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Montale's Metaphysics

»L'argomento della mia poesia (…) è la condizione umana in sé considerata: non questo o quell'avvenimento storico. Ciò non significa estraniarsi da quanto avviene nel mondo; significa solo coscienza, e volontà, di non scambiare l'essenziale col transitorio.«
Eugenio Montale in *Confessioni di scrittori (Intervista con se stessi)*, Milano, 1976.

»The subject matter of my poetry (…) is the human condition considered in itself: not this or that historical event. This does not mean cutting oneself off from what goes on in the world: it means knowing the difference between what is essential and what is transitory, and refusing to trade off the one for the other.«

Eugenio Montale was born in Genoa in 1896 and died in Milan in 1981. He was one of the six twentieth century Italians to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (1975), being preceded by Giosuè Carducci (1906), Grazia Deledda (1926), Luigi Pirandello (1934) and Salvatore Quasimodo (1959), and followed by Dario Fo in 1997.

In his autobiographical short story *Ricordo di una spiaggia (Memory of a beach* – First published under that title in 1943, republished as *Punta del Mesco* (1945), and later as *Una spiaggia in Liguria,* now in Romano Luperini, *Montale o l'identità negata,* Liguori, Naples, 1984), Montale recounts his experience when, as a fourteen-year-old boy coming from a rich bourgeois family, he goes out fishing with another two boys his age, the sons of poor peasants working in the Cinque Terre, on the Ligurian coast. Soon after they put out to sea, Montale feels sick and his friends are obliged to abandon him on a desert beach, promising to pick him up on their way back. He sleeps for a few hours, wakes up at dawn and starts to explore the pebbly, desolate shore, when he hears noises followed by a gun-shot. Then a strange little animal – a badger – rushes out of the hills and stares at him with its small shiny eyes. The boy raises his gun, aims at the badger, but at the last minute shoots deliberately off target. A while later the hunter arrives, accompanied by a small dog. The boy pretends not to have seen the badger, the boat returns, and the episode comes to an end.

There are a number of elements in this short narrative that find an echo in Montale's poetry. First, there is an aura of mystery hanging over the landscape, the characters and the sequence of events, a kind of premonition that something strange is about to happen. It's the same kind of eerie feeling conveyed by the works of the two leading exponents of Italian ›metaphysical‹ painting in the first quarter of the twentieth century, Carlo Carrà (1881-1966) and Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978). De Chirico admired the »magnificent nightmares« of Andrea Masaccio (1401-1428) and Paolo Uccello ((1396-1475) and was full of praise for the way these two great pioneers of the Italian Renaissance transformed their »terrible dreams« into a kind of tranquil and serene luminosity that hides an inner sense of bewilderment and discord. It was the same painter who, after reading Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, produced his long series of enigmatic paintings depicting open and silent urban spaces with strange pieces of architecture – porticos, towers, monuments – suspended in the still light of summer afternoons. The sense of metaphysical wonder and mystery evoked by de Chirico's urban paintings permeates Montale's physical and spiritual landscapes and is a distinguishing feature of his work.

In the poem *L'estate (Summer)*, for example, (in the fourth section of *Le Occasioni)*, reality presents itself as fragmented and discontinuous. Things stand next to each other with no sign of communication between them. They are contiguous but unrelated. »The crossed shadow of the kestrel seems unknown to the young bushes that it barely grazes. The cloud sees nothing. The welling spring has countless faces. The cabbage moth has gone wild, and the spider's line is strung over boiling foam.« (The poems quoted or referred to throughout the text are from Eugenio Montale, Collected Poems 1920-1954, bilingual edition, translated and annotated by Jonathan Galassi, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 1998) These images of incommunicability lead to the final thought: »Too many lives go into making one« – which carries over the idea of discontinuity from the phenomenal world to its embodiment in the life of the individual, which is similarly marked by fragmentation and lack of identity.

