Between History and Fantasy: The Poet as "Other-than-Human" in Michele Mari's Novel *Io venia pien d'angoscia a rimirarti* (*I Anxiously Return To Gaze Upon You Again*) (1990)[1]

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Summary

Michele Mari's novels are highly original disquisitions on intertextual referencing. The postmodern amalgamation of history and intertextuality in his novel *Io venia pien d'angoscia a rimirarti* (1990), undertakes a fantastic reworking of the historical facts associated with the life of the Italian Romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837). Constructed around references drawn from Leopardi's canon, particularly the 1819 poem "Alla luna", these erudite and hyperbolic references are woven into a new, alternative text that uses the fantasy genre to challenge literary canonicity with ironic distance, positing an alternative reality to the ends of drawing attention to the text's clearly defined parameters of fictionality.

Opsomming

Michele Mari se romans is hoogs oorspronklike stellings oor intertekstuele verwysings. Die postmoderne samesmelting van geskiedenis en intertekstualiteit in sy tweede roman *Io venia pien d'angoscia a rimirarti* (1990), onderneem 'n fantastiese her-bewerking van die historiese feite wat verband hou met die lewe van die Italiaanse romantiese digter Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837). Opgestel rondom die intertekstuele verwysings na Leopardi se kanon, veral die 1819 gedig "Alla Luna", word hierdie geleerde en hiperboliese verwysings saamgevleg om 'n nuwe, alternatiewe teks te vorm. Die nuwe teks gebruik die fantasie-genre om literêre kanonisasie met ironiese afstand uit te daag en 'n alternatiewe werklikheid daar te stel om aandag te vestig op die teks se duidelik omskrewe parameters van fiksionaliteit.

This article will explore the links between fantasy writing and postmodernist revisionist historicism in the work of a relatively neglected contemporary Italian novelist, Michele Mari. Mari's writing is largely defined by a low key but steadily productive stream of poetry, prose, cultural commentary and varied occasional pieces. Although highly lauded by critics, his work is on the

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1.　　Unless otherwise stated all translations are the author's own.

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periphery of the current Italian literary scene perhaps because it is characterised by elaborate intertextual referencing and therefore targets the limited readership of a specialised subgenre. Quintessentially postmodernist in his historically biased intertextuality, his work is highly wrought in style and startlingly original in design. The second novel of his career, *Io venia pien d'angoscia a rimirarti* (1990), hereafter *Io venia*, focuses on a fantastic intermingling of historically identifiable facts drawn from the life of the Italian Romantic poet, Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837), with the fictional monster figure of the lycanthrope, its literary tradition and the many associated Gothic conventions.

The characters of the novel, all drawn from the Leopardi family, the poet's father, Count Monaldo, his cold and domineering mother, the Countess Adelaide Antici − with whom the poet had a difficult and tense relationship − younger siblings, brother Carlo Orazio and sister Paolina, function as emblematic historical tokens rather than as biographical profiles, providing apparent veracity while in fact serving as fantastic accretions that distance the reader from any immediate "solution" to the mystery of the reappearing werewolf. Their role is to draw attention to the changeability of these "pieces" that in turn furnish apparent "veracity" to the rewritten historical text.

Playing on this narrative dislocation, some of the names of the characters in the novel are inverted. Leopardi's younger brother, Carlo Orazio, becomes Orazio Carlo, while the poet, Giacomo Taldegardo, becomes the fictional Tardegardo Giacomo[2] thereby adding further layers to the imagined and sustained referential game. In spite of the identifiable historical base, therefore, the historicity of the text is presented as little more than a series of shifting perceptions. Mari's focus on Leopardi as a historical figure is uncertain in spite of its also being multifarious; biographical content, intertextual referencing and linguistic game-play all fused together in a "recreation" that functions as annotation to the original subject matter, or as fantastical and hypothetical elaboration thereupon, and above all, as the reader's personal "guide" to the historical figures that appear in the novel. The inversions of the names themselves, identified as "sabotage of conventions"[3] (Nascimbeni 1999: 23), are actually much more than that. They give us the first clue to the postmodern game; the de-centring of the subject "Leopardi", indicating the shift from his historical positioning as an Italian scholastic icon to his new position in this postmodern context. Presented as an ambivalent figure, the Romantic poet now functions as a clue for the parallel revision of the reader's terms of reference towards the text itself.

