Introduction

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In a page from the *Zibaldone*, dated August 1821, the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi wrote:

> Il passato, a ricordarsene, è più bello del presente, come il futuro a immaginarlo. Perché? Perché il solo presente ha la sua vera forma nella concezione umana; è la sola immagine del vero; e tutto il vero è brutto.[1]
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> The past, when remembered, is more beautiful than the present, just as the future, when imagined, is. Why? Because only the present reveals its true form to human conception; it is the only image of truth; and all truth is ugly.

Consistent with his pessimism and his ideas of Reason as a destructive force, Leopardi sees the present as a time within which imagination has no place: a historical time that has dissolved its link with nature, but also a time in which the human search for pleasure remains deeply unsatisfied. If beauty can only be detected in what is no longer (i. e., the past) or in what has not yet come to pass (i. e., the future), memory and imagination are the only tools of resistance to the present. Thus, Leopardi, who also strongly attacked all facile progressivism founded on blind faith in rationality, establishes a profound link between imagination, beauty, and the future. The idea of the future comes to play a major role in the poet's thought – not because the future itself is the bearer of improvement but because, not having yet come to pass, it constitutes the most powerful alternative to what already is.

To borrow the categories developed by Reinhart Koselleck, the split between the past-oriented realm of experience ("Erfahrungsraum") and the future-oriented hori-

1 Giacomo Leopardi, *Tutte le opere di Giacomo Leopardi*, vol. 2: *Zibaldone di pensieri* 1, ed. by Francesco Flora, 6th edition, Milan: Mondadori, 1961 ([1]1937), p. 1002. Unless otherwise noted, translations are ours.

zon of expectation ("Erwartungshorizont") is one of the hallmarks of modern identity.[2] It is in the asymmetric relationship between the past and the future, or, to be more precise, in the idea that expectations are increasingly distant and 'different' from accumulated experience, that the modern concept of the future-as-progress takes shape. At the same time, the polarization between experience and expectation nurtures ideas that the future will not be better, but rather worse, than the past. Hence, the relationships that modern people usually establish with the future oscillate between the competing paradigms: utopia and decadence, progress and catastrophe, redemption and apocalypse. Ideologies, political traditions, and aesthetic forms have equally drawn upon both sets of paradigms. Leopardi's remarks strike us precisely because they sidestep these dichotomies. The poet does not pit the past and the future against one another; rather, he sees in both an antagonism to the present. In particular, he elects the future as a realm of potential and imagination.

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If, for Leopardi at the beginning of the 19th century, the future was a time associated with beauty – beauty still to come –, the situation seems different today. In the 21st century, it seems increasingly difficult for many people to imagine any form of beauty in the future. The environmental crisis, driven by climate change and exacerbated by geopolitical and economic imbalances that not only divide societies but entire global regions, confronts us with the idea that humanity itself is at risk of extinction. Scientific knowledge about climate change and its effects has expanded enormously since 1992, the year of the first UN Framework Convention. Yet, the slowness, partial disbelief, and indifference that still characterize government action, as well as the perception of many people, are striking: for most, confidence in progress seems misplaced; but at the same time, they are so accustomed to the idea of an imminent catastrophe that they accept it as if it were inevitable. Instead of moving into action, people tend to normalize the idea of the extinction of *homo sapiens* into a familiar narrative pattern.

The present situation, however, should make us reflect and act otherwise. We should see the future precisely as the time that is not yet, a time still to come that, for this very reason, we can imagine as different. In order to do so, we need to question the conceptual axes on which some of the most resistant ideologies of modernity are still based: the first is an idea of history rooted in the modern split between the past and the future as antagonistic dimensions of time; and the second is the well-established distinction between nature and culture. In order to flank the existing body of scientific knowledge, we have to radically change our perspective and revise our traditional (Western) con-

2 Reinhart Koselleck, "'Erfahrungsraum' und 'Erwartungshorizont' – zwei historische Kategorien", in: Id., *Vergangene Zukunft: zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, ^{4}2000 (^{1}1979), pp. 349–375.

cepts of time, history, nature, and the human. In particular, we must begin to think of humans as living beings on par with other planetary life forms instead of superior to them. Some of the leading questions in this context include: How can we imagine a future beyond catastrophe? How can we renounce the simplifications of unidirectional progressive thinking? How can we rethink the interweaving of all living beings, the interdependence between organic and inorganic matter, and the deep connection between the infinitely small and the infinitely large scales within which all planetary life is situated?

If we want to learn to think differently, if we want to shape an alternative future, we might also turn to the realm of literature. The literary imagination has always been – and continues to be – a formidable tool for redirecting our gaze, of expanding our sense of temporality, and for building connections between (seemingly) disparate things and beings. As Primo Levi illustrates in "Carbonio", the final story of *The Periodic System* (1975), to recount the life of a carbon atom is to recount centuries of transformations of matter – transformations that ultimately culminate in the life of the writer. No human body or subject can exist without the entire life of matter and the physical world.

