

PLATO AND THE IDEAS: A VERY COMPLICATED STORY

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Afterword

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All Ideas are Invisible except One Travels in the Ideal World of the Phaedrus, between Earth and Heaven¹

«It was Plato's dream that the ideas of things existed before them, in such a way that they could not be otherwise»
(G. Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 6 luglio 1820)²

I. Some introductory reflections on the presence of the doctrine of Ideas in an "iconic" dialogue

With this paper, I intend to reflect very briefly and, evidently, in a wholly partial and incomplete way, on the presence of the doctrine of Ideas in a Platonic dialogue that is at the same time very complex, much studied and of a dazzling beauty: the *Phaedrus*. It is no coincidence that,

¹ All the translations of this paper are by the writer, revised by Dr. Giuseppe Thomas Vitale.

² G. Leopardi, *Pensieri di varia filosofia e di bella letteratura*, Le Monnier, Firenze 1921.

just to name one, the German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer wrote that: «the *Phaedrus* is Plato's dialogue that I love most: the dialogue in which dialectics and rhetoric, philosophy and *eros*, friendship and art are perfectly linked together, with a religious afflatus. Plato cannot be reduced to logic alone or dialectics alone»³.

To this dialogue which, by virtue of the powerful and immortal images contained in it, can be undoubtedly defined as "iconic", Plato entrusts the famous and very powerful figure of the *hyperuranium*, the place literally "above heaven", seat of the Ideas. But this image is as well known as it is rare, given that it should be remembered that the lemma ὑπερουράνιος represents an *hapax legomenon* within the *corpus platonium*, appearing only once – more precisely, in *Phaedrus* 247 C 3.

II. Ideas' profiles in the *Phaedrus*

Before going into the merits of this dialogue, however, it is appropriate to make some frame remarks on the general doctrine of Ideas in Plato.

There is, in fact, a further important element, which must be taken into consideration in a preliminary way, namely the fact that, as has been stressed, «He [Plato], in none of his works ever gave a complete exposition... of the doctrine of the Ideas»⁴.

To Ideas, therefore, applies what is more generally valid for a large part of Platonic philosophy. In fact, we have to remember that, as stated by Migliori, «the Philosopher does not write down everything he knows, but saves the most valuable things by keeping them as a tool for a possible rescue, which can also be exhibited in a later writing. In the Platonic text, therefore, there is philosophy, but always incomplete with respect to what is necessary, with a reference to further work to be done. This means that the ultimate foundation in the writings is never there»⁵.

It is important, furthermore, to reflect briefly on the general nature of the Ideas and on the names that Plato used to describe them, given that the Philosopher does *not* use a single term to refer to Ideas. This is an extremely significant element, because it indicates, *de facto*, the need, on the part of Plato, to multiply the perspectives on the notion of Idea, to de-angle the gaze, according to the frame of that “multifocal approach”⁶ that has already found numerous verifications on other grounds.

The two fundamental terms used by Plato to call the Idea are ἰδέα and εἶδος, nouns derived from related verbs that mean "to see". These terms, as Ritter⁷ has pointed out, essentially have six fundamental meanings:

- 1) The external appearance;
- 2) The constitution or condition;
- 3) The characteristic that determines the concept;
- 4) The concept itself;

³ H. G. Gadamer, in G. Reale, *La nuova interpretazione di Platone. Un dialogo tra Hans-Georg Gadamer e la Scuola di Tubinga-Milano*, a cura di G. Girgenti, Rusconi, Milano 1998, p. 32.

⁴ W. Jaeger, *Paideia. Die Formung des griechischen Menschen*, 3 voll., Berlin 1936-1947; trad. it. L. Emery-A. Setti, introduzione G. Reale, *Paideia. La formazione dell'uomo greco*, Bompiani, Milano 2003, p. 861.

⁵ M. Migliori, *Platone*, in M. Migliori – A. Fermani (eds.), *Filosofia antica. Una prospettiva multifocale*, Morcelliana-Scholé, Brescia 2020, p. 124. The assumption of the fact that Plato does not entrust the most valuable things to writing represents the theoretical heart of the hermeneutic paradigm of the Tübingen-Milan-Macerata School.

