

Coming Way Far-Away from Would-Be Ecomonics : The Outsidedness of Logics : Flower of the Desert : Poetics as Ontology from Leopardi to Negri

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(出版者 / Publisher)

Institute of Comparative Economic Studies, Hosei University / 法政大学比較経済研究所

(雑誌名 / Journal or Publication Title)

比較経済研究所ワーキングペーパー / 比較経済研究所ワーキングペーパー

(巻 / Volume)

145

(開始ページ / Start Page)

60

(終了ページ / End Page)

70

(発行年 / Year)

2009-02-20

知としての経済学理論の脱構築－理論の外部－ シリーズ No.1

**Coming Way Far-Away From Would-Be Economics :
The Outsidedness of Logics**

Nagahara Research Project

Coming Way Far-Away From Would-Be Economics: The Outsidedness of Logics

CONTENTS

Introduction & Acknowledgements

Yutaka Nagahara (ICES Hosei University)

- 1 French Theory and the Outside of Philosophy: Lacan's Desiring Machine
Janell Watson (Virginia Tech.) 1
- 2 On Going "Beyond the Pale of the Human"?
Kenneth Surin (Duke University) 34
- 3 The Production of Subjectivity: From the Transindividual to the Commons
Jason Read (University of Southern Maine) 45
 - * Comments on Jason Read
Takashi Satoh (Oita University) 57
- 4 Flower of the Desert: Poetics as Ontology from Leopardi to Negri
Timothy S. Murphy (University of Oklahoma) 60
- 5 The Militant Diagram and the Problem of Political Passion
Nicholas Thoburn (Manchester University) 71
 - * Comments on Nicholas Thoburn
Kosuke Oki (Kagawa University) 90

Introduction & Acknowledgements

1 本論集は、法政大学比較経済研究所の補助（2007年度法政大学競争的資金獲得研究助成金）によって、2007年12月13日から14日に法政大学ポアソナード・タワーで開催された〈The Outsides of What looks like an Elegant Circle: Economics and Its Residue〉と題されたWorkshopで読まれた論攷を集めたものである。またこの論集には、Workshopには参加されなかったTimothy Murphy氏が、本プロジェクトへの共感を示され、論攷を寄せてくださった。

2 Workshopでは、Tomiko Yoda (Duke University)が佐藤良一教授（法政大学経済学部）とともに司会の労を執ってくださるとともに、Mark Driscoll (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)がKenneth Surin教授へのDiscussantとして参加してくださった。

3 〈経済学理論の外部〉を探るという本論集に込められた企図は、2008年度法政大学競争的資金獲得研究助成金の補助によってより深化され、2009年1月に行われたRobert Brenner (UCLA)およびDuncan Foley (New School for Social Research)へのインタビューへと繋がれている（両氏のインタビューは現在編集中であり、比較経済研究所のサイトへアップする予定である）。

末尾になるが、比較経済研究所の前所長・菊池道樹教授および現所長・絵所秀紀教授に感謝する。両氏の助力がなければ本論集は完成し得なかった。また比較経済研究所の家村真名氏と山家歩さん（法政大学社会学部）には煩瑣な依頼に快く応えていただいた。感謝する。

なお、収録した論文の引用および転載は禁止する。

Poetics as Ontology from Leopardi to Negri

Timothy S. Murphy

Antonio Negri has gained a degree of notoriety at two distinct stages of his long career, for two very different reasons: first, in the Seventies, as a theorist and organizer of the Italian radical workers' movement who was imprisoned without trial on charges of terrorism⁶⁴, and later, in the new millennium, as a theorist of globalization who views it as a process without a center.⁶⁵ The critical and journalistic preoccupation with these two admittedly important stages has almost completely obscured the rest of Negri's long, varied and fascinating development as a thinker engaged with politics, ethics and ontology. Perhaps the most important aspect of his work that has been so obscured is the radical shift in his critical perspective that took place between the Seventies and the new millennium, a shift whose logic and reference points are still poorly understood by both his opponents and his admirers. This shift is what produced the Negri who is now so often cited, the Negri who often seems more closely allied with Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze than with the Marx and Lenin of his activist days. In what follows I will try to bring some of the logic and reference points of that shift to light, and in the process demonstrate how Negri "became what he is" — as Nietzsche would say.⁶⁶

Negri himself has acknowledged that his experience of imprisonment from his arrest on April 7, 1979 to his election to the Italian parliament in 1983 imposed a fundamental reorientation on his thought. It isolated him from the social and political movements to which he had dedicated more than a decade of his life and deprived him of most of the intellectual tools necessary to continue the militant analysis of the present that had preoccupied him during that period. His only alternative was to turn back to his original scholarly training in the history of philosophy, but with a significant difference. In the preface to *The Savage Anomaly* he notes that