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2. Nascimbeni explains the misspelling of the poet's name from Taldegardo to Tardegardo in the novel with an anecdote that the author tells about having mistakenly heard the name in his school days and thus building the school boy error into the text. (Nascimbeni, *Corriere della Sera*: 23).

3. In the original Italian "sabotaggio delle consuetudini".

Set in 1813, between the 9th of February and the 9th of May, on the Leopardi familial estate in Recanati, the poet's younger brother, Orazio, the novel's first person narrator, speculates, in a secret, personal diary, around the identity of a mysterious lycanthropic figure, whom he suspects of being the poet Giacomo himself, supposedly heir to the legendary werewolf ancestor, Don Sigismondo. This werewolf at the centre of the story is a monster that links the historical figure with the literary game and therefore serves as the bridge between the two planes of reality: the historical figure of the poet amongst his identifiable familial connections and the literary construct within which the character operates. Responsible for a series of horrible murders starting with the savage mauling of sheep at the beginning of the story, to the bloody murder of the steward Scajaccia's nephew, Tano engaged as watchman over the animals, this werewolf is also, however, the invisible threat in the story. No one ever sees the werewolf. Although being the possible ancestor upon whom the Gothic curse has fallen, and Leopardi being his suspected embodiment, the 'reality' of the story is never confirmed. Literally appearing as "a kind of third term that problematises the clash of extremes" (Cohen 1996: 6) the werewolf is here the ontological link between two levels of "certainty": the fantastic and the historical.

The anti-rational literary werewolf figure has enjoyed a resurgence of interest in the last decade, largely due to the fact that the myth is a short hand for "a composite 'Otherness'" (Du Coudray 2006: 50) which reflects the many social and ideological projections of differing eras.[4] As projections of the inner fears of generations, werewolves make their periodic reappearance in literary fantasy and subsume in themselves varying levels of imagery, bringing together a network of disparate Gothic traditions, usually manifesting in a self-consciously literary game. As the "Other" the monstrous body, according to Cohen, is "pure culture" (1996: 4); a summation of the communally accepted ideas on fear, abjection and other "embodiment[s] of a certain cultural moment" (Cohen 1996: 4). As such, the unseen, but none the less threatening werewolf that haunts the Leopardi family is the nexus between the reader and the "reality" of the world of the text.

Mari's redisposition of the theme consciously plays with the Gothic traditions of the werewolf to the end of (re)presenting the monster's (re) appearance as an epistemological projection. In the tradition of the Gothic novel the ancestral curse is often the liminal historical space in which the characters are forced to confront their own self-definitions. At first the novel appears to be a virtuoso manipulation of both historical "facts" and atmospheric recreation of Leopardi's ancestral home and isolated life in Recanati. It soon transpires, however, to be a far more complex play on a number of

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4.   Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seminal work "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" theorises a number of categories that govern the literary and filmic appearance of the 'monster' in a variety of social categories.

integral literary themes: revisionism, memory, historical veracity and the complex relationship between the reader and the text. As such, the presence of the lycanthropic poet, whose reality is neither real nor false, is always part of the essential "reality" of the text. In *Io venia* the werewolf is, therefore, confined to the shadows of the poet's ancestral estate in Recanati and said to have also been the family's "dark" ancestor, Don Sigismondo, whose portrait in the familial gallery displays "l'aria di cane, il genere che monta"/having the general appearance of a dog, the type that mounts (Mari 1990: 29). Another level is added to the standard Gothic trope hinting at the trope of sexual incontinence. Sexual perversion, typical of most Gothic antagonists in their pursuit of their virginal prey, is included in the unspecified horrors of which this serial killer-werewolf partakes, while its association with the familial Leopardi line makes this lycanthropic ancestor into what Derrida called the specific animal, the "unsubstitutable singularity" of the personal monster (Cohen 2012: 450). In this way the fantasy is intimately linked and inextricably related to the historical family.