⁶ See M. Migliori, E. Cattanei, A. Fermani (eds.), *By the Sophists to Aristotle through Plato. The necessity and utility of a Multifocal Approach*, Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin 2016; *Filosofia antica. Una prospettiva multifocale*, M. Migliori-A. Fermani (a cura di), Scholé, Morcelliana, Brescia 2020; *Il pensiero Multifocale* (a cura di M. Migliori), «Humanitas», 1-2, 2020; *Il pensiero multifocale 2. Una ripresa teorica della proposta* (a cura di P. Mauri-M. Migliori), «Humanitas», 1-2, 2022.

⁷ See C. Ritter, *Neue Untersuchungen über Platon*, Beck, München 1910, p. 322.

- 5) The genus or species;
6) The objective reality underlying our concept.

Beyond the rich range of meanings underlying the two terms, it should be highlighted that they often pass into one another and that it is difficult to isolate them. Moreover, as recalled by Ross⁸, when Plato thinks of such notions to describe the Ideas, he always refers to something which «he considers perfectly objective, which exists in itself and not because we think it»⁹.

Furthermore, the terms in question are internally rich and stratified and in all or in almost all of them there is a reference to the sensible, physical and visible dimension. Not by chance, the first meaning of *ιδέα* (this lemma occurs a total of 98 times within the *corpus platonicum*)¹⁰ is “external appearance”, “appearance”, “figure”, “image”¹¹, “sight”. Similarly *εἶδος* has, among its first meanings, those of “appearance”, “figure”, “formosity”, “beauty”¹². In fact, as Ross always reminds us, «we find that not infrequently Plato uses both terms with their original meaning of 'visible form', that he uses both terms with different non-technical meanings used by previous writers»¹³.

As concerns the term *εἶδος*, which already appears in one of the first dialogues as the *Euthyphro*¹⁴, its features are synthesized by Werner Jaeger, when he recalls the fundamental functions of the *εἶδος* itself with these words: «this “something” by which the virtues no longer appear distinct and varied, but are one and the same thing, Plato calls it *εἶδος*. This is that “for which” they are all virtues. Plato chooses this name of *εἶδος* because only by looking at something can one give a clear and exact answer to anyone who asks what virtue is. The words “looking at something” (*apoblèpon èis ti*) are continually found in Plato and effectively and plastically express the nature of what he means by *εἶδος* or *ιδέα*»¹⁵.

The Idea, in this sense, represents, for Plato, the axis that holds together stability and plasticity, that same plasticity that has also been well highlighted by Friedländer who stated that: «Plato possessed... the *plastic eye* of the Hellene, an eye of the same nature as the one with which Polykleitos saw the canon...; and also of the same nature as what the Greek mathematician aimed at pure geometric shapes. It might seem that Plato was aware of this gift, which of all thinkers fell to him the most. The proof of this awareness lies in the fact that the creation of the expressions “the sight of the mind”, “the sight of the soul”, dates back to Plato to indicate the ability of the intellect to think and to grasp the essence»¹⁶.

Furthermore, as regards instead the origin of the term *eidōs*, Jaeger recalls its medical origin: «truth can never be dissolved in the infinite variety of single cases, and in any case, such a truth would have no meaning for men. So the medical thought of this age coined for the first time the concept of types (*eide*) of human nature, of the structures, of the bodily dispositions, of the

⁸ D. Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1951; trad. it. G. Giorgini, *Platone e la teoria delle Idee*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1989, p. 40.

⁹ Ross, *Platone e la teoria delle Idee...*, p. 40.

¹⁰ Of these occurrences, only 7 are in the *Phaedrus*. Even if they seem to be relatively few, it must be taken into account that, inside the same dialogue, Ideas are mostly called differently, as we will see afterwards.

¹¹ See, for instance, P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque: histoire des mots: avec en supplément les Chroniques d'étymologie grecque*, achevé par Jean Taillardat, Olivier Masson et Jean-Louis Perpillou, nouvelle édition, Klincksieck, Paris 2009, p. 455.

¹² Chantraine, *Dictionnaire...*, p. 316.

¹³ Ross, *Platone...*, p. 40.

¹⁴ «It seems probable that the *Euthyphro* is the first dialogue in which both the term *idea* and the term *εἶδος* appear with their specific Platonic meaning» (Ross, *Platone...*, p. 37).

