

The Infinite

*By. Giacomo Leopardi; translated by
Ottavio M. Casale*



Top Right: Leopardi, painted to look handsome. Top Left: Leopardi, with blindness in his left eye. Bottom Left: Leopardi, photographed in death.

Giacomo Leopardi is considered one of the greatest Italian poets, and one of the most important Romantic poets in literature.

He was incredibly smart, learning Latin at a young age and mastering poetry before he was 14. Poor health and physical disabilities kept him from living a full life - he stayed indoors, rarely traveled, eventually becoming blind, hunchbacked, and suffering from extreme pain. He believed he was too ugly to ever be loved, and that the only happiness man could achieve was in death (CITE). Because of this many of his poems are pessimistic.

He died at the age of 38.

Translations

The poem was originally written in Italian. There are many translations of the poems, and each is slightly different. This project looks at the translation by Ottavio M. Casale (CITE)

Different translations of the last two lines:

Immensità s'annega il pensier mio:
E'l naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare.

Immensity is drowned my thoughts:
And being shipwrecked is sweet to me in this sea.

In such immensity my spirit drowns,
And sweet to me is shipwreck in this sea.

That immensity were my thoughts drowned,
And sweetness to be lost in such a sea.

Of them: immensities in which my thoughts drown,
Though sweet to me the foundering in such sea.

In this immensity my thought is drowned:
And sweet to me the foundering in this sea.

Elements for Analysis

- Personification
- Metaphor
- Imagery
- Juxtaposition
- Rhyme (End and Internal)

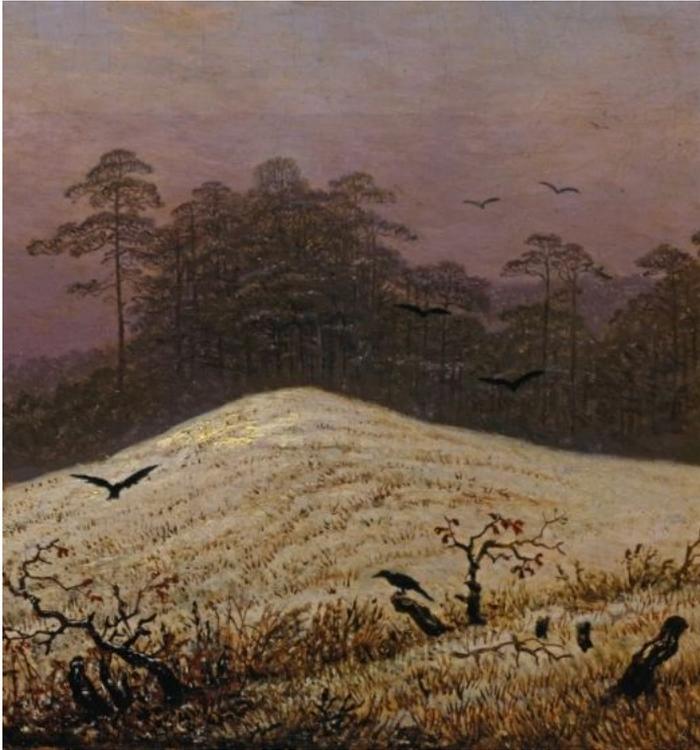
Theme

The universe contains massive and tiny things, life and death, all at the same time. This can be overwhelming, scary and confusing - but can also be a comfort when we realize the balance in nature. There is a love poem to death and the vastness of the universe.

The Infinite

This **lonely hill** has always been so **dear** to me, and **dear the hedge which hides away** the reaches of the sky. But sitting **here** and wondering, I fashion in my mind the endless spaces far beyond, **the more** than human silences, and deepest peace; so that the **heart is on the edge of fear.**

And when I hear the wind come blowing through the trees, **I pit its voice** against that boundless **silence and summon up eternity,** and the **dead seasons, and the present one,** **alive with all its sound.** And thus it is **in this immensity my thought is drowned:** and sweet to **me** the **foundering in this sea.**



Lines 1-3: “This **lonely hill** has always been so **dear** to me, and **dear the hedge which hides away the reaches of the sky...**”

The poet personifies nature - the hill and the hedge - as being ‘dear’, sweet, and precious to him, almost like a friend. He says the hedge purposefully hides the sky, almost as if it is protecting him from the ‘infinite’ beyond. Since the poet stayed indoors, would have only seen the world from outside his window, and had few friends, this personification makes sense and is almost sad in its tone. He has no dear friends - just a dear hill, and a dear hedge.

Line 9-10: “**I pit its voice** against that boundless **Silence...**”

The poet personifies nature - that the wind has a ‘voice’ (the howling sound it makes).

Personification



Line 3: “the reaches of the sky...”.