It is incontestable that an important stimulus to studying the origins of Modern thought and the Modern history of the State lies in the recognition that the analysis of the genetic crisis can be useful for clarifying the terms of the dissolution of the capitalist and bourgeois State. However, even though this project did form the core of some of my earlier studies (on Descartes, for example), today it holds less interest for me. What interests me, in fact, is not so much the origins of the bourgeois State and its crisis but, rather, the theoretical alternatives and the suggestive possibilities offered by the revolution in process.⁶⁷

We might paraphrase this shift, in terms that Negri sometimes uses, as a transition from the *pars destruens* or destructive step of the dissolution of the capitalist state to the *pars constuens* or constructive step of constitutive ontology.⁶⁸ *The Savage Anomaly* (1981) itself,

⁶⁴ On Negri's imprisonment and trial (in that order), see my introduction to Negri's *Books for Burning: Between Democracy and Civil War in 1970s Italy* (New York: Verso, 2005).

⁶⁵ See of course Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), and the forthcoming *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), as well as the extensive critical literature that has arisen around those texts.

⁶⁶ See the subtitle to Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is* (in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufman [New York: Modern Library, 1968], p.671).

⁶⁷ Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp.xx-xxi.

⁶⁸ On this terminology, see Michael Hardt, "Into the Factory: Negri's Lenin and the Subjective Caesura (1968-73)" in Timothy S. Murphy and Abdul-Karim Mustapha, eds., *The Philosophy of Antonio Negri: Resistance in*

which bears the dateline “From the prisons of Rovigo, Rebibbia, Fossombrone, Palmi and Trani, April 7, 1979 – April 7, 1980”⁶⁹, is only the earliest and most visible manifestation of this reorientation, at least for Anglophone readers, but by itself it does not reveal the full magnitude of the shift. To grasp the real extent of his reorientation, readers must engage Negri’s other works of the period that explicitly bear the imprint of his prison experience, such as *Fabbriche del soggetto* [*Factories of the Subject*] (1987) and *Politics of Subversion* (1988), works of political philosophy in which he first lays out the contours of his constitutive ontology, as well as *Il lavoro di Giobbe* [*The Labor of Job*] (1990) and my primary subject today, *Lenta ginestra: Saggio sull’ontologia di Giacomo Leopardi* [*Gentle Broom: On Giacomo Leopardi’s Ontology*] (1987), works of essentially literary analysis which lay the groundwork for what we might call the linguistic or poetic “turn” his thought has taken as part of its *pars construens*. Negri’s work on Spinoza has been widely analyzed, and his constitutive ontology has also been engaged from a variety of critical perspectives, but his poetic turn has attracted little attention as yet, despite the fact that it forms the basis for much of his work on immaterial labor and network resistance.⁷⁰

The other striking aspect of Negri’s reorientation that is bound up with his poetic turn and that similarly deserves to be brought to light is the shift in his attitude toward the tradition of French Nietzscheanism, by which I mean primarily the work of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault. In his pre-prison writings, references to those thinkers are few, and they tend to be rather ambivalent, as in the account of Foucault in the essay “Sulla metodo della critica della politica” [On the Method of the Critique of Politics] (1977)⁷¹, whereas after his relocation to Paris, Negri begins to place Foucault’s conceptions of biopower and biopolitics and Deleuze’s logic of radical immanence at the center of his own project. This rapprochement can be partially understood *ad hominem* as a consequence of the fact that it was the philosophical circle around Deleuze, most importantly Félix Guattari, which embraced and supported Negri before his imprisonment and during his Parisian exile as a result of shared political convictions as well as the convergence between his Spinoza interpretation and Deleuze’s own.⁷² To understand the shift *ad rem* is somewhat more complicated, however, given Negri’s prior ambivalence to Foucault’s Nietzschean methods and the apparent absence of Nietzsche from his own earlier philosophical frame of reference. Indeed, Negri has only ever written one essay on Nietzsche: “Marxistes: une approche paradoxale” [Marxists: A Paradoxical Approach], published in 1992, is a very brief account of Marxist responses to Nietzsche from Lukács onward. Can such a brief — and belated — textual engagement with Nietzsche actually account for the shift in Negri’s philosophical perspective?

In the course of a very careful and suggestive contextual reading of that single essay on Nietzsche, Judith Revel has shown that Negri, like others who emerged from the current known as autonomist Marxism, “found in Nietzsche a reformulation of the link between subjectivity and production from the viewpoint of creation, a violent polemic against a dialectical understanding of history, and a radical critique of real socialism in all its varieties”.⁷³ Central to this approach is the practice of reading Nietzsche “no longer from within a modernity for which

Practice (London: Pluto Press, 2005), pp.7-37.

⁶⁹ Negri, *Savage Anomaly*, p.xxiii.