¹⁵ Jaeger, *Paideia...*, p. 965.

¹⁶ Of different opinion is Crombie, according to whom «The classical theory of forms... is prominent... in the *Phaedrus*, but in this dialogue the passages most characteristic of the theory occur in the myth, and are therefore possibly not to be taken seriously» (I. M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines*. 2 vols., Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1962, p. 63).

diseases. *Eidos* primarily indicates the form, then the set of visible connotations of the form of a group of individuals in contrast to those of another»¹⁷.

The configuration of the *eidos* as a passage from multiplicity to unity is very well expressed precisely in the *Phaedrus*, where we read:

«The human being needs to understand on the basis of what is called idea (*kat'eidos*), proceeding from a multiplicity of sensations to a unity (*eis en*) grasped with thought»¹⁸.

However, another very important fact must also be taken into account, namely the fact that εἶδος (lemma that occurs 412 times in Platonic works and 22 times in the *Phaedrus*), does not always have the "technical meaning" just mentioned. In fact, according to that meaning inaugurated by medicine and taken up by Plato himself, of the εἶδος as a unit that brings together several similar cases, it can be rightly translated with "species" or with "nature", as in the beautiful invocation to the Muses at the beginning of Socrates' first speech:

«Come, sweet-voiced Muses, whether you have this denomination from the species (εἶδος) of your song, or from the musical lineage of the Ligurians»¹⁹.

II.a. Insights into Ideas in the *Phaedrus* (first act): looking up at "what really is"

As mentioned above, the *Phaedrus* is an iconic dialogue, and it is such also with respect to the identification of a series of features of the Ideas, many of which are precisely derived from the dialogue in question.

According with Giovanni Reale²⁰, the basic characteristics of the Ideas – founded on the objective basis of the texts - can be summarized in the following six, which are what constitute truly pivotal points of reference:

- 1) intelligibility (the Idea is par excellence the object of intellect and can only be grasped by the intellect);
- 2) incorporeality (the Idea belongs to a totally different dimension from the sensible corporeal world);
- 3) being in the full sense (Ideas are being that truly is);
- 4) immutability (Ideas are free from any form of change, as well as being born and perishing);
- 5) perseity (Ideas are in and of themselves, i.e. absolutely objective);
- 6) unity (the Ideas are, each, a unity, unifying the multiplicity of things that participate in them).

The passage, drawn from *Phaedrus* 247 C 3-E 1, from which many of the characteristics of the Ideas indicated above are taken and which, due to its extraordinary clarity and beauty, deserves to be quoted in its entirety, is the following one:

«The *hyperuranium*, the supra-celestial place, none of the poets down here ever sang of it, nor will ever sing of it in a worthy way. It is like this. Indeed, one must really have the courage to tell the truth, especially if one speaks of the truth. For the being that really is, colorless and shapeless and not visible, which can be contemplated only by the guidance of the soul or by the intellect, and around which true knowledge revolves, occupies this place. Now, since the reason of a god is nourished by intelligence and by a pure knowledge, also that of every soul which cares to know what suits it, rejoices when it sees being after a certain time, and, contemplating the truth, if it feeds of it and enjoys it, until the circular rotation has brought it back to the same point. In the circle it makes, it sees Justice itself, it sees Wisdom, it sees Science, not the science which is connected

¹⁷ Jaeger, *La medicina greca come paideia*, in Jager, *Paideia*, cit., pp. 1369-1370.

¹⁸ Plato, *Phaedrus* 249 B.

¹⁹ Plato, *Phaedrus* 237 A 7-8.

²⁰ Reale, *Storia della filosofia antica*..., vol. II, p. 78.

with becoming, nor that which is different in that it is founded on those things that we call beings, but that which is truly the science of what it is truly being».

The physical movement of raising one's head towards "what really is", i.e. towards Ideas, is outlined with very clear and evocative strokes in Socrates' second speech, in which the Philosopher recalls the journeys of souls following the gods:

«when our soul followed a god, it looked down upon the things we now say are being and, raising its head, it looked up at what is truly being»²¹.