The second element in the story which stands out is the sea. For Montale the sea is the all-embracing, Parmenidean, Spinozian or Heideggerian Being or One, Dante's »gran mar dell'essere« (Paradiso I, 113), the great sea of being, a vastness »redeeming the suffering of the stones«, justifying »the fixedness of finite things« and »the dripping of inexorable time.« Montale sees the sea as a manifold symbol of eternity, infinity and purity of soul. He craves to be part of it, to synchronize with its rhythm. At the same time he feels thrown out, rejected, an outcast, cut off from the sea's life-giving forces, abandoned on a desert beach, like the boy in the story we started with, tossed ashore like flotsam, »among cork and seaweed and starfish, the useless rubble of the abyss« described in *Mediterraneo,* or like *ossi di seppia,* the light and dry cuttlefish bones that give their name to Montale's first poetic collection.

The poet »turns to stone« in the sea's presence, no longer »feeling worthy of the solemn admonition of (its) breathing,« forgetting that »the petty ferment of (the human) heart« is no more than a ›moment‹ of the sea's incessant throbbing, losing sight of the sea's »hazardous law: to be vast and various and yet fixed« – a hard rule »unleashed« by the Father, a rule one simply cannot evade: »if I try, even an eroded pebble on my way condemns me, …or the shapeless wreckage/the flood of life tossed by the wayside/in a tangle of branches and grass.«

»The symbol of the sea«, as one critic puts it, »functions in two directions: on the one hand, it is the point of comparison through which (man's) distance from his origins and the limits of the human condition become clear; on the other, it is a paradigm which functions in this condition as a tendency toward self-determination: man separates from the sea but will continue to carry within him its echo and its lesson.« (R. Luperini, op.cit., p.65. Quoted in translation by Galassi, p. 462.)

This is how, addressing the sea, Montale describes the negative condition, the state of *anomie* or existential atonality resulting from his separation from the sea's life-giving forces:

Now and then, suddenly,
there comes a time when your inhuman heart
terrifies us, separates from ours.
Your music then discords with mine
and all your movements are inimical.
I fold inside myself, devoid of forces,
your voice sounds stifled.
I stand amid the rubble
that scales down to you, down
to the steep bank above you,
prone to landslides, yellow, etched
by rivers of rainwater.
My life is this dry slope,
a means not an end, a way
open to runoff from gutters and slow erosion.
And it's this, too: this plant
born out of devastation
that takes the sea's lashing in the face,
hanging in the wind's erratic gales.
……
Silence is still missing from my life.
I watch the glistening earth,
the air so blue it goes dark.
And what rises in me, sea,
may be the rancor
that each son feels for his father.

And here is the positive riposte, the flicker of hope coming from the thought that despite our forgetfulness, even in our fallen state as creatures cut off from the sea's life-giving forces, we still carry within us a memory or trace of its voice or calling.

We don't know how we'll turn up
tomorrow, hard-pressed or happy:
perhaps our path
will lead to virgin clearings
where youth's water murmurs eternal;
or maybe come down
to the last valley in the dark,
the memory of morning gone.
Foreign lands may welcome us again; we'll lose
the memory of the sun, the chime
of rhymes will abandon the mind.
Oh the fable that explains our life
will suddenly become
the murky tale that can't be told!
Still, Father, you assure us of one thing:

that a little of your gift
has passed into the syllables
we carry with us, humming bees,
and will stay there for ever.
We'll travel far yet keep
an echo of your voice,
as gray grass recalls the sun
in dark courtyards, between houses.
And one day these noiseless words
we raised beside you, nourished
on fatigue and silence,
will taste of Greek salt
to a brother heart.

