

LETTERATURA COME VITA: AN EXPLORATION OF  
ITALIAN HERMETIC POETRY AND THE POWER OF THE  
POETIC WORD

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Romance Languages  
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Science

October 2018

## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

Adam Roppo for the degree of Bachelor of Science  
in the Department of Romance Languages to be taken October 2018

Title: Letteratura Come Vita: An Exploration of Italian Hermetic Poetry and the  
Power of the Poetic Word

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

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*Letteratura come vita*, or, in English “Literature as life”, was a phrase coined by Italian author Carlo Bo in reference to a growing movement in Italian poetry during the early to mid-twentieth century: Hermeticism. A current begun by World War I veteran and Italian writer Giuseppe Ungaretti, Hermeticism received its name from critics who thought it represented a type of poetry that was “sealed” or “impenetrable”; i.e., difficult to read and interpret due to dismal imagery, unorthodox rhythmic and verse structure, and existentialist themes. This thesis explores the works of three of the (arguably) most influential Italian Hermetic poets: Giuseppe Ungaretti, Eugenio Montale, and Salvatore Quasimodo, with the goal of demonstrating the complexity and variety of the Hermetic movement. The Hermetic poets wrote poetry that wasn’t necessarily “sealed off” to the reader, but that was remarkably personal and self-reflective. It was a poetry that embodied the essence of their lives, and was a testament to the evocative potential of the poetic word.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my sincerest thanks and gratitude to Professor Nathalie Hester, for her unwavering patience and for providing me with constant insight and assistance as I navigated the depths of Italian Hermetic poetry. I would also like to thank Professor Massimo Lollini, whose instrumental recommendations allowed me to more fully examine and understand this topic, and Dr. Barbara Mossberg, who not only helped me develop a greater passion for writing this thesis, but strengthened my passion for writing poetry as well. I am so privileged, honored, and grateful to have such excellent and generous professors who dedicated their time to help me in the completion of a remarkably demanding but ultimately edifying and worthwhile project. In addition, I would like to say thank you to Professor Harinder Khalsa, my first Italian teacher at the University of Oregon, for being the first to stimulate my love of the Italian language and culture. Finally, I have to thank my parents, Paul and Anna Roppo, and my sister, Emma, for their enduring support, encouragement, and love. I'm not sure I would have been able to finish this process without them.

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## Introduction

### What is Hermetic Poetry?

Hermeticism (in Italian, “L’Ermetismo”) is a modernist poetic movement that has its foundations in early twentieth century Italy. Characteristics of hermetic poetry can include atypical structure, a varied and unorthodox lexicon, and dark, powerful imagery. Hermetic poets drew inspiration from the works of the French Symbolist poets, such as Baudelaire and Rimbaud, and its formalistic devices have been labeled as a partial offshoot of another early twentieth century movement that stressed the importance of innovation in literature and language: Futurism. Futurism was initially an anarchistic movement, but after World War I, it shifted to embody a Fascistic nature, celebrating hyper-masculinity, technology, and war. Hermeticism reflected no such themes, being a tenebrous and opaque movement that persisted through the rise of Fascism and both World Wars, despite its criticism and lamentation of both. While Futurism fizzled out, not because of the imposition of Fascistic ideals, but rather in spite of it, Hermeticism’s obscure nature kept its anti-war/anti-progress sentiments relatively safe from autocratic censorship.

In his book, *A Brief History of Italian Literature*, Vincent Luciani describes Hermeticism as poetry that “wants to express the real reasons for sentiment with an ‘essential’ language, one devoid of frills, of rhetoric, i.e., with a limited use of adjectives. Its images may be exciting and mysterious, but they are always difficult,” (271). Luciani explains that, in order for one to truly understand poetry in the Hermetic style, one must forgo the restraint of common logic and rationality and really try to

“grasp intuitively the relationship between images and sentiments,” (271). Written in either free or traditional verse, Hermetic poetry has also been called “pure” poetry, due to its refusal to incorporate common poetic devices (such as rhythmic or syntactical constructions) and antiquated literary figures, as well as its focus on the evocative power of words (Luciani, 271). Recurring themes in Hermetic poetry are those pertaining to the futility of existence, denunciation, and the empty illusions that are power, conquest, and progress (Luciani, 271). Hermeticism reflects an innovative poetic movement in the timeline of Italian poetry, because the desire of the poets to express their existentialist sentiments necessitated a new form of writing poetry that was not bogged down with excessive words or compressed by strict rhyme schemes; that not only broke free of previous thematic or symbolic standards, but, at times, darkened and subverted them as well.

The term “Hermeticism” itself had already been in use in France towards the end of nineteenth century (Anceschi). It resurfaced in Italy in the early twentieth century, specifically the 1920s, as being associated with, according to Luciano Anceschi: “the first critical reactions, controversy to the new research of poetry that later will be called the ‘new lyric’,” Anceschi). The term “came to delineate the boundaries of a broad movement of poetry and criticism that developed between the two [world] wars,” (Anceschi). It is important to note, then, that the movement that the term “Hermeticism” refers to is substantially diverse and wide-ranging, lasting until, says Anceschi, its “dissolution” at the end of the Second World War. Anceschi even says that the Hermetic current, or the multiple currents that can be categorized as Hermetic, pervaded poetic thought and Italian poetry itself from the years 1916 to 1956.

This thesis will explore the complexities of Hermetic poetry and its diverse poets, and why it was a poetry that became so pervasive and resonant in Italian literature.

### **Etymology and Reception**

The adjective “Hermetic” comes from the mystical figure Hermes Trismegistus, who was purported to have sealed an ampoule of glass by melting the edges of the openings, from which we today derive the phrase: “hermetically sealed.” Anceschi goes on to describe “Hermetic” as representative of a “doctrine of late Hellenistic age in which obscurely mystical motifs of philosophical-religious syncretism merged with hypotheses of fantastic alchemy, in a secret linguistic fabric, full of allusions, of difficult participation.”<sup>1</sup> The writings that came from this doctrine were obscure and difficult, representing connections between mysticism and alchemy, and the first writers to be known as “Hermetic” belonged to movements of occultist thought (Anceschi). It was only much later that “Hermeticism” was ascribed to an Italian poetic current during the first half of the twentieth century. The Italian Hermeticists were by no means followers of Hermes Trismegistus or his Hellenistic doctrine, in fact, it was not the poets, but the critics who coined the term to describe the movement.

It was Francesco Flora who established the term Hermetic when classifying some of the early, notable twentieth-century Italian poets (namely Giuseppe Ungaretti and Eugenio Montale). Until then, the term was only used sporadically in reference to the obscure and depressing writings, some of which were thought to demonstrate a

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<sup>1</sup>Translated from Luciano Anceschi: “...si disse ‘ermetica’ una dottrina di tarda età ellenistica in cui motivi oscuramente mistici di sincretismo filosofico-religioso si fusero con ipotesi di fantastica alchimia, in un tessuto linguistico segreto, ricco di allusioni, di difficile partecipazione.”

refusal to allow for an open, direct relationship with the reader. Flora considered this impenetrable element of Hermetic writing analogous to the concept of the hermetically sealed, or closed, ampoule. With his book, *La poesia ermetica* (1935) Francesco Flora sought to utilize “Hermetic” to signify an official, unified category of poetry. This category of poetry was “Hermetic” in that the poet looked inward in order to “resurrect within himself and within the reader the primordial meaning of human existence,” (Golino, xviii). The poetry is “sealed” because the poet is focusing inward, on his own personal memories and struggles, without trying to make them more universally appealing or understandable.

Deriving his classification of Italian Hermeticism mainly from the works of Ungaretti, Flora was critical of the abstractness and the lack of accessibility in the Hermetic poems. Anceschi argues that these criticisms are reflective of the condition of Hermeticism itself; that is, a “categorical form of the negative of poetry as expressed in the experience of decadence,” (Anceschi). So, Italian Hermeticism represented a sort of “negative” reaction to the poetry and literature that was typical of Italian culture, i.e., poetry that was decorated with rhythm and adjectives; that spoke directly to the reader and was decidedly *engagée*. However, Anceschi says that, between the years 1935 and 1940, Hermeticism obtains a more positive reception and takes on newer meanings and variations that prolong its existence and influence, due to the diverse group of writers who associated themselves with this movement. For example, in his publication, *Letteratura come vita*, (1938), which is considered to be the official manifesto of Hermeticism, Carlo Bo refers to Hermetic poetry as a pure form of poetry that seeks to explore and develop a relationship between art, literature, and human existence. Bo said



that literature was intertwined with life, and that it was a condition, not a profession. Literature does not provide knowledge because it is a knowledge that one already has in themselves. The poet writes about the truth that he discovers within. So, Hermetic poetry is *Letteratura come vita*, or “Literature as life” because it is a manifestation of the poet’s life and their condition. The words themselves and the images they evoke represent a fragment, or a snapshot, of the poet’s experiences and lived truths. It is, essentially, a piece of them.

