopardi: brief notes on life and poetics

Leopardi is considered the greatest Italian lyric poet of the XIX century and one of the greatest in the whole of the Italian literary tradition. Son of a noble family, Giacomo Leopardi was born in 1798 in Recanati, a very small town in the region of Marche, a district of the Papal States, and died in Naples in 1837.

Leopardi lived in the stifling atmosphere of the Italian Restoration Age and started his literary career by opposing the new incoming Romantic theories and poetry and strongly defending the immortal beauty of the classical Greek-Roman literature. Being influenced by the materialistic philosophers of the XVIII century, his revolutionary style combines a complex philosophical meditation on Nature and Time, with a refined lyrical expression of the poet's deepest feelings.

The first complete collection of his poems was published by the poet himself in Florence in 1831 with the title *Canti* (Songs); the last one was published posthumously in 1845. The title *Canti*, unprecedented in Italian literature, indicates the idea of 'poetry with no name', free from the strict rules of the ancient Italian literary tradition.

When in 1824 Leopardi decided to give up poetry and to dedicate himself to prose, he wrote the *Operette Morali* (Minor Moral Essays), a collection of dialogues and essays, in which literature and philosophy, reality and imagination, humor and seriousness are originally combined. The *Operette Morali* shows us most of the main topics of his thought: the indifference and the hostility of nature to mankind, the fleetingness of pleasure and illusions, the power of boredom and pain in human life, the fight between common sense and a deeper wisdom which results from a conscious, mature acceptance of the tragic destiny of mankind.

It is not possible to forget, among his other works, the *Zibaldone*, his daily intellectual journal, which was published posthumously in 1900. It is a vast, complex collection of philosophical, aesthetic, literary, linguistic and social notes, related to all key issues of his thought.

1. The Piazza of the Menippean satire in Leopardi's *Operette Morali* (Minor Moral Essays).

The first draft of *Operette Morali* in 1824 already draws heavily from such an ancient 'serio-comic' literary genre as the Menippean satire, and particularly from Lucian, who was its outstanding representative in Second Century Greek literature. By this means, the literary *topos* of a boundless square enters the fictional world of Leopardi's dialogues in

the *Operette Morali* and is represented as the scene of a close confrontation between opposite interpretations of the world. Leopardi's *piazza* amounts to a *carnavalesque* square, *carnavalesque* being a term coined by the great Russian critic and theoretician Mikhail Bachtin in the early Twentieth century, who pointed the square out as a central image of a literary tradition that is long-established in Western culture and whereby gravity and comedy, literature and philosophy, realistic items and imagination freely mix.

According to Bachtin, this literary tradition started with Plato's dialogues and developed into true and proper Menippean satires at the time of the Hellenistic civilization; then it carried on with the dialogues of the philosophical literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (like in Boetius, Erasmus from Rotterdam and Tasso), all through the Eighteenth-century *comtes philosophiques* in France (primarily Voltaire) or the utopian and humorous novels in England (Swift and Sterne) and Germany (Wieland) during the same period, down to its eventual achievements in the Nineteenth century, when, still according to Bachtin, the Russian writer Dostoevskij finally dismantled any traditional notion of the novel.¹

It is to the square of the Menippean satires that also Leopardi's *piazza* ascribes; a square that in the *Operette Morali* alternatively takes on metaphorical and realistic significance, and where many dialogues take place, such as those between Fashion and Death, the Earth and the Moon, Hercules and Atlas, but also between imaginary figures of philosophers.

As Bachtin reminds us, the *carnavalesque* square is the place where people belonging to completely different social classes can freely mix and where assumed conventions, power structures and hypocritical rites are subverted and where dialogues become the dramatic scenes in which an ultimate truth on the human condition is being searched for by the main characters.

After the literary experience of the *Operette Morali*, the square comes across as a theme also in Leopardi's other works, and during later periods of his life, although under different guises.

In fact, the poem *Il Sabato del Villaggio* dates to many years after the *Operette Morali*, which, as I have already mentioned, were composed in their first version in 1824, and then

1 For the whole perspective of the 'seriocomic' literature and the role of the square in the Menippean satire in the tradition of the *carnavalesque* literature see all the fundamental works by Michail Bachtin, in particular: M. Bachtin, *Dostoevskij. Poetica e stilistica*, trans. G. Garritano (Torino: Einaudi, 1968), ID., *Estetica e romanzo*, trans. C. Strada Janovic (Torino: Einaudi, 1979) and ID., *L'opera di Rabelais e la cultura popolare. Riso, carnevale e festa nella tradizione medievale e rinascimentale*, trans. Mili Romano (Torino: Einaudi, 1979).

the poet's last painful and intense stay at his father's house, in Recanati. In this poem the square is clearly assumed as a real and metaphorical background as well.

