

# Examining the Conditions for a Generative Embodied Reading: Nurturing an ‘Optimistic Will’ through ‘Works of Genius’

Alice Gibson, PhD

## Introduction

This poster examines through two overlooked thinkers – Germaine de Staël (1766-1817), better known as Madame de Staël, and Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) – to consider how certain works of art can effectively motivate meaningful engagement with the world.

I maintain a narrow focus on the theme of ‘works of genius’, showing how the term, used in Staël’s *Corinne*, or *Italy* (1807), influenced key works by Leopardi, including the *Zibaldone* (1898) and ‘La Ginestra’, published in the *Canti* (1845), making a significant, yet underexamined mark on the development of the philosophy of art.

My aim is to reflect on thinkers’ descriptions of the attributes and effects of such works of art, to uncover the latent potential of an alternative response to despair, that can be weaponised in today’s fight against contemporary forms of injustice.



The statue of Niobe

## Madame de Staël (1807)

Throughout *Corinne*, de Staël referred to the works of ancient sculptors, reflecting on the effect of their displays of conscious strength and nobility:

*Oswald spent the following day in the gardens of several monasteries. First he went to the Carthusian monastery, stopping for a moment before going in to look at two Egyptian lions not far from the door. These lions have a remarkable expression of strength and repose. There is something in their looks which belongs neither to animal nor man. They are like a force of nature and on seeing them one can understand how the pagan gods could be represented in that form.*

Bk. 2, Ch. 1, p167

*The Florence art gallery has an enormous collection. You could spend days there without managing to know it. Corinne looked at all the exhibits and felt sadly that she was distracted and indifferent. The statue of Niobe aroused her interest. She was struck by her calm and dignity despite extreme grief. In a similar situation, no doubt, a real mother’s facial expression would be distraught. In works of genius, what is deeply moving is not misfortune itself but the power of the soul over this misfortune. Not far from the statue of Niobe is the dying Alexander’s head. The two kinds of facial expression give much food for thought. In Alexander there is astonishment and indignation that he could not conquer nature. The anguish of love is depicted in all Niobe’s features.*

Bk. 18, Ch. 4, p355

## Giacomo Leopardi (~1820s)

In the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi describes the significant impact of reading *Corinne* on the development of his thinking.

On philosophy:

*Even if philosophy paved the way for the French Revolution, it did not bring it about, because philosophy, especially modern philosophy, is incapable by itself of achieving anything. And even if philosophy itself had the power to start a revolution, it could not sustain it. It is really moving to see how the French republican legislators thought that they could keep up the revolution, decide its length, and influence its progress, nature, and scope by reducing everything to pure reason, and expected for the first time ab orbe condito [since the earth was formed] to geometricize every aspect of life. Something not only deplorable had it succeeded, and therefore foolish to desire, but something that could not succeed even in this mathematical age because it is directly contrary to the nature of man and the world. [Zib. 161] - 8 July 1820*

Of the impact of reading Madame de Staël’s work:

*Dedicating myself entirely and with the utmost relish to literature, I despised and hated philosophy. The thoughts of which our age is so fond bored me. In accordance with the usual prejudices, I believed myself to be born for letters, imagination, feeling, and that it was altogether impossible for me to apply myself to a faculty wholly opposed to these, that is, to reason, philosophy, mathematical abstraction, and to succeed in it. I did not lack capacity for reflecting, for paying attention, for comparing, for reason, for combining, I did not lack profundity, etc. But it was only after having read some works by Mm. de Staël that I believed myself to be a philosopher. [Zib. 1742] -19 Sept. 1821*

## Works of Genius in Leopardi

*You need a time of strength, but strength that is tranquil, a time of actual genius rather than of actual enthusiasm (that is, an act of genius rather than of enthusiasm), the influence of past, future, or habitual enthusiasm rather than its presence, and we might even say its twilight rather than its midday. Often, the best time is the moment that follows the experience of enthusiasm or feeling, when the soul, though calm, goes back and rides the waves once more after the storm, and recalls with pleasure that past sensation. This is perhaps the most suitable and most frequent time for the conception of an original subject, or the original parts of a subject. And generally, one could say that in the arts and poetry, demonstrations of enthusiasm, imagination, and sensibility are more the immediate fruit of the memory of enthusiasm than of enthusiasm itself, where the author is concerned...Works of genius have this intrinsic property, that even when they give a perfect likeness of the nullity of things, even when they clearly demonstrate and make us feel the inevitable unhappiness of life, even when they express the most terrible despair, nevertheless to a great soul, that may even find itself in a state of utter prostration, disillusionment, futility, boredom and discouragement with life, or in the harshest and most death-dealing adversities (whether these appertain to the strong and lofty emotions, or to any other thing); they always serve as a consolation, rekindling enthusiasm, and though speaking of and portraying nothing but death, restore to it, at least for a while, the life that it had lost. [Z259-260]- 2 Oct. 1820*



Mount Vesuvius, with yellow ‘broom’