Although a psycho-analytical (Freudian) interpretation of the paternal image as moralistic superego, laying down fidelity to the law and pitting the ›reality principle‹ against the ›pleasure principle‹, has been suggested (for example, by E. Gioanola, in the collection Letture montaliane in occasione dell'80º compleanno del poeta, Genoa, Bozzi editore, 1977, 55ff), a reading, in terms of Heidegger's ›fundamental ontology‹, sounds more plausible. In such a reading ›the valley in the dark‹ where ›the memory of the morning (is) gone‹, ›the strange lands where the chime of rhymes has abandoned the mind‹, the condition where ›the fable that explains our life‹ becomes ›the murky tale that can't be told‹, would correspond to Heidegger's inauthentic mode of existence resulting from the ›forgetfulness of Being‹, or ›nihilism‹ – the belief that Being can be created or destroyed, which has culminated in the domination of the world by technology, a state of affairs Montale rails against in his later poetry *(Satura* and *Altri Versi)*. Though the true sense of Being has been forgotten, a little of its gift ›has passed into the syllables we carry with us‹. The reference to ›the taste of Greek salt‹ in the last lines of the poem may very well be a reference to the Pre-Socratic thinkers who, in Heidegger's view, preserved the true sense of Being; an echo of its voice can still be heard in the words of poets like Hölderlin, revered by both Heidegger and Montale, who may offer us a way out of ›forgetfulness of being‹, and in the language of poetry in general, which has a special relation to Being and Truth, since it discloses a world and creates a language for its adequate expression – as against the language of technology, which is merely an instrument for the calculation and domination of entities, an instrument of manipulation, rather than the ›abode of being‹.

It's not at all difficult, I think, to hear Heideggerian resonances in the poem that brings the Mediterranean suite to a close, if we take Montale's lyric to be addressed to the ›sea of Being‹ represented by the sea:

Dissolve if you will this frail
lamenting life,
the way the eraser wipes the ephemeral
scrawl off a slate.
I'm waiting to return inside your circle,
my straggler's wandering is done.
My coming was in witness
to an order I forgot in travelling,
these words of mine pledge faith
in an impossible event, and don't know it.
But always when I overheard
your sweet backwash along the shore
I was dumbfounded
like a man deprived of memory
whose country comes back to him.
I learned my lesson
not so much from your open glory

as from the almost-
silent heaving
of some of your deserted noons;
I offer myself in humility. I am only
the spark from a beacon. And I know for certain:
burning, nothing else, is what I mean.

»These words of mine pledge faith/ in an impossible event.« By expressing the gift »that passes into the syllables we carry with us«, poetry makes it possible for »the chime of rhymes« to be heard again, for »these noiseless words… nourished on fatigue and silence« to travel with us, enabling »the exile« to return »to his uncorrupted country,« to see »the dreamed-of homeland rising from the flood.«

Montale's declared aim was to find a ›fitting language‹, which is the phrase he uses in *Intervista immaginaria,* the prose composition in which he describes his poetic motives with greatest clarity and precision: »I wanted my word to be ›più aderente‹, more close-fitting, more appropriate, than that of the other poets I had known. More appropriate to what?« he asks, and then continues: »I seemed to be living under a bell jar, and yet I felt that I was close to something essential. A thin veil, a thread, separated me from the definitive *quid.* Absolute expression would have meant breaking that veil, or thread: an explosion, the end of the deceit of the world as representation. But this was an unreachable threshold…I wanted to wring the neck of our old high-flown language, even at the risk of creating a counter-eloquence. « (Il secondo mestiere. Arte, musica e società, ed. G. Zampa,. Milano, Mondadori, 1996, p. 1480. Tr. Galassi p. 458).

Montale is here turning against Dannunzio's inflated, rhetorical style, which is felt by him to be merely decorative and quite empty, because it doesn't capture the essence of things, but falsifies them through decoration and over-elaboration, whereas what he's after is a leaner, more humble vocabulary, as he makes clear in *I Limoni,* a poem placed right at the beginning of *Ossi di Seppia,* as a sort of manifesto in which he draws a sharp contrast between these two ways of poetic expression:

Ascoltami, i poeti laureati
si muovono soltanto fra le piante
dai nomi poco usati : bossi ligustri o acanti.
Io, per me, amo le strade che riescono agli erbosi
fossi dove in pozzanghere
mezzo seccate agguantano i ragazzi
qualche sparuta anguilla:
le viuzze che seguono i ciglioni,
discendono tra i ciuffi delle canne
e mettono negli orti, tra gli alberi dei limoni.

