

LA GINESTRA, O IL FIORE DEL DESERTO (THE BROOM, OR THE FLOWER OF THE DESERT)

Giacomo Leopardi

Analysis by Stefano Sbrana

Poetry

Giacomo Leopardi's 1845 *La ginestra o Il fiore del deserto* (*The Broom, or The Flower of the Desert*) builds on rich volcanic imagery. In this poem, eruptions are read as allegories for social upheaval, inner transformation, and artistic creation. The broom blooming on Vesuvius symbolises humility and resilience, while the persistence of volcanic risk and the memory of past eruptions trigger a reflection on human vulnerability. The poet's style reflects nature's destructive and creative powers.

Year of Publication

1845

Publication Place

Florence

Editor

Le Monnier

Entity

Vesuvius

Collection

Canti

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcano Vesuvius

REAL EVENT

Time

1836

Location

Campania Italy

Coordinates

40.821360, 14.426208

Base/Complex

Volcanic complex Somma-Vesuvius

Typology

Terrestrial

Stratovolcano

Anthropization Level

Cities

Towns

Villages

Volcano

LITERARY EVENT

Time	1836
Location	Campania Italy
Volcano Name	Vesuvius
Base/Complex	Volcanic complex Somma-Vesuvius
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Typology	Terrestrial Stratovolcano
Anthropization Level	Cities Towns Villages Remote Dwellings Agriculture Areas

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	The Lyrical I
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Recanati
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Awareness Fear Pessimism Trust Acceptance Rationality

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Poor people
Reactions	Fear Apprehension Distress Unease Awareness Adaptation Acceptance

Name	Educated people
Reactions	Disregard Underestimation Compensation

Name	Wealthy people
Reactions	Disregard Underestimation Compensation

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	"Formidabil Monte" (Leopardi, Line 2); "La Dura Nutrice" (Line 44); "Notte E Ruina" (Line 216); "Vetta Fatal" (Lines 244-245); "Sparsa Ruina" (Line 279); "Funerea Lava" (Line 286).
Metaphors	"bipartito giogo" (Leopardi, line 277)
Similes	"Come d'arbor cadendo un picciol pomo [...] così d'alto piombando, dall'utero tonante scagliata al ciel profondo, di ceneri e di pomici e di sassi notte e ruina, infusa di bollenti ruscelli (Leopardi, lines 202-217); "come sinistra face" (line 284)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Horridus Locus Amoenus Cruel Nature Civilisation Ruins Hubris Death The End Of The World The Downfall Of Society
Syntax	Parataxis, Unconventional Position
Punctuation	Ellipsis, Multiple Colons, Multiple Commas
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives
Phonetics/Prosody	Sound-related word choice (onomatopoeia, rhyme, alliteration)

Giacomo Leopardi's poem *La ginestra o il fiore del deserto* (*The broom, or The Flower of the desert*), which is contained in the 1845 edition of the *Canti*, is considered Giacomo Leopardi's true spiritual testament and masterpiece. By writing the *Canti*, Leopardi completed a literary project that spanned twenty years and, given his short life, represented the work of a lifetime – from his youth to his final months. This poetry collection was investigated through a biographical lens for a long time, resulting in readings and interpretations that did not fully grasp its artistic value. Indeed, critics often did not consider Leopardi's deliberate and thoughtful reworking of his work, which was aimed to create a collection with a complex and cohesive structure, able to reflect the poet's unified philosophical and aesthetic vision (Sapegno 20). *La ginestra o il fiore del deserto* was composed in 1836 at Torre del Greco (Naples), in the Ferrigni villa where Leopardi was staying with relatives of his friend Antonio Ranieri. The last structural adjustments of the *Canti* were entrusted to the care of Ranieri, who was asked to place *La ginestra* as the end of the *Canti* in the final edition.

Regarding the theme and the metaphorical thread of the desert, which also emerges in *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* and is further developed in *Amore e morte*, the poet constructs a long and complex allegory centred around the broom plant, the *ginestra*. In the poem, this simple and humble plant symbolizes life's resilience in the face of an inhospitable environment, and it also becomes a metaphor for the poet himself. Even though *La ginestra* expresses the pessimistic view on existence that characterizes much of Leopardi's work, in this poem he sees humanity's painful fate as a basis for invoking fraternal solidarity.