⁷⁰ It also connects his work closely to that of Paolo Virno, Christian Marazzi, Maurizio Lazzarato, and others working in the field of “cognitive capitalism”.

⁷¹ Antonio Negri, *Macchina tempo: Rompicapi Liberazione Costituzione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1982) pp.70-84. This essay was originally published in the philosophy journal *Aut Aut* in 1978.

⁷² See Antonio Negri and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Negri on Negri*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp.42-50.

⁷³ Judith Revel, “Antonio Negri, French Nietzschean? From the Will to Power to the Ontology of Power” in Timothy S. Murphy and Abdul-Karim Mustapha, eds., *The Philosophy of Antonio Negri 2: Revolution in Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), pp.91-92.

he would serve as the signifier of a profound crisis, decadence or alternately even the horizon of redemption, but instead in an *anti-modern* manner”, which entails the affirmation of “the necessity of overcoming modernity, or...the idea that a different model of modernity was possible”.⁷⁴ In terms of Nietzsche’s concepts, this approach focuses not on the transvaluation of all values or the overman but rather on “the will to power as the subjective power of creation and inauguration and the construction of a model of historicity that functions as a critique of scientific positivism and of the Hegelian dialectic at the same time”.⁷⁵ She goes on to explain quite convincingly how, “On the basis of this double lineage — a ‘French-style’ historicism of which Foucault will become the most striking figure, and a Spinozism of power that owes so much to Deleuze — we can understand Negri’s Nietzscheanism”.⁷⁶

A question remains, though: what is the immediate source of all these Nietzschean elements in Negri’s writings? They don’t arise from direct engagements with Nietzsche; even Negri’s post-prison writings contain only occasional and peripheral references to Nietzsche, often framed by Heidegger’s reading. They don’t seem to arise from explicit reconsiderations of the Nietzschean elements in Deleuze and Foucault either; by the time he begins to write about his new allies, the reorientation has already taken place. Yet Revel is undoubtedly right to describe Negri as a “French Nietzschean”, and I will argue that the source of all the Nietzschean elements that she identifies — an “untimely” critique of dialectical and scientific history, an implacable antagonism toward the abstract administration of life, and subjectivation and ontology conceived as creation or *poiesis* — lies precisely in his interpretation of the Italian philologist, essayist and poet Giacomo Leopardi. As Revel herself notes in passing, the “anti-modern” interpretation of Nietzsche “was first inferred by Mazzino Montinari [the Italian co-editor, with Giorgio Colli, of the definitive edition of Nietzsche’s works], in the wake of the approach that [Cesare] Luporini and [Sebastiano] Timpanaro had applied to the works of Giacomo Leopardi, which could be considered in many ways as anticipating those of Nietzsche”.⁷⁷ Thus I am claiming that Leopardi serves Negri as an anticipatory stand-in for Nietzsche, a dark or not-so-dark precursor who connects Negri’s work to the heterogeneous series of Foucault and Deleuze.⁷⁸ In addition, Leopardi compels Negri to confront for the first time the constitutive role that language plays in the production of subjectivity and community. Leopardi thereby provided Negri with many of the same theoretical tools that Nietzsche gave to Deleuze and Foucault, and consequently made possible Negri’s new line of alliance and his poetic turn despite his minimal direct engagement with Nietzsche.

Despite his canonical stature in the history of Italian poetry — where he is lauded as the peer of Dante and Plutarch — Leopardi is not widely read, or even widely known, in the Anglophone world, so it is not surprising that Negri’s study of Leopardi has been ignored by Anglophone critics. A little background may therefore be in order. Leopardi was born to an aristocratic family in the provincial town of Recanati in 1798 and, after struggling most of his life to escape that suffocating environment, died in Naples in 1837. Aside from brief periods of study with tutors, he was almost entirely self-taught in the fields of his greatest achievement, namely classical philology, the history of philosophy and poetry; indeed, so intense was his independent study that it permanently impaired his physical health and contributed to his early death. His

⁷⁴ This anti-modern reading of Nietzsche closely parallels Negri’s reading of Spinoza; see his essay “Spinoza’s Anti-Modernity” in Negri, *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)Contemporary Variations*, trans. Timothy S. Murphy et al (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp.79-93.

⁷⁵ Revel, p.91.

⁷⁶ Revel, p.104.

⁷⁷ Revel, p.91.