### **Historical Contexts and Literary Predecessors**

In order to explain the birth and rise of the Hermetic movement in Italy, it is necessary to examine the political, social, and national aspects of Italian history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Italy had existed as a nation-state only since 1870 (Domenico, 5). The newly-minted Italians chose the term *Risorgimento*, from the Italian verb *risorgere* (resurge), to represent their liberation from foreign domination and to signify their future as a free nation (Domenico, 5). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Italian economy was expanding. However, despite progressive industrialization, poverty plagued the nation, especially in the south, as a result of the north’s exploitation and neglect of southern industry and agriculture (Domenico, 10-11). The growth of industry also led to the development of a large working class, which in turn led to the organization of the Socialist Party in the 1890s as a voice for the members of the proletariat (Domenico, 11-12). The government in Rome would sometimes retaliate against the protests of the working class with violent means, adding to the social unrest and tension between the new government and the proletariat, as well as to that between the north and the south (Domenico, 12).

Even though Italy was now a unified country, there still remained the issue of unifying its multiple regional cultures and identities. Despite the institution of a standard Italian language based on the Tuscan dialect, the new national language was only spoken in big cities and among the bourgeois, while the peasant class still adhered to regional dialects (Domenico, 17). However, a national language carried with it a national mentality, which was evident in the literature of the time, especially poetry.

One popular poet and author of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was Gabriele D'Annunzio. D'Annunzio's works, influenced by Romanticism, embodied the nationalist sentiments of the time, and, despite the shocking, avant-garde opulence of his writings, he managed to draw the attention of a bourgeois audience (Domenico, 18). According to Carlo Golino, D'Annunzio's influence was crucial for the "subsequent renewal of Italian poetry", as well as the development of the later Hermetic movement (Golino, viii). Golino posits that D'Annunzio's lucid and opulent baroque-style language triggered negative reactions from the Hermetics, who stressed the usage of fewer words in their works in order to emphasize the power of the words' meaning (Golino, viii).

D'Annunzio was one of three "nationalist" poets to dominate the Italian poetic scene at the beginning of the twentieth century. The other two were Giosuè Carducci and Giovanni Pascoli (Golino, viii). Despite all three poets having origins in the Romantic style, their works differed from one another. Carducci was considered the unofficial poet of the new, modern Italy. Like D'Annunzio, Carducci's poetry also embodied nationalist sentiments, though his demonstrated a much more blatant, righteous civic message in comparison to D'Annunzio's adventurous themes (Golino, viii). Pascoli employed more romantic elements, and his poems were melancholic and

subdued rather than vehement, like Carducci's, or opulent and exciting like D'Annunzio's (Golino viii).

The first group of poets to signify a solid opposition to the likes of D'Annunzio and Carducci were the *crepuscolari*, or the "Twilight" poets. Guido Gozzano and Sergio Corazzini were two of the movement's most important figures, and their poems were resigned and vacillant, rather than bold and unabashed like those of D'Annunzio (Golino, ix). They were reserved anti-intellectuals in the face of a growing nationalist movement, and their poetry signifies the first, albeit small, deviation from tradition in Italian poetry in the early twentieth century (Golino, ix).

As the breakout of World War I approached, there was widespread discontent in Italy about the new nation's preparation for war. King Victor Emmanuel III's forces were grossly underprepared for a conflict of such magnitude (Domenico, 25). However, support for the war still found traction, fueled by nationalists whose ideas paralleled those of writers and intellectuals like D'Annunzio and Carducci (Domenico, 26). This nationalism also spawned a new movement in poetry, Futurism. The Futurists displayed an extremely radical stance in their support of the war, with their 1909 manifesto praising war as "the sole hygiene of the world" (Domenico, 26).<sup>2</sup> Futurist poetry aimed to eradicate the traditions of the past and to draw inspiration only from the future (Golino, x). This break with tradition involved the implementation of new poetic elements, such as using verbs only in the infinitive, eliminating adjectives and adverbs and even punctuation, along with the dismissal of poetic meters (Golino, x). The goal of the Futurists was to bring about drastic change in ways of thinking through a drastic

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<sup>2</sup> A better translation for this might be "the sole cure for the world" or "the sole cleanser of the world".

shift in the production of literature and poetry. However, Futurist poetry was not able to accomplish this feat, because its radicalism lacked emotional or moral depth, and the Futurist movement as a whole was assimilated into the growing Fascistic influence that followed World War I (Golino, xi). Nevertheless, it introduced new and eccentric techniques that later poetic movements incorporate, like Hermeticism, and allowed for, Golino says, Italian poetry to shed some of its more “exhausted” traditions (Golino, xi).

### **The Birth of Hermetic Poetry**

The First World War took its toll on the young nation-state of Italy. 571,000 soldiers died in combat, 57,000 more met their demise in prison camps, and another 60,000 went missing (Domenico, 29). The devastating effects of the war were catalysts for the rise of Fascism (Domenico, 31). The consequences of war also resonated in Italy’s poetic realm. Although the term *poesia ermetica* (Hermetic poetry) did not make its official appearance until 1935, Golino says that Hermeticism originated right after the end of the First World War, with the poetry of Giuseppe Ungaretti (Golino, xvi). Ungaretti fought in the World War I, and his first two collections of poems came out in 1916 and 1919 (Golino, xvi). According to Golino, Ungaretti was able to fill the void that Futurism had left in the Italian poetic tradition. He made it his goal to revitalize the poetic “word”, to express its “true meaning and dignity,” (Golino, xvi). In essence, Ungaretti was able to create real reform in Italian poetic tradition by combining his education in European literature (namely the French symbolists) with the ideas of the Futurists and the *crepuscolari*, such as removing ornaments and excess in poetry in order to focus on the impact of individual words. However, unlike the Futurists and the *crepuscolari*, he was not overtly radical nor withdrawn and reserved, and he found

success in his reformation efforts. Golino credits Ungaretti with creating a new technique that would influence all Italian poetry to come (Golino, xvi-xvii).

Although Ungaretti is considered the founder of Hermetic poetry, Eugenio Montale gave the poetic trend direction and further depth (Golino, xvii). Montale, like Ungaretti, was well versed in European literature, but he was more inspired by English writers like T.S. Eliot, in contrast to Ungaretti's French influence (Golino, xvii). Montale was a follower of Ungaretti's mantra that words must be restored to their pure, evocative meaning, and took this concept a step further by adding an element of (slight) musicality to his writings not found in those of Ungaretti (Golino, xvii). The two writers differ in their philosophy; while Ungaretti certainly acknowledged the reality of human suffering, he also recognized, in a Christian sense, that there would be a chance at deliverance from such suffering (Golino, xvii). Montale, on the other hand, did not believe in such deliverance, and was steadfast in the conviction that humanity is alone and that life and existence are meaningless (Golino, xvii).

Ungaretti and Montale were the heroes (or, rather, antiheroes) of the early phase of Hermeticism, and though there were many who followed in their footsteps and added their own unique style to the movement, the most notable of these was Salvatore Quasimodo. Quasimodo brought a level of fame and recognition to the Hermetic current not previously seen, becoming one of the best-known Italian poet outside of Italy and receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1959 (Montale received one himself in 1975) (Golino, xviii). Unlike Ungaretti and Montale, he did not draw his poetic influence from foreign schools of European literature, and his roots are solely in Italian poetry. His poetry was able to reach a larger audience than his predecessors, and his 1942

publication, *Ed è subito sera*, received more public appreciation than the work of any other Hermetic poet in Italy (Golino, xix). It is for this reason that Quasimodo is considered the “last champion of the hermetic trend” and is the last poet in my discussion and analysis of Hermetic poetry, following Ungaretti and Montale (Golino, xix).

### **Significance**

The importance of studying Hermeticism, for me, lies in the conception and reception of poetry today. While poetry is certainly a respected literary art form, as well as one that is taught and emphasized in schools, I feel that the potential and influence that it has on the world is significantly underrated and underappreciated. I believe that shedding new light on a now obscure movement, characterized itself by obscurity, will help to reveal the variety, depth, and complexity that is poetry. Hermeticism was a movement that undeniably showed the evocative power of the poetic word, and how the words a poet wrote could become an extension of him/herself. It was a revitalization, not only of poetry, but of what it *meant* to be a poet and the connection poetry could have with one’s life. In writing this thesis, I hope to show how the Hermetic poets embodied the mantra of *Letteratura come vita*, and in doing so highlight the importance and timelessness of poetry itself.

## Chapter One: Ungaretti

### Background

Giuseppe Ungaretti once said, upon the publication of his 1919 collection *L'Allegria*, that he “had no ambition, and [he believed] the great poets have none, other than to leave a very beautiful autobiography” (Luciani, 272). This could be considered as Ungaretti’s deepest conviction for his work: to write poetry that embodies the life of the poet.