The use of traditional song meters (hendecasyllables and heptasyllables in free rhyme) signals a connection to the Italian lyrical tradition. However, the poem's considerable length (317 lines) and its reflective, philosophical tone make it close to a poetic essay, much like Foscolo's *Sepolcri* (1807). The poem is divided into seven stanzas of varying length. The lyric I rarely appears directly; more often, the speaking voice addresses the *ginestra*, expressing a tendency to identify with the flower. The plant is portrayed as a humble and resigned spectator that lives on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius, in a landscape marked by the ruins of the 79 AD eruption. The *ginestra* stands alone, a lover of "tristi lochi" 'sorrowful places' (Leopardi, *La ginestra* lines 14–15; my trans.), and has the power to bring beauty even to the most desolate sites, being compassionate towards the suffering of other creatures. The apostrophe to the *ginestra* opens and closes the poem, although other subjects and internal

interlocutors appear throughout it. The only stanza in which the lyrical voice speaks directly in the first person is placed at the poem's center.

The first stanza opens with the arid, desert-like landscape of Vesuvius, whose bleakness is evoked through the *topos* of the *locus horridus*. It is a place of extreme contrasts: "arida" 'arid' (line 1; my trans.); "sterminator" 'exterminator' (line 3; my trans.); "null'altro [...] arbor né fiore" 'no tree nor flower' (line 4; my trans.). A lifeless place, yet, paradoxically marked by the extraordinary presence of the *ginestra*, a sign of life's stubborn perseverance. Following one of the many recollection processes typical of Leopardi's poetry, the sight of the flower evokes the ruins of ancient Rome – most likely those of Pompeii and Herculaneum – among which the *ginestra* blooms. These ruins simultaneously bear witness to the destructive power of time and nature.

The contemplation of ruins – a familiar *topos* in Romantic poetry – occupies the opening lines of the poem, but it is soon repositioned in a specific spatiotemporal frame. A sudden shift to the present is signaled by the sentence "Or ti riveggo in questo suol" 'now I see you again on this soil' (line 14; my trans.). The splendours of past life contrasts with the present-day desolation, a "ruina" 'ruin' (line 33; my trans.) against which the *ginestra* stands out with its quiet dignity and its fragrance.

Madame de Staël's novel *Corinne, or Italy* (1807) represents a valuable source to figure out how the Campanian landscape described by Leopardi might have appeared in the early decades of the 19th century. Following the European Grand Tour tradition, the French writer travelled through Italy between 1794 and 1803, keeping a travel diary which has flown in the content of *Corinne*. In the fourth chapter of XI book, the protagonist Corinne goes on an excursion to Mount Vesuvius with her beloved, Lord Nevil. The description provided by Madame de Staël seems to share with the Recanati poet's own account the same stark contrast between the idyllic and the dreadful, represented, respectively, by the beauty and lushness of the land surrounding Vesuvius and the macabre desolation that defines the terrain closest to the volcano. Corinne and Lord Nelvil, after leaving Pompeii and passing through Portici, are met by locals who encourage them to witness "the Mountain", i.e. Vesuvius. At its base lies "the most fertile and well-cultivated" land in Naples, a region "most favored by the heavens" (De Staël 207). Here, the renowned *Lacryma Christi* vineyard thrives beside lava-scared ground. It seems as if nature, "before perishing," has adorned itself "with her most beautiful gifts" (208). As they ascend, the view of Naples and its glittering sea gradually disappears into a desolate, ashen landscape. Past lava flows leave "wide, black furrows," (208) and life slowly vanishes – first birds, then plants, and finally even insects. They enter "the realm of death," where the earth "crumbles beneath your unsteady feet" (209).

In *La ginestra*, the Vesuvian eruption to which Leopardi refers in his contemplation of "questi campi cosparsi / di ceneri infeconde, e ricoperti / dall'impieatrata lava" 'these fields strewn / with barren ashes, and covered / by hardened lava' (Leopardi, *La ginestra* lines 17–19; my trans.) is most likely that of 79 AD, an event that has echoed throughout literature since the days of Pliny the Elder.

The risk of future eruptions – the unsettling idea that the volcano, which humans foolishly believe to be inactive, is in fact very much alive – is a *Leitmotiv* that runs throughout the poem.

At the end of the first stanza, Leopardi uses sharp sarcasm to underline how those who celebrate the grandeur of civilisation should become aware of human powerlessness in the face of the dreadful forces of Nature. He reminds us that, with the slightest movement, nature – "dura nutrice" 'harsh nurse' (line 44; my trans.) – can erase human life without warning:

[...] E la possanza / qui con giusta misura / anco estimar potrà dell'uman seme, / cui la dura nutrice, ov'ei men teme, /con lieve moto in un momento annulla /in parte, e può con moti / poco men lievi ancor subitamente /annichilare in tutto. / Dipinte in queste rive / son dell'umana gente / *le magnifiche sorti e progressive.* (lines 41–51, emphasis in original)

[...] And here, / one may justly measure / the might of humankind— / that the harsh nurse, where least it fears, /with but a gentle motion can/ wipe it out /in part in a moment, and with motions /scarcely greater, utterly destroy it. / Inscribed upon these slopes /are the *magnificent and progressive fates* / of humankind. (my trans.)