⁷⁸ Negri has acknowledged the similarities between Leopardi and Spinoza that drew him to both thinkers during his time in prison, and while these overlap with the similarities between Leopardi & Nietzsche, they are ultimately distinct. See his essay “Between Infinity and Community: Notes on Materialism in Spinoza and Leopardi” in *Subversive Spinoza*, pp.59-78.

poetic output was comparatively small — 36 poems, primarily in the lyric mode, that occupy fewer than 150 pages in his collected works — but it is extended and enriched by his prose writings, most importantly his *Moral Essays* and his massive, posthumously published philosophical/critical notebooks, the *Zibaldone*. His prose writings in particular reveal his assiduous study of the anti-idealist philosophies that contributed essential elements to his own materialist metaphysics: Locke’s critique of innate ideas, Condillac’s sensationalism, the Enlightenment materialism of La Mettrie and d’Holbach, and so on.⁷⁹

As in the case of his study of Spinoza, Negri’s account of Leopardi’s development stresses its discontinuities. Whereas in Spinoza he identified a second, immanent and productive “second foundation” that displaced the first, neo-Platonic and emanationist foundation of the *Ethics* toward a constitutive ontology, in Leopardi he identifies five stages of nonlinear development:

In the first period Leopardi confronts the dialectical culture of the beginning of the nineteenth century; in the second he shifts his focus toward a radical sensualist theory, with points of extreme pessimism; in the third and fourth periods Leopardi attempts, with various different motivations, to develop an approach to history and strives to reconstruct an ethical perspective; in the fifth period, he theorizes human community and the urgency of liberation.⁸⁰

Leopardi’s last great poem, “La ginestra, o il fiore del deserto” [“The Broom, or, The Flower of the Desert”], recapitulates this process of development and in so doing serves as the culmination of Negri’s account of the poet’s poetic, political and philosophical project. I will refer often to “The Broom” in laying out the broad outlines of what I am calling Leopardi’s anticipatory Nietzscheanism.

Nietzsche himself was well aware of his predecessor’s achievements, and described Leopardi as “perhaps the greatest stylist of the century”⁸¹ and “the modern ideal of a philologist”.⁸² This tribute is particularly significant because it arises in the context of Nietzsche’s meditation on their shared profession, classical philology, whose methods led them to remarkably similar conclusions regarding history, society and existence. For example, Nietzsche’s conception of the “untimely” has been widely influential, but his readers often forget that he first presented it as precisely the critical power of classical philology: “I do not know what meaning classical studies could have for our time if they were not untimely — that is to say, acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come”.⁸³ In the second *Untimely Meditation*, from which that famous quotation is drawn, Nietzschean untimeliness takes the form of a virulent critique of the positivistic, teleological “science” of history, denounced as the desubjectified accumulation of indifferent data that fossilizes life in the present and denies it a future. Contrasting this science to the ancient Greeks’ subordination of history to life, Nietzsche traces the problem back to the Hegelian philosophy of history, the inevitable coming to consciousness of spirit in its dialectical passage through matter and time that culminates in the non-culture of the nineteenth century:

The belief that one is a latecomer of the ages is, in any case, paralyzing and depressing;

⁷⁹ For a quick outline of Leopardi’s materialism in English, see Negri’s “Between Infinity and Community”, pp.63-64.

⁸⁰ Negri, “Between Infinity and Community”, p.77n23.

⁸¹ Nietzsche, “We Philologists” in *The Complete Works of Nietzsche* volume 8, ed. Oscar Levy and trans. J.M. Kennedy (Edinburgh: T.N. Foulis, 1911), section 63.

⁸² Nietzsche, “We Philologists”, section 10.

⁸³ Nietzsche, “On the uses and disadvantages of history for life” in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.60.

but it must appear dreadful and devastating when such a belief one day by a bold inversion raises this latecomer to godhood as the true meaning and goal of all previous events, when his miserable condition is equated with a completion of world-history ... for Hegel the climax and terminus of the world-process coincided with his own existence in Berlin.⁸⁴

A generation before Nietzsche, almost contemporaneous with Hegel, Leopardi was already thinking in an “untimely” fashion on the basis of his own youthful studies in classical philology. As Negri sees it, Leopardi responds to the “catastrophe of memory” that is the confused aftermath of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic restoration in an anti-Hegelian — and anti-modern — way. Negri insists that

The dialectic shatters the confusion of historical time, intervening into the catastrophe of memory and, with Hegel, re-ordering everything... the difference is resolved into a sublime, reasonable overdetermination of the totality of development. The historical delay allows Hegel to conceive philosophy as the “owl of Minerva” that explores, re-organizes and sanctifies historical effectiveness. The confusion and error of memory become the logic of history.⁸⁵

Thus the synthesizing teleology of dialectical history transforms the unpredictable whiplash of revolution and reaction into an epiphenomenon of linear development, turning history into a ruse of reason and reducing the constituent power of the revolutionary movement to the constituted power of the state. While Leopardi, like Hegel, displaces the historical catastrophe to the metaphysical plane, for him “this translation of the event leaves the problem open and indicates, within the time of the dialectic, not a logical solution but an ethical opening”. This opening is the immanent and material space in which subjective agency is constructed, as we will see shortly. In this Leopardi resembles Hölderlin: “Within the time of the dialectic, confronted by the need to establish distinctions in the chaos of memory, both of them refuse the logical solution and idealist foundation of science” (*LG* 31). This commitment to poetic creation and ethical practice over logical closure leads Leopardi to attack the teleological progressivism that his era was just beginning to learn from Hegel. In “The Broom” he ironically presents the unstable landscape around Vesuvius as a depiction of

