

GLAUCO CAMBON

Eugenio
Montale's Poetry

A Dream in Reason's Presence



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EUGENIO MONTALE'S
POETRY

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A Dream in

★ *Reason's Presence*

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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

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*Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton,
New Jersey 08540*

In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, Guildford, Surrey

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*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data will be found on the last
printed page of this book*

This book has been composed in Linotron Palatino

*Clothbound editions of Princeton University Press books are printed on acid-
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*Printed in the United States of America by Princeton University Press,
Princeton, New Jersey*

*TO MARLIS, connoisseur of poetry,
who kept encouraging me to write this book*

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PREFACE

In the wake of the Nobel prize awarded to him in 1975, Eugenio Montale's work has been attracting much more attention in the English-speaking world than had formerly been the case, though some critics and translators did not wait for the Stockholm accolade to exercise their talents on his poignant, elusive verse and on his muffled prose. Poets like Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Cid Corman, and Charles Wright had already tried their interpretive and creative mettle in the challenging encounter with some of Montale's finest poems, while long before them (in 1928) T. S. Eliot, a germane voice in some regards, had introduced the Italian writer's sophisticated "Arsenio" to readers of *The Criterion* in Mario Praz's careful English rendering—without eliciting thereby the widespread response that this kind of introduction should have warranted among scholars and publishers in the language. Now that Montale's international recognition has significantly increased that response, the time has come to sharpen the focus of analysis, and that is partly the purpose of the present book.

But its basic motivation is another. Montale's poetry has accompanied me for a lifetime, and if my various interpretive endeavors from the mid-fifties on have intimated the constancy of this interest on my part, they have been too fragmentary to attain an organic scope. A more sustained effort was in order, and now that its results are ready to meet the public eye in the pages that follow, I hope they

will convey a sense of the steady development of Montale's writing down to the last years, along with the realization of how inexhaustible certain poems can be even if taken by themselves. There is no end to the questions this poetry can elicit, beyond whatever answers it may also provide. Conversing with it is like prolonging beyond the threshold of death the conversation that for so many years I was privileged to have with my friend Eugenio Montale, with the man of an older generation who had been through two world wars and who left us forever in September 1981.

Though he told me (in December 1980) that my completed manuscript met with his approval, I am only too aware of its gaps, since space prevented me from devoting more than a passing reference to several poems I cherish; the book is far from slim as it is.

Thanks are posthumously due to Eugenio Montale for his kindness through a quarter century of personal acquaintance, and for having written poetry that has helped me to live. His housekeeper, Ms. Gina Tiossi, is also entitled to my gratitude for her helpfulness and for the invaluable assistance she gave him in the painful years of his physical decline. Without her, he would not have survived to write what he did in the last years. I am indebted to the Research Foundation of the University of Connecticut and to the Merrill Foundation of New York for travel grants that made it possible for me to consult Montale in Italy and to visit libraries there in summer 1977 and in summer 1978. In the same period, Professors Maria Corti and Maria Antonietta Grignani, both of Pavia University, and their assistants, earned my gratitude by allowing me to examine that university's special collection of modern manuscripts, which includes important early and intermediate drafts of many of Montale's poems from the first as well as from the last books.

Chapter Two is translated with minor changes from the original Italian essay, "Carnevale di Gerti," which appeared in *Eugenio Montale, profilo di uno scrittore*, ed. Annalisa Cima and Cesare Segre (Milano: Rizzoli, 1977), ©

PREFACE

1977 by Rizzoli, and is included in the present book by permission of Rizzoli publishers. Chapter Three is reprinted with some changes by permission of the Modern Language Association of America from *PMLA*, 82, no. 7 (December 1967): 471-484, © 1967 by the Modern Language Association of America. The pages in Chapter Four that analyze the poem "Iride" were published as part of a work in progress in *Canto* 4, no. 1 (June 1981). All the English translations of poetry or prose quoted in this book from Montale's work or from other sources are mine.

Montale's poems first appeared in these Italian editions: *Ossi di seppia*, *Le occasioni*, *La bufera e altro*, *Satura*, *Diario del '71 e del '72*, *Quaderno di quattro anni*, © 1948, 1949, 1957, 1971, 1973, 1977 by Arnoldo Mondadori Editore. Permission to quote the Italian version of Montale's poems is granted by New Directions Publishing Corporation, publisher of Montale's *Selected Poems* (1965), *New Poems* (1976), and *It Depends: A Poet's Notebook* (1980). Permission to use my translations of entire poems and excerpts has been granted by Chatto and Windus Ltd. of London for the part of Montale's work that was published under the title *New Poems* (1976), translated by Ghyam Singh. An additional permission to the same effect, covering "Mottetti" and "Xenia," has been granted by Agenda Editions of London for their E. M., *Xenia and Motets* (1980), tr. Kate Hughes.