Ungaretti was born in 1888, in Alexandria, Egypt to Lucchese parents (Luciani, 272). He studied poetry at the Sorbonne in Paris, and established notoriety in Italy as a contributor to *avant-garde* reviews (Luciani, 272). Ungaretti was influenced by the French symbolists he studied in Paris, as well as from the *crepuscolari* and Futurist movements of pre-World War I Italy (Luciani, 272). His harrowing and tragic experiences fighting as part of the Italian infantry during the Great War inspired his first collection of poetry, *Il porto sepolto*, or “The Buried Port” (Luciani, 272). *Il porto sepolto* was followed by *Allegria di naufragi*, or “The Joy of Shipwrecks” in 1919, which later became known as simply *L'Allegria* or “Joy” (Luciani, 272). *L'Allegria* represented Ungaretti’s first real plunge into the Hermetic style, and with this publication he began to gain an audience for his poetry (Golino, xvi). It was one of his later collections, however, 1933’s *Sentimento del tempo* (“A Sense of Time”) that led Francesco Flora to label the obscurity and abstruse symbolism of Ungaretti’s poems as *la poesia ermetica*.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, Ungaretti strived in his writing to restore the poetic “word” to its true meaning and dignity. What this means is that Ungaretti desired to rid words of any historical connotations, as well as limit the use of syntax and adjectives in his poetic structure, essentially allowing the words to “speak for themselves” by conjuring a candid image in the reader’s mind the moment he or she reads them (Golino, xvi). To put it more simply, Ungaretti did not believe descriptive eloquence was necessary in poetry in order for the reader to grasp the poem’s meaning. His poems were usually short in length and often succinct, but they were intended to be, because he wanted to show the evocative power of words in their rawest, purest form. Ungaretti’s poetry was a poetry “in progress”, in that it reflected his own personal experiences as he progressed in life, making his poems somewhat of a diary. It was also “progressive” in a historical sense, as Ungaretti endeavored to revitalize and reform the Italian poetic tradition through the use of a new technique, one that discarded the strict versification and punctuation of the old tradition (Golino, xvii). Ungaretti once said that, if the goal of 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry was to use “bridges and rails” to connect the reader to the meaning of words, then the goal of modern poetry is to allow the reader to traverse the gap of understanding without having to use such bridges (*Saggi e interventi*, 760).

Considered to be largely autobiographical, the work of Ungaretti represents the idea that poetry and the poetic word are akin to the power of “miraculous creation” (Dombroski, 502). Ungaretti expresses his beliefs regarding his situation as a poet through the use of few words and substantial spaces in his writings; for example, in *L'allegria*, the poem “Mattina” or “Morning” is only four words separated into two



lines, and the amount of empty space on the page is significantly greater than the amount of writing (Luciano, 272). This “poetic space” symbolizes the perceived absence of poetry in the time of war and the industrial age. The lack of words is a negative space that reflects the silence and resignation of the poet who feels removed from a society that has grown increasingly autocratic and war-driven (Dombroski, 502). However, the poet is not completely silent, rather, he draws on the power of his experiences in order to create new meaning in the form of his poetry. Even though the words that still remain inside him are few, the poet is able to use these fragments to revitalize the poetic genre and to convey the truth and power of his emotions (Dombroski, 502). In summary, while he expresses the bleakness and destruction of war and the modern age, Ungaretti presents the poetic word as a means of the writer’s resilience during these dark times.

In Ungaretti’s later works, such as *Sentimento del tempo*, a collection composed during the time of Fascist rule in Italy, his writing becomes somewhat more structured, even incorporating some traditional elements such as metrics and punctuation (Dombroski, 503). However, this was not Ungaretti deciding to conform to the old tradition; rather, he was drawing from said tradition in order to create a new one (Dombroski, 503). In fact, Golino says that Ungaretti “sought to reconstruct the rhythm of the Italian language by recasting into new form the traditional hendecasyllable,” (Golino, xvii). So Ungaretti was implementing poetic devices that he had previously ignored into his later writing, as a means of developing a “new mode of poetic consciousness” as well as creating a new poetic rhythm to accompany it (Dombroski, 503).

The new poetic tradition that Ungaretti fostered in *Sentimento del tempo* involved a greater use of order and structure than his previous poems in *L'allegria*, but also relied on the subversive elements characteristic in *L'allegria* and his earlier works (Dombroski, 503). The poetry of *Sentimento* influenced the “poetry as life” concept of Hermetic poetry introduced by author Carlo Bo, which I discussed briefly in the introductory portion of this thesis. According to Dombroski, *Sentimento* encompasses a situation in which “the poet, in a moment of existential uncertainty, starts to understand himself in relation to absolute existence,” (503). The poet uses poetry as a means of perceiving the truth, and then that perception becomes truth in reality; lived truth (Dombroski, 503). Thus, in a sense, poetry becomes “life”. Forming the basis of *Sentimento* was Ungaretti’s conviction that there is no “disjunction” between poetry and reality, allowing the poet to redeem himself through reclaiming the “fullness”, purity, and innocence of spirit that have now become his reality” (Dombroski, 503).

### ***Agonia (Dying)***

English Translation by Lowry Nelson, Jr. (in Golino, 110-111).

Morire come allodole assetate  
sul miraggio

To die like thirsting larks  
before a mirage

O come quaglia  
passato il mare  
nei primi cespugli  
perchè di volare  
non ha più voglia

Or like the quail  
having crossed the sea  
in the first branches  
because it has lost  
all desire to fly

Ma non vivere di lamento  
Come un cardellino accecato

But not to live on anguish  
like a blinded finch

This poem is taken from one of Ungaretti's earliest collections, the aforementioned *L'allegria*, and it was part of a subset of poems in that collection that Ungaretti wrote prior to his time serving in World War I. Ungaretti incorporates aspects of the "old tradition" such as a rhyme scheme and alliteration into a poem that relatively lacks in rhythm. The first verse contains the alliteration "allodole assetate" which translates into "thirsting larks", the first of three birds mentioned in this poem. The repetition of the double consonants, "ll" and "ss", combined with the assonance of the "ah" sound evinces a somewhat dry-mouth feeling when pronounced out loud. The very words themselves bring to life the feelings of the parched birds in the poem. Despite beginning with a strong poetic device, however, the very next verse is only two words, cutting off any previously established rhythmic quality that the reader may have been anticipating. The choice of words used in the second line is also relevant: "sul miraggio", or in English "before a mirage". While the poem is painting a picture of larks dying of thirst, unable to drink because the water in front of them is only a mirage, the reader also experiences a "mirage" of sorts, in that the alliteration of the first line tricked readers into thinking that they were reading a poem with a set rhythm. Already in the first two verses of the poem, Ungaretti shows that things are never what they seem.

This poem was written before Ungaretti's involvement in World War I, and it actually reflects a pro-war position on Ungaretti's part. Somewhat like the pre-war Futurists, Ungaretti at first supported the war, and the birds in this poem symbolize the glorious deaths that await those who decide to go and fight. Birds are usually symbols of unrestrained, exuberant freedom, and Ungaretti slightly subverts that stereotype in

his poem. Freedom is not akin to joyous flight, but to agonizing death brought upon through fighting for one's country, as evinced in the overexerted quail and the water-deprived larks. Ungaretti, or the poetic voice in which he writes, prefers death on the battlefield of war to living on in the potentially harrowing environments of war's aftermath as a veteran with crippling injuries, or as a civilian who never fought at all.

The second portion of the poem could more or less be one sentence (if grammatically incomplete): "O come quaglia, passato il mare nei primi cespugli, perchè di volare non ha più voglia," (Or like the quail, having crossed the sea in the first branches, because it has lost all desire to fly) but is divided into five fragments, not separated by commas, but by lines. Again, Ungaretti juxtaposes a poetic device with an unconventional rhythm. There is a rhyme scheme present in these fragments, in the first and fifth lines: "quaglia" and "voglia", and in the second and fourth lines: "mare" and "volare". However, the construction of this verse causes the rhythm to feel strained, as if it almost drags on, forcing the reader to pause abruptly at the end of each line before being able to read on. Although constituting one image, that of a quail being so exhausted that it has lost the will to fly any further, the lines feel disconnected from each other, and it is as if the reader has to piece together each fragment in order to obtain the full image. This reflects the narrator's own exhaustion with life and his disillusionment with existence. Fighting and dying in the war thus provides a sort of clarity and a sense of purpose in a life that, for the narrator, is otherwise meaningless.

The poem finishes with a couplet that, unlike the two beginning verses, rhymes in the last syllable of each line: "lamento" and "accecato". Ungaretti compares his anguish to that experienced by a "cardellino accecato" or "blinded finch", the third and

final bird to be mentioned in this poem. Notably, the finch is blind, while the larks are thirsty and the quail is exhausted. The finch's blindness could represent those who are against the war and/or don't want to fight. They don't possess the clarity that the narrator claims to have in regard to death on the battlefield being true freedom. Ironically, after actually serving in the army during the Great War, Ungaretti would come to change his pro-war stance.<sup>3</sup> His immediate post-war poetry, poems like "Fratelli" (Brothers) and "Veglia" (Vigil) would reflect the horrors of trench warfare and the ugly reality of dying on the battlefield. To be clear, Ungaretti was never as zealous in his support of the war as, say, the Futurists were, but he did believe in its necessity<sup>4</sup>, and this poem implies that he viewed death on the battlefield as the ultimate freedom. Those beliefs, of course, changed after his service was done, but the poem's relevancy to his experience did not. Ungaretti himself ended up becoming the blinded finch, for he had been blind to the fact that war does not bring an escape from life's misery, but only compounds it. The poem's title, "Agonia", which literally translates to "Agony" is thus very appropriate in that it speaks to the agony that Ungaretti had to endure, both physically and mentally, as his perceptions on war and existence were uprooted. In addition, even reading the poem could be thought of as somewhat "agonizing" in that the fragmented, disconnected lineation provides the reader some difficulty in getting through it, despite the poem not being rather long.