*... the impressive destiny
and fated progress of the human race.*
Here see yourself reflected,
Proud century and stupid,
You who have left the way
Where man’s reascent thought had made its mark
And signaled you to follow, you who take
Some pride in moving backwards
And even call it progress” (ll.50-58).⁸⁶

One of the main objects of Leopardi’s untimely critique of progressive history, which Negri often describes as a “dialectic of Enlightenment” that directly anticipates Horkheimer and

⁸⁴ Nietzsche, “On the uses and disadvantages of history for life”, p.104. This is the aspect of Nietzsche’s work that was most significant for Foucault; see Revel, pp.96-100.

⁸⁵ Antonio Negri, *Lenta ginestra: Saggio sull’ontologia di Giacomo Leopardi* (Milan: Mimesis, 2001; originally published by SugarCo in 1987), p.31. Further references to this edition will be noted parenthetically in my text with the abbreviation *LG*.

⁸⁶ Throughout this paper I cite J.G. Nichols’ translation of “The Broom” from *The Canti* (London: Carcanet, 1994), pp.141-148. Further references to it by line numbers will be included parenthetically in my text.

Adorno's analyses,⁸⁷ is what Negri will later call, following Foucault, biopower: the institutional management of life that develops through the sciences of public health, education and administration in the course of the nineteenth century, which become key weapons in the arsenals of both the democratic reformists and the monarchical reactionaries. Leopardi denounces what he calls the "statistical" approach of these sciences as a project for producing docile, interchangeable social and political subjects for the European nation-states that were still being consolidated, alternately by democrats and monarchists, during his lifetime. For Leopardi as for Horkheimer and Adorno, this project exemplifies the subordination of critical reason to the institutional unreason of the despotic state, which Negri calls a "false illusion" that must be fought in the name of the "true illusion" of revolutionary community (I will return to this point below). Linked to his denunciation of statistics is Leopardi's attack on mass-market journalism as a tool for molding public opinion, which in some ways anticipates Benedict Anderson's identification of the modern nation-form with the rise of what he calls "print capitalism".⁸⁸ Leopardi's contempt for both aspects of this project leads him to the point of viciously parodying the culmination of Italian progressivist ideology, the *Risorgimento* or unification of the Italian nation that was underway during his lifetime, in his mock-epic "The War of the Mice and the Crabs" (see *LG* 182-202). This contempt for the structural unreason of the progressivist/nationalist project appears in "The Broom" as a bitter address to the administrators of human life:

You dream of liberty, but also wish
 To enslave that thought by which
 Alone we rose a little
 Above barbarity, by which alone
 We grow in civil living, and which only
 Betters the people's lot" (ll.72-77).

In Leopardi's untimely critique of statistics and mass administration we can hear echoes of Nietzsche's later critique of socialism and democracy as continuations of the ascetic ideal and "heir[s] of the Christian movement" against life: the anarchists, for example, seem opposites of the peacefully industrious democrats and ideologists of revolution, and even more so of the doltish philosophasters and brotherhood enthusiasts who call themselves socialists and want a "free society"; but in fact they are at one with the lot in their thorough and instinctive hostility to every other form of society except that of the *autonomous* herd ... They are at one in their tough resistance to every special claim, every special right and privilege (which means in the last analysis, *every* right: for once all are equal nobody needs "rights" any more).⁸⁹

Although Nietzsche does not focus on statistics and journalism as Leopardi does, he identifies a similar threat in mass or herd democracy: the threat of de-differentiation, the reduction and co-optation of difference for purposes of command and control. Nietzsche calls the statisticians of life "levelers"⁹⁰ whose work "will on average lead to the leveling and mediocritization of man — to a useful, industrious, handy, multi-purpose herd animal".⁹¹ His

⁸⁷ Negri directly interrogates Horkheimer and Adorno's dialectic of Enlightenment, and Adorno's theory of the end of poetry that follows from it, in his essay "Art and Culture in the Age of Empire and the Time of the Multitudes", trans. Max Henninger, in *SubStance* 112 (2007), pp.48-55.

⁸⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), especially chapter three, pp.37-46.

⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, section 202, p.306.

⁹⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 44, p.244.