The shift between the werewolf ancestor Sigismondo and Giacomo is articulated by the poet himself, his identity flowing fluidly between the two: "E tu, perché mi chiami Tardegardo? Il mio nome è Sigismondo, nol sai?"/Why do you call me Tardegardo? Are you not aware that my name is Sigismondo? (Mari 1990: 68). Just as Todorov required the "pure fantastic" to have "hesitation" between it and the natural, it was also required to be "sustained to the end" (Brooke-Rosa 1976: 150); a decision on the veracity of the events would thus cause the "fantastic" to cease to exist in the text. In the same way Mari's novel never offers a resolution on the identity of Leopardi's purported lycanthropic double, the reader thus maintaining this theoretical "hesitation" to the end.

A number of shifts in the narration take the reader from the historicity of the known iconic poet to the fantastic of the narrative mode. The reader shares in the surveillance of the character by his brother Orazio, ("Io lo seguii (non è senza vergogna che 'l dico)"/I followed him (I say this not without a sense of shame), Mari 1990: 180) while the author intermingles purely literary inventions in with the writer's known historical life; his youthful study of

erudite treatises,[5] his early poetical compositions,[6] disquisitions on the treatises in the family library, his musings on the moon in the preparation of one of his most famous texts, are all historically Leopardian moments familiar to the reader of his canon.

In this fantastic text, the diary format of the novel adds to the narrator's, and reader's, ever increasing disquiet, a gradual build-up of anxiety progressing in the manner of a detective novel in which each daily entry heightens the tension of the investigation. Firstly, the reader is led by the vague curiosity of the child narrator around his elder brother's strange behaviour, ("Tardegardo m'inquieta. Sembra quasi sfuggirmi, pur mantenendo meco tutta la gentilezza e la soavità che gli conosco."/ Tardegardo disquiets me. He almost flees from my presence, but still appears to maintain the kindness and sweetness which I know he possesses.) (Mari 1990: 14). Later the poet's behaviour, perceived as the mark of secrecy and alienation ("Tardegardo non m'invita più come un tempo al suo tavolo per parteciparmi le sue ultime scoperte storiche …"/ Tardegardo no longer invites me to his desk, as he was in the habit of doing, in order to share with me his latest historical discoveries) leads the narrator to manifest higher levels of suspicion as the violent crimes become more heinous, both in the grounds of the estate and the neighbouring village. As the tension heightens amidst the younger sibling's spying and surveillance around the ever more strained figure of the young poet, the perception of the familiar becomes more and more alienated in the eyes of the reader.

The reader, closely aligned to the narrator's viewpoint, also begins to share the dichotomous love/fear that the narrator feels for his brilliant older brother and the suspicion that he harbours about the identity of the murderous werewolf in their midst. Stylistically, the first person narration of the book

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5. Leopardi's treatise *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi,* written in his youthful years in Recanati, around 1813-1816, is referred to in a conversation between the fictional Tardegardo and his father "… tu mi vai parlando da un po' di cotesto *Saggio sugli errori popolari* …"/you keep talking to me about this *Treatise on popular errors* (Mari 1990: 65), while the moon, image of one of his most well-known poems *Alla luna*, is a cause of discord between the young fictional poet and his father "… tu mi vai sempre a finir col parlare della luna, né so capir donde questo provenga"/ you keep going back to speaking to me about the moon and I cannot make out where this comes from (Mari 1990: 65).