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<sup>3</sup> Credit for this information goes to Massimo Lollini, Professor Emeritus of Italian in the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Oregon.

<sup>4</sup> Quote from [www.studenti.it](http://www.studenti.it): "Non amo la guerra. Neppure allora l'amavo, ma ci sembrava che quella guerra fosse necessaria..." (I don't love the war. I never loved it, but it seemed to us that that war was necessary...)

**Girovago (Wanderer)**

English Translation by Diego Bastianutti (in *A Major Selection of the Poetry of Giuseppe Ungaretti*, 127).

In nessuna  
parte  
di terra  
mi posso  
accasare

There's not  
a single place  
upon this earth  
that I can  
call my home

A ogni  
nuovo  
clima  
che incontro  
mi trovo  
languente  
che  
una volta  
già gli ero stato  
assuefatto  
E me ne stacco sempre  
straniero

In every  
new  
clime  
I find myself  
I feel  
wistful  
as soon  
as I've grown  
accustomed to it

And I always leave  
a stranger

Nascendo  
tornato da epoche troppo  
vissute

Reborn  
through ages  
too long lived

Godere un solo  
minuto di vita  
iniziale

To enjoy  
but a single instant  
of primal life

Cerco un paese  
innocente

I seek an innocent  
land

This poem, also from *L'Allegria*, is entitled "Girovago" or "Wanderer". The title does not necessarily connote a dark or dispiriting tone; at the very most the feelings it conjures are melancholic or even detached. Yet this poem does not tell the tale of an aimless drifter or carefree traveller; rather, it reveals a man who is constantly moving from place to place in a futile search for somewhere he feels at home.

*Girovago* is slightly longer than *Agonia*, and employs the same fragmented verse technique that is prevalent throughout Ungaretti's work. For example, in the first stanza: "In nessuna/parte/di terra/mi posso/accasare", or, in English, "There's not/a single place/upon this earth/that I can/call my home". The fragmentation has a similar effect as in *Agonia*, causing readers to pause abruptly in their reading at the end of each line in order to continue on with the poem. However, unlike *Agonia*, *Girovago* does not begin with a alliterative sentence that is then cut off and followed by a two-word fragment. It (somewhat) employs this technique later on in the poem, however, with the couplet: "E me ne stacco sempre/straniero" which Bastianutti translates to "And I always leave/a stranger". Yet the most direct translation of "staccarsi" into English is "to break away". With this translation, the narrator is no longer simply "leaving", he is now breaking away from each place, as if he was stuck there. The word "stacco" is sharp and precise, even succinct, with hard consonant sounds. The musical term "staccato", for playing notes sharply, quickly, and separately, is derived from "staccarsi". The semantics and sounds of "stacco" cause the word itself to evoke the feeling of separation. The wanderer has to separate himself, to tear himself away, because even though he has become accustomed to each new place, he still does not feel at home, connoting a violent cycle that only leaves the narrator more broken and destitute than before.

In the Italian, the placement of the words "stacco" and "sempre" next to each other creates a slight alliteration and gives a stronger rhythmic quality to the poem, which is subsequently interrupted by the beginning of a new line containing only the word "straniero". One could argue that "straniero" continues the alliteration, as it also

begins with an “s”, however, this would mean that the alliteration is now interrupted. The reader has to pause after “stacco sempre” before saying “straniero”, and thus we have another example of Ungaretti subverting the impact of a poetic device. The reader grasps the meaning of what the narrator is saying, how he feels like a stranger anew after leaving each place he travels to, because the individual word “straniero” (stranger) is highlighted due to its placement. Despite beginning with the same letter as the previous two words, the word “straniero” itself becomes a stranger in relation to the alliterative rhythm of the previous line.

While at the surface level, the poem is about a wanderer who struggles to find a place where he feels truly at home, underneath lies a deeper meaning in relation to Ungaretti and his poetry. Towards the end of the poem, the narrator laments how he would love to enjoy just a single moment of “vita iniziale” or “primal life”. He finishes by saying how he is searching for an “innocent” land. Both of these phrases indicate a desire to return to innocence or purity, yet what does he mean by a “primal” state of life or a land that is “innocent”? It could be that he wishes to return to a pre-war existence, one where he had not yet endured the traumatic conditions of the battlefield and where he would have been more “innocent” of witnessing and experiencing such atrocities. However, I don’t believe that is what Ungaretti (through the poetic voice) is referring to here. “Iniziale” directly translates to “initial” or “starting”. So, Ungaretti could really be desiring to return to an infantile/childlike existence, or the literal beginning of life. He doesn’t feel “at home” in any place he travels to because he, now an adult, has forever lost that feeling of childlike wonder and joy. The poem is about how growing up and getting older is akin to “wandering”, because one is essentially always wandering



through life; each year that passes takes them further away from that innocent state of childhood that they can never reclaim but always long for.

### ***L'isola* (The Island)**

English Translation by Lowry Nelson, Jr. (in Golino, 118-121).

A una proda ove sera era perenne  
Di anziane selve assortite, scese  
E s'inoltrò  
E lo richiamò rumore di penne  
Ch'erasi sciolto dallo stridulo  
Batticuore dell'acqua torrida,  
E una larva (languiva  
E rifioriva) vide;  
Ritornato a salire vide  
Ch'era una ninfa e dormiva  
Ritta abbracciata a un olmo.

To a shore where ancient brooding woods  
Made perpetual evening, he descended,  
And walked forth,  
And, lured by rustling of feathers  
Perceptible above the shrill  
Heart-throbbing of the torrid waters,  
He saw, as it drooped  
and rose again, a ghost;  
Turning to ascend he saw  
It was a nymph sleeping upright  
Her arms around an elm.

In sé da simulacro a fiamma vera  
Errando, giunse a un prato ove  
l'ombra negli occhi s'addensava  
Delle vergini come  
Sera appiè degli ulivi;  
Distillavano i rami  
Una pioggia pigra di dardi,  
Qua pecore s'erano appisolate  
Sotto il liscio tepore,  
Altre brucavano  
La coltre luminosa;  
Le mani del pastore erano un vetro  
Levigato di fioca febbre.

Wandering inwardly from image  
To real flame, he came upon a meadow where  
The shadows in the eyes of maidens gathered  
Like evening at the foot of olive trees;  
The branches distilled  
An indolent rain of darts;  
Here sheep had lain down to nap  
Under the bland warmth;  
Others browsed  
On the gleaming cover;  
The shepherd's hands were glass  
Smoothened by faint fever.

*L'isola* is a poem that is at once both shrouded in imagination and grounded in reality. The first half is reverent, and Ungaretti is hauntingly beautiful in his descriptions. There is an air of myth to it; the island described is like a picture in a storybook brought to life with Ungaretti's words. The enjambment helps to staggeringly

unfold the image of this island in the reader's mind, and the repetition of "E" (And) at the beginning of multiple lines is a tool that allows each line to repeatedly add a new sight or sound that the reader experiences along with the unnamed man.

Ungaretti makes heavy use of alliteration throughout this poem, as well as assonance and consonance. Remember that Ungaretti is always trying to show the evocative power of words and sounds to create meaning and imagery, and *L'isola* is no exception. The first two lines of the poem are as follows: "A una proda ove sera era perenne/Di anziane selve assortite, scese," (To a shore where ancient brooding woods/Made perpetual evening, he descended,). The assonances of the short "e" sound and the "ah" sound serve to tie the words together, creating two flowing lines of sounds. Then on the third line, Ungaretti breaks this consistency: "E s'inoltrò" (And [he] walked forth). The shortness of this line highlights the importance of this moment and adds a dynamic quality to the poem; the man observed the shore as he approached it, disembarked, paused, and then began to walk forward. The following lines continue with a similar rhythm to the first two, showing that this fragment was intentional and meant to give the reader pause like the man in the poem.

The assonance continues, this time with the "o" sound: "E s'inoltrò/E lo richiamò rumore di penne/Ch'erasi sciolto dallo stridulo" (And [he] walked forth/And, lured by rustling of feathers/Perceptible above the shrill). Then, the sonority of the poem shifts. Following the "o" assonance, there is the line "Batticuore dell'acqua torrida" (Heart-throbbing of the torrid waters), which uses the double-consonant sounds of "tt" and "rr", and the hard "k" sound in "acqua", to evoke the constant beating power of the waves. But then, on the next lines, words like "larva" and "languiva" and

“rifioriva”, filled with the heavy assonance made by the “va” syllable, slow the poem down and contrast the sharper, more accented sounds of the previous lines. The image of this ghost (who then becomes a nymph) drooping and then rising again is akin to a flower, and Ungaretti conjugates in the multi-syllabic imperfect tense (lan-gui-va, ri-fi-o-ri-va) to emphasize the gradualism of this occurrence.

