

A golden notebook

It's taken two centuries to translate fully into English this giant work by the Italian great Giacomo Leopardi. The wait has been well worth it

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ZIBALDONE: The Notebooks of Leopardi ed MICHAEL CAESAR and FRANCO D'INTINO *Penguin Classics* £50 ebook £29.99 pp2,502

Giacomo Leopardi is, along with Dante, Boccaccio and Manzoni, one of the giants of Italian literature. His poems are studied and learnt by all Italian school-children. But the chances are you've probably never heard of him. He has rarely registered on the literary landscape in the English-speaking world for the simple reason that *Zibaldone*, his epic calling card, a collection of his notes and reflections, has never, until now, been fully translated.

It is easy to understand why: the original manuscript was 4,526 pages long and it is, to say the least, pretty dense stuff. "*Zibaldone*" means "mishmash" or "jumble" and the work is so enormous that even the editors describe it as "unique, infinite, almost monstrous". It has taken seven years for seven translators and two editors to produce this exemplary translation. It runs to more than 2,500 pages and, even on thin paper, it is a vast tome.

And yet what is surprising is that *Zibaldone* is such a pleasurable read. Often writing in note form, Leopardi jots down guesses about links between languages, about human nature, recounts anecdotes and put-downs, sketches people and critiques books. It is the kind of work that you almost certainly don't read cover to cover, but have by a much-loved armchair and dip into when you want intellectual stimulation, controversy, provocation or precision.

Leopardi called himself a "solitary philosopher" and he was certainly an outsider to the

literary elite. But, as the editors say in their introduction, "his status as an amateur, his isolation...all these elements, mixed with genius, allowed Leopardi to speak to posterity".

Born in Le Marche, in 1798, he was brought up in an aristocratic household that had fallen on hard times. Le Marche was then part of the conservative Papal States, and Leopardi's father was a stern instructor. Leopardi read voraciously, even obsessively: legend has it that



Astonishingly postmodern: Giacomo Leopardi

romantic poet. His blissfully wistful poems such as *L'infinito* and *A Silvia* offered a Keatsian combination of pastoral idylls and metaphysical observations. But on the centenary of his birth, in 1898, *Zibaldone* was published. Until then, the manuscript had, for 50 years, been stashed in a trunk belonging to one of Leopardi's closest friends. Its publication turned Leopardi from an admired, elliptical poet into a literary colossus — more than just sparse and lyrical, he was now revealed as a phenomenally intellectual, humane prophet, writing about nihilism, pessimism and relativism almost a century before they became fashionable.

To read *Zibaldone* is to crawl inside an extremely spacious mind. The erudition is so breathtaking that almost every line could be offered to Private Eye's Pseuds' Corner. He writes not just about classical or common European languages, but about Mongolian or Moldovan.

It is enjoyable, though, because Leopardi is lofty but also earthy; he is lethally acute but also empathetic. There is a precision in the sentences that reveals a surgical mind, able to slice and suture the most hidden corners of culture. The breadth of reference, the cold analysis but warm humanity, are reminiscent of Goethe or Coleridge.

It is pretty difficult to summarise his philosophy: Samuel Beckett and Friedrich Nietzsche were known admirers, and Leopardi has therefore often been imagined to be a prophet of the 20th century's pessimistic nihilism. And it is true that he sounds astonishingly postmodern at times: "There is almost no other absolute truth, except that all is relative." His central contention, however, the point to which he returns again and again in *Zibaldone*, is that reason makes humans ruthless

his near-blindness and spinal deformity were caused, certainly aggravated, by too much study. Appalled by the decadence and corruption he saw in Rome, he moved on to Naples. He died of cholera two weeks before his 39th birthday.

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and cruel, especially when they believe themselves to be following universal principles.

But as well as his intriguing philosophy, Leopardi wrote great one-liners: "Man is not perfectible but corruptible"; "Abuse of and disobedience to the law cannot be prevented by any law"; "Men without talent are more usually good than are those who have an abundance of it"; "Very many pleasures are almost only pleasures because we hope and intend to recount

them." His almost wilful sadness is beautifully lyrical: "I placed my joy in the custody of melancholy," he writes at one point.

Priced at £50, this edition is unlikely to trouble the bestseller charts. But the editors and translators have given us a majestic edition, one that will, hopefully, grant him far greater recognition.

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