2. *Time in the piazza.*

In *Il Sabato del Villaggio*² the square is envisaged through the diverse perspectives of villagers who share the same square and the common expectation of a future happiness, that of a Sunday holiday. Within the square, each of the villagers take up a physical as well as conceptual position, which is carefully described by the gaze of the poet, so that the scene gets charged with strong allegorical meaning. With this intent in mind, Leopardi selects specific stylistic and linguistic devices, like, for instance, the recurring one consisting in a diminutive often preceded by a definite article: 'la donzella' (literally: the little girl); 'la vecchierella' (liter.: the little old lady); 'nella piazzuola' (liter.: in the tiny square); the 'garzoncello' (liter.: little boy), whose function is to stress the emblematic significance of these figures. The strong metaphorical strain of the text gradually depicts the net of complex relationships among these characters just upon the scene of the *piazzuola* (the tiny square).

The 'country girl' who is 'coming from the fields' primarily corresponds to the 'old crone', who, in contrast, 'settles on the steps to spin' together with her friends. The two figures remind each other, in that they share the same wait, but also suggest fundamental differences. Thus, the youthful image in motion of the girl is balanced against the static and meditative one of the old lady. Likewise, the fresh beauty of the young woman seems to challenge the lost charm of the 'old crone', who also used to be 'lovely and lively then'. The fascination exerted by the young woman and arising from her silent and mysterious attitude is balanced against the nostalgic and perhaps voluble stories of the old lady. Finally, the youthful wait for the Sunday holiday, allegorically expressed by the 'bunch of blooms, the rose, the violet' the girl is going to dress on the following day, recalls, by means of a contrast, the tormenting memory of the old lady: «' [...] of her own best days / Of dressing as she did for holidays, [...] And dancing all the night away with those / Who were companions of her happy time'. Today instead her eyes look far away, towards where the day fades away. She looks towards an elsewhere that is both spatial and temporal.

On a different level, the figure of the 'country girl' relates also to that of the 'whistling labourer', returning home from the country-land, glad for the holiday and the approaching break. These two images in motion accompany the author's (and the reader's) gaze entering the square and also portray two different ways to experience the wait: that of the country girl is the affectionately flirting manner of a girl who cares about holiday dresses as well as about the pleasures and meetings the holiday will entail; that of the labourer is the humble

2 The edition of Leopardi's works from which the poem will be quoted in this essay is G. Leopardi, *Canti*, ed. E. Peruzzi (Milano: Rizzoli, 1998). The English translation is quoted from G. Leopardi, *The Canti with a selection of his prose*, trans. J. G. Nichols (New York: Routledge, 2003).

and more practical manner of a farmer, who, in contrast, basically looks forward to his Sunday rest.

But it is exactly (and not by chance therefore) in the middle of the poem (first stanza, line 25) that one eventually comes across the image of the 'tiny square', the real centre of gravity of the poem, in which 'The small boys crowd and shout'. The echo of their voices in the square 'leap about and cheer', being the allegorical significance of a shouted and irrepressible will to take delight, along with the confidence in a forthcoming and never-ending happiness: that happiness of adulthood.

The depiction of a wonderful twilight from line 16 to line 20 paves the way for the following scene, while its iridescent colours seem to suggest ('The air begins to gloom') the problematic side of this eager wait. The following nocturnal scene displays the quiet little square in the dark: one can only distinguish the lights and rhythmical sounds coming from the carpenter's workshop, whose strokes seem to beat the relentless going by of the hours which separate the villagers from their most desired holiday. This is the time when silence and darkness gradually prepare the reader to listen to another voice, that of the poet. Thus, in the following scene the poet turns his and the readers' eyes away from the preparations for the holiday, so as to halt and observe the transience of the pleasure which is enjoyed on this day of the week. Saturday will necessarily be followed by the sadness and boredom of Sunday, when the worry about the imminent return of the dull daily life of the weekdays will dissolve the intense pleasure supposedly natural to so much desired holidays.