The first half of the poem depicts this dynamic scene bursting with powerful, mythical imagery. The second half, though similar rhythmically (Ungaretti continues his use of enjambment and sound repetition) displays a different tone, characterized by images that are dark, melancholic, or bluntly realistic in comparison to the heart-throbbing waves or sleeping nymphs of the first half. It even begins with the poetic voice stating that the man was “wandering inwardly from image/To real flame”, marking a transition from the imaginative realm to the real one. The pastoral scene described here is tepid, stagnant. The shroud of mystery of the first stanza is gone, the mythical nymph is replaced with maidens whose eyes are filled with shadows, the torrid waters are replaced with a “pioggia pigra di dardi”, or an “indolent rain of darts”. Note the consonance of the “p” and “d” sounds and how the pronunciation of this sentence almost evokes the sound of water dripping from a branch. There is pain subtly imbued in Ungaretti’s images; the water is not falling in drops, but in darts, the warmth is not comforting, but “liscio” or “bland”. Ungaretti uses the imperfect tense more often in the second stanza, as well as the “l” sounds towards the end (“liscio”, “la coltre luminosa”, “levigato”) to prolong the pace of the poem so as to convey the stagnancy of the meadow’s existence. There is no sense of reverence here; Ungaretti’s island has been “smoothened”, like the shepherd’s hands, to reveal a bland, tepid, listless reality.

If Ungaretti's goal was to use poetry to leave a "very beautiful autobiography", then he certainly achieved it. The three poems I have presented here are excellent representations of how Ungaretti was able to imbue his own personal struggles and sufferings into the very words and sounds of his writing, all the while creating imagery that is as starkly painful as it is dynamic and beautiful. For Ungaretti, being a poet truly wasn't a profession, but a condition, and his poems were the symptoms.

## Chapter Two: Montale

### Background

Eugenio Montale, born in Genoa in 1896, was a poet whose vivid writings, infused with intricate lexicon and painfully nostalgic imagery, diversified and expanded the Hermetic trend begun by Giuseppe Ungaretti. Montale, like Ungaretti, believed that words must be stripped of ornamentation and returned to their “pristine, evocative meaning” (Golino, xvii). Where Montale diverged from Ungaretti was in his conviction that poetry did not serve a positive function (Dombroski, 505). Montale’s beliefs reflected those of the earlier; that poetry lacked legitimacy and was an exercise in failure. (Dombroski, 505). Endeavoring, like Ungaretti did, to use poetry as a means of resilience, was futile according to Montale. Luciano describes Montale as a “gloomy, pessimistic poet” whose works communicate the futility of life and progress and even the pointlessness of poetry and the senses that it can evoke (Luciano, 273). His 1925 collection, *Ossi di seppia* (“Cuttlefish Bones”) is titled so in order to represent the nakedness of the verses he writes; the kind of nakedness embodied by the dried-out, desiccated remains of a cuttlefish whose bones are washed up on the shore (Dombroski, 505). It is a raw, joyless eviscerated image, symbolic of what Montale considers to be the only real purpose of poetry: drawing attention to the undeniable bleakness of life. According to Montale, a poet must discard his own conceptions and perceptions of the world and not use poetry as an escape or relief from the terrifying futility of existence, but rather as a means of affirming it. “Il male di vivere”, or “life’s sufferings” is the

idea that the suffering of life is present in all things, even in the shriveling of leaves or the strained gurgling of a strangled brook (Dombroski, 506).

Golino says it best: the themes of Montale's poetry "revolve around the concept that man is alone and that the world is futile and meaningless," (Golino, xvii). Similar to Ungaretti, Montale is someone who recognizes the austere nature of his reality, but unlike Ungaretti, his poetry never evolves to reflect a means through which the poet can overcome this crisis. Montale's poetry, written between the two world wars, captures the utter helplessness of a generation that is on the precipice of insurmountable tragedy (Golino, xvii). In his poetry, this tragedy and hopelessness is evoked in a depiction of a cruel, unforgiving nature where beauty is only a false spectacle that is "obscured by the undercurrent of futility that cold reason introduces" (Golino, xviii). Nothing is safe from this harsh reality; it is present everywhere and in everything, and there is no avoiding or overcoming it, not even through poetry.

Montale believed that, if poetry was a means towards highlighting the essentiality of words and aspects of the world, then the poet must abandon his "conceptualized perceptions of the world," (Dombroski, 506). So, the poet should not impress his own interpretations of his surroundings upon the reader; he must be in a constant pursuit of capturing the substance of things as they actually are, and he does this through a "fresh act of naming," (Dombroski, 506). By simply giving a name to things that reflects what they objectively are, Montale seeks to eliminate any possibility for subjective interpretations and establish his conviction, as a poet, to be clear and impartial in his presentation of reality. Ironically, this conviction demonstrates faith in the poetic word and its power, despite Montale's aforementioned belief that poetry was

essentially pointless. The idea that poetry can objectively and accurately present reality denotes its legitimacy in Montale's eyes, even though he might have said otherwise. Perhaps Montale disagreed with the idea that poetry SHOULD do anything other than objectively present reality, such as its ability to evoke senses and feelings. Whether or not poetry could evoke certain feelings and senses in the reader was irrelevant to him, because that shouldn't be the goal of the poet in the first place. Yet Montale wrote in a style that nonetheless put him in the same category as Ungaretti in terms of the powerful images and feelings that his words evoked.

Montale's 1956 collection, *La bufera e altro* ('The Storm and Other Things'), contains poems that Montale wrote between 1940 and 1954 (Dombroski, 507). *La bufera* follows the 1939 collection *Le occasioni* ('The Occasions') which was written during the rise of Fascist rule in Italy as well as the rise of Nazism in Europe. *La bufera* underlines Montale's experience of the Second World War and its aftermath, leading into the Cold War (Dombroski, 507). Montale possessed strong liberal ideals, so the events leading up to the Second World War, especially the establishment of Facism in Italy, were likely extremely distressing to him. In *Le occasioni*, Montale actually included "occasions" for salvation, or instances in which he used his poetry as a means of resilience and salvation in the face of dark times, similar to Ungaretti. In his poems, Montale incorporated "real women from his past, all engaged in surviving life's onslaught" that acted as memories that momentarily took the poet away from his current harsh reality (Dombroski, 507). In *La bufera*, these women continue to make appearances, though now they no longer serve a concrete purpose, but "move effortlessly in and out of the verses, leaving no stability of meaning," (Dombroski, 507).

So, in *La bufera*, Montale no longer resides under Fascist rule, has weathered the Second World War, and has returned to his conviction that poetry's sole purpose is to reveal objective truth (Dombroski, 507). *La bufera* is characterized by a revitalization of Montale's poetic intent, because the death and destruction of the Second World War snapped him back into the abject horror of the real world.

### ***L'arca* (The Ark)**

English Translation by Carlo L. Golino (in Golino, 148-150).

La tempesta di primavera ha sconvolto  
l'ombrello del salice  
al turbine d'aprile  
s'è impigliato nell'orto il vello d'oro  
che nasconde i miei morti,  
i miei cani fidati, le mie vecchie  
(quando il salice era biondo e io ne stroncavo  
le anella con la fionda) son calati,  
vivi, nel trabocchetto. La tempesta  
certo li riunirà sotto quel tetto  
di prima, ma lontano, più lontano  
di questa terra folgorata dove  
bollono calce e sangue nell'impronta  
del piede umano. Fuma il ramaiolo  
in cucina, un suo tondo di riflessi  
accentra i volti ossuti, i musci aguzzi  
e li protegge in fondo la magnolia  
se un soffio ve la getta. La tempesta  
primaverile scuote d'un latrato  
di fedeltà la mia arca, o perduti.

The springtime storm upset  
the willow's crown,  
the April whirlwind  
entangled in the kitchen garden  
the golden fleece that hides my  
dead, my old maidservants –  
those who since (when blond  
was the willow and with my  
sling I tore its curls) have sunk  
still alive, into the pitfall.  
Surely the storm will reunite  
them under the roof of old, but  
far away, farther away beyond  
this bolt-struck land where lime  
and blood seethe in the footprints  
of mankind. The ladle smokes in  
the kitchen, its round reflections  
center the bony faces, the pointed  
muzzles and in the background  
the magnolia shields them if a gust  
should fling it. The springtime  
storm shakes with a bark of  
faithfulness my ark, oh lost ones.

This poem, at its core, is about memories; Montale, or the poetic "I" in the poem, relates to the reader the pain and loss that come with the passing of time. The enjambed lines give the poem a disjointed rhythm that reflects the bitter nostalgia of a



man recalling the dismal images and memories from his past. Lines 3-10 are a continuous thread of thoughts and images only punctuated by commas, dashes, and parentheses. The fourth line, in which the poetic voice talks about the April whirlwind becoming entangled in his garden, is particularly striking. The consonance of the double “ll” sound, the assonance of the long “o”, and the syllabic construction of the word “im-pi-gli-a-to” (pronounced EEM-PEE-LEE-AH-TOE), are thrown together in one line sans punctuation (besides the apostrophes). These words and sounds themselves seem to be entangled with each other, giving Montale’s image greater potency and impact.

The images of the blond willow tree and the golden fleece that hides the dead of the narrator parallel each other: they both offer some sort of covering, or protection. The poetic voice describes how he “tore the curls” of the willow with his sling, showing how he took its protection and beauty for granted. He might have also taken his “faithful dogs” and “old maidservants” for granted, and now his memories of them resurface in a fashion similar to the volatility of the April whirlwind. “Trabocchetto” most literally translates to “trap door”, so it is like these memories were trapped in the recesses of the narrator’s mind, only to return suddenly with a force that is painfully nostalgic.