⁹¹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 242, p.366.

parallel critique of the “disease” of German nationalism, and nationalism in general, is well known.⁹²

Finally, we come to the anti-dialectical alternative to both progressive or teleological history and the statistical administration of life that Negri finds in Leopardi’s “metaphysics of constitution” (LG 217). The explication of that metaphysics or ontology, which occupies the entirety of *Lenta ginestra*, is far too complex to follow in detail here, but Negri summarizes it as a prelude to his reading of “The Broom” at the end of the volume. His analysis identifies three key steps that have clear Nietzschean resonances. The first step is

a complete and radical revision of the concept of nature. [In Leopardi] it appears not as a unitary essence but rather immediately as a split, as one of the masks of the vicissitudes of being and it is implicated in the catastrophe that constitutes its essence... This concept of nature is set before us as a context of alternative values that must be distinguished. Nature is something split, therefore it is the terrain of a choice to which we are pressed or rather constrained by the possibility of destruction and death that it implies (LG 216-217).

Leopardi sees nature not as an undifferentiated unity opposed to human civilization nor as the subordinate counterpart of a triumphant dialectical reason but rather as an active nothingness, a faceless, non-subjective antagonism toward all of its productions (including the human subject), “the ruin of all rational consistency” (LG 206) that bears comparison to Nietzsche’s conception of the “original Titanic divine order of terror”, “the terror and horror of [non-individuated] existence” delineated most forcefully in *The Birth of Tragedy*.⁹³ In “The Broom”, this conception of nature is figured as “Vesuvius the destroyer” (l.3), whose lava flows obliterated Pompeii but later provide fields where the broom grows — but only until the next eruption. The volcano’s slope starkly displays “How humankind is held/In nature’s loving hand”: nature is both life and death, strength and weakness, creation and destruction, and the immanent difference between those aspects offers the possibility of a choice, a selection or affirmation within and against nature that produces the human subject — which is figured as, but also contrasted with, the gentle broom itself, “denizen of the desert” (l.7) — in the struggle of life against death. This conception of a differentiating and differentiated nature entails many of the same consequences as Nietzsche’s ontological conception of will to power.⁹⁴

From this split in nature a second step follows, which concerns the subject in its relation to nature, the subject that stands up to it or struggles against it:

In the constitutive passage that we are now beginning to verify between the critical event — that is, the recognition of a gap in knowledge faced with the nothingness in which the spirit threatens to founder — and an ethical act, a constructive gap opens up, an attempt not merely to escape nothingness but rather, on the basis of this separation, an attempt to constitute the schema of the ontological imagination emerges. (LG 217)

Negri sees Leopardi’s ontology opposed not only to the Hegelian teleology of absolute spirit but also to what he sees as the source of its apotheosis of reason, namely Kant’s transcendental analytic that subordinates the imagination, as a purely instrumental faculty, to reason. Against this, Leopardi presents the imagination as an ontological activity that responds

⁹² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 251, p.377.

⁹³ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, section 3, p.42.

⁹⁴ See, among other things, the famous final aphorisms (1066 and 1067, pp.548-550) in Nietzsche’s *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1967).

to the antagonism of nature by creating active illusions for its own survival⁹⁵:

If we return to Kantian terminology, this means that the transcendental aesthetic, far from seeking the analytic or demanding that it complete the possible deduction of the subject, instead opposes the analytic, recognizes it as a hostile function, as a mystifying trap from which it must free itself or preferably avoid altogether. In the critical making [fare] of poetry, the transcendental aesthetic reveals the essence of the subject, its opening to the world, to the imagination, to the true illusion and against the analytic prison of the logically true. (LG 208)⁹⁶

These illusions, whose logic corresponds quite closely to the genealogy of truth as “illusions which we have forgotten are illusions” that Nietzsche outlines in “On Truth and Lying in the Nonmoral Sense”,⁹⁷ constitute a “second nature”, a transformed or reconstituted world within which the subject can survive and even thrive. This is Leopardi’s way of assenting, in advance, to Nietzsche’s claim that “it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*”⁹⁸, if we understand “justified” to mean something like “made livable for particular forms of life”.

But distinctions arise and choices between affirmation and negation must be made within second nature as well, ethical choices between “true and false illusions”, which correspond to the Nietzschean choices between “good”, life-affirming illusions and “bad”, pathological ones. This is the third and final step of Leopardi’s constitutive ontology. As Negri notes,

The nature-subject antagonism is dynamic and open as a result of a double rupture: first on the side nature, by a series of radical alternatives that oppose the values of positive and negative, life and death, youth and age; then on the side of the subject moving between nothingness and the being of consciousness, seeking life and opposing death. It seeks to understand the relation that ties it to nature across the complexity of exclusions, alternatives and ethical choices that compose this relation. (LG 217)

Such ethical choices figure into “The Broom” as the contrast between humankind’s arrogant belief that it is “the lord and end of all” (l.189) for whose sake “the authors of the universe came down,/... and held a conversation” (ll.192-193) and the lesson of the broom, whose head “was never bowed before/In craven supplication and in vain/To the oppressor [i.e., nature]; never held erect/Either, in crazy pride towards the stars” (ll.307-310). This contrast in the poem also marks the persistence of Leopardi’s critique of Christianity as anthropomorphism, which has several additional points of convergence with Nietzsche’s that are beyond the scope of this essay.