In the fifth stanza, the poet once again focuses on the insignificance of human beings and the precariousness of civilization by using a simile that likens men to ants: the devastation wrought upon an anthill by the fall of a fruit is connected to—and symmetrically equated with—that inflicted on the inhabited territory around Vesuvius. In both cases, the outcome is the erasure of every trace of life under the weight of a greater force, which leaves intact only the memory (evoked through the ruins) of what once was:

Come d'arbor cadendo un picciol pomo, / [...] d'un popol di formiche i dolci alberghi / [...] schiaccia, diserta e copre / in un punto; cosí d'alto piombando, / dall'utero tonante / [...] di ceneri e di pomici e di sassi / notte e ruina, infusa /di bollenti ruscelli, / [...] e di metalli e d'infocata arena / scendendo immensa piena, / le cittadi che il mar lá su l'estremo / lido aspergea, confuse / e infranse e ricoperse / in pochi istanti. (lines 202–226)

As a small apple, falling from a tree, suddenly crushes, destroys, and covers the cherished homes of an ant colony / So, plunging down from above, / from the thundering womb / [...] of ashes and pumice and stones, / night and ruin, mingled /with boiling streams, / [...] and with metals and fiery sand, / an immense flood descends, / and it overwhelms, shatters, and buries the cities which the sea washed / upon the farthest shore, / in a few moments. (my trans.)

By using the personification "utero tonante" 'thundering womb', the poet personifies Vesuvius as a dreadful manifestation of Mother Nature that brings about devastation rather than generating life. In the sixth stanza, the looming presence of the volcano is seen through the eyes of a "villanello" 'poor peasant' (line 240; my trans.) who raises his gaze to the fatal summit, which threatens to bring destruction upon the man's children and his meager possessions. Sleepless, lying on the roof of his modest home, he imagines the flowing of the lava spilling down the volcano's slope. The "vetta / fatal" 'fatal / peak' (lines 244–245; my trans.) is still dangerous because of the "bollar" 'boiling stream' (line 253; my trans.) originated within its "inesausto grembo" 'unexhausted womb' (line 254; my trans.). The expression "inesausto grembo" 'unexhausted womb' relates to the previous "utero tonante" 'thundering womb', evoking the image of nature as a murderous mother.

A few lines later, in the final part of the stanza, the ruins of Pompeii discovered during the archaeological excavations allow the visitor to come face-to-face with a past that is not over yet: the red threat of lava still hangs over the surrounding land: "corre il baglior della funerea lava, / che di lontan per l'ombre / rosseggi e i lochi intorno intorno tinge" 'The glow of the funeral lava runs, / and from afar through the darkness, /it glows red and stains the surroundings all around' (lines 286–288; my trans.).

Following a circular structure, the poem ends as it began—with the image of the *ginestra*. Unlike human beings, it is aware that sooner or later it will have to yield to the power of the volcano, but it will surrender with dignity, neither bending in cowardice nor rising with foolish pride above other creatures: "Anche tu presto alla crudel possanza / soccomberai del sotterraneo foco, /che ritornando al loco / già noto, stenderà l'avarо lembo su tue molli foreste. E piegherai sotto il fascio mortal non renitente il tuo capo innocente" 'You too will soon succumb/ to the cruel power of the underground fire, /which, returning to the place /already known, will spread its greedy edge / over your soft forests. And you will bow your innocent head /beneath the deadly weight, unresisting' (lines 300–306; my trans.).

The lyrical I sharply attacks the dominant mindset of his time, "[un] secol superbo e sciocco" '[a] proud and foolish century' (line 52; my trans.) that has abandoned the path of reason. On the one hand, people in position of power keep on asserting their dominion over others and nature itself, celebrating the achievement of civilisations, igniting hatred, and waging wars; on the other, they ignore or deny their own vulnerability. Despite its blind belief in the myth of progress, contemporary civilization is described as the triumph of obscurantism: people seek comfort in history, religion, and myth, and cowardly refuse to face (and accept) the truth. The truth, for Leopardi, involves not only a shared awareness of the indifference of nature and the wretched condition of humankind, but also a faith the possibility of reshaping the social contract in terms of a "social catena" 'a chain of solidarity' (line 149; my trans.) where human beings support each other in the face of social and natural disasters.