Meglio se le gazzarre degli uccelli
si spengono inghiottite dall'azzurro :
più chiaro si ascolta il sussurro
dei rami amici nell'aria che quasi non si muove,
e i sensi di quest'odore
che non sa staccarsi da terra
e piove in petto una dolcezza inquieta.
Qui delle divertite passioni
per miracolo tace la guerra,
qui tocca anche a noi poveri la nostra parte di richezza
ed è l'odore dei limoni.

Listen to me. The poets laureate
walk only among plants
with rare names: boxwood, privet and acanthus.

But I like roads that lead to grassy
ditches where boys
scoop up a few starved
eels out of half-dry puddles;
paths that run along the banks,
come down among the tufted canes
and end in orchards, among the lemon trees.

Better if the hubbub of the birds
dies out, swallowed by the blue;
we can hear more of the whispering
of friendly branches in not-quite-quiet air,
and the sensations of this smell
that can't divorce itself from earth
and rains a restless sweetness on the heart.
Here, by some miracle, the war
of troubled passions calls a truce;
here we poor, too, receive our share of riches,
which is the fragrance of the lemons.

Montale wants his words to capture the essence of things. He too »would have liked to feel harsh and essential« like the pebbles tumbled by the waves, »gnawed by the sea brine; a splinter out of time in evidence/ of a cold, constant will«; but he knows this image does not reflect what he really is. »I am different: a brooding man/ who sees the turbulence of fleeting life/ in himself, in others – who's slow to take the action/ no one later can undo«. What we have here is the poetic expression of the Sartrean contrast between the solid, stable, impervious but lifeless *en-soi,* the in-itself, and the transparent, penetrating but fickle, flickering consciousness, the *pour-soi,* the for-itself, the hankering after their unification, and the sheer futility of trying to achieve it.

This brings us to the *spiaggia* in the original story, the desolate beach surrounded by dark barren hills where the boy is abandoned by his friends and left alone until they return. In an essay where he describes the nature and sources of his inspiration, Montale states: »Avendo sentito fin dalla nascita una totale disarmonia con la realtà che mi circondava, la materia della mia ispirazione non poteva essere che quella disarmonia.« – »Since I felt from my very birth a total disharmony with the reality that surrounded me, the material of my inspiration could not be anything but that disharmony.« (Confessioni di scrittori: Intervista con se stessi, in Sulla poesia, p.570). Throughout Montale's poetry, as Claire Huffman points out, »the desire to escape from the self is frustrated a priori by the failure to find or define anything to escape *to* or *for;* and indeed it is the conflict between desire and skepticism that enlivens Montale's poetry of ›disharmony‹« (Claire C.L. Huffman, Montale and the Occasions of Poetry, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1983, p. 17.), the kind of disharmony poignantly expressed in this well-known lyric, which gave Montale his well-deserved nickname – *»il poeta del mal di vivere«* – the poet of the sickness of living - and is also a fine example of the poet's essentialism:

Spesso il male di vivere ho incontrato:
era il rivo strozzato che gorgolia,
era l'incartocciarsi della foglia
riarsa, era il cavallo stramazzato.

Bene non seppi, fuori del prodigio
che schiude la divina indifferenza:
era la statua nella sonnolenza
del meriggio, e la nuvola, e il falco alto levato.

Often I've encountered the sickness of living*
it was the stream that chokes and roars,

the shrivelling of the scorched leaf,
the fallen horse.

I knew no good, beyond the prodigy
that reveals divine Indifference:
it was the statue in the drowsiness
of noon, and the cloud, and the hawk that soars.