This plastic movement toward the Ideas, which consists in raising the head upwards, in turning the gaze, so the head of the charioteer is raised towards the place outside the sky (*eis ton ex topon*), is, therefore, a movement towards "what is truly being", that is, towards the truth. There is, not by chance, the term ἀλήθεια²² that appears in 248 C 3-4:

«Any soul which, finding itself in the following of a god, has contemplated some truth (*ti ton alethon*), remains unharmed until the next round».

Besides truth, other ways to say Idea are *physis* and *ousia*. The latter has 8²³ occurrences in the *Phaedrus*, in a very interesting combination of technical and general meanings. If, in fact, as for example in 245 E, we speak of *psychès ousian*, or of essence of the soul, or in a highly specific sense of what makes a thing what it is, elsewhere it assumes the generic and also concrete meaning of possession or wealth.

In the first scenario, we witness the maximum distance of the ideal world with respect to the sensible world. About it, we can say, in conclusion, that: «"Place above heaven" is a metaphor that indicates the world of Ideas, i.e. the metempiric and incorporeal dimension of being, which constitutes the true cause and true *raison d'être* of the sensible. Plato is very explicit: the realities that occupy the "Supraceutical place" have features that have nothing in common with the sensible world. They are "without a physical figure", "without colour", "not visible", and "can be grasped with intelligence alone": they are "beings that truly are", that is, eternal realities.

II.a. Insights into Ideas in the *Phaedrus* (second act): turning our gaze to the visible appearances of the Idea of the Beauty

«[For a Greek] it is not possible to conceive the good without passing through the beautiful».

(U. Curi, *L'apparire del bello*)²⁴

«Beauty alone has this privilege, of descending to earth luminous and visible like nothing else, and of activating an extraordinarily intense desire» (*Phaedrus* D 6-E 1)

²¹ Plato, *Phaedrus* 248 A.

²² G. Nicholson, *Plato's Phaedrus: The Philosophy of Love*. Purdue University Press, West Lafayette 1999, pp. 174-195, shows that other terms, such *talete*, truth, and *ta onta*, reality, are in effect synonyms for the Ideas.

²³ Among the 256 overall occurrences.

²⁴ U. Curi, *L'apparire del bello. Nascita di un'idea*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2013, p. 12.

It is a passage, crucial (and beautiful) like few others, with which we can try to illuminate the “second scenario” on the Ideas outlined within the Platonic Phaedrus. After the invitation to keep our gaze upwards, towards the ideal world, incorporeal and invisible, clearly separated from the real one, Plato invites us to radically reverse course and look at Ideas from a new and unexpected perspective, directing the gaze downwards, towards the Beauty that can be seen and that appears, here and now.

In this visibility, moreover, there is an enormous power, given that it represents the condition of possibility of the ascent towards the Ideal world. In fact, the idea of Beauty is the only one that can be seen, and in its visibility lies the possibility for the human being to ascend from the sensitive world to the ultra-sensitive one, from the earth to the Hyperuranium.

Physical beauty, that is to say, the beautiful bodies, the beautiful forms, which are such by virtue of the Idea of Beauty, in itself invisible, transcendent, and separate from beauty, represents, for us, the fundamental stepping stone towards the ideal world.

Beauty, in fact, in the Platonic perspective, configures itself truly as something “essential”, both in the sense that we cannot do without it, and in the sense that it is that with respect to which individual physical manifestations represent the epiphenomenon, the material embodiment. Beauty, in fact, represents the only Idea visible even with “the eyes of here below”.

But Plato, it must be emphasized, becomes the warden of beauty first of all as Greek, inasmuch as, that is, beauty, always and forever, constitutes the watchword of Greekness. As stated by Curi²⁵, in fact, «*Kalón kaléin*, beauty calls us not to linger on the level of sensitivity, going beyond “appearances”. In this regard, a paradox which has already been mentioned above arises. That “beauty” which, in the modern age, will be indicated as the privileged “object” of aesthetics, and that is of what pertains to *áisthesis*, and therefore to “sensation”, originally acts as a voice that invites us to go beyond the merely sensitive, in search of another, and more adequate, plane of reality».