The poetic voice talks of the “bolt-struck land” in which he lives, where “lime and blood seethe in the footprints of mankind,”. The footprint that mankind has left on the land of his memories, and on nature overall, is destructive. Perhaps nature has a right to be cruel and unforgiving because of the evils that man has committed against it. The land is soaked in the lime that humans used to build their cities and industries, soiling and defiling nature in the process, all in the name of perceived progress. The

blood is from the endless violence that humans have enacted upon each other through war, specifically the two World Wars between which Montale is writing. These elements “bollono”; they seethe, they boil, representing how memories and reminders of the past never go away, but remain, simmering, in the mind. Italy, according to Montale, is a land that has endured the repercussions of man’s fruitless ambition, and now continues to be relentlessly struck by vicious lightning storms that are symbolic of the utter damnation and destruction on the horizon for him and the Italian people.

In the final verses of this poem, Montale’s images, the “volti ossuti” (bony faces) and “musi aguzzi” (pointed muzzles) demonstrate a forceful lexicon that accents the poignancy and sharpness of this memory. The “ramaiolo” or ladle, smoking in the kitchen reflects the visages of the faithful dogs and old maidservants, showing how sharp and clear they are in the narrator’s mind after all this time. The consonances of the “ti” sound and the “ss” and “zz” sounds indicate the intention behind Montale’s selection of these adjectives: to bring these images out of memory and into striking reality. Then, the mention again of the “tempesta primaverile” (springtime storm) and how it “shakes with a bark of faithfulness [his] ark, oh lost ones.” The “ark” is the narrator’s house, along with the willow and magnolia trees and the kitchen garden, which have now become a symbol of his memories and nostalgia. Unlike the ark of biblical proportions, this ark does not carry the future of life, but the memory of it. In a Hermetic fashion, Montale subverts a positive symbol to convey the loss he has suffered in the past and his lack of faith in the future.

***Giorno e notte (Day and Night)***

English Translation by Carlo L. Golino (in Golino 150-151).

Anche una piuma che vola può disegnare  
la tua figura, o il raggio che gioca a rimpiazzino  
tra i mobili, il rimando dello specchio  
di un bambino, dai tetti. Sul giro delle mura  
strascichi di vapore prolungano le guglie  
dei pioppi e giù sul trespolo s'arruffa il pappagallo  
dell'arrotino. Poi la notte afosa  
sulla piazzola, e i passi, e sempre questa dura  
fatica di affondare per risorgere eguali  
da secoli, o da istanti, d'incubo che non possono  
ritrovare la luce dei tuoi occhi nell'antro  
incandescente – e ancora le stesse grida e i lunghi  
pianti sulla veranda  
se rimbomba improvviso il colpo che t'arrossa  
la gola e schianta l'ali o perigliosa  
annunziatrice dell'alba  
e si destano i chiostrì e gli ospedali  
a un lacerio di trombe...

Even a floating feather in the air can trace  
your shape, or the sunbeam that plays hide-and-seeK  
among the furniture, the reflection of a child's mirror  
from the roofs. Above the circle of the city walls  
lingering streams of vapor lengthen the spires  
of the poplar trees and down below the knife-grinder's parrot  
ruffles its feathers on the trestle. Then the stifling night  
on the small square, and the footsteps, and as always  
this harsh struggle of sinking to rise again unchanged  
for centuries, for moments, from nightmares  
that cannot find again the light of your eyes  
in the glowing cave – and still the same cries, the long  
weeping on the verandah  
if suddenly the shot resounds that reddens  
your throat and shatters your wings, you perilous  
harbinger of the dawn  
and the cloisters and the hospitals awake  
at the rending blasts of trumpets...

This poem, entitled “Day and Night” is not only about the transition from day to night, but it also evokes that transition in its very structure. It begins with a rather gentle, even calming voice describing a feather floating in the air, how the sun plays “rimpiattino” or hide-and-seek amongst furniture, and the reflection a child’s mirror on the roof. These images are not dark or desolate; they are delicate and perhaps even beautiful, and do not necessarily adhere to Montale’s policy of “naming” things as they really are. The sunlight playing hide-and-seek, for example, is a whimsical, lighthearted description of the world, something not usually characteristic of Montale’s writing or convictions. This beginning section represents the “day” portion of the poem, and as Montale continues, describing the “spires of poplar trees” and the knife-grinder’s parrot ruffling its feathers, he seems to be establishing a transitional pattern that would gradually take the reader into perhaps the “evening” section of the poem. Even the sounds used give this part of the poem a vibrant tempo; the phrase, “s’arruffa il pappagallo dell’arrontino”, plays on the consonance of the “rr” sound to create a rolling rhythmic quality. Yet this “evening” section is cut drastically short, for with the very next sentence, with a brusque transition to the “la notte afosa sulla piazzola” (the stifling night on the small square) and the “dura fatica di affondare per risorgere eguali da secoli,” (the harsh struggle of sinking to rise again unchanged for centuries). Night does not fall gradually and gently, and this poem similarly does not progress in the gradual fashion it was establishing.

Montale employs a technique similar to that seen in some of Ungaretti’s work: luring the reader into a sense of complacency and stability (with regards to the tone or structure of the poem) and then veering completely off course to reveal a much more

chaotic structure or a much darker tone. The structure of the poem itself, especially in Hermetic poetry, can have evocative powers. The night in *Giorno e Notte* is “afosa” which translates to “sweltering” or “muggy”, synonyms for the word “stifling” that Golino used in his translation. The sounds in “afosa” are echoed later on in the poem, with “affondare”, which means “to sink”. The syllables in both these words are dense and pronouncing them almost elicits a sense of dryness in the mouth, akin to the dryness one would feel in the air on a stifling night. In any case, Montale is painting a picture of a hot, humid, insufferable night in which he is forced to endure the “harsh struggle of sinking to rise again unchanged for centuries, for moments, from nightmares that cannot find again the light of your eyes in the glowing cave,”. Sleep is not an escape, it is a battle that feels both endless and instantaneous at the same time; it is a monotonous struggle that has left even the narrator’s nightmares unable to find any more light to snuff out. Montale turns sleep from something healing and restorative to yet another aspect of life where suffering and evil are always present.

There is clearly a female figure present in *Giorno e notte*, introduced at the beginning as the person whose shape is being traced by the floating feather. She makes an appearance again at the end as the “perilous harbinger of the dawn”, which is translated from “perigliosa annunziatrice dell’alba”; “annunziatrice” being a feminine noun, signifying that Montale is referring to a woman. This woman could be Clizia, who, in *Le occasioni*, was a mythical angel whose purpose was to save Montale from the “barbarism that threatens the world,” (Dombroski, 507). However, *Giorno e notte* is from the *La bufera* collection, so now she serves no purpose, as Montale has returned to his disillusionment with the possibility of salvation. Her wings have been shattered by a

“shot”- most likely referring to World War II – showing that the war has shattered any belief in a divine realm that Montale may have had. She is a bringer of the dawn, but again Montale inverts what would be a positive and inspirational image; the dawn now represents a new day that promises only more death and misery and suffering because of the war. *Giorno e notte* is day and night in every aspect: it is about the agonizing transition from day into night into yet another day that Montale had to suffer during the war years, its tone shifts from light to dark in almost an instant, and it is reflective of Montale’s relationship with Clizia, and how he found potential salvation with her, salvation that he would once again spurn as he descended back into the darkness.

Montale’s poetry was a complex, intricate, dismal portrayal of his reality. Even though he may have differed from Ungaretti philosophically, the autobiographical, inward-facing element of Montale’s poetry paralleled that of his Hermetic contemporary. Yet Montale added depth to the Hermetic movement by implementing an expansive lexicon into his poems: his use of words was nowhere near as limited as Ungaretti’s, but he was still just as painstakingly specific and intentional in his selection of them.

## Chapter Three: Quasimodo

### Background

Golino mentions several poets who followed in the footsteps of Ungaretti and Montale, to create the “final brilliant phase” of the Hermetic current (Golino, xviii). Such poets include Libero De Libero, Alfonso Gatto, Mario Luzi, and Vittorio Sereni. Yet none of these were arguably as influential to the later Hermetic current, and to Italian poetry itself, as Salvatore Quasimodo. Quasimodo became, according to Golino, the most favored hermetic poet by the Italian public when he published his 1942 collection, *Ed è subito sera* (And It Is Suddenly Evening), and would go on to receive a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1959 – almost two decades before Eugenio Montale received his in 1975 (Golino, xix).

Quasimodo was born in 1901 in Modica, a province of Siracusa, Sicily (Luciano, 273). He went north in 1918, and by 1929 had settled in Milan, traveling often to Florence to act as a contributor to avant-garde reviews (Luciano, 273). His earlier poetry was always associated with the Hermetic school; it was characterized by what Dombroski calls an “impenetrable” imagery; “impenetrable” referring to a focus by Quasimodo on colors and sounds and the nuances of a landscape, rather than subject matter (504-505). For example, in one of his most famous poems, *Ed è subito sera*, Quasimodo presents a powerfully evocative depiction of his surroundings in only three lines of verse:

Ognuno sta solo sul cuor della terra  
trafitto da un raggio di sole:  
ed è subito sera.

Each alone on the heart of the earth,  
impaled upon a ray of sun:  
and suddenly it's evening.