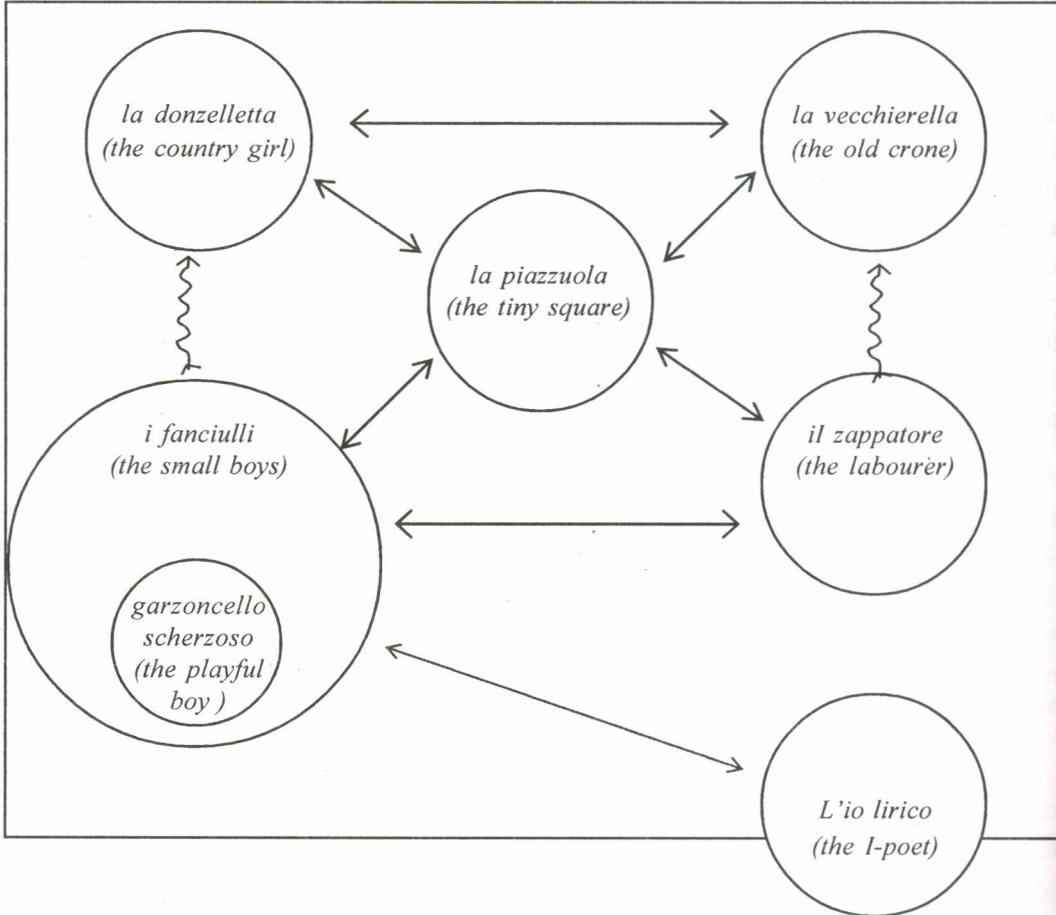
By no chance the ending stanza, through its gnomic tone, features the 'playful boy, full of zest' as interlocutor, the very same boy the reader already saw playing and screaming at the centre of the square with his very young friends. Here the playful boy is summoned, by means of a subtle and affectionate irony, to think about a very different future from the one he is hoping for. All of a sudden, the viewpoint on the square is broadened by the author and the blue, reassuring veil of a pure, naive hope covering the young boy's imagination is raised for a short while: the scene suddenly widens, with a dizzy zoom that now frames the square, including the poet himself. In fact, the poet has thus far remained covered beyond a window which is not completely metaphorical.

By means of this procedure, that pattern of symmetrical opposites we already cope with at the beginning of this talk, is featured once again: the pair 'country girl/old crone' corresponds now to the pair 'poet/playful boy' with a difference: while the opposition youth/old age is kept unchanged, now a theme, which before was less evident, is emphasized, that of the relationship between innocence and experience. And yet, the experience of the poet differs from that of the old woman, who is necessarily constrained within the limitations of her little world and her small square, and left unaware of the problematic human condition. The poet is really out of the scene, far out from the square, both factually and metaphorically.

He can see and understand things that it would be impossible for the villagers to see and understand from within such enclosed space.

The final invitation has the ironical and charming touch of a man who looks from afar, from above, the tender, unaware striving of men towards a better life, towards the hope of the future of happiness which the poet has already experimented as something impossible to obtain. The square scene becomes thus the allegorical emblem of a collective dream of hope, a dream of a time that cannot really exist, the time of a happy stage of life that moves far away from us as we approach it, until it finally gets blurred in the evening shadows of our lives, like in the eyes of the little old woman. The disappearance of the square – the space where the theatre of life was staged by the poet – corresponds in the vision of the author to the waning of time, particularly of a better future, which, through a process of incessant change in the present, turns soon into reality and makes every man feel the painful precariousness of his existence.

***Il sabato del villaggio* di Giacomo Leopardi
(Giacomo Leopardi's *The Village Saturday*)**



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