And if on the one hand – to speak of the need for the continuous shifting of the angle of view operated by Plato – without virtue it is not possible to adequately administer or make the precious gift of beauty bear fruit, on the other hand, the same virtue needs to “show itself” from the body and through it the body, to manifest itself, to shine. The “cunning” of Beauty, and, with it, the infinite power of Eros, which represents its most effective access key, therefore finds its earthly ploy in visibility: in this sense the beautiful body, beautiful face, beautiful shapes, are nothing but what Beauty uses to bring back human beings scattered throughout the world, forgetful of otherworldly visions enjoyed by their own soul, attracting them through an object of love which, at the same time, is and is not (because it is infinitely more than what appears, what it manifests) what it seems to be.

Beautiful bodies, in this sense, must be thought of, from different points of view, as both accidental and essential: accidental with respect to the Beautiful itself, of which, precisely, they represent the (inessential) empirical manifestations; essential to us, in relation to the earthly affair of us human beings who, without them, could not “grow wings”:

«this is the conclusion reached by all the discussion on the fourth form of mania, that is, that mania for which, when one sees the beauty of here below, remembering the true Beauty, he grows wings»²⁶.

However, this implies that, for example, the caliber of Temperance, sublime *in itself* and supremely resplendent (shining among the «realities above on an immaculate pedestal»²⁷), *for us*, if not mixed with the right dose of “divine madness”, is destined to transform itself into «mortal temperance» (σωφροσύνη θνητή), and to make our existence dull, petty, marshy.

²⁵ Curi, *L'apparire del bello...*, p. 40.

²⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus* 249 D 4-6.

²⁷ Plato, *Phaedrus* 254 B 6-7.

This does not mean, of course, that everyone, at the sight of physical beauty, is able to fly upwards. In fact, the souls in which the "anamnesis" is alive and adequate are few. Few are the souls that from the copies or images of sensible things know how to go back to the eternal models: Justice, Temperance or similar Ideas. But a very special ontological privilege has fallen to Beauty, to which Eros is connected. In the "Supracelestial Place" the soul has seen Beauty in all its splendor: with a happy contemplation it has enjoyed it; intact and uncorrupted, it knew the most blessed initiation, without the evils that would have afflicted it once it fell into the bodies. When Beauty has come into the bodies, we still see it with the eyes of the body, i.e. with the highest and most perfect sensory organ, as Beauty continues to shine «in a most luminous way» (250 D 2-3), and therefore it arouses Eros together with the memory and desire of the things of that time. How come Beauty has known this fate? All the other Ideas would be worthy of Eros: Wisdom, for example, if it were seen, would arouse «terrible loves» (*Phaedrus* 250 D 4-5), and similarly also the other Ideas. Beauty was granted an exceptional ontological privilege: it alone is that form of Being which is "most manifest and most worthy of love", and therefore lets the intelligible shine through into the sensible. As for all the other Ideas, such as for example those of Justice and Temperance, «no splendor is present in the images here below» (*Phaedrus* 250 B 2 -3). Precisely for this reason, no one can escape Beauty and the Eros it arouses, even if there are not many who are able to understand its meaning and scope.

III. Learn how to divide meat as a good butcher can do: closings remarks on the usefulness of Ideas and of dialectics for understanding the world

If, as we have seen, the Ideas represent the unity of a multiplicity, on the other hand the Ideas themselves are multiple. Given that each Idea implies multiple forms, we need to see how it is articulated, as we read in *Phaedrus* 265 C ss. It is therefore a question, as Plato clearly recalls just in this dialogue²⁸, of initiating those two fundamental dialectical procedures of *diairesis* and *synopsis*:

«*Phaedrus*: What processes?

Socrates: One to embrace in an overall look and bring back to a single idea the things scattered in many ways, to clarify, defining each thing around which one wants to investigate from time to time...

Phaedrus And the other form of process?

Socrates: It consists in the opposite sense in knowing how to divide according to ideas based on the articulations they have by nature, trying not to break any part as a bad butcher usually does».

Briefly, as stated by Migliori, «dialectic is necessary to move in multiplicity that characterizes these simple and unitary entities. In fact, an element makes explicit the "complex", uni-multiple nature of Ideas: each one is made up of Ideas and is part of superior Ideas. The texts state this explicitly, emphasizing that, in the dialectical process, one must divide by Ideas (*kat'éide*) following the natural articulations (*Phaedrus* 265E)»²⁹.