Quotations from Montale's poetry are based on the following edition: Eugenio Montale, *Tutte le poesie* (Milano: Mondadori, 1977). The critical edition of his complete poetry by Rosanna Bettarini and Gianfranco Contini, E. M., *L'opera in versi*, Edizione critica a cura di Rosanna Bettarini e Gianfranco Contini (Torino: Einaudi, 1980), appeared when my manuscript was already going to press. My short translated excerpts from *Farfalla di Dinard* (Butterfly of Dinard) are based on the second edition (Milano: Mondadori, 1961).

*EUGENIO MONTALE'S
POETRY*

1

INTRODUCTION: THE SEA OF BEING

Ossi di seppia, Cuttlefish Bones: the modest title of Eugenio Montale's first volume of verse (1925) carries the salty breath of the vast element that works on the rugged Ligurian shores and, at the same time, a sense of the inexorable desiccation that the Mediterranean sun can visit on living and inanimate nature alike.¹ And the whole book reverberates that fierce light and pulses with the rhythms of the sea. It is first and foremost a rhapsody of the four elements, Nature's essentiality confronted by a tried consciousness that keeps wavering between utter disenchantment and glimpsed ecstasy in the reiterated endeavor to regain contact with the lost bliss of childhood. This confers on *Ossi di seppia* its unique quality, as of "songs of innocence"

¹ The Ligurian roots of M.'s poetry have been recognized, without unduly confining implications of regionalism, by Gaetano Mariani in *Poesia e tecnica nella lirica del Novecento* (Padova: Liviana editrice, 1958), pp. 137-168. M.'s connection with fellow Ligurian Camillo Sbarbaro is well known, and with Sbarbaro he shares motifs and tones in his first phase; but he also values other poets from his native region, notably Mario Novaro and Ceccardo Roccatagliata Ceccardi, not to mention Giovanni Boine who, along with Sbarbaro, represented a significant link to the seminal *La voce* movement of the pre-World War years. In a letter to me, M. has said that his interest in *La voce* focused on the so-called "moralist" members of that group; Sbarbaro and Boine were two such "moralists," along with non-Ligurian Piero Jahier, Scipio Slataper, Gaetano Salvemini, and Giovanni Amendola.

intermittently echoing from the prevalent "songs of experience" or even submerging that somber music in those moments when the young man can put behind him the ordeal of achieved virility (war being tacitly part of that ordeal) and let himself go to the suggestion of a stark but magnificent Nature that welcomes the prodigal son back to her "eternal bosom/womb" (eterno grembo). The wastelandish aspects counterpoint the regenerative ones, which they almost overwhelm, but not quite.

Thus the Schopenhauerian, or Buddhist,² vision of "Il male di vivere" (The Pain of Living) reinforces the desolate brilliance of "Merigiare Pallido e assorto" (Nooning in Pale Absorption), avowedly the earliest piece (1916) in the whole collection; but while "Merigiare" closes on the note of ineluctable exclusion made concrete (in the image of the bottle-shard topped wall so familiar to northern Italian eyes in the countryside), "Il male di vivere" reviews the instances of existence as suffering to find symbolic release in

² Even if the poet himself had not told me (in 1977) of his interest in Arthur Schopenhauer's ideas, their consonance with certain Montalian formulations in verse and prose is remarkable. This interest is also apparent in a passage from M.'s "Intenzioni (Intervista immaginaria)," the imaginary interview, first published in *La Rassegna d'Italia* 1, no. 1 (January 1946): 84-89; later reprinted in E. M., *Sulla poesia*, ed. Giorgio Zampa (Milano: Mondadori, 1976), pp. 561-569, and in *Per conoscere Montale*, ed. Marco Forti (Milano: Mondadori, 1976), pp. 77-84. Here M. discusses his own philosophical readings, and Schopenhauer's name does not come up, but a central conception of his does. According to M., at the inception of his literary career he "obeyed an urge for musical expression" and sought a breakthrough to "absolute expression" that would have shattered the invisible "glass bell" in which he felt encased. That, he adds, would have been "an explosion, the end of the deceit which is the world as representation"; an unattainable limit to be sure. This echoes the very title of Schopenhauer's masterpiece, *The World as Will and Idea* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*); and *rappresentazione* (representation) is the Italian translation of *Vorstellung*, which M. uses in his passage. "The Pain of Living" is at the same time a Leopardian and a Schopenhauerian expression, and it will be remembered that Schopenhauer pointedly refers to Leopardi as a kindred spirit. The "Buddhist" component in Schopenhauer's thought is explicit, and it comes to mind when M. appeals to "divine Indifference" as a liberation from pain.