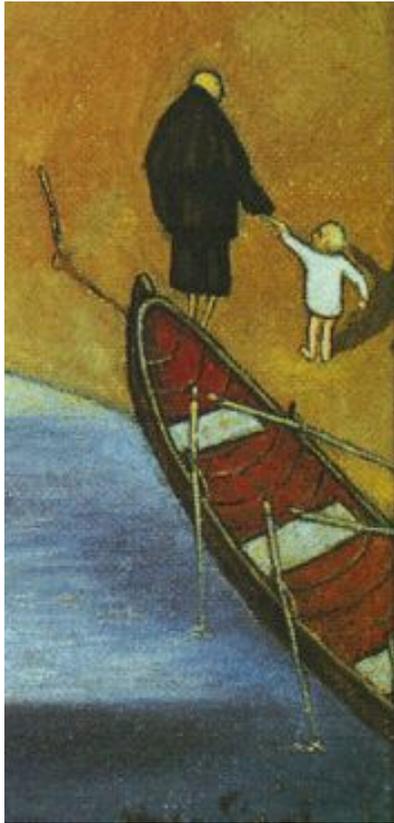
The poet describes the endless, seemingly never ending blue of the sky, and how far away and endless it seems to us on the ground. This makes the reader understand how small we are compared to the endless, ‘infinite’ sky above us.



Line 8-9: “And when I hear the wind come blowing through the trees...”

The poet describes the wind howling - this is the only sound described in the poem, which again create the feeling of loneliness or isolation. Given the poet’s real life, this makes sense.

Imagery



Lines 1 1-7: This lonely hill has always been so **dear** to me, and dear the hedge which hides away the reaches of the sky. But sitting **here** and wondering, I fashion in my mind the endless spaces far beyond, the more than human silences, and deepest peace; so that the heart is on the edge of **fear**.

The poet uses end rhyme at the beginning of the poem - 'dear', 'here', and 'fear'. The poem is 14 lines long, which is the standard length for a sonnet or love poem. The first half of the poem's rhyme shows us that the poet is with someone he care about or love - in this case, nature (dear/here). He considers the infinite sky above him, the silence, the endless silence of death, until he is almost afraid (fear).

Lines 12-14: "alive with all its **sound**. And thus it is in this immensity my thought is **drowned**: and sweet to **me** the foundering in this **sea**."

The poet uses internal rhyme to pair 'sound' and 'drowned' - he can barely comprehend that the universe is full of so much sound/life and silence/death. He rhymes 'me' and 'sea', ending the poem on a oddly positive note - he is drowning/dying/can barely comprehend the vast infinite universe, but it is ok - it is 'sweet' to him.

Rhyme

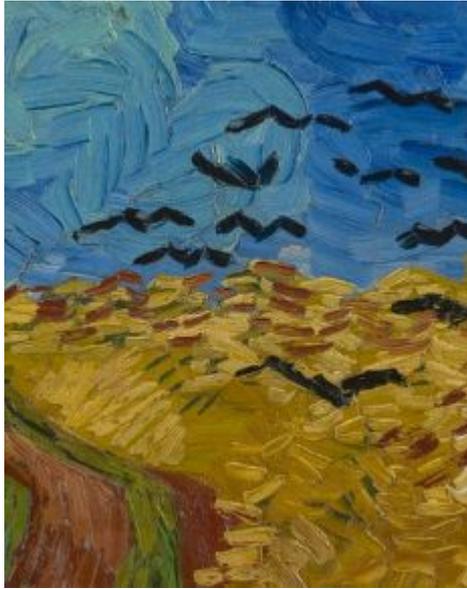


Juxtaposition

Lines 9-12 : “the trees, I pit its voice against that boundless silence and summon up eternity, and the dead seasons, and the present one, alive with all its sound...”

The poet juxtaposes the ‘voice’ of nature (the wind) and the ‘boundless silence’ (the infinite sky/universe). This draws attention to the contrast in sound, but also in size - the sound of the wind in the trees is very small compared to the infinite vastness of space.

The juxtaposition of the ‘dead seasons’ and the ‘present one, alive’ captures the poet’s deeper meaning - that life and death exist side by side, and that this is confusing, hard to understand, and even a little scary - but ultimately sweet and comforting to imagine that both are always present.



Metaphor

Lines 5-6: “the endless spaces far beyond, **the more than human silences,** and deepest peace;”

The poet is comparing the silence of the universe, the silence of nature, the silence of death to be ‘more than human’... more final and silent than a living human could ever be. This suggests that silence/the infinite/death is something much bigger than humans.

Lines 12-14: “**alive with all its sound. And thus it is in this immensity my thought is drowned: and sweet to me the foundering in this sea.**”

The poet compares his overwhelming realization that the universe is vast, infinite and enormous - and full of life and death all the time - as ‘drowning’. However, the poem ends on a positive tone, as this ‘drowning’ in realization is compared to a boat filling with water and sinking or ‘foundering’. The poet is ‘going under’, but this new knowledge and understanding of the universe comforts him and is ‘sweet’. He isn’t terrified - he is happy and content with the knowledge that life and death are always around him.



The painting that pairs with the poem is Van Gogh's 'Wheatfield with Crows'. This was the last painting Van Gogh completed before killing himself at the age of 37. Like Leopardi, he died young and suffered from illness. This painting combines the warm images of wheat - a plant that give life, is turned into bread - and the cold blue sky full of black crows - which are symbols of death, and eat the flesh of dead. Like 'The Infinite', life and death are side by side.



The painting that pairs with the poem is “Garden of Death” by Hugo Simberg. Simberg is a symbolist painter from Finland, and focuses on the macabre and deathly images in his work. This painting juxtaposes death, seen as skeletons, with life by having them work as gardeners - they tend to flowers and plants and other living things in painting, showing life and death beside each other just like in ‘The Infinite’.

Works Cited

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