**The ‘power of the soul over...misfortune’ in Leopardi’s poetic work ‘La Ginestra’, written in 1836, and included in the *Canti*:**

The ‘silent broom’, living in precarity on the slopes of the dormant Mount Vesuvius:

*Now one ruin envelops everything where you take root, noble flower, and, as if sharing in the pain of others, send a waft of sweetest scent into the sky, consoling the wilderness. (33-37)*

The poor farmer:

*More than eighteen hundred years have passed since these lived-in places disappeared, extinguished by the power of fire, and yet the farmer bending to his vines which the scorched and poisoned earth nurtures poorly in these fields still lifts his anxious eyes to the fatal peak, in no way gentler, which sits there still tremendous. (237-249)*

## Creating Works of Genius

**Madame de Staël’s *Corinne*, reflecting on writing poetry:**

*Admittedly, to write well you need a genuine emotion, but it must not be destructive. Happiness is necessary for everything and the most melancholy poetry has to be inspired by a kind of vigour which assumes strength and intellectual pleasures. Genuine grief is by nature infertile. What it produces is only a gloomy restlessness –which continuously brings one back to the same thoughts. P356*

**Leopardi**

**...on creating works of genius:**

*In the first place, it is difficult to promote works of genius. Honors, glory, applause, and rewards are efficient means to encourage them but not the honors and the glory that come from the applause of an Academy. The ancient Greeks, and the Romans, too, had public literary competitions, and Herodotus wrote his history to be read in public. This is a very different stimulus from that of a small group of highly educated, cultured people, where the effect can never be the same as that in the people as a whole. If you aim to please critics you must (1) write with caution, which is fatal, (2) look for out-of-the-way topics, subtlety, wit, and a thousand other trifles. What the people as the audience can stimulate originality, greatness, and naturalness in a composition. [Z146] – July 1820*

**...considering art’s function:**

*...if the aim is to be useful, it is another matter. In that event... we should not forget the words of Madame de Staël (*Corinne*, bk. 7, ch. 2): ...[“He” (Alfieri) “sought to achieve a political objective by means of literature: this objective was no doubt the noblest of all; but there is no way out of it, nothing so perverts a work of imagination as having an objective”]. [Z4484] – April 1829*

### Reception of Leopardi’s Works

**Antonio Negri**

*I spend the day studying. I am reading Leopardi. I have been working on him for a while now and he fascinates me. There are curious analogies between our personal situations—imprisonment in Recanati and the omnipresent wretchedness of the Italian provinces; also between our historical situations—the defeat of the revolution, the disaggregation and the lack in Italy of any centre of cultural production; and at the level of our metaphysical crisis—in solitude only the poetic voice makes it possible to live an ethical tragedy that is so fully under way. - prison diary entry, March, 1983*

*Leopardi is someone who never stopped asking himself. What happened? All his works echo with that question... All the works that I began in jail, as well as most works that I wrote right after my time in jail, are works of this type, namely, works that are trying hard to find out what comes after defeat, how not to be defeated by defeat. - In Praise of the Common, 2008*

### Separate reflections, which I relate to this theme:

Antonio Gramsci, on the ‘Optimism of the Will’:

*...man ought to be so deeply convinced that the source of his own moral forces is in himself... that he never desponds and never falls into those vulgar, banal moods, pessimism and optimism. My own state of mind synthesizes these two feelings and transcends them: my mind is pessimistic, but my will is optimistic. Since I never build up illusions, I am seldom disappointed. I’ve always been armed with unlimited patience – not a passive, inert kind, but a patience allied with perseverance- Prison Notebooks (Dec 1929)*

Audre Lorde, on the power of poetry:

*The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are — until the poem — nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. - Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches, 1984*

## Conclusion

In this poster, I have elucidated some of the history, features, and impact of ‘works of genius’, beginning by tracing the idea’s prevalence throughout Madame de Staël’s 1807 novel *Corinne*. By highlighting the influence of this notion of ‘works on genius’ on Leopardi, I have intended to suggest that there is a rich history of examining the ways that forms of art can be socially productive that are insufficiently recognised . Such works of art, I have sought to show, are an underexamined yet significant theme in the philosophy of art. Whilst unexamined here, these share areas of convergence with Theodor Adorno’s more widely celebrated assessment of ‘autonomous art’, in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970).

By briefly touching on the ideas of thinkers on the impact of art outside of the narrow lens of ‘works of genius’, I have also sought to suggest that socially impactful art frequently share certain features, including an ability to invoke strength of feelings strong enough to encourage action after calm reflection, and a capacity to shine a light on ideas that may otherwise have been felt but remained nameless and formless. These qualities, frequently fostered in what de Staël and Leopardi referred to as ‘works of genius’ warrant further investigation, particularly for the individual, who has the potential to find in these reflections the roadmap for nurturing the quiet and noble perseverance that might generate effective engagement with the world.

With thanks to:



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Email: [alicejgibson@icloud.com](mailto:alicejgibson@icloud.com)