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the countervailing emblems of "divine Indifference": the statue in the midday sun, the free cloud, the high-soaring hawk. And the opening gesture of the voice in the final words ("il falco alto levato") seals that release in the triumph of the liberating vowel "a" (ah), which becomes the mimetic vehicle of a total image of freedom. Liquid alliteration contributes to the effect, for Montale, never addicted to self-indulgence in his craft, has nevertheless known from the start how to extract unhackneyed music from his venerable linguistic medium. Pain of living, walled-in existence, and the negative freedom of detachment: these are keynotes not to be missed, and they resound again and again in this extraordinary first book.

But a singular antiphon rings out in "Il girasole" (The Sunflower), where the fairly ubiquitous denizen of Ligurian gardens converts blight into bliss, Nirvana-like annihilation into ecstatic fullness:

Portami tu la pianta che conduce
dove sorgono bionde trasparenze
e vapora la vita quale essenza;
portami il girasole impazzito di luce.

Bring me the plant that leads us
where blond transparencies arise
and life evaporates into sheer essence;
bring me the sunflower, frenzied with light.

Decades later (1938), under the gathering storm of a different frenzy, the sunstruck flower of our poet's regional homeland will return as Clizia, the Ovidian girl metamorphosed into a sunflower by the solar godhead from whom she could not avert her eyes; and the ecstasy of annihilation will become mystical union with the unknown, vaguely Christian God who provides the only antidote (reason and communal faith) to Nazi obscurantist folly:

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. . . Guarda ancora
in alto, Clizia, è la tua sorte, tu
che il non mutato amor mutata serbi,
fino a che il cieco sole che in te porti
si abbàcini nell'Altro e si distrugga
in Lui, per tutti . . .

. . . Oh keep looking
on high, Clizia, it is your lot, you
who, herself changed, harbors unchanging love,
until the blind sun you carry in your innermost
will be dazzled in the Other and in Him
annihilate itself, for the sake of all . . .

And in a coeval poem from *Le occasioni* (The Occasions), "Elegia di Pico Farnese" (Elegy of Pico Farnese),³ the same exorcistic power will be credited to "the sunflower seeds" in an imperious Clizia's keep.

This trajectory of symbolic development and semantic enrichment from an intense lyrical perception of Nature to a no less intense mythic personification with historical, ethical, and religious implications characterizes Montale's growth as a poet who keeps faith with the seminal motifs of his initiation without thereby fossilizing them. Seen in diachronic perspective, his books compose a poet's progress, the steps of a dialectic that is no less consistent for being restless in its unpredictable movements. The several volumes accordingly demand to be integrated into a coherent opus, just as each of them, synchronically viewed, presents the

³ Umberto Carpi has published an extremely searching and revealing analysis of this complex poem in his "Elegia di Pico Farnese" (in *Letture Montaliane*, ed. Comune and Provincia di Genova [Genoa's town administration and provincial administration; Genova: Bozzi publisher, 1977], pp. 127-169. The same scholar had written a more ideologically oriented book on M.'s postwar work from a Marxist point of view: *Montale dopo il fascismo dalla "Bufera" a "Satura"* (Padova: Liviana editrice, 1971). A textually useful study of "Elegia" for certain lexical and semantic aspects has been done by Luciano Rebay in his "I diàspori di Montale" (*Italica* 46, no. 1 [Spring 1969]: 33-53).

physiognomy of an organic whole, self-contained but not insulated from its predecessor(s) or successor(s). Thus the first member of the series, *Ossi di seppia*, bears the mark of a unique beginning that contains the main themes and attitudes of all the subsequent works, which in turn move far beyond that beginning, but without ever superseding it. Readers who emphasize the technical and cognitive progress of *Le occasioni* and *La bufera e altro* (The Storm and Other Things) at the expense of *Ossi di seppia*'s value risk doing scant justice to the achievement of a poet who would have left a major mark in the modern scene, and in the landscape of Italian poetry as a whole, even if blind chance had cut his life short just after that rich first book had taken shape.