6. Leopardi's poem "La sera del dì di festa"/The Evening of the Feast Day, is referenced in Tano's suspected courtship of the steward's daughter. ("Ed anzi Tano parmi molto intrinseco della figlia del Fattore, con la quale io credo che secretamente si parli, come par dimostrare la preferenza ch'ella gi accorda nel ballo **le sere de' dì di festa**"/. And in fact, it seems to me, favour is already found in the steward's daughter, to whom I believe he already speaks secretly, as is apparent from the preferential treatment he receives in dances on feast days (Mari 1990: 55).

underlines the uncertainty of perception typical of the Gothic mode, while the realism of the narrative ambience and the finely crafted 19th century linguistic register draw the reader into an apparently recognizable historical context. In the first entry, dated "9 Febbrajo 1813", Orazio verbalises the basic issue at the heart of diary writing itself; the apparent veracity of empirical truth which is also the debate around literary construction. This opening "entry" also provides, for the reader, a programmatic entry into the novel:

> Ma come svelargli il mio animo, senza distruggere lo scopo della mia osservazione? Se l'oggetto di questa non è altri che lui, e il suo comportamento sempre più strano da qualche tempo in qua?
>
> (Mari 1990:11)

> How am I to reveal my soul to him without compromising the reason for my observation? If the object of this task of mine is nothing more than observing him, then is it clear that his behaviour has recently become stranger?

How, indeed, is the author to reveal his "soul" to the reader without revealing the strategy of the work? If the narrator's task is to identify the frightening signs of personal dysfunctionality of the young Giacomo/Tardegardo, suspected of lycanthropic involvement as embodiment of the werewolf ancestor, then the reader is the narrator's present literary embodiment, following the trajectory of the unfolding of the text.

The startling alignment of the hallowed Romantic poet and the monstrous werewolf directs the reader's attention to the literariness of the game within which the text operates. Essentially exemplifying what Darko Suvin calls "non-cognitive estrangings" (1979: 12), which in the latter's categorisation becomes the main defining feature of the fantastic mode, this novel breaks the presumptive familiarity of the "known" by fusing the "impossible" with an iconic figure familiar to every Italian reader. Rather than creating a grand alternative universe in the tradition of Tolkien, Mari's fantasy is of the type that lays bare the obverse within the realist tradition, what Jackson describes as the scar on the underbelly of reality (1981) striving to reveal the "ex-centric" (Jackson 25) and the peripheral.

To the ends of reworking "history" into its many important variants, the fantastic is the only means whereby the real can encompass its opposite. The mimetic level of language, which in itself is a *tour de force* of recreation, is a proficient emulation of the 19th Century register, creating a startling fictional world which could be called a parallel universe, the accuracy of the historical register both confuses the reader and underscores the familiarity of the original setting, serving as a foil for the other levels of emulation and subversion.

Neither the narrator nor the reader come to any certainty over the mystery of Leopardi as werewolf. However, to the reader's consciousness, the "fantastic" doubt is mediated by the historicity of the "actual" Leopardi of the

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text books, about whom the reader will inevitably start to question the historical "falsity" involved in the literary process in general. This literary journey is clearly only partly concerned with the fantastic discovery of the Romantic poet as lycanthrope (similar perhaps to the many Jane Austen Zombie hunters of recent fame) but undertakes the manipulation of the *genre* as an alternative "message" for the text, giving us insight into the nature of literature itself more than into the nature of the past and its literary presentation.

While, according to McHale, the revisionism of postmodernist historical fiction revises both content of the past as well as "the conventions and norms of historical fiction itself" (1987: 90), the inclusion of the fantastic in the historical portrayal of the iconic poet's identity extends the notion of the game involving the reader's familiarity with the historical *oeuvre* itself. The reader's only certainty is the untrustworthy young narrator, whose own perceptions are constantly subverted by the erudite explanations that he gleans from the poet himself, who is also the suspected werewolf. Thus, Mari's fantastic literary diary postulates the alternative of accepted reality, but also a critique of the nature of historical writing. Similarly to the way in which canonic history is a different form of fantasy due to the fact that history is a by-production of the imagination, no matter how "real" the events are believed to be, Mari by-passes the process of discovery, positing the fantastic as the inevitable, and incontestable, part of the real. Historical "facts" become "factors" rather than truths, just as "… creativity becomes more relevant than facts, so an imaginative response to history becomes more relevant than history itself" (Benedict 1995: 118).