The purpose of the poem is not so much to convey a message as it is to impress an image into the reader's mind. Specifically, the image of a person impaled on a ray of sunlight is paradoxical: is the sun shining through the person, reflecting off of them? Or is it as the literal translation of "trafitto" suggests, striking through them like a blade, implying that the person is enduring a painful experience because of the sun's heat? The image Quasimodo presents is confusing and hard to picture, yet this makes it all the more cogent and resonant. This is what, according to Golino, might make Quasimodo's earlier poems more "difficult" than Montale's, while at the same time appealing to a larger audience (Golino, xix). The subject matter is certainly not as harsh or even as dark as that of Montale or Ungaretti, but the imagery is so striking and potent that it makes the poem just as complex, and, sometimes, just as difficult to interpret. However, it is difficult in a sense different from the poems of Montale or Ungaretti, because the images are not starkly depressing or shocking, but more intricate and even haunting. There is even an impressionistic quality to these images; the feelings they evoke are immediate and easy to understand, even if the deeper meaning is still difficult to grasp or ascertain. Quasimodo brings a heightened enigmatic quality to the Hermetic school, based on a focus on imagery that is as strikingly impressionistic as it is thought-provoking.

Golino says that Quasimodo was "at the center of the last polemic between hermetics and anti-hermetics...the last champion of the hermetic trend," (Golino, xix). In a sense, Quasimodo did to Hermetic poetry what the Hermetics did to Italian poetry; he revitalized it. Ungaretti and Montale took qualities present in previous movements of Italian poetry (such as symbolism, rhythm, and structure) and upended them to create



their own unique style, characterized by stark images, heavy subject matter, and unorthodox metaphors. Quasimodo took this style and adjusted it by writing poems brimming with complex and evocative imagery, but with subject matter that was not necessarily as heavy; poems that were still “Hermetic” in that Quasimodo could conjure such images with a sparing use of words and abstruse poetic language.

Similar to Montale, the Second World War was central to the development of Quasimodo’s poetics. Critics were quick to call out Quasimodo for entering what they thought was a new phase of writing, characterized by a new, anti-hermetic Quasimodo (Golino, xix). However, Golino would argue that was not a phase at all, only a “logical and imperative development” (Golino, xix). After World War II, Quasimodo’s poetry began to take on messages pertaining to ethics and drawing attention to the struggles of the oppressed (Luciano, 273). The later works of Quasimodo, compiled in the volumes *Giorno dopo giorno* (“Day After Day” – 1947) and *La vita non è sogno* (Life Is Not a Dream – 1949), reflected what he now believed were the duties of a poet (Golino, xix). Poetry was now the expression of a judgment on society, a representation of the poet’s ethics, and as such it had the ability to impact the society and the ethics of the society in which the poet lived (Golino, xix). While some may have seen this as Quasimodo detaching himself from the Hermetic current, I would argue that Quasimodo was taking Hermeticism through its final stages (perhaps he could see that its relevance was waning), representing another transitional period in Italian poetry as new trends, such as neo-realism, began to emerge after the Second World War (Golino, xix). These newer poems may have climbed “out of the hermetic mode into a more concretely historical discourse of civic poetry”, but that did not make Quasimodo any less of a

Hermetic (Gatt-Rutter, 555). Quasimodo was tackling issues similar to those his Hermetic predecessors, Ungaretti and Montale, tackled in their poems (such as Fascism and the wars), only this time, he was decidedly more plain and straightforward in his language, making this a poetry that wasn't "anti-hermetic", only "non-hermetic".

### ***Antico inverno (Ancient Winter)***

English Translation by Allen Mandelbaum (in Golino, 178-179).

Desiderio delle tue mani chiare  
nella penombra della fiamma:  
sapevano di rovere e di rose;  
di morte. Antico inverno.

Desire for your bright hands  
in the penumbra of the flame:  
they smelt of oak and roses;  
of death. Ancient winter.

Cercavano il miglio gli uccelli  
ed erano subito di neve;  
così le parole.  
Un po' di sole, una raggera d'angelo,  
e poi la nebbia; e gli alberi,  
e noi fatti d'aria al mattino.

The birds were seeking grain  
and suddenly were snowed under;  
thus – words.  
A little sun, an angel's glory,  
and then the mist; and the trees  
and us, made of air in the morning.

With this poem, Quasimodo seeks to capture not just what winter may sound or look like, but what it *feels* like. Take the first line, for instance: "Desiderio delle tue mani chiare," or "Desire for your bright hands,". Quasimodo doesn't exactly specify who that desire is coming from; while it may very well be his desire or the desire of the poem's narrator, he leaves it purposefully vague by not saying "Io desidero" (I desire), and referring to the desire as a noun instead of using it as a verb. In doing this, the "desire" doesn't have a connection to a specific person, only an image: the bright hands. While those hands are obviously assumed to be attached to a person, likely a woman or love interest, Quasimodo doesn't want the reader to think of them solely in that way. The desire simply exists, permeating the poem as smoke from a fire would permeate the

air, and so for the rest of the poem the presence of the bright hands remains, in the “penumbra” of the flame; that is, the flame’s shadow.

Quasimodo’s Hermeticism, like the bright hands, shines through in the following verses: “sapevano di rovere e di rose; di morte,” (they smelt of oak and roses; of death). Like Ungaretti and Montale, Quasimodo surprises the reader with a sudden shift in tone; from the hands smelling of roses and oak to smelling of death. Yet, unlike Ungaretti and Montale, this is not a permanent change. Following the word “death” with the phrase “Antico inverno” (Ancient winter) softens the impact. There is death in winter, yes, but Quasimodo presents it as a death that is not cruel or harsh or final, but simply *is*. Winter and death are not synonymous, rather, death is just another color on the canvas of winter that Quasimodo is painting with his words. Death, like the aforementioned desire, permeates winter in a way that does not give it a lifeless quality, but an ancient one. Just as one can see the death evident in an ancient ruin yet still appreciate its beauty and antiquity, so can one understand that death is an aspect of winter that doesn’t take away from the reverence that the season can instill. Death is ever present in winter, but it is not a malignant presence; it is just simply there.

The second stanza parallels the tone shift of the first, only this time in reverse. The stanza begins with a somewhat dispiriting scene, that of birds searching for food only to be “snowed under” by the winter weather. Quasimodo follows this grim image with a line shorter than all the rest in the poem: “cosí le parole”. Now, Mandelbaum translates this as “thus—words”, though I interpret it differently. Mandelbaum also adds a dash in his translation, creating a pause that is not there in the original Italian. Instead, I see “cosí le parole” as Quasimodo saying “and so are the words” or “these are the

words”, in a tone that is resigned and perhaps wistful. The “words” he is referring to are the previous two lines about the birds, and Quasimodo might be implying that there is no need to dissect these words in search of a deeper meaning, because he is just telling it like he sees it. It could also reflect the notion that words themselves are impeded in their function, as the birds are, buried under excessive adjectives or connotations as the birds are buried under snow. The last three lines are as follows: “Un po’ di sole, una raggera d’angelo, e poi la nebbia; e gli alberi, e noi fatti d’aria al mattino” (A little sun, an angel’s glory, and then the mist; and the trees and us, made of air in the morning”. Quasimodo is continuing to paint the picture of winter, his winter, and these last three lines add in the finishing touches to make that picture complete. But it is not an immobile scene Quasimodo is painting, it is a dynamic, moving depiction of winter, composed of many different sights and smells. Some of these images are beautiful or peaceful, and others are melancholic or grim, but they all come together to create this immersive poem that allows the reader to see and to *feel* what Quasimodo himself sees and feels during winter. Like the flame in the first stanza, the poem “flickers” between the different visuals that Quasimodo presents, and by the end we are made of air, and we too can now permeate this ancient winter as a part of Quasimodo’s vibrant, fluid picture.

### ***Imitazione della gioia (Imitation of Joy)***

English Translation by Allen Mandelbaum (in Golino, 184-185).

Dove gli alberi ancora  
abbandonata piú fanno la sera,  
come indolente  
è svanito l'ultimo tuo passo,  
che appare appena il fiore  
sui tigli e insiste alla sua sorte.

Una ragione cerchi agli affetti,  
provi il silenzio nella tua vita.  
Altra ventura a me rivela  
il tempo specchiato. Addolora  
come la morte, bellezza ormai  
in altri volti fulminea.  
Perduto ho ogni cosa innocente,  
anche in questa voce, superstite  
a imitare la gioia.

Where the trees make evening  
even more abandoned,  
how languidly  
your final step has vanished,  
like the flower that scarce appears  
on the linden, insistent on its fate.

You seek a motive for the feelings,  
experience silence in your life.  
Mirrored time reveals to me  
a different destiny. Beauty flashing  
now in other faces, saddens me  
like death.  
I have lost every innocent thing,  
even in this voice, surviving  
to imitate joy.

The abandoned evening is made even more so by the presence of trees, according to the poetic voice in the first few lines of *Imitazione della gioia*. In evoking the deserted state of this evening, Quasimodo doesn't describe an empty field or neglected house, images that would usually be associated with the concept of "abandoned". He describes trees, trees that take up space and are not what first comes to mind when one imagines someplace "abandoned". Trees are symbols of growth and resilience, but in Quasimodo's poem they become inferior placeholders that only serve as a reminder of a presence that is no longer there, a presence that vanished "languidly". This may look similar to a common motif in Montale's work, that is, turning nature from a benevolent entity into something imbued with evidence of life's inescapable suffering. Yet I believe the angle Quasimodo is taking here is that nature is not cruel,

just disheartening in that it can only provide a pale imitation of the love and happiness that another person can give.