In his article "Mountains, glowing hot: The Radical Volcanic Aesthetics of Wordsworth's Early Poetry" (2023), Philip Lindholm shows how, within the Romantic context, volcanic risk was perceived with deep ambivalence, blending fear, fascination, and a profound attraction to the sublime. The image of the "mountains, glowing hot, like coals of fire" in Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches*, for example, is not so much a realistic geological description as an aesthetic and symbolic manifestation of nature's uncontrollable power (Lindholm). The volcano, in the Romantic vision, embodies the earth's primordial force – something inexplicable and captivating, which defies human comprehension; it is a manifestation of the Sublime in the Burkean sense: it generates both terror and wonder; it is an aesthetic experience produced by the clash of rationality and the threatening "vastness" of nature (Burke 51).

In this context, the awareness of volcanic risk coexists with the symbolic use of volcanic imagery: the volcano is, among other things, an allegory of social upheaval (like the French Revolution), of inner transformation, of artistic creation, and of the power of nature itself. Volcanic risk is thus inseparable from the Romantic aesthetic reflection on the sublime, on *obscurity*, and on stylistic exuberance. The violence of nature becomes a metaphor for creativity: the poetic "eruption" is what breaks away from classicism and Augustan order, embracing an aesthetic made of incandescent images, turbulent style, and a constant tension between light and darkness (Lindholm).

In his 1987 essay "Leopardi e la percezione dei fenomeni naturali", Giuseppe Camerino highlights how the relation between Leopardi and the natural world is very complex, due to the coexistence, within his poetics, between images of nature as the depository of the primitive, the naïve, and the wondrous, and of nature as the cause of a radically negative ontological condition (Camerino 337). When evoking nature in his *oeuvre*, Leopardi aligns himself more with the ancient literary tradition than with the Romantics. In the classical world, the relationship between the contemplating subject and the contemplated nature gave rise – according to Leopardi – to the highest possible aesthetic harmony, something that neither modern art nor artifice could ever hope to imitate (337). On this point, critics argue that Leopardi's reflections did not originate from nostalgia for the ancient world, but from the awareness that the growth of reason and the expansion of human knowledge had dried up the sense of wonder and enchantment once inspired by natural phenomena.

This aspect is crucial in the broader context of Europe's transition toward Romanticism, which was marked by a progressive imbalance in the relationship between the perceiving subject and nature as the object of perception (338). Romantic poets, Camerino notes, subjected nature to an unconditional inner meditation in which the idea of nature gradually transformed and became enriched with inscrutable symbols—symbols inconceivable to the classical aesthetic so dear to Leopardi. According to Camerino, Leopardi built on the models of ancient literature to shape his own poetics of nature, describing what he saw and added nothing of his own. In his view, to produce authentic emotions, it was necessary to imitate "la nuda natura" 'bare nature' to draw inspiration "da quei semplici e innocenti oggetti che per loro propria forza, inconsapevoli, producono nel nostro animo quegli effetti" 'from those simple and innocent objects that, by their own unconscious power, produce such effects in our soul' (341; my trans.).

It cannot be denied that in Leopardi's descriptions of natural landscapes there are moments of wonder, imagination, and even harmony between individual feelings and the external world. However, as he observes in a passage from the *Zibaldone*, written between 1817 and 1832, those moments are rare, because "le cose che producono le sensazioni di dolore sono incomparabilmente più che quelle del piacere [...] la facoltà di sentire è un male [...]" 'the things that produce sensations of pain are incomparably more than those of pleasure [...] the faculty of feeling is an evil thing [...]' (Leopardi qtd. in Camerino 339; my trans.). With the discovery of "evil" as an inescapable element of the physical world, Leopardi makes a genuine and significant break from the rationalist assumptions of the 18th century: after this rupture, it becomes very difficult—if not impossible—for him to recover any aesthetic pleasure from the natural world, which the Romantics held so dear. And even when such pleasure is present, it is always accompanied by a complementary negative feeling such as fear, as clearly exemplified by the following verses from fragment XXXIX (1816), in which an idyllic natural landscape at sunset suddenly turns dark: "Ecco turbar la notte, e farsi oscura / a sembianza del ciel, ch'era sì bella, / e il piacere in colei farsi paura" 'And now the night is troubled, and grows dark / the face of the sky, once so fair,/ and the pleasure within her turns to fear' (Leopardi, XXXIX lines 19–30;

my trans.). These lines clearly show that it is nature's metamorphosis to cause the shift from delight to fear, rather than a change within the human soul. Pleasure and fear, therefore, appear as two different yet complementary versions of the original relationship between the self and nature. Finally, even in these youthful verses, Leopardi establishes a *topos* that will remain constant throughout his work: the dichotomy of the pleasant and the terrifying in nature, which also emerges vividly in *La ginestra* (Camerino 340).

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