For richness is its prerogative, although this is easy to overlook under the spell of nearly ascetic austerity that radiates from many a sharply delineated scene where eye and pen seem bent on paring visible reality to the bone; and then one remembers *Ossi di seppia* as but the image of a world of stone, consumed by sun and wind and threatened by an imminent crack, "no water and only rock": "Debole sistro . . . d'una persa cicala" (faint sistrum . . . of a lost cicada), "la vita brulla" (dried up life), "impietrato soffrire senza nome" (stonebound suffering without a name), "crollo di pietrame" (cave-in of rocks). And, in a memorable poem of the series, "Ossi di seppia," which forms a kind of eponymous book within the book, the image crystallizes:

Chi si ricorda più del fuoco ch' arse
 impetuoso
 nelle vene del mondo;—in un riposo
 freddo le forme, opache, sono sparse.

Who remembers the fire any more that blazed
 impetuously
 in the world's veins;—in a cold
 repose all shapes, opaque, are sparse.

But listen to the contrapuntal motifs in "I limoni" (The Lemons): the small eel caught by little boys in a puddle not far from town, the lemon trees gracing a city courtyard with their sunlike fruits, the "golden trumpets of sunniness" in the spring sky and in the people's hearts. "I limoni" is a poem amounting to a personal manifesto at the very outset of the book after the epigraphlike piece "In limine" (On the Threshold); it proclaims the rejection of stale literary convention in favor of a rediscovery of humble, unadulterated reality and language, fusing the quest for beauty with the quest for truth:

il filo da disbrogliare che finalmente ci metta
nel mezzo di una verità

the thread to be unravelled that will finally put us
in the midst of a truth

(Stanza 3)

and it caps these sober statements with the hymning finale heralded by the "golden trumpets of sunniness"—as strong an affirmation of life as one could ever expect from the bemused author and doubting-Thomas persona of *Ossi di seppia*. The relaxed conversational utterance, the liberal admixture of free verse with regular lines of amply varying length, and the antigrandiose focus, a clear inheritance from the so-called Crepuscular poets who ever since the start of the new century had waged a quiet battle against highfalutin vatic style in verse, might deceive the unwary reader about the real scope of this discreet *ars poetica*. Rhythmic suppleness, tonal modulation, verbal precision are its secret; and the care that went into its making also shows from the variants exhibited in the modern manuscript collection of Pavia University,⁴ where a few lexical

⁴ A checklist of those manuscripts and typescripts, including facsimiles of early letters and poems such as "Crisalide," has been published by Maria Corti and Maria Antonietta Grignani of Pavia University (*Autografi di Montale, fondo dell'Università di Pavia* [Torino: Einaudi, 1976]).

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alternatives are weighed or adopted while an entire stanza, the capitally important third one of the four that have always made up the poem from its first publication in the Gobetti edition of 1925 down to the latest Mondadori edition of 1977,⁵ at one point had been crossed out in the autograph manuscript to be later recast, with some changes, on the back of the same sheet, right after the text of stanza 4. The importance of the recast stanza comes from its being the epistemologically oriented one among its three companion units, which rely on thematics, mood, and scene (with a glance at the stylistic implications of the pertinent choices). Stanzas 1 and 2 outline a literary policy in the very act of describing a locale where "we the poor can have our part of riches, . . . the smell of lemons." Stanza 4 celebrates the victory of spring over winter, of light and color over grayness, of joy over urban tedium, applauding the reward of fidelity to the unadorned truth of simple things. But stanza 3 (and this must have been the reason for the poet's doubt and temporary rejection) goes far beyond that impressionistic approach to probe a further dimension, a clearly intellectual one. "In these silences . . . things/ let themselves go and seem on the verge/ of betraying their ultimate secret"; and characteristically for Montale, that secret is a matter of discovering "a mistake of Nature,/ the dead point of the world, the ring [in the Chain of Being] that does not hold."

Thus while the metaphysical truth he seeks can only be glimpsed and not possessed, negatively formulated and not embalmed in foolproof arguments, it becomes for that very reason the magnet of Montale's poetics—a cognitively oriented kind of poetics from the start, sharply separated from aesthetic hedonism however keen its sensuous organs.

⁵ The textual variants of "I limoni" on the Pavia University manuscripts have been closely analyzed by Marco Forti in his "Esercizio su 'I limoni'," in *Eugenio Montale*, ed. Annalisa Cima and Cesare Segre (Milano: Rizzoli, 1977), pp. 21-37. The same author had devoted another close study to the definitive text of this poem in his comprehensive book *Eugenio Montale: La poesia, la prosa di fantasia e d'invenzione* (Milano: Mursia, 1973), pp. 60-61.

"Lo sguardo fruga d'intorno,/ la mente indaga accorda disunisce" (Eyesight searches everything around,/ mind investigates harmonizes disjoins): the act of aesthetic perception is one and the same thing with the heuristic process of knowledge, and the very sequence of verbs is significant here, casual though it may sound at first. The eye functions from the start as a cognitive organ; It "searches" (fruga) instead of merely "taking things in." The mind develops that cue on a more abstract level, analysis following sensuous prehension and detached "investigation" superseding the sense-bound, almost tactilely qualified action of "searching." The naive unity of sensuous perception breaks down into different acts or phases, which are not necessarily irreversible: after (or simultaneous with) investigation comes "harmonizing" (accorda) and its contrary, "disjoining" (disunisce).

Standard philosophical terminology (especially of the idealist type prevailing when this poem was written—between November 1922 and May 1924 to judge from the Pavia manuscript), would speak of analysis and synthesis as the two essential operations of speculative intellect, synthesis inevitably superseding analysis. But at this point, the Montalian elf—a learned elf at that—shows his mettle and subverts the established harmony. "Disunisce" (disjoins) is the conclusive word in the sequence. Taking apart what has been conventionally joined in language, criticizing the stereotypes of intellectual currency is germane to the skeptic vein in Montale's thinking, and in this particular context, where one would least expect it, that cleansing operation "in the expanding aroma" (of lemons at twilight) sets the stage for a visionary moment that makes sense of the previous negations:

Sono i silenzi in cui si vede
in ogni ombra umana che si allontana
qualche disturbata Divinità.

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These are the silences in which one sees
in every human shadow vanishing in the distance
some disturbed Divinity.

The phonic and semantic link between "*disunisce*" (disjoins) and "*disturbata*" (disturbed) serves to precipitate a final resolution of meaning in "*Divinità*," epiphany aided by alliteration. Its radiance will extend to the symmetrically conclusive word "*solarità*" (sunniness) of the following and last stanza by way of distant rhyme. The two preceding stanzas ended on the word "*limoni*" (lemons), an identical rhyme well attuned to the happily literal drift of the first half of the poem: it's as if the rhyme said, by just being there, that lemons are lemons and nothing else, nor do they need to be anything else, for their significance is in their reality, in their presence. By contrast, the "*Divinità-solarità*" rhyme of the two last stanzas introduces a semantic swerve into the unpredictable; even if it is "illusion" (as the first line of stanza 4 says), the epiphany favored by twilight's silence and lemon aroma, which activate the mind in a contemplative direction, suspending the quotidian, will have given us a spiritual break, and we shall then be able to recognize the fullness of reality ("*solarità*") without having recourse to mere "shadows."

But the authorial persona of *Ossi di seppia* is protean, and his statements of poetics can likewise range through a wide gamut of attitudes. The clearly affirmative note of "*I limoni*" can rise to nearly triumphant pitch in "*Quasi una fantasia*" (Almost a Fantasy), where the poetic self envisages a forthcoming spell of its own making that will efface the deadness of daily routine to create a snowlit fairyland and summon up remembrance of all things past—like a recovered childhood; the "solitary mirth" will find its focus in a "March cockerel" alighting on a fence pole. And if in "*Quasi una fantasia*" the poet's double vision can tilt the scales all the way toward the subjective side and thus momentarily revive the Romantic myth of the poet as wizard, of imagination

as a victorious, boundless power, the very first, and obviously programmatic lyric, "In limine," so well analyzed by Emerico Giachery⁶ and now by Rebecca West,⁷ sets sharp boundaries to that power and thereby carves out a "liminal" enclosure for the poet's use as his only locus, while the privilege of breaking away is reserved to others, to the ubiquitous and changeable "Thou" the speaker is addressing.

This sense of the limit which sets the authorial persona apart from the fullness of unconfined life marks poem after poem and book after book, without, nevertheless, hardening into an unmodifiable idea—for boundary lines (between land and sea, between self and reality, between dream and truth, between reason and imagination) are also there to be transgressed, as the "Mediterraneo" (Mediterranean) series shows. In the versatile first book, statement follows counterstatement and it becomes impossible to pin down the persona that speaks now with Hamlet's saturnine voice and now with Puck's or Ariel's mischievous ease.

The true hallmark of Montale's poetics has been seen in the bleak negotiations of "Non chiederci la parola" (Do not ask us for the word), the introductory piece of the eponymous series "Ossi di seppia" within *Ossi di seppia*, and it would be rash to ignore the importance (both aesthetic and ethical) of that crabbed statement which replaces any crepuscular languor⁸ with stark diction, somber tone, and sunburnt imagery to deflate any Romantic or decadent (or political)

⁶ Emerico Giachery, " 'In limine' e la metamorfosi dell'orto," in *Lecture Montaliane*, pp. 17-33.

⁷ Rebecca West's study of M.'s poetry, which I was privileged to see in typescript while still working on the present book, has now been published as *Eugenio Montale: Poet on the Edge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981). A telling advance sample has appeared in *Forum Italicum* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 147-168, with the title "Montale's 'Forse': The Poetics of Doubt."

⁸ For this question, see Forti, *Eugenio Montale*, pp. 45, 70, 124; see also Natale Tedesco, *La condizione crepuscolare* (Firenze: La nuova Italia, 1970), who extends the range of the historical definition of "crepuscular poetry" to cover the main developments of Italian poetry in this century from Gozzano to Montale and beyond.

claim for poetry's consolatory power. Poetry is not reassurance; it is a deeper realization of our human condition. Yet Montale refuses to be trapped even within this virile asceticism, lest it become a formula; and the refusal to "define" himself, generationally uttered in the plural form, the concomitant self-disparagement of poetry as "some crooked syllable dry like a branch," the ironic admiration of the self-assured man without problems who goes along "a friend to himself and to others" without minding his shadow on the sunstruck wall—these are radical gestures that finally keep the vein of possibility open.

In a subsequent poem, the authorial persona will lament his "divided soul" and yearn for wholeness, while "anima indivisa," undivided soul, will be part of his eulogy for prophetess Clizia in "L'orto" (The Garden) from *La bufera e altro*; here, however, he denounces his own generational predicament in such a way that the denunciation of crisis becomes an acknowledgement and therefore the beginning of a possible overcoming, while the blissfully unaware passerby, a clear representative of the self-deluded many who live unproblematically, cannot read the writing (his shadow) on the wall—cannot see his dark double. "Don't ask us for the formula that can disclose worlds to you," "don't ask . . . for the word that will hone out from every side/ our formless soul": the rebellion against formulas is no rebellion against form as such, and the denounced formlessness (*informe*) of the speaker's mind and of his generation is at the same time a matter of soul-searching by the Great War's survivors and a vindication of the persona's availability, a rejection of closure.

Also, the refusal of definition finds an antiphon in the sharp definiteness of the style, where every word tends toward the uttermost semantic focus and phonic function; this poet does not wallow in suggestive vagueness, though he cultivates ambiguity as an expressive enhancement of his object-based vision. But etching, not shading, is his way. The imagery is sharply outlined, vivid, and spare rather than lush; the phrasing is direct, at times relaxed

and proliferating in rich syntax, at times tightening into tense, compact units with the help of strict hendecasyllabic meter, as in the case of "Delta," one of the strongest poems to come from Montale's pen, clearly foreshadowing the climate of *Le occasioni* where ellipse and visionary intermingling of expressionist élan with objective realism will achieve new depths.

Rhymes, whether regular or teasingly imperfect, sustain the scansion of thought, often chiming from afar or playing at hide and seek within the body of verse to disarticulate meter for the sake of resilience, while liquid or crackling dental and guttural alliteration cooperates with the coloratura of vowel scales to make the music more pervasive and less fixed: witness "Corno inglese" (English Horn), the only survivor of a rejected sequence on musical instruments,⁹ where the alternation of full-throated *a*'s *e*'s and *o*'s does much to set the somber mood, beyond any external onomatopoeia.

Montale's early training as an operatic singer (baritone) stands him in good stead as a poet when it comes to avoiding hackneyed *bel canto* effects in a language that is beset with such traps. Off rhyme, perfect rhyme, or assonance sometimes carries the burden of connotation: the third piece of the "Ossi di seppia" section can supply one of the many examples, with its alternation of *ombra-verzura-strapiombacaldura* (shadow-greenery-plummet-heat). Here the dark vowels prolonged into the pedal-like nasal resonance of *-omb(r)* or into the oboelike note of *-ura* conspire with the hidden alliteration of *f* (each of the short lines in the first quatrain has a word containing or beginning with that fricative consonant, *rifugiarti*, *folto*, *falchetto*, *fulmineo*) to create a sense of mugginess, of oppression barely stirred by sudden movement. The following quatrain heightens that summer spell to a feeling of universal entropy:

⁹ E. M., "Accordi—Sensi e fantasmi di una adolescente," in *Primo Tempo* 2 (June 1922): 37-41; later included in E. M., *Accordi e pastelli*, ed. Vanni Scheiwiller (Milano: Scheiwiller, 1962).

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È ora di lasciare il canneto
stento che pare s'addorma
e di guardare le forme
della vita che si sgretola.

It is time to leave the scrawny
reed patch which seems to drowse
and to look at the shapes
of life that crumbles.

The imperfect rhyme between *s'addorma* and *forme*, and the false rhyme between *canneto* and *sgretola*, help to convey the sense of disintegration. The next quatrain shifts to a different phonic register with line endings like *pulviscolo-vibra-invischia-sfibra* (thin dust-vibrates-entangles-unnerves), reiterating the vowel *i* (= ee), a sound that, in the particular semantic context, takes on a shrill, penetrating quality, well attuned to the effort of breaking the sultry spell, the paralysis of life.

Another memorable instance of phonic expressiveness is the conclusion of "Clivo" (Knoll), from the section "Meriggi e ombre" (Noons and Shadows):

un crollo di pietrame che dal cielo
s'inabissa alle prode . . .

Nella sera distesa appena, s'ode
un ululo di corni, uno sfacelo.

a cave-in of rocks that from the sky
tumble all the way to the shores . . .

In the barely spread evening one hears
a howling of horns, a cosmic dissolution.

"Cielo" (sky) touches off the *Goetterdaemmerung* of "sfacelo" (dissolution), and "ululo di corni" in the last line predominates with its dark vocalic color over the lighter, open vowels that unfold their gamut in the same line.

The phonic keyboard is as mercurial as the tonal and thematic one, and it is precisely against such somber notes that one can best appreciate the thrill of "Felicità raggiunta" (Happiness Attained) or "Gloria del disteso mezzogiorno" (Glory of the Outspread Noon) in the "Ossi di seppia" section. The awesomeness of a blighted world can occasionally be transfigured into joyful plenitude, however ephemeral, to supersede the terror of a metaphysical emptiness, like Pascal's abyss suddenly yawning behind the persona in the midst of everyday certainties ("... vedrò compirsi il miracolo:/ il nulla alle mie spalle, il vuoto dietro/ di me, con un terrore di ubriaco": I'll see the miracle happen:/ the nothingness at my back, the void behind/ me, with a drunkard's terror—"Ossi di seppia," poem 14, "Forse un mattino," *Perhaps One Morning*¹⁰). Even when a ferocious sun seems to devour earth and life, its inmate, everything will fade into "the serenity/ of one certainty: light" (to quote from the conclusion of a poem previously discussed).

The "Ossi di seppia" section lends itself to intensive analysis because of its lyrical compression and versatility of attitude, which results in some of the most perfect lyrics in the entire Italian canon. A world poised between doomsday and paradise haunts these vibrant pages, dryness eventuating in improbable ecstasy; and every poem probes reality anew, repeatedly distilling wonder from disenchantment, against all odds. Tenor, syntax, and meter tend to contract, as if consumed by a force that erodes language itself into a gnarled essentiality; at that point the words' resistance to potential disintegration mirrors the imaged world's precarious endurance, and the sky itself appears "finite" ("l'arco del cielo appare/ finito") while forms are frozen into a motionless litter; the cosmogonic fire is extinguished.

The previous lines are from the last poem of the "Ossi

¹⁰ On this intriguing poem, "Perhaps One Morning," that voices M.'s metaphysical doubts on what he elsewhere will call "the deceit that is the world as representation," see Italo Calvino's analysis, "Forse un mattino andando . . ." in *Lecture Montaliane*, pp. 37-45.