In all reality nestles its obverse and in the words of Mari's sage-like young poet, change accompanies all certainty in a constant pattern of shifting uncertainty ("Nelle tradizioni non v'ha nulla di certo, e appena tu credi d'aver fissato un qual punto, esso ti sfugge e delude, e presenta un volto diversissimo"/In traditions there is never any certainty for, at the moment that you feel certain of having found fixity, the latter eludes and flees from you and shows itself entirely differently (Mari 1990: 80). The narrator hopes, but ultimately fails, to unmask the ancient Gothic curse of the lycanthropic poet's identity within the storyline. Not so, however, for the text. The subject at the centre of this narrative game is only partly the Romantic poet Leopardi himself, who as the holiest of cows of the Italian curricular firmament, never represents only himself, but also the multifarious readings of each Italian school child. The poet's "reality" is filtered through the personal experience of the individual reader and is only one of the many important elements of the novel.

The subtle literary game kicks off with the very title itself: *Io venìa pien d'angoscia a rimirarti*, which focuses on "looking" and "re-looking" just as

the Romantic canonic text[7] deals with the poetic "I" returning and revisiting his past haunt, the hill from which he gazed upon the moon in the past and relooks in the present, and will in the future, again and again. The returning of the poetic "I" (and eye) isolates the "I" and the "other" from one another, the poet and the moon, by distancing them and defining them as individual objects. The act of the novel in its turn, programmatically defines the acts of

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7.   **Alla luna**

O graziosa luna, io mi rammento
Che, or volge l'anno, sovra questo colle
Io venia pien d'angoscia a rimirarti:
E tu pendevi allor su quella selva
Siccome or fai, che tutta la rischiari.
Ma nebuloso e tremulo dal pianto
Che mi sorgea sul ciglio, alle mie luci
Il tuo volto apparia, che travagliosa
Era mia vita: ed è, nè cangia stile,
O mia diletta luna. E pur mi giova
La ricordanza, e il noverar l'etate
Del mio dolore. Oh come grato occorre
Nel tempo giovanil, quando ancor lungo
La speme e breve ha la memoria il corso,
Il rimembrar delle passate cose,
Ancor che triste, e che l'affanno duri!
O lovely moon, how well do I recall
The time, –'tis just a year – when up this hill
I came, in my distress, to gaze at thee:
And thou suspended wast o'er yonder grove,
As now thou art, which thou with light dost fill.
But stained with mist, and tremulous, appeared
Thy countenance to me, because my eyes
Were filled with tears, that could not be suppressed;
For, oh, my life was wretched, wearisome,
And _is_ so still, unchanged, belovèd moon!
And yet this recollection pleases me,
This computation of my sorrow's age.
How pleasant is it, in the days of youth,
When hope a long career before it hath,
And memories are few, upon the past
To dwell, though sad, and though the sadness last!

(https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/to-the-moon-9/)

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perception and (re)seeing with the act of (re)visiting (history) and (re)reading (the text) as it is invested in the act of detection in the detective novel.

In the circularity of writing that is encapsulated in this novel's extended intertextuality, this text also undertakes the "revisiting" of Leopardi the poet's true "nature" as it is encapsulated in the poem in which interpretation and revision also become integral parts of life, literature and history. Rather than reading the historical canon in a manner that can be defined as "relentlessly celebratory" (Greenblatt 2007: 272) the game of *Io venia* postulates revisiting not only the past but also the reader's approach to the past as it is contained in the canon.