The dialectical process, which represents the heart of Platonic philosophy, finds one of the clearest representations precisely in the *Phaedrus*. Indeed, right here, in fact, Socrates declares himself a lover of divisions and unifications, as they are necessary for speaking and thinking; if he finds someone capable of looking at a thing that is together one and many, i.e. a "dialectician", he will follow in his footsteps like those of a god (*Phaedrus* 266B-C).

²⁸ Plato, *Phaedrus* 265 D 2-E 3.

²⁹ Migliori, *Platone*, in *Filosofia antica...*, cit., p. 148.

Furthermore and more in general, the Ideas themselves, even in their separateness, represent a clear need to ground and save the *phainomena*. For example, as Repellini³⁰ recalled: for Plato *sozein ta phainomena* means: «to remove the *phainomena* from the condition that makes them unreliable and explain them as "the appearance of the truth"»³¹.

More generally, this means, always remembering a general principle rightly underlined by Migliori, that «the Platonic interest in our empirical world is an original fact. The philosopher does not deal only with the world of Ideas: reality is a whole that includes two dimensions, our physical world, which must be explained, and the superior reality of Ideas, which establishes the existence and knowability of the first. Plato is therefore not a dualist, except in the sense that he establishes a difference in value between the two spheres: the physical world is real, but it cannot exist or be known "by itself" and finds its foundation in the Ideas and Principles»³².

The Idea of Beauty, therefore, in its ontological privilege, imposes a de-angled gaze, capable of moving both on the horizontal and vertical axes, that is, gathering the numerous manifestations of beauty into a single transcendent idea which, however, is the only case of an Idea that can also be seen through the physical eyes (thus also making possible a vision which, from below, allows us to go upwards).

This allows, on the one hand, to stress that, also for Plato, as it will be for Aristotle, appearances are not always deceiving and, on the other hand, to understand more generally how, for Plato, the Ideas are, from different points of view, both transcendent and immanent: «1) on the ontological level the Ideas are separate, while 2) their action is internal to the empirical world on which they impose order and structure»³³.

In short, Ideas do not serve to replace the empirical reality, to forget or diminish it but, on the contrary, they serve exactly to ground and explain it: «Plato, as we have repeatedly pointed out, discovered the world of the intelligible as the incorporeal and metempiric dimension of being. And this world of the incorporeal intelligible certainly transcends, the sensible, but not in the sense of an absurd "separation", rather in the sense of a metempiric cause (that is, of a "true cause"); and therefore it is the true *raison d'être* of the sensible. In conclusion, Plato's dualism is none other than the dualism of those who admit the existence of a supersensible cause as *raison d'être* of the sensible itself, holding that the sensible, due to its self-contradictory nature, cannot have a global *raison d'être* of itself. Therefore, Plato's metaphysical "dualism" has absolutely nothing to do with the ridiculous dualism of those who hypostatize the sensible, and then oppose the hypostatization to the sensible itself»³⁴.

Closing the circle, at the end of this contribution, we can go back to Giacomo Leopardi, quoted at the opening of this paper, who wrote:

«Plato's system of ideas pre-existing things, existing by themselves, eternal, necessary, independent of things and of God: not only is it not chimerical, bizarre, whimsical, arbitrary, fantastic, but such that one marvels how an ancient man could reach the ultimate bottom of abstraction and see where our opinion about the essence of things and our own, about the abstract nature of the beautiful and ugly, of good and bad, of true and false, necessarily led»³⁵.

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³¹ Repellini, *Platone e la salvezza...*, p. 430.

³² For further information on the matter, see also C. J. De Vogel, *Rethinking Plato and Platonism*, E. J. Brill, Leiden 1986.

³³ M. Migliori, *Platone*, in M. Migliori – A. Fermani (eds.), *Filosofia antica. Una prospettiva multifocale*, Morcelliana-Schol , Brescia 2020, p. 148.

³⁴ G. Reale. *Storia della Filosofia Antica*, 5 voll., Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1988, pi  volte riedito, vol. II, *Platone e Aristotele*, pp. 95-96.

³⁵ Leopardi, *Pensieri...*, cit., 12 settembre 1821.

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