⁹⁵ See passages in Leopardi’s *Zibaldone* such as the following: “imagination is the source of reason, as it is of feeling, passions, poetry. This faculty that we suppose to be a principle, a distinct and determined quality of the human soul, either does not exist or it is merely the same thing, the same disposition along with a hundred others that we distinguish absolutely from it, and with the same thing we call reflection or the faculty to reflect, and with what we call intellect etc. Imagination and intellect are the same.” (Leopardi, *Zibaldone: A Selection*, trans. Martha King and Daniela Bini [New York: Peter Lang, 1992], p.149.

⁹⁶ Compare to Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche as a critic of Kantian morality in chapter 3 of *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), and Michael Hardt’s identification of this “triangulation” with Deleuze’s general project of anti-Hegelianism in *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp.27-30).

⁹⁷ Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche’s Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, ed. and trans. Daniel Brazeale (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1979), p.

⁹⁸ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, section 5, p.52.

The ultimate expression of the ethical demand to choose “true illusions” lies in the impulse toward community as a new collective subject, and this is the point at which Leopardi’s thought most significantly diverges from Nietzsche’s, at least as the latter is most often understood. As Negri sees it, “The ethical community is born, positively, in the separation”, the fissure or gap in nature that only the constitutive imagination can fill:

the necessity of the “common war” [against nature as catastrophe] posits the conditions of solidarity and, through it, freedom... The community, therefore, is opposed to nature to the point that it is born from the conflict itself. The community is the collective subject that constructs itself within the horizon of the war. (LG 220-222)

This conception of community appears in Leopardi’s work for the first time in “The Broom”; like Spinoza, he turns his attention to the issue of effective political community only at the end of his life and in relatively ambiguous terms that have been interpreted in divergent ways by his readers.⁹⁹ The identification of nature as the inescapable and undefeatable common enemy, however, is clear: “He is a noble being/Who lifts — he is so bold —/His mortal eyes against/The common doom, and with an honest tongue,/Admits the evils of our destiny,/Our feeble lowly state;/.../But fixes guilt where it belongs, on Mother/Nature: mother because she bears us all,/Stepmother, though, by virtue of her will./She is his enemy” (ll.111-17, 123-26). According to Negri’s reading, because of the infinite disproportion of power between nature and humankind (registered explicitly in the poem’s meditation on infinity in lines 167-183), the only effective resistance to such an enemy lies in community: “since he [that is, the noble being] thinks,/What is the simple truth,/Mankind has been united, organized,/Against her from the first,/He sees all men as allies of each other,/And he accepts them all/With true affection, giving/The prompt assistance he expects from them/In all the varying danger and the troubles/Their common war gives rise to” (ll.126-35). The broom too reflects this recognition of the power of community — at the start of the poem, the flowers are “spread... in solitary tufts” (l.5), but by the end they grow into “sweetly scented thickets” (l.298).

The ethical affirmation of community thus conceived is predicated not on pure or practical reason but rather on the aesthetics — or rather the poetics, which is to say the *poiesis* or imaginative “making” [*fare*] ¹⁰⁰, of empowering “true illusions”, and such practical empowerment is the only possible immanent meaning of truth for Leopardi as it is for Nietzsche. As Negri says, “The true can only be constituted in making. It only exists as subordinate to making” (LG 208). Clearly the ontological making or *poiesis* at stake here goes far beyond the literary genre of poetry, but it does very emphatically include poetic language as a privileged instance. ¹⁰¹ At the close of his study, Negri sums up its results as follows:

In a materialist universe, truth is a name and the universal is a convention, but poetry, on the contrary, is a concretization, a process of construction. Poetry is the conclusion

⁹⁹ See Spinoza’s *Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), chapter 11, pp.135-137, as well as Negri’s attempt to complete Spinoza’s conception of democracy in “*Reliqua desiderantur*: A Conjecture for a Definition of the Concept of Democracy in the Final Spinoza” in *Subversive Spinoza*, pp.28-58.

¹⁰⁰ Negri’s usage of *poiesis* seems to refer implicitly to Heidegger’s distinction between the repeatable, rule-generating/governed *praxis* of the craftsman and scientist and the *poiesis* of the artist that exceeds any technical repetition or rule and thereby implicates existence (see “...Poetically Man Dwells...” in Heidegger’s *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter [New York: Harper & Row, 1971], pp.211-229). However, Negri’s conception of living labor, derived from Marx, deconstructs this opposition to posit *poiesis* as the defining characteristic of all production of value.