[* Galassi renders »il male di vivere« by »evil«. I don't think this captures the idea. »Mal di vivere« has the same flavour (and the same ring) as »mal di testa«, »mal di dente«, or »mal di pancia« (headache, toothache, tummy ache) and implies pain, discomfort, unease. Hence my departure from Galassi at this point.]

This brings us to the fourth important element in the short story we started with: the gun-shot that shatters the eerie silence of the beach and the sudden appearance, as if out of nowhere, of that strange little animal with a terrified look and glittering eyes. For Montale this is a kind of inexplicable event, one of the many little prodigies or miracles scattered throughout his poetic works that are interpreted by him as some kind of transcendental sign of salvation or redemption from the inexorable laws of nature – the chink in the armour, the broken mesh in the net, the missing ring in the chain.

»Look for the gap in the net that binds us tight, burst through, break free!«, the poet tells his unnamed interlocutor in the very first lyric of *Ossi di Seppia, In limine (On the Threshold)*, a poem originally called *La libertà.* But in *Chrysalis* and elsewhere the possibility of breaking free, of finding a flaw in the mesh of strict physical laws and natural necessity, is soon seen and described for what it is, as nothing but a vain hope.

Ah chrysalis, how bitter
is this nameless torture that envelops us
and spirits us away –
till not even our footprints last in the dust;
and we'll walk on, not having moved
a single stone in the great wall;
and maybe everything is fixed,
everything is written,
and we'll never see it come our way,
we'll never come across it:
freedom, the miracle,
the fact that wasn't sheer necessity!

The same thought is expressed in *I limoni,* where »in these silences where things give over and seem on the verge of betraying their final secret, sometimes we feel we're about to uncover an error in Nature, *il punto morto del mondo,* the still point of the world, *l'anello che non tiene,* the link that does not hold, the thread to untangle that will finally lead to the heart of a truth…It's in these silences you see in every human shadow some disturbed Divinity. But the illusion fails, and time returns us to noisy cities where the blue is seen in patches, up between the roofs. The rain exhausts the earth then; winter's tedium weighs the houses down, the light turns miserly – the soul bitter.«

The line »till not even our footprints last in the dust« brings to mind Michel Foucault's image of the face in the sand being wiped out by the waves, and of his claim, in *Les mots et les choses (The Order of Things),* about man being »a creature of recent invention destined to an early death«; but whereas for Foucault the ›demise of man‹ is a historical a *priori* marking the ultimate *episteme* of the post-modern era of structuralism, what Montale seems to have in mind, in this poem at least, is the death of the individual, which is also, of course, the fate of each and every human being (hence the use of the first person plural in the text). Montale was also quite aware of the possibility of the total annihilation of the human race through the use of weapons of mass destruction. The horrors of war are evoked, literally or

metaphorically, in some of the poems of Montale's third collection, *La Bufera e altro (The Storm and other things).*

I limoni is one of the few poems in Montale's *oeuvre* which end on an optimistic note. Winter's tedium is only temporary. The light turns miserly and the soul bitter, but only »Till one day through a half-shut gate/ in a courtyard, there among the trees, /we can see the yellow of the lemons; /and the chill in the heart melts, and deep in us/ the golden trumpets of sunlight/ pelt their songs.« Such expressions of unmitigated optimism in Montale's works are few and far between; generally, any sign of hope in his poems is tinged with ambiguity or undermined by doubt.