The image of a flower that “scarce appears on the linden, insistent on its fate” implies that the linden tree is weak, perhaps dying, and rarely flowers, and when it does those flowers are pathetic and desiring to die. Comparing that to the vanishing “ultimo passo” (final step) of this person to whom the poem is directed, combined with a word like “indolente” (indolent, languidly) serves to show how the person’s abandonment of the narrator has dragged on agonizingly for him. Take, firstly, the syllabic construction of the word “in/do/len/te” (pronounced EEN-DOE-LEN-TAY). It is a four-syllable word, one that seems to drag on in its enunciation. The word slows down the pace of the poem and expresses how this person’s abandonment of him has tortured him for so long.

The first two lines of the second stanza could be a criticism from Quasimodo, or perhaps a piece of advice: “Una ragione cerchi agli affetti, provi il silenzio nella tua vita,” (You seek a motive for the feelings, experience silence in your life). It is futile to try and comprehend why we experience certain feelings, like love or abandonment, because there is no reason why. Similarly, it is futile to try and understand why we experience a loss of certain feelings, such as joy. The “tempo specchiato” (mirrored time) that the narrator talks about is the wishing for what could have been, a “different destiny”. In this poem, the mirrored time represents for the narrator the ideal, the love he wishes he could have, the joy he wishes he could still feel. The beauty that he sees in the faces of others is not necessarily beauty in terms of looks, but the beauty that reflects the joy one has in their life. This is one of the most painful experiences: to see

others revel in joy and happiness while you know that you have lost your own happiness permanently. Joy is not a feeling that one can recreate or reclaim; it is a feeling that comes with innocence and thus is lost when one loses their innocence. Quasimodo does not rebuke the joyful, however, like Ungaretti or Montale would, saying that it is naïve to be happy. Rather, the narrator in his poem laments the loss of his own joy, and how fleeting it seems compared to the languid decay that is his pain and suffering. The narrator now has to “imitate” joy, as if he is mimicking the happiness of others so as not to drown in the truth of his bleak reality.

### ***Òboe sommerso (Sunken Oboe)***

English Translation by Allen Mandelbaum (in Golino, 180-181).

Avara pena, tarda il tuo dono  
in questa mia ora  
di sospirati abbandoni.

Miser pain, delay your gift  
in this my hour  
of longed-for abandons.

Un òboe gelido risillaba  
gioia di foglie perenni,  
non mie, e smerora;

Chill, again an oboe utters  
joy of everlasting leaves,  
not mine, and disremembers;

in me si fa sera:  
l'acqua tramonta  
sulle mie mani erbose.

in me, evening falls:  
the water sets  
on my grassy hands.

Ali oscillano in fioco cielo,  
làbili: il cuore trasmigra  
ed io son gerbido.

In a dim sky, fleeting  
wings sway; the heart migrates  
and I am fallow

e i giorni una maceria.

and the days, rubble.

The title, “òboe sommerso”, (sunken/submerged oboe), conjures an image of an oboe suspended in water.<sup>5</sup> The first line of the second stanza reads “Chill, again an oboe utters”.<sup>6</sup> The oboe is sunken, underwater, in this suspended state, cold and detached. These feelings of suspension and detachment are imbued into the entire poem. Note how in the first stanza the narrator talks about the delay of pain in his “hour of longed-for abandons”, and then in the second stanza, the “joy of everlasting leaves, not mine,”. He’s referring to the seasons here, namely winter. In winter, growth is delayed, as most plants are dormant until the spring. For the narrator in this poem, winter represents a suspension of his pain, akin to the oboe suspended in water. The oboe makes music that reminds him of everlasting leaves, or the plants that don’t go dormant in the winter. These represent the people that are always joyful, whereas the narrator is always in such suffering that he longs for the winter to make it numb, where he can be detached from the rest of the world and the pain that it brings him.

The poem truly captures the feeling of transition; for example, Quasimodo talks about how, in him, “evening falls: the water sets on [his] grassy hands,”. We see the transition from day into evening as well as that of the narrator into a dormant state. The water “sets” into his hands, fading into the grass as the rains stop and winter sets in. His heart migrates away with the birds, symbolizing again a delay of the painful feelings that he has to endure the rest of the year. He is “gerbido” or “fallow”, like uncultivated

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<sup>5</sup> “Sommerso” most literally translates to “submerged”, so it is likely Mandelbaum was likely using “sunken” to tend to the darker aspect of the poem.

<sup>6</sup> Again, a more accurate translation of “Un òboe gelido risillaba” is “Again an icy oboe utters”, rather than “Chill, again an oboe utters.” Mandelbaum was likely focusing more on the impact of his English translation with respect to the original Italian.



land, waiting again to be “sown” with a happiness that might never come. Notice also the similarity between the Italian words “gelido” and “gerbido”. One describes the oboe, the other the narrator himself, showing a connection between the two as both are in a suspended, delayed state.

Quasimodo rounded out the Hermetic movement by writing poetry where imagery took precedence over the subject matter. He was able to transcend the boundary between words and images; one was immediately struck by how his words so effortlessly resonated as potent imagery in their mind. And these were images of his memory, his thoughts, his life, tying him to Ungaretti and Montale in that his poetry was still very much a Hermetic, inward-facing exploration.



## **Closing Remarks and Reflections**

Throughout the duration of this thesis, I have generally referred to Hermetic poetry as one, cohesive category. But after researching these three poets, who represent three of the biggest names pertaining to the Italian Hermetic current, I've realized just how much of a broad, umbrella term "Hermeticism" is. Ungaretti, Montale, and Quasimodo all displayed similar elements in their poetry (enjambment, potent imagery, themes of war and isolation), and they all incorporated an autobiographical essence into their works, but these poets were truthfully more different than they were alike.

After my extensive research on the subject, I've found it difficult to see "Hermeticism" as a definitive poetic category. The multiple sources I traversed could only loosely define what was and what wasn't Hermetic poetry. For example, I kept reading that Hermetic poetry was a "rejection" of more antiquated poetic styles, and that it almost never used traditional poetic devices. Upon reading the poetry of Ungaretti, Montale, and Quasimodo, however, I found that more often than not they weren't eliminating these poetic devices, but subverting them to fit with the poem's overall effect. It makes more sense, then, that "Hermetic" was a term ascribed to these poets by critics, and not something they came up with themselves. The critics, and now some of the literary historians that I've read, are trying to apply a set of standards or rules to a set of writers who didn't really follow any. I felt that Carlo Bo's manifesto of Hermeticism, in which he stated that it was "literature as life" was the least limiting definition, and the most helpful to my interpretations. Bo presents Hermeticism, and poetry itself, as an innate condition, not something that one has to join or subscribe to. "Hermeticism" as a movement delineates more of a time period than a style or way of

writing, a time period in which poets were using their writing to manifest their struggles, memories, and fears. Thinking of Hermeticism in this way, rather than as a style that incorporated this or didn't incorporate that, made the process of interpreting these poems much easier. I could recognize in each poet's writing their individuality and diversity, while still understanding that there was a common thread, *Letteratura come vita*, connecting them.

The Hermetic poets were speaking of their own experiences of life, and they captured their feelings and sentiments in the words of their poems. It started with Ungaretti, who consistently incorporated an autobiographical element in his writing, so that his poems became a sort of diary that reflected the essence of his life. His poetry, and that of Montale and Quasimodo, has endured because it *is* life, it is words stripped of ornamentation or connotation so as to evoke the raw, uncensored reality of existence. The Hermeticists' feelings of disillusionment, nostalgia, loss, hopelessness, are human, and thus are timeless. These are feelings that many, including myself, experience today, and so despite this poetry having a name that denotes being "sealed" or "closed off", it is undeniably profound and sympathetic. Perhaps it is "closed off" because the poet is being, for lack of a better term, selfish; he is writing about his own experiences and his own struggles, and not for the pleasure or entertainment of the reader. Yet it is this poetry of the self that I felt such a connection to, because the poet is vulnerable, he is baring himself to the reader, so, in truth, this poetry is not "sealed" like an ampoule. The Hermeticists showed that poetry doesn't necessarily have to serve a civic duty, reflect an important theme, or spread a message of morality. Poetry doesn't have to follow a certain rhythmic structure or have a designated rhyme scheme; it doesn't have to be

flowery or verbose or lengthy or righteous. It can be just words, simple words that when put together are able to evoke not just images, but *feelings*, feelings that can transcend the boundaries of time and still resonate strongly with an undergraduate student in the year 2018.

*Letteratura come vita* doesn't just imply that poetry reflects the lives of these poets, but that, at certain times, it was their life-blood; their sustenance. At a time when wars were raging and the future, especially that of a young country like Italy, was shrouded in perilous uncertainty, poetry allowed Ungaretti, Montale, and Quasimodo to be certain in something: the potency of the written word. For Hermetic poetry is not just powerful, it is potent, because of the lasting impact it had on Italian poetry in the twentieth century and the impact it still has on scholars of both Italian and of poetry.

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