It is the literary perspective that will be explored and discussed in this volume. We will see how the aforementioned questions are reflected in literary texts from the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. The articles in this collection originate from an international conference held in Villa Vigoni on Lake Como (Italy) in September 2023. Its conceptual framework grew out of the editors' common interest in examining the role of literature in the context of the environmental crisis. The primary objective of this volume is not to discuss the notion of the Anthropocene in general or to test its theoretical validity. Rather, it is to reflect on the function of the literary imagination in shaping space, time, the human and the nonhuman against the backdrop of the contemporary ecological crisis, using the Anthropocene debate as a starting point. One aim of this book, which operates mostly at the crossroads of different disciplines, is to explore the future not simply as a time yet to come, but as a realm of potential(s), as a space for imagining change. Therefore, the focus is on the central role of the conceptions of time and history, as well as on the genealogical reconstruction of various ideas of the future that have prevailed in modern literature. The volume equally investigates the (re-)definition of time and space in contemporary literature in the context of the Anthropocene debate, highlighting the ethical and therapeutic potential of narrative discourse and the role of empathy. Crucially, the interdisciplinary approach proposed here does not separate philosophical conceptualization from the observation of literary practice. Instead, through a fruitful combination of theoretical and philosophical interventions on the one hand, and case studies on the other, it offers a comprehensive reflection on the capacity of literature to enact a shift in perspective.

The contributions collected in this volume focus on different periods of European literary history (from Romanticism to contemporary literature), on different cultural

contexts (from Italian to German, French, Anglo-American, and African), and on different methodological approaches (ecocriticism, psychoanalysis, critical theory, postcolonial criticism, the history of concepts, and narratological and thematic analysis). They follow different pathways which, nevertheless, intersect with one another. Together they give shape to a prismatic inquiry that pivots around these questions: Is there a conceptual alternative to the most resistant paradigms (apocalypse, catastrophe, progress) through which modernity has conceived the future? How effective is the literary imagination in reversing the given representations of human-nonhuman relationships? Does the non-anthropocentric imagination have political value, and if so, to what extent? How can we (still) conceive of literature as politically or socially engaged?

The first two chapters provide a conceptual basis for the inquiry: Carla Benedetti delves into the apocalyptic paradigm and addresses its paralyzing effects; building on Bruno Latour's *Gaia*, Davide Luglio redefines the idea of artistic engagement and advocates for a bio-aesthetic approach that fosters a more sensitive relationship with reality. In line with the first of these theoretical outlines, time and its conceptualizations are explored by Stefan Willer, who focuses on the ways in which the future has been conceived in German Romantic poetry and theory, and on this basis, proposes an alternative model of an open future for our present time. Case studies relevant to the notion of a new engaged literature, as discussed by Davide Luglio, appear in Christina Schaefer's contribution, which investigates the metaphorical use of paleogeological concepts like deep time and stratification in a selection of contemporary Italian texts and authors, highlighting a trend of new engaged realism among a younger generation of writers. While Niccolò Scaffai expands on the exploration of the depth paradigm at a transnational level, the chapters written by Simon Probst and Chiara Rolla showcase a planetary species perspective by discussing authors such as Peter Handke, Italo Calvino, and Matthieu Duperrex. Anti-anthropocentric perspectives, especially in human-animal relationships, are analyzed in a wide range of works and authors: Jobst Welge focuses on Tommaso Landolfi, Giorgia Ghersi on Anna Maria Ortese, Chiara Caradonna on Giovanni Verga and Stefano D'Arrigo, and Johann Haberlah on French young-adult fiction. Another series of contributions engage with texts and authors from within a more political framework: either by adopting a post-colonial perspective in reading francophone novels from Sub-Saharan Africa (Susanne Goumegou); by investigating the intersection between philosophy and the performing arts in Bruno Latour (Elisa Bricco); by examining the position of the victim in the context of power relations in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Petrolio* (Alessandro Fiorillo); or by highlighting the ambivalence of the dystopian imagination in recent American and Austrian science fiction and climate fiction (Johannes Kaminski). In the final contribution, Alexander Fischer returns to the positive image of the future evoked at the beginning of the volume and advocates for the therapeutic function of fiction and its ability to foster empathy and emotions.

Finally, this volume also testifies to the strong personal and professional relationships between scholars working within the Italian- and German-speaking contexts. Scholars not only from Italy and Germany, but also from Austria, France, and Israel have fruitfully worked together on this volume. The book is a document of the vital Italo-German scholarship embedded in the European and international context. It is dedicated to all those who are engaged in maintaining peace and friendship not only among scholars, but among all 'earthlings'.

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