In 1924, before the publication of his first poetic collection, Montale wrote to Paola Nicoli (August 24): »It's a little difficult for me to manage to work at the moment: my life is all *a waiting for the miracle,* and miracles in these times without religion are rather rarely seen.« In the poem I quoted earlier, on the theme of »the sickness of living«, the poet speaks of »divine Indifference«. And in his collection of essays *Auto da fé* (p. 350) he says, »The Greeks had resolved the problem of God in another way: inventing the gods, *ad hoc* divinities made to measure and ideally suited to their needs. Hölderlin's thought was no different. He believed in the existence of earthly gods, living *incognito* among us. But it's not easy to meet any of them; that possibility (Hölderlin believed) is only conceded to poets. And even today this is still the only way to have a concrete experience of the divine.«

We can take our fourth and final cue from the title of the short story itself: *Ricordo di una spiaggia. Il ricordo*, memory, plays an important role in Montale's poetic works, being as it were the means by which the past is somehow saved from being completely wiped out, as well as the place where some kind of personal identity, however fragile, may be located. Remembering an event involves somehow reproducing it by means of an image; and even though the image involved in its reproduction may be inaccurate and incomplete, it must correspond to it in some degree. Memory involves re-creating a past experience and re-living it in some way. By bringing the past into the present, memory saves the experience from being swept away by the current of time. And even though personal identity may amount to little more than Hume's bundle of perceptions, memory seems to hold the bundle together and save the subject from complete dispersal or disintegration. For not only is memory, in Augustine's words, »a storehouse for countless images of all kinds which are conveyed to it by the senses«, and which may be recalled or brought back on occasion, »until such time as these things are swallowed up and buried in forgetfulness«; not only do »the vast cloisters of my memory« contain »the sky, the earth, and the sea, ready at my summons, together with everything that I have perceived in them by my senses, except the things I have forgotten«; »in it I meet myself as well. I remember myself and what I have done, when and where I did it, and the state of my mind at the time,« together with »things that have happened to me or things I have heard from others.« (Augustine, Confessions, X, 8)

A great deal of Montale's poetry consists of recollection and re-elaboration of past events. Memory, however, plays an ambiguous role, a kind of double game. On the one hand it seems to have the power to save things and events from the inexorable advance of entropy and the devastating effects of time. »When time overflows its dykes« (in *Delta*) the poet is prepared to make do with the image of the woman he loves, even though, precisely as an image, she only exists »as form or a mirage/ in the haze of a dream/ fed by the shore as it rages, eddies, roars/ against the tide«; and even though, »in the flux of hours«, there is nothing of her »other than the whistle of the tugboat/ leaving the mist and making for the gulf.« On the other hand, memories resemble photographs. They speak of absences, of things that once were and now are no more. In other words they speak the language of death, of which they are both a trace and a premonition. In one of Montale's later poems, written in 1979 *(Quartetto,* in the collection *Altri Versi)*, the poet pulls out a photograph from the bottom of a drawer, a faded picture showing four characters, including the poet himself and his ›angel-woman‹ Clizia, her face »severe in its sweetness.« The four of them had met in Siena forty years earlier to watch the Palio, the race where »tired-out horses are flogged to death in the shell-shaped arena in front of a ferocious crowd.« In the same collection *(Altri Versi)* another photo of Clizia is the subject of a poem written on 5th January 1980, forty-six years after the photo was taken and a mere twenty months before the poet's death. The poem is called *Clizia nel '34 (Clizia in 1934)*, and the woman is described as »stretched out on the chaise-lon-

gue/ on the verandah/ overlooking the garden, holding a book…« The poem opens with the words »Sempre allungata sulla chaise longue«, where »sempre« may be translated »as usual« (or »as always«), referring to the way Clizia used to sit, but may also be rendered *»Still* in that position«, i.e. after so many years, and would immediately foreground the fact that she, who is now dead, is fixed in that position forever.