¹⁰¹ For another gloss on this, see also Negri’s *Arte e multitude: Neuf lettres sur l’Art* (Paris: Editions EPEL, 2005): “The first paradox is that of an aesthetic, that is to say a discourse on the beautiful, which, when it confronts this concreteness of the body, can no longer be given...Thus only a poetics can exist, consist, be given: a poetics as a very singular artistic *poiesis*, as an action expressing a practice of the beautiful from within acting. No discourse can describe it—only a participatory discourse of poetics will be capable to expressing it” (pp.19-20).

of a making within the concrete and within immediacy. Thus every truth has a poetic aspect from the moment it becomes real.... Ethical practice is situated between poetry and the true. It is a “making” set in motion by freedom that determines the constitution of the true. (LG 227)

Thus conceived, poetry not only constitutes the true but it also gives history an immanent meaning and direction:

To confer a sense on history, poetry must appear as an act of the practical constitution of being, not as a handmaid of the true but as productive of the true in the practical and material sense. In this way it constitutes a significant ontological activity.... It is the voice of an analytical making whose comprehensive material and constitutive force extends from sense to feeling, from experience to history. (LG 203-204)

Therefore poetry is the aesthetic justification of existence and the world that Nietzsche demanded of Greek tragedy, as well as the necessary counterforce to both the dialectical reduction of history to linear progress and the biopolitical administration of life.

This Nietzschean insistence on the productive priority of *poiesis* and poetry to reason and truth represents a final rebuke to Hegel, who famously proclaimed in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* that poetry, “the universal art of the mind which has become free in its own nature”, must end “by transcending itself, inasmuch as it abandons the medium of a harmonious embodiment of mind in sensuous form, and passes from the poetry of imagination into the prose of thought”.¹⁰² For the dialectical tradition of modernity, poetry can only serve as a temporary relay for spirit, an imaginative detour that must close once philosophical reason reaches maturity. For the anti-moderns Leopardi, Nietzsche and Negri, however, poetry is the constituent power that constantly though discontinuously produces true illusions, and as such it can only be suppressed temporarily by the institutionalization of reason, whether pure or instrumental. For Negri, Leopardi’s example points forward directly to Wittgenstein and the “linguistic turn” his work gave to philosophy and social science:

Wittgenstein’s discourse reveals to us a new world of production, one made of signs and woven by the community. The community alone produces, but by means of signs; in other words, signs are productive insofar as they are the expression of the community. Moreover, signs sketch the contours of reality and emancipate meaning: the relationship between community and production of signs is thus real, ontological.¹⁰³

From here it is only a relatively short step — by way of Marx’s notion of living labor — to the tendency toward immaterial labor and network resistance that defines Hardt and Negri’s conception of the subject as self-made through communication and the multitude as counter-empire, and it is no accident that the chapter with that title in *Empire*, the “Intermezzo” around which its entire argument pivots, is filled with poetic and literary references, to the poet and dramatist Nanni Balestrini and the novelists John Dos Passos, Elio Vittorini, Kathy Acker, William Gibson and William S. Burroughs. Nor is Negri’s recent foray onto the dramatic stage

¹⁰² Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet (New York: Penguin, 1993), p.96. This line of thinking later leads Negri to a similar rebuke of Adorno: “It’s not straightforwardly true anymore that poetry has become impossible after Auschwitz, as Adorno claimed, just as it’s no longer straightforwardly true that all hope has perished after Hiroshima, as Günther Anders asserted; poetry and hope have been revitalized by the postmodern multitudes, yet their measure is no longer homogeneous with that of the poetry and the hope of modernity” (Negri, “Art and Culture in the Age of Empire and the Time of the Multitudes”, p.51).

¹⁰³ Negri, “Wittgenstein and Pain: Sociological Consequences”, trans. Timothy S. Murphy, in *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* volume 37: 3-4 (2004), p.361.

with his *Trilogie de la différence* (*Essaim: Didactique du militant, L'Homme plié: Didactique du rebelle* and *Citheron: Didactique de l'exode*)¹⁰⁴ a matter of chance. Drama is poetry, and poetry, linguistic *poiesis*, is counter-power, constituent power, ontological action or activism. To cite Negri's account of Leopardi one last time, "When it conflicts with the world, in the tragedy of life, poetry can create new being. The ontological power of poetry becomes historically effective, and thus illusion can become truth."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ The *Trilogie de la différence* is forthcoming from Editions Stock, Paris. The plays comprising it have been staged in Paris, Rome and elsewhere. His recent collaboration with Raffaella Battaglini, the dialogue *Settanta* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2007), also appears to be part of this development.

¹⁰⁵ Negri, "Between Infinity and Community" p.75.