A fantasy novel, which by definition is one that not only "… tells a story that is not true, [but] […]tells a story that cannot be true" (Ordway 2001: 15), thereby bridges the divide between the presumed objectivity of historicism and the avowed subjectivity of the personal diary. In this sense, Mari's reliance on the fantastic distances the historical figure and turns him into a literary creation, similar to the werewolf: a fusion of the fantastic-cum-gothic that engages the imagination on the periphery of the real. The conundrum of the novel is therefore the potential *sdoppiamento* (or doubling), of the figure of Leopardi as well as the concept of the "real" itself. The reader, like the first person narrative voice, will need to observe reality, as in the method of historical writing, but also betray the real, also as is the case with any attempt at historicity. The only other option for a potential historian is to adhere to the traditional version, of that "reality", the canonic text, thereby betraying Leopardi's multifaceted essence, as revealed by his poetry and his works.

On these levels, then, the revisionism in Mari's work directs the reader's attention towards the narrative product and its relationship with the present, rather than the historical subjects, under scrutiny. While the novel's main focus is centred on historicity and the process of text creation, the engaging historical elements of the novel that entice and unsettle the reader are treated as mere elements on the path to the creation of this text. That is why the author has found it necessary to fuse the historical base with the patent and accepted "falsity" of the fantastic text.

The uncertainty of perception that the reader faces resides at the core of the novel. It is responsible for the redefinition of the story's essence: it forces the reader to re-evaluate the shifting nature of historical "truth" and, more importantly, of this specific genre and its relevance. Through the first person narrative voice of the young, nervous and unreliable narrator, the younger son of the Leopardi household, the displacement of the focus introduces the disruption of the *Heimlich* by the *Un-heimlich,* the interplay between the two Freudian poles at the root of most readings of the Gothic. In this case, however, the re-evaluation is not so much the central character of Leopardi himself, but a deep sense of doubt arising out of the reader's certainty with regards to the expectation of our childhood understanding of the canon. Each entry, marked by day to day musings, throws the reader into ever spiralling

patterns of uncertainty. Each episode or entry in the diary offers a new perspective in which the reader is forced to face the ambivalence of his own or her own recall and in which he or she understands the tenuousness of the historical past, as well as the meaning of shifting possibilities in the reading and understanding of the hallowed literary perspective. In the fantastic literary form, associated primarily with escapism, Mari's novel directs the reader backwards, forcing him or her to burrow back into the origins of the reader's personal past. Mari suggests that the real link that binds differing genres to the reader's expectations and pleasure is the reality of the text itself, rather than the subject matter.

Using the fantasy genre to challenge the norms of canonicity with postmodern literary ironic distancing, the mode gives the reader insight into the notion of an alternative history in which the question will be: "how has the definition of Italy's most famous Romantic poet been created through time?" In the recreation of the poet's literary "reputation" has the actual truth been hidden? Is the "reality" the obverse of the "fact", as it must be if Leopardi is to be believed to have been a werewolf, and if so, whose authority has been the carrying voice of the "real"? If the poetry is the reader's only link with the poet, and if the same poetry can hide such diversity of views of the "real", then how can it be said to represent what we have come to "know" as "truth"? For, while historical revisionism is its strongest in the exposure of the secondary character or of those so often overlooked in the path of history or fame, the falsity of canonicity could also be said to hide the "Other", the obverse within the norm, the werewolf within the poet.

To this end, then, the novel projects a dual falsehood: the fake history of the actual poet Leopardi, and the historic actions (re)created in a text that function as a mirror image for the familiar historical character, while placing the work within its own clearly defined parameters of fictionality. The best way to explore this is the genre of fantasy fiction in which the possibilities of the text are infinite and open-ended. The return of the text of Leopardi's "Alla luna" is the literary double of the returning werewolf, whose re-enactment of the crimes in the past is similar to the re-enactment of the textual presence of the rewritten work. Just as the poet returns to look again and again upon the moon, his personal harbinger of peace, the "historical" is repeated over and over again as a fallacious and arbitrary definition of "truth" which is as fantastic and textual as the presence of Leopardi's embodiment as lycanthrope.

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