»The photograph,« Roland Barthes says in *Camera Lucida,* »does not call up the past. There's nothing Proustian in a photograph. The effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed… Always the Photograph *astonishes* me… what I see is not a memory, an imagination, a reconstruction, a piece of Maja, such as art lavishes upon us, but reality in a past state; at once the past and the real… The date belongs to the photograph: not because it denotes a style (this does not concern me), but because it makes me lift my head, allows me to compute life, death, the inexorable extinction of the generations… I am the reference of every photograph, and this is what generates my astonishment in addressing myself to the fundamental question: why is it that I am alive *here and now?* It is the kind of question that Photography raises for me: questions which derive from a ›stupid‹ or simple metaphysics… The Photograph is a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask. It says ›Look, he has been but is no more. And so it shall be for you‹.« (Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, tr. Richard Howard, London, Jonathan Cape, 1982, pp. 82-5). Stanley Cavell puts it this way: »The work of art declares my presence to the world, the photograph declares my absence from it.« (Stanley Cavell, The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film, Harvard U.P., 1980).

Montale's poetry is a poetry of absences, a reconstruction of the poet's life as if it were a novel. Montale's original title for *La Bufera* was *Romanzo,* a novel, but one can read his entire poetic output as a narrative neatly divided into chapters, with the various sub-sections carefully put together as part of a well-made plot, whose main themes are love and death. (Commentators and critics have noted the attention paid by Montale to the order or sequence in which the poems were to be published, not necessarily in accordance with the chronological order of their composition but rather following the unfolding of the story-line, the narrative's *denouement.*) Walter Benjamin thought that what we look for in narrative constructions is that sense or knowledge of death not given to us by life. Death writes the word ›end‹ to our days, and *in this way* gives them a meaning. »Death,« Benjamin wrote, »is the justification of everything a narrator may narrate.« (Quoted in Peter Brooks, Reading for the Plot (1984), a work that attempts to show how the dynamics of desire are reflected in the structure of narrative.)

The presence of death, nothingness, the void, is felt throughout Montale's works. A fine example, one of many, is the following short poem from *Ossi di Seppia:*

Forse un mattino andando in un'aria di vetro,
arida, rivolgendomi vedrò compirsi il miracolo:
il nulla alle mie spalle, il vuoto dietro
di me, come un terrore di ubriaco.

Poi come s'uno schermo, s'accamperanno di gitto
alberi case colli per l'inganno consueto.
Ma sarà troppo tardi; ed io me n'andrò zitto
tra gli uomini che non si voltano, col moi segreto.

Maybe one morning, walking in dry, glassy air,
I'll turn and see the miracle occur:
nothing at my back, the void
behind me, with a drunkard's terror.

Then, as if on a screen, trees houses hills
will suddenly assemble for the usual illusion.
But it will be too late, and I'll walk on silent

among the men who don't look back, with my secret.

Montale described himself as a metaphysical poet. In the introduction to his collection of lyrics by seventeenth century English ›metaphysical‹ poets from John Donne to Samuel Butler, Herbert Grierson defines metaphysical poetry »in the full sense of the term« as that kind of poetry which, »like that of the *Divina Commedi*a, the *De Rerum Natura,* or Goethe's *Faust*, has been inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence. These poems were written because a definite interpretation of the riddle… laid hold on the mind and the imagination of a great poet, unified and illumined his comprehension of life, intensified and heightened his personal consciousness of joy and sorrow, of hope and fear, by broadening their significance, revealing to him in the history of his own soul a brief abstract of the drama of human destiny.« The power of Montale's poetry comes from having raised and tackled some of these basic philosophical questions and made of them »passionate experiences communicable in vivid and moving imagery,« using a wealth of vocabulary and a variety of rhythms that produce in us the same kind of surprise and joy experienced by their first readers.

Note

A version of this paper was presented to a conference ›Philosophical Poets‹ organised by Nicholas Bunnin, Simon Critchley, Katerina Deligiorgi and Ulrich Schoedlbauer for the Forum for European Philosophy and the Centre for Literature and Philosophy, University of Sussex on 9 February 2008. Further information about the Forum for European Philosophy can be found on the website: www.philosophy-forum.org. Further information about the Centre for Literature and Philosophy can be found on the website www.sussex.ac.uk/clp/.

Interviews

2008